

From Eritrea to Morocco. Perspectives on Contemporary Arabic Literature in Africa

Edited by
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Introduction

There are two facts that hardly need to be proven: Arabic literature was born on the Arabian Peninsula, and for many centuries its most important expression was poetry. The present volume, inspired by the 2nd International African Studies Congress held in Toruń on 19–21 February 2025, seems to contradict both of these foundational statements, since it is devoted to Arabic literature on the African continent, and moreover, all of the contributions focus on prose, mainly narrative prose.

Narrative prose—short stories, novellas, or novels—began to develop in the Arabic literary language only in the 19th century, to a significant extent under the influence of Western literatures. Elements of narrative can certainly be found in earlier Arabic writing, but in the literary language these were short forms such as *maqāma*, which were not particularly widespread, perhaps due to their complex formal features (above all the refined rhyme and rhythm of *sağ'*), or long-existing but “popular” genres such as the *sīra* and *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, transmitted orally in dialects or Middle Arabic as a form of storytelling for ordinary people.

As mentioned, the situation began to change in the 19th century. I would hesitate to state unequivocally that

this was exclusively due to Western influence—perhaps it should simply be seen as another stage in the development of Arabic writing, to which prose was never entirely alien, and in which, at some point, forms such as the short story or novel might have appeared even without external inspiration. Today, Arabic prose—extremely popular across the contemporary Arab world—like ancient Arabic poetry, constitutes an inseparable part of the *dīwān al-‘Arab*, the “archive of the Arabs”, across all regions. It reflects the problems faced both in the *Mašriq* and the *Mağrib*, which this volume clearly demonstrates. It addresses not only the issues specific to individual states, but also pan-Arab concerns and, at times, questions that may even be considered pan-Islamic.

The articles in this book are arranged according to geographical criteria—from east to west—with one exception, which will be explained below.

The volume opens with Maria Elena Paniconi’s article on Eritrean literature in Arabic, focusing on Ḥāğğī Ğābir’s novel *Rağwa sawdā’*. This is an example of Eritrean literature in diaspora. The literature of this country is as intriguing as it is little known, even among Arabists. Ğābir’s novel, however, goes beyond the Eritrean context to address broader issues of forced migration from Arab countries, a matter of particular relevance given the decade-long “migration crisis”. The novel’s emphasis on the integration of immigrants into host societies makes it a study of universal significance, transcending both Arab migration and the present time.

František Ondráš takes us to 19th-century Sudan. His article discusses Ḥammūr Ziyāda's novel dedicated to the events surrounding the Mahdist uprising. Rather than offering a realist historical account, Ziyāda presents a narrative imbued with symbolism and mysticism characteristic of Sudanese Islam. The work highlights key issues that have long shaped, and still shape, Sudanese society—religious questions deeply rooted in history yet resonating in contemporary challenges that ultimately contributed to the emergence of two Sudanese states.

The next two texts deal with Egyptian literature. Magdalena Kubarek casts new light on the work of Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, most often associated with feminist themes. While feminism remains present, Kubarek shifts the perspective to *Al-Ḥubb fi zaman an-nift*, reading it not through feminism but through the lens of “petrofiction”, situating the novel within the theoretical framework of “oil societies” in the Arab world. In this way, As-Sa‘dāwī is, at least partly, lifted out of the overly simplistic “feminist” label.

Hani Rtaibah's somewhat “iconoclastic” contribution examines the writings of Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, a relatively underexplored and undervalued author whom Marcia Lynx Qualey has called “Egypt's poet of the short story”. What makes the article striking is not the choice of writer but the use of Marxist methodology in the analysis—an approach regarded in the West, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, as outdated due to historical baggage. Free of these prejudices, Rtaibah demon-

strates that such methodology retains value, at least in certain socio-cultural contexts.

Sebastian Gadomski and Jamila Oueslati turn to Tunisian literature. Gadomski's article, the only one in this volume devoted to drama and theatre, analyzes "The Trilogy of Future Memory" by Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybī. Their artistic project highlights the continuity of social problems while also illustrating how the past, even stripped of its original context, can serve as a teacher for the present. Tunisian identity emerges here not as a purely contemporary phenomenon but as one deeply rooted in political, social, and cultural contexts.

Oueslati, in turn, provides a condensed account of the life and work of Maḥmūd al-Mas'ādī, one of Tunisia's, and indeed the Arab world's, most important writers. She identifies the key themes of his prose and drama, as well as his reception beyond Tunisia, thus highlighting the universalism of his concerns.

Rashad Hasanov's article takes us to Algeria, examining Amīn az-Zāwī's novel *Al-Aṣnām* and its symbolism. By situating the text within postcolonial studies and depth psychology, Hasanov uncovers new layers of meaning, offering a multi-faceted interpretation that ties the work closely to Algeria's historical and political experiences.

Marek Dziekan's own article turns to Morocco, focusing on 19th-century historical prose by Al-Walīd al-'Irāqī. His text, intergeneric in nature, blends historiography with autobiography, recounting family history against a backdrop of historical events. This work, a significant

contribution to Moroccan historiography, also reveals the beginnings of autobiographical prose in Arabic literature.

Moroccan literature is further represented by contributions from Basilius Bawardi and Oumassou Raji, Babalhacena Raji, and Fathi Adil. Bawardi analyzes Malika Mustazraf's *Trānt Sīn*, which explores the rarely addressed theme of androgyny in Arab society. Using an interdisciplinary approach, he situates the novel within literary theory, gender studies, and cultural criticism, offering a valuable methodological proposal for broader application.

Similarly, the article by Raji, Raji, and Adil offers a multi-dimensional interpretation of Halima Hamdane's *Le Chaos de la liberté*, centering on the protagonist's "desire". Their stylistic analysis, combined with psychoanalysis and feminist criticism, produces a rich and original reading of the text.

The volume concludes with Samir Mundy's article, which stands apart for addressing writers from both Egypt (Laṭīfa az-Zayyāt and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn) and Morocco (Muḥammad Šukrī). Positioned within the popular trend of autobiographical studies, Mundy analyzes three autobiographical novels, focusing on depictions of family relations: father–daughter in *Az-Zayyāt*, child–parents in *Ḥusayn*, and father–son in *Šukrī*. These narratives reveal the complexity of family dynamics in Arab cultural contexts.

The eleven texts collected in this book showcase diverse thematic and methodological perspectives pur-

sued by scholars of different generations and traditions, which constitutes an important added value. Together they reflect the richness of contemporary Arabic prose, which, like classical poetry, has become a new *dīwān al-ʿArab*. They also highlight the methodological diversity of literary research in Arab studies, demonstrating both its potential and its cultural limitations—limitations which transdisciplinary approaches can successfully transcend, particularly in the study of African and Asian cultures.

Marek M. Dziekan

Maria Elena Paniconi

***Raġwā Sawdā'* (Black Foam)
by Ḥāġġī Ġābir:
the Role of Storytelling in a Novel
on the Eritrean Diaspora**

Abstract: This paper explores the function and narrative structure of storytelling in *Raġwā sawdā'* (Black Foam, 2018) by Eritrean-born author Ḥāġġī Ġābir, within the broader context of Arab forced migration literature. Storytelling emerges as a central device through which migrants negotiate identity, seek agency, and resist the reductive frameworks of international humanitarian discourse. Drawing from the scholarship on forced migration narrative, from the ecocritical studies and from studies on Arabic literature on migration and exile I articulate the modalities and motivations underpinning the narratives on migration, how they are performed, fabricated, and weaponized by migrants navigating scepticism and legal scrutiny. Through a close textual analysis, I will demonstrate how the character's tragic trajectory and alienation, *Black Foam* challenges the "affirmative Bildungsroman" paradigm, and questions the redemptive promise of human rights discourse.

Keywords: *Raġwā sawdā'* (*Black Foam*), Ḥāġġī Ġābir, Storytelling, Eritrean Novel in Arabic, Eritrean Diaspora

"We're in a new world now. No one knows where they belong anymore, neither humans nor animals".

Amitav Gosh, *Gun Island*

Introduction: Storytelling in Recent Arab Novels of Forced Migration

In recent Arabic forced migration novels, storytelling is a common feature: it is an act of survival, a symbolic reconstruction of the self and the world, a form that asserts the complexity of the migrant experience against ideological or media reductionism.¹ To understand why the technique of storytelling is so widespread in forced migration novels, it can be interesting to see how Bishupal Limbu, in his study on literary representation of forced migration, articulates the relations between the thematic dimension of the forced migration novel, and the "narrative dimension" of the humanitarian legislative framework, seen as a "discursive space with a set of rules and procedures that determine truth value, and who has the power to make such determinations".² According to Limbu, literary representations of forced migration face an enduring challenge: crafting a narra-

¹ R. Salam, *Smotherland Speaks. Syrian Refugee Identity in the Space Between Media and Literature* [in:] *The Migrant in Arab Literature. Displacement, Self-Discovery and Nostalgia*, M. Censi, and M.E. Paniconi (eds.), London and New York 2023, pp. 123–150.

² B. Limbu, *Literary Representation of Forced Migration*, in *The Routledge Companion to Migration Literature*, G. Adair, R. Fasselt and C. McLaughlin (eds.), London and New York 2025, p. 312.

tive form that adequately captures the structural, historical, and political complexities inherent in such experiences.³

Some authors, such as the Iraqi novelist Ḥasan Blāsim, based in Helsinki, choose a scattered narrative to expose the difficulties of finding an adequate form to represent the experience of forced migration. Other Arab writers are making extensive use of storytelling techniques in their narratives of migration, attempting to represent the processes of self-narration, adapting to conventions, and being the object of suspicion that disseminates the path of a forced migrant or an asylum seeker. Among those writers, we can name the Lebanese writers Rabī' Ġābir and his *Amīrka* (America, 2009) and Hudā Barakāt, who also uses the storytelling technique in her *Barīd al-layl* (*The Night Mail*, 2017). Both novels, although in very different ways, are conceived to safeguard the stories of lost cities, uprooted families, and landscapes erased by conflict.

Other Arab authors in the diaspora draw on oral traditions and mythological heritage to reconstruct cultural continuity through narrative and migratory supra-individual identity, as is the case of Abū Bakr Kaḥḥāl in *Titanikāt Ifriqiyya* (2008, trans. *African Titanics* 2014), a text with a focus on the sub-Saharan and Mediterranean migration routes of African migrants.⁴ In

³ Ibid., p. 314.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of this novel, see: M.E. Paniconi, *Migrating to and in Europe Beyond the Naḥḍawī and Modernist Paradigm. Mudun bi-lā naḥīl by Ṭāriq al-Ṭayyib and Taytanikāt Ifriqiyya by Abu Bakr Khal as Novels of forced migration* [in:]

the global novel of forced migration, storytelling is used also to explore human migration as a multispecies phenomenon, bringing humans, animals, natural elements, and supernatural presences into dialogue: this is the case of the Indian acclaimed novel by Amitav Gosh, *Gun Island* (2017). This novel challenges the anthropocentric narrative of migration and proposes a new kind of storytelling that recognizes the meaningful lives of others, human and non-human,⁵ as the quotation placed at the beginning of this contribution exemplifies.

In other words, in forced migration narratives, stories of migration experiences, legends, myths, and oral stories about migration become epistemological and moral tools for understanding and addressing global displacements and dehumanizing experiences to which migrants are exposed. In this contribution, I propose to study the narrative modes and purposes of storytelling in the novel *Black Foam* by the Eritrean born author Ḥāḡḡī Ġābir.⁶ The novel shows how migrants have to

The Migrant in Arab Literature, M. Censi, M.E. Paniconi, London 2022; M. Censi and M.E. Paniconi, *Migration Narratives in Contemporary Arab Novels* [in:] *Routledge Companion to Migration Literature*, G. Adair, R. Fasselt and C. McLaughlin (eds.), London and New York 2025.

⁵ J. Hoydis, *Parables for planetary crisis: storytelling and multispecies migration in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island*, "Interventions" 2024, 1–19.

⁶ Born in Massawa in 1976, Ḥāḡḡī Ġābir is one of the most famous novelists of the Arabic-speaking Eritrean diaspora, together with Mohammed Saeed Nawed (Muḥammad Sa'īd Nāwid), considered a pioneering figure of the Eritrean diaspora and author of the novel *Rihla aš-šitā'. Šālih* (The Winter's Journey: Salih, 1978) and Abū Bakr Kahḡāl, author of the acclaimed *Titanikāt Ifriqiyya* (2008, African Titanics 2014). The author currently lives in Qatar,

craft stories and self-narratives for a range of reasons, as for instance to gain credibility and move empathy from the workers of the humanitarian field, to survive in their migratory project and counter-balance their lack of agency, to maintain a link with their roots, or to carve out a transformative space from their daily lives.

Although Ḥāġġī Ġābir spent only his early childhood in Massawa, before moving to Jeddah with his family, his novels are set in Eritrea and deal with issues such as forced migration, human trafficking, exploring the history of the country during and after the war for independence, up to the current events and the painful condition that the country is currently going through, that of a military dictatorship that holds the youth of the country hostage. His novel *Raġwā sawdā'* was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction and is one of the most significant works of the Arabic-speaking Eritrean literary diaspora. It narrates the story of Adal, a boy who will take on multiple names during his life, and becomes Dawit, Dawoud, David, through his passage from the "Blue Valley" prison camp, in Eritrea, to the Endabaguna refugee camp in Etiopia, to the Gondar camp, in Etiopia, to the capital

where he works as a journalist for Al-Jazīra TV. He combines his activity as a journalist with an intense production of fiction. He has published five novels, including *Samraweit* (2012), *Marsa Fatima* (2013), *Rimbūd al-Ḥabašī* (The Abyssinian Rimbaud, 2021). For a survey on the Eritrean Arabophone literary diaspora see D. Comberiat and X. Luffin, *Introduction. Literatures of the Horn of Africa*, in *The Literatures from the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti*, D. Combierati and X. Luffin, (eds), Roma 2018.

Addis Abeba, to flight eventually to Jerusalem. Each of these stages involves a new name and a new narration of the self, in a story of plural and labyrinthine identity, whose pieces the reader must reassemble in order.

The Multiple Stories of Adal /Dawit/Dawoud/David

Adal⁷ is a “fruit of the struggle”, one of those Eritrean boys born at the front from the unofficial relationship between two soldiers. He was raised collectively by different women at the front and was destined to become a servant of the homeland. The novel, divided into 29 untitled chapters, tells its story in the third person, maintaining a generally internal focalization, thus conveying the protagonist’s impressions and thoughts. The opening scene depicts a community of men aboard five departing buses: it will later become clear that this is a group of Falash Mura about to leave Ethiopia for Israel. Among them, “the man sitting by the window in seat 37” does not seem to join in the singing or share the group’s festive mood. That man, who will only respond to the question “What’s your name?” at the end of the third chapter with “Dawit,” is Adal, portrayed here, in the first chapter, as he appears in the final stage of his long journey.

⁷ Contrary to what happens in the novel, for the sake of clarity I will maintain a double naming of the character throughout this essay: the first name will always be the childhood name, Adal, while the second name indicated after the slash will be the one assumed from time to time, depending on the circumstances.

The detail of the crowd outside the buses, pressing forward and trying to “protest” against that fortunate chance to emigrate – a chance granted only to a select few – immediately suggests to the reader that this journey represents salvation, both for the group and for the man in seat 37:

في الخارج حشود أخرى، ما إن رأت الحافلات حتى علا ضجيجها.
 جهدت الشرطة في إبعاد المتجمهرين الغاضبين وهم يحاولون عرقلة مسير القافلة.
 فتح بعض الركاب النوافذ فوصلت إليه الأصوات واضحة: «خدونا معكم»، «نحن
 يهود أيضاً»، «لعنة الله المرتشين».⁸

Crowds thronged outside the gate, and when they saw the buses, they grew even louder. The police tried to restrain the angry crowd blocking the convoy. Some of the passengers had opened their windows, and the voices from outside reached them clearly: “Take us with you!” “We are Jews too!” “God damn those of you who bribed your way on”.⁹

The question of identity, its discursive dimension, and the inclusion or exclusion from a community that determines one’s identity is immediately addressed since the first pages.

Adal’s identity as a former child soldier remains, as far as possible, hidden and “protected” by a network of narratives, identities and an incessant movement, which in turn leads him to assume new identities, the experience of the reality of war gives the narrative a precise dimension, that of the “race” for salvation. The reader discovers in the next chapters that Adal/Dawit comes

⁸ Ġābir, *Raġwā sawdā'*, pp. 12–13.

⁹ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 4.

from the refugee camp of Gondar – a camp hosting predominantly Sudanese refugees – where he recovered after being escaped on foot from the camp of Endabaguna in Etiopia. In Gondar he meets Saba, the woman who intuits his past as a boy-soldier and helps him forge a new identity to try to migrate with the Falash Mura, and who also instructs him on the rites and characteristics of this community:

”لا تنسَ كلمة مما اتفقنا عليه.“
 أوماً مرافقها برأسه، وهو يفركُ بتوتو كَفِيه المتعرقَتين. طوال الطريق من
 الفندق الى المخيم كانت سابا تُعيد على مسامعه
 تعليمات (...) ”ها قد عدتْ أخيراً بعد ان أضاعك والدك إلياس قبل خمسة
 عشر عاماً في الطريق من مَكلي الى غوندار (...).
 و كان والدك لا يزل تحت وطأة فُقد والدتك راحيل...“¹⁰

“Don’t forget event one word of what we agreed”.

He nodded, anxiously rubbing his sweaty palms, the whole way from the hotel to the camp, Saba had repeated her instructions [...]. “You have finally returned after you and your father, Elias, were separated fifteen years ago, on the way from Mekele to Gondar [...].

Your father was still grieving the loss of your mother, Rachel...“¹¹

This (fake) personal narrative developed by Saba to introduce Adal/Dawit to the Falash Mura community is just one of the many personal narratives that the character will interpret, each time facing the “culture of scepticism”¹² that permeates the humanitarian environment. As a refugee, he is obliged to “perform” at his

¹⁰ Ġābir, *Rajwa sawdā’*, pp. 21–22.

¹¹ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 15.

¹² Limbu, *Literary Representation*, p. 312.

best his own “identity”, without ever revealing it in full: being a soldier and son of the front. One of the moments in the text where the theme of “storytelling” as a “topical moment” of the migration narrative is ironically subverted is when Adal / David recites in front of a UNHCR official a version prepared to satisfy the parameters foreseen by international law for obtaining refugee status. However, the story does not have the desired effect on the official:

صمت ديفيد قليلا دون أن يرفع رأسه، فيما الأوروبي ينتظر أن يكمل
حكايته (...). طالع للمترجم بقنور، قيل أن يقترح بطريقة مباغتة:
”ما رأيك أن ننقل الى الوادي الأزرق مباشرة، وليتك تشرح في الحديث
عن التعذيب فيها بداية“ (...)
تتنح ديفيد وهو يحاول استعادة طقس الحزن الذي كان عليه، وبمسك
بخيط الحكاية من جديد:
”في الوادي الأزرق كان التعذيب وجبة يومية. لم يكن الهدف أن نصبح
جنوداً أقوياء، بل عبيداً خانعين. عبودية أبدية لا فكاك منها...“
”ومتى تفتت أمك؟“
غطى ديفد وجهه بيديه وغاص في شعور مختلط بين الحرج والغيبظ وقد
تأكد أنه يسرد قصة سمعها الأوروبي آلاف المرات...¹³

David fell silent for a moment, keeping his head down, while the European waited impatiently for the story to continue. [...] He gave the translator a bored look and then made a shocking suggestion: “How about we go straight to the Blue Valley, and you start with the torture there.”

[...] David cleared his throat as he tried to get back into the rhythm of his sadness and to take up the thread of his story once again. “In the Blue Valley, torture was our daily bread. The goal wasn’t that we become strong soldiers but that we be submissive slaves. It was an eternal slavery, inextricably...”

¹³ Ġābir, *Raġwā sawdā'*, p. 84.

"And when did your mother die?"

David covered his face with his hands, plunged into a swirl of embarrassment and rage. This confirmed it: he was telling a story the European had heard thousands of times".¹⁴

The story Adal/David was about to tell was full of emotional details artfully constructed, but by reciting it the protagonist senses that the official has already heard this story a thousand times and paradoxically decides to impress him by revealing his true story ("A new idea took hold of him, filling him with energy. *He would tell the truth*".¹⁵ Faced with Adal's true story, the European official comments: "This is new"¹⁶ and asks him to continue. The reader's perspective, at this point, aligns itself with that of the European official who listens to the story: according to this new personal narrative Adal has been taken from Massawa to Asmara at the age of 17, and of having been confused by chance, by a Sudanese refugee, at the Endabaguna refugee camp. From this misunderstanding his idea of mingling with the Falash Mura community was born.

In this ironic and unsettling treatment of the migration policies by the international agencies that deal with collecting the stories of asylum seekers, the author seems to establish a counter-narrative of migrant identities. This narrative emerges from the margins, from the initiative of the migrant who develops a strategy auto-

¹⁴ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

mously (in this case, the counterintuitive choice is to tell the truth). This character brings to mind the character of "Tipu" in the aforementioned *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh. Precisely to satisfy the need of migrants to have adequate stories, Tipu becomes an active storyteller and content creator. He produces digital content for other refugees – videos, memes, and stories – embodying a form of grassroots storytelling that challenges dominant, dehumanizing discourses on migration.

Through the fictional character of Adal the author demonstrates a playful positioning towards that long tradition of novels that exemplify the transformative impact a migration to a "developed" Country and recognition of Human rights can have on the life of a migrant from the Global South. An example of these narratives is the "affirmative *Bildungsroman*",¹⁷ namely those narrative structures that align with liberal humanist ideals, especially the ideals underpinning modern human rights discourse and plot this alignment into the form of a coming of age novel.

In these narratives, the personal growth confirms or affirms the legitimacy of the existing societal structures and promotes the idea that inclusion within these systems is both desirable and possible for everyone. This contrasts with more critical or resistant narratives, which might portray maturation as alienation or question the legitimacy of the dominant order.

¹⁷ J. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, New York 2007, p. 147.

The character of Adal, the boy soldier, does not allow the evolution and conciliation foreseen in the developmental pattern of the “Bildungsroman” linked to a situation of passage from marginality to a First World, under the leading principles of the Human Rights. Adal’s character, in fact, on the one hand, exacerbates and takes to the extreme what is a normal condition of forced migrants: that of producing a credible story, which invariably portrays them as victims, trapped in risky lives. On the other hand, the character escapes this same victimizing logic, for a specific choice of the author, who explained in an interview that he had deliberately created a protagonist who commits crimes and “lies”, to highlight the multifaceted world of the forced migration, steering the reader away from feeling a false sympathy for the weak.¹⁸ The author poses a question to the reader, asking whether one could observe a person lying and stealing and still recognize that this individual represents the health of a larger global system.

The trajectory of Adal’s story, therefore, marked from the very beginning by guilt and an ancestral marginality, can only lead to a tragic ending and, above all, to the failure of every attempt to be accepted by a place, a city, a society, or an institution. While the camps of Endabaguna and especially Gondar prove to be harsh and competitive environments, it is upon his arrival in Israel that Adal/David will endure the most extreme form of racism. The “welcome” offered by the Israelis

¹⁸ Interview given by the author on May 17, 2024.

is as far as possible from a warm reception: "Lama bata la'aretz? Lama bata?"¹⁹ "Why did you come to the country? Why?", is the question a girl in Jerusalem asks him as soon as he gets off the bus).

Ḥāġġī Ġābir thus reprises in *Black Foam* the ironic portrayal of the "rhetoric of the Human Rights," already present in *Marsa Fatima*.²⁰ The narrative of empowerment, traditionally associated with the discourse of Human Rights, is both exposed and undermined by the deep disillusionment that emerges when the bureaucratic machinery comes into contact with individual stories. On the one hand, there is the jaded lens through which these cases are viewed; on the other, the very nature of the stories themselves – blatantly false and pre-packaged to fit the criteria set by the 1951 Geneva Convention or the 1967 New York Protocol: claims of persecution, well-founded fear for one's life, and the absence of criminal acts. This last condition, as previously mentioned, is openly violated by Adal, who – as it is revealed at the end of the novel – hits violently, immobilizes, and robs a fellow refugee camp member while taking his place on the bus to Jerusalem. This crime, revealed at the end of the protagonist's journey, sheds new light on the character and his continuous

¹⁹ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 47.

²⁰ Part of the plot takes place in the Shagarab Refugee Camp, in Sudan, where a vague and non-existent protection of the UNHCR should help the refugees. The novel highlights the tensions that run through the camp, a true city of exiles, camped in makeshift places and waiting to be able to access the European or American Eldorado.

narrations. The reader understands that Adal/David is also running away from himself and not only from his condition of a young soldier.

Adal in Israel: Archaeology of an Inner Landscape

Adal seems to protect the most hidden part of himself from the spiral of stories surrounding him. The only account of his childhood is entrusted to Aisha, a girl he meets while staying in the Eritrean refugee center in Endabaguna, with whom he has a brief relationship. She asks him what it's like to fight on the front lines: "I'd had not childhood in any village or city. The first time I opened my eyes it was on a battlefield. I had moved from one babysitter to another, and they were all my mother. The fighters took turns tying me to their backs. With them I would go up hills. Down across the plains, and stretch out in the trenches".²¹

Aside from Aisha, this character on the run seems to "find" himself only a few times throughout the plot. One rare moment of introspection is the journey from Gondar to Israel, when, together with the other migrants, he makes a stop at the "Canada Park", a national Park built on Palestinian villages destroyed after 1967 (Imwas, Yalu, Beit Nuba). Today the area is a naturalistic site that visually erases the memory of those settlements. Setting a scene at this Park is a narrative

²¹ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 91.

gesture aimed at denouncing the erasure of Palestinian historical memory and the normalization of colonial violence²².

The choice of Canada Park also creates a strong contrast between the apparent serenity of the natural landscape and the traumatic past that it conceals. The place is not only a backdrop, but it is part of the storytelling across the novel: it represents the illusion of harmony, the overwriting of trauma, and the silent exclusion of marginalised subject (the former Palestinians villagers and the new forced migrants). Adal/Dawit is symbolically “sitting” on that very repressed trauma, unable to merge with the environment, rejected by history as he is by the places he has passed through. The character of Adal/Dawit is therefore brought closer – even if, at this point in the plot, only at the level of logical juxtaposition – to Palestinian uprooting and exile than to the present of the Israelis who marginalize him. In any case, the setting of this scene in Canada Park is meant to create a rupture – or opening – in the narrative.

الوقت قد مرّ ثقيلًا على داوت في كندا باركز
 قد اختار أن يجلس على مصطبة خشبية ليست بعيدة عن الحافلة، بينما
 توزع الركاب المبهجين على زوايا المنتزه (...)
 من أسمارة إلى إنداباغونا إى نل أبيب والآن إلى القدس، وكل مكان
 يلفظه إلى السطح كرجوة، دون أن يمنحه التفاتة تُبقيه
 في العمق.²³

Time had passed slowly from Dawit in Canada Park. He chose to sit on a wooden bench not far from the

²² Ibid, p. 121.

²³ Ġābir, *Raġwā sawdā'*, p. 142.

bus, while the other passengers spread out joyfully throughout the park [...]. From Asmara to Endabaguna to Tel Aviv, and now to Jerusalem. All of these places had tossed him to the surface, like foam, without allowing into their depths.²⁴

In Jerusalem, Adal/Dawit takes his room and has his first encounter with his two roommates. He visits the Holy Sepulchre, the part of the Old City with which he shares a special connection, and where he seems to identify with the place itself. It is precisely there that the oldest and most hidden part of himself begins to surface:

في أعمق نقطة لديه كان لا يزال أدال ، ذلك الشاب المنتمي للجبال الأودية
وحدها، للأماكن المنبئة عن كل صلة، رغم ما أصبح يثيره هذا فيه من حزن
وإشفاق على نفسه.²⁵

“Down in his deepest core, he was still Adal, the young man who belonged to the mountains and valleys, to the places that were cut off from any origin, despite the sadness and the self-pity this aroused in him”.²⁶

The reader feels like he is in a narrative in the form of a spiral, which returns with small variations, following a pattern. Again, the protagonist is put in dialogue with a natural landscape, this time an Eritrean landscape, that seems to contain the most authentic part of Adal, ideally contrasting with the operation of cultural cancellation hidden behind the verdant Canada Park.

²⁴ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 121.

²⁵ Ġābir, *Raġwa sawdā'*, p. 179.

²⁶ Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 66.

Adal/Dawit's multiple identity meets the European desire for linearity when Dawit meets the anthropology researcher Sarah, who is looking for Eritrean refugees for her doctoral research and who will end up being a sort of guide for the character. The young man introduces himself to her as a member of Beta Israel, and then introduces himself as an Eritrean who pretended to be a Falasha. With Sarah, idealistic and motivated by sincere curiosity, Adal/Dawit experiences the enchanting power of his own narration, and for the first time has the clear impression of being something more than a victim ("He loved how he had come to control her through his voice").²⁷ However, he feels in check when he discovers Sarah's research topic: the sexual life of asylum seekers. Sarah prompts with her question "which of your names do you want me to call you?" a long interior monologue in the youth's mind, in which the interlocutor seems to be the reader ("Should he say Dawoud, with all the defeats and losses that old names carried? Or should he choose David, a new name, yet with many bitter experiences? Or should he stake with the infant Dawit, without knowing for sure whether it was any different from its predecessors? his many names were a lot like him and his amputated life!").²⁸

Adal/David's identity is mutilated, just like his life: broken, incomplete, deprived of something essential. Names thus become not only a reflection of his internal fragmentation, but also of his inability to belong

²⁷ Ġābir, *Raġwā sawdā'*, p. 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

entirely to a place, a culture, a history. The character of Adal / Dawoud / Dawit is therefore, in his evasiveness, a symbol that can take on the name and face of many other characters.

Adal himself identifies with the *raġwa sawdā'*, the black foam. This is a kind of sea foam destined to remain on the surface, unable to “put down roots” and delve into the realities he encounters. This self-representation of the narrator as foam brings to mind Jose, another protagonist of a migratory narrative, the well known novel *Sāq al-bambū* (Bambu Stalk) by the Kuwaiti author Sa'ūd as-San'ūsī. The protagonist, a Filipino-Lebanese boy torn between two identities, identifies himself with another natural element, namely the bamboo plant, which, thanks to its rhizomatic roots, takes hold in any soil²⁹.

Functions of storytelling in *Raġwa sawdā'*

According to Raipola, who investigates storytelling in an inter-species dimension storytelling “is an ability that allows us, as human individuals, to manage time by discovering or imposing links between different cultural and material phenomena”.³⁰ In the condition of the mi-

²⁹ M. Censi and M.E. Paniconi, *Migration Narratives in Contemporary Arab Novels* [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Migration Literature*, G. Adair, R. Fasselt and C. McLaughlin (eds.), London and New York 2025, pp. 445–447.

³⁰ J. Raipola, *Unnarratable Matter: Emergence, Narrative, and Material Ecocriticism* [in:] *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman*

grant, where the individual has very little agency, storytelling is an activity that compensates for this lack of agency and allows the construction of a supra-individual dimension where a memory of the dispersed migrant siblings is maintained, or where a new identity is built through words.

In the case of *Black Foam*, we can therefore certainly speak, building on Raipola's definition, of "restorative storytelling", that is, a form of narrative that, without offering solutions, offers a "narration", even a plural one, to a fractured existence. The story does not offer simple solutions, but through the very process of narration, the character "acquires the time" necessary to process his trauma. Storytelling, at the same time, fulfils the task of protecting the subject from his own past, also made of shadows and crimes; it helps to silence the conscience, or to create bonds, in a world of emotional desertification such as that of those who face forced migration, fleeing from a ferocious dictatorship like the Eritrean one.

Storytelling is also a transformative space³¹ that, in the emotional desertification of forced migration, allows a space of relief and consolation for those who find themselves migrating alone. Storytelling can also become a game, a habit or a way of weaving relationships with others, that the narrator explicitly talks about: "Storytelling was a dangerous game, and the tale could

and *Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, S. Karkulehto (ed.), New York and London 2020, p. 263.

³¹ J. Sellman, *Arabic Exile Literature in Europe. Defamiliarizing Forced Migration*, Edinburgh 2022, p. 60.

slip from your hands at just the moment you thought it was fully yours... Still, he felt he was a good test of his ability to narrate, or rather to fabricate. After all, narration was fabrication”.³²

When his deception is exposed, the protagonist is expelled from the Falasha compound. He feels lost, destined to wander from country to country without rest. In old Jerusalem he is noticed and “saved” by Muḥammad ‘Ālī, a refugee of African origin who considers himself “Palestinian”, active in the Palestinian cause, who hosts him in his home. It is interesting to note here how Adal/Dawoud, in the end, takes refuge in the definition and in his identity as a Muslim, which had never been emphasized before, nor had it been configured as an important part of his identity. Through the character of “Mariel” (Muḥammad ‘Ālī) he discovers an entire Afro-descendant community in Jerusalem: “His curiosity was piqued after he discovered that Mariel was among the descendants of those immigrants who had come to Jerusalem from Sudan, Chad, Nigeria and Senegal”,³³ who in some cases joined the Palestinian resistance.

In the game of mirrors that opens up in this mutual recognition, the protagonist feels at first almost overwhelmed, and later decides to settle in that community: “He was embracing the idea of black foam, now and no longer trying to get past it. Let the surface be his place -what of it? He hadn’t ever experienced settling into the

³² Jaber, *Black Foam*, p. 70.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

depths of things".³⁴ After only a month of staying in the only environment that seemed to welcome him, he is killed by a bullet fired by an Israeli soldier, who mistook him for a terrorist, while crossing the area in front of the Damascus Gate.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Adal is a character with a composite and labyrinthine identity, which is enriched with new details every time the protagonist, driven by the instinct to escape from his past, faces a new environment. In some parts of the novel Adal is a non-reliable narrator, which contributes to confusing the reader's mind, who at the end of the novel feels disoriented.

Who is the real Adal? The protagonist repeatedly asks this question to himself, in the form of dramatic monologue or through the mouths of other characters. The question does not find in *Raġwā sawdā'* a single and definitive answer, just as the question of the migrant's identity remains open.

In dealing with the theme of forced Migration, the novel introduces a look aligned with the new trends in global narrative: the novel puts to the fore a kind of migration that moves (at least for a large part of the book, if we exclude the great migration of the Falash Mura to Jerusalem, in any case aligned with a city of the global North) from edge to edge, questions black

³⁴ Ibid., p. 216.

identity and south-south migration from the point of view of a chameleon-like-character, who changes his identity, names and his own story to find minimum stability in life.

The novel surpasses the “improvement rhetoric” of migration, which had characterized migration narratives towards Europe in the early 20th century Arab and aligns itself with a contemporary, global, integrated (often multi-species) sensibility of the representation of migration.

Finally, the novel itself, in addition to addressing the theme of storytelling as a restorative practice in a context of limited agency, is configured in its interest as a restorative narrative. In fact, the novel takes shape from a news story, the killing of an Eritrean migrant at the hands of an Israeli. The real victim – Habtom Zerhom, an Eritrean asylum seeker killed in 2015 during a terrorist attack in Be’er Sheva, after being mistaken for the attacker and lynched by a mob – was quickly reduced to a “mistake” in public and media discourse. In this sense, *Black Foam* can be read as a response: it restores voice, face and human depth to someone who has been treated as an interchangeable presence, “another African Migrant” in Jerusalem.

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František Ondráš

**The mystical and historical
imagination in *Šawq ad-darwīš/The
Longing of the Dervish*
by Sudanese writer Ḥammūr Ziyāda/
Hammour Ziyada**

Abstract: The interweaving of historical events with narrative imagination is in the focus of many literary works. In the case of Hammour Ziyada's novel *The Longing of the Dervish* readers have the opportunity to follow events with historical consequences and mystical undertones, which enable the author to present history through human emotions and everyday attitudes, revealing the true nature of people. The plot of Hammour Ziyada's novel is based on historical events which took place in Sudan at the end of the 19th century. The historical context is very important, as the novel depicts a key period in the modern history of Sudan and Egypt, set in the wider context of colonial expansion in Africa. The author treats the story of Bakhit Mandeel/Baḥīt Mandīl, a former slave newly released from prison and seeking revenge for his imprisonment. His release coincides with the end of the Mahdist war – a British colonial war fought between Egypt and a section of Sudanese society seeking independence under their religious leader, Mahdi, and when Mahdi and his followers are defeated and

force to flee. The novel's narrative is characterised by its symbolic representation of social and political conflicts between Christianity and Islam, and consequently between the North and the South, at the level of the relationships between individual literary characters and the political forces influencing the life of Sudanese society in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. The study explores the relationships between the characters, in which historical facts and mystical visions linked to the desire for revenge intertwine, as well as the emerging love relationship, which the author sees as a timeless element that transcends the boundaries of country and culture.

Keywords: Sudanese Novel, Historical Novel, Mystical Imagination, the Mahdist War, Hammour Ziyada

Introduction

This study focuses on the conceptualisation of narrative imagination and symbolic horizons in the novel *Shawq ad-darwīsh* (The Longing of the Dervish, Dār al-ʿAyn, al-Qāhira, 2014), by Sudanese writer Hammour Ziyada/Ḥammūr Ziyāda (born 1977). He is the author of several stories and novels: *A Life Story from Umm Durman* (short stories, 2008), *Sleeping at the Foot of the Mountain* (short stories, 2014), *al-Kūnġ* (novel, 2010), and *The Drowning* (novel, 2022). The novel *The Longing of the Dervish* won the Naġīb Maḥfūz Medal for Literature in 2014 and was shortlisted for the 2015 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Ḥammūr Ziyāda is not only a brilliant author, but also an excellent journalist and an outstanding expert on Sudanese history and archival research. His profound knowledge and refined methods

enable him to create original stories set in a world marked by dramatic conflicts and tragic human destinies.

Methodological approaches

The imaginative representation of history in the novel can be analysed from a variety of conceptual and methodological viewpoints. The fundamental research concept involves intertwining fictional literary characters with verified historical facts, resulting in a narrative that oscillates between an engaging chronicle and a national allegorical narrative.

During my research on the topic, I have encountered a whole range of highly specialised literary critical studies, that provided different perspectives on the semantic and contextual relationships within the novel. These publications guided me towards further methodological books, including Paul Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations* and Richard Boothby's *Death and Desire. Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud*, and *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward W. Said. Ricoeur's work in particular formed the wide basis for theoretical reflections on historical time and traces. This can be considered the starting point for a historian's practice, demonstrating that wherever the present exists, so did the past.

The narrative of the novel *The Longing of the Derwish* is divided into two basic levels – historical and mystical – which intertwine and complement each other. While the historical level represents the supporting

structure of the novel's plot, the mystical level is the carrier of the tension that results from the emotional outbursts of the characters, as well as from the natural emotional ties that bind the literary characters to the setting, which includes a variety of historical and local elements. Some historical, political and social aspects are made into artifacts. As long as these aspects are thought of as the "facets" of a particular society, they provide its ultimate characterization. These facets can be referred back to the global societal phenomenon due to the noteworthy feature of the latter. The facets ensure the transition from global history to the special histories.¹

When we consider these entities, we are dealing with "constructs" whose basis in narrative and, all the more so, in experience, is less and less apparent. We can no longer discern in these constructs the equivalent of what we call project, goal, means, strategy, or even occasion and circumstance. In short, at this derived level we may no longer speak of a quasi-character. The language appropriate to second- and third-order entities is too far removed from that of narrative, and even more so from that of real action, to retain any trace of its indirect derivation. It is only by way of the relation of derivation of second-order entities starting from first-order ones that this filiation can be reactivated.²

The most apparent, and perhaps also the most intractable one, proceeds from the undeniable asymmetry

¹ P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*, Chicago 1984, p. 196.

² *Ibid.*, p. 219.

between the referential modes of historical and fictional narrative. Only history can claim a reference inscribed in empirical reality, inasmuch as historical intentionality aims at events that have actually occurred. Even if the past no longer exists and if, in Augustine's expression, it can be reached only in the present of the past, that is, through the traces of the past that have become documents for the historian, still it did happen. The past event, however absent it may be from present perception, nonetheless governs the historical intentionality, conferring upon it a realistic note that literature will never equal, even if it makes a claim to be "realistic".³

In this sense, fiction would borrow as much from history as history borrows from fiction. It is this reciprocal borrowing that authorizes my posing the problem of the interweaving reference between history and narrative fiction.⁴ History and fiction can only realise their respective intentions by adopting each other's intentions. We have addressed the issue of concretisation on two occasions: firstly, when we followed in Hayden White's footsteps to clarify the relationship between the representation of historical consciousness and the past itself using the concept of analogical grasping; and secondly, when we described reading from Ingarden's perspective as the actualisation of a text understood as a score to be performed.⁵ Even though the development of documentary research has weakened their scientific

³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Čas a vyprávění III* [Time and Narrative III, Chicago 1990], Praha 2007, p. 261.

reliability, certain great historical works have an enduring quality precisely because of their poetic and rhetorical art, which is perfectly adapted to the way they see the past.⁶ Just as history itself, with certain characteristics, calls for a certain fictionalisation, does fiction also have features that lend themselves to historicisation?⁷

The plot summary and structure of the novel

The novel opens with the downfall of the Mahdist state, which leads to the release of the protagonist, *Baḥīt Mandīl*, from prison. His life consists of nothing but suffering as a result of his long imprisonment. *Baḥīt Mandīl*, the protagonist of the novel, comes from Khartoum. Excluding several periods of imprisonment, his life is characterised by constant travel between Sudan and Egypt, and between Khartoum and Omdurman. He is released from the as-Sāyir prison, where he had spent seven years being tortured, tormented and insulted.

This marks the beginning of the novel's story and a series of dramatic events motivated by revenge against those responsible for his imprisonment. His release coincides with the arrival of Egyptian troops in Sudan to support the British. This intervention results in the defeat of the Mahdist state and Mahdī's followers fleeing the country. Following the downfall of the Mahdist regime, *Baḥīt* was assigned to serve the arriving Egyptians

⁶ Ibid., p. 266.

⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

and English as a slave. His duties also include caring for *Theodora*, the novel's female protagonist.

After getting to know each other better, *Bahīt* feels that *Theodora* is an inhabitant of the land of angels. He cannot believe that this 'white foreigner' treats him with dignity and protects his decency, and that respect forms the core of their relationship. *Bahīt* sees how beautiful his relationship with *Theodora* is. *Theodora* rejects all forms of slavery, works in Khartoum and feels a sense of belonging in Sudan. However, after her family returns from Egypt to Greece, the situation changes radically. She becomes a slave in the merchant's house in Khartoum, but refuses to obey him. Forced to convert to Islam, she tries to escape but is eventually caught by the merchant's spies. Her master has her killed. *Bahīt* decides to avenge *Theodora's* death. He is arrested and eventually decides to face death, convinced that the most important mission in human life is to fight for the freedom of others.

Title of the novel

The title of the novel refers to the desires and wishes of *Bahīt Mandīl*. After his release from prison, he seeks to find his way to himself and to the people he will associate with and who will co-create his new world and life. Desire is a symbol of his search for the freedom that was denied to him during his imprisonment. Clearly, this is a semantic contrast to spilled blood and, above all, bloody revenge. It is a tool for revenge and retribution.

It is important to note that the Mahdist Revolution is the most significant event in 19th century Sudanese history. Sudan is often considered marginal or peripheral in comparison to Egypt. Compared to other historical events in Sudan, the Mahdist Revolution is the most thoroughly researched period and continues to attract the interest of Sudanese and foreign researchers alike. Ḥammūr Ziyāda's novel can be considered a narrative text that clearly features elements of a historical novel.

As Northrop Frye says, historical fictions are not designed to give insight into a period of history, but are exemplary; they illustrate action, and are ideal in the sense of manifesting the universal form of human action.⁸ The repetition of certain common images of physical nature like the sea or the forest in a large number of literary texts cannot in itself be called even "coincidence", which is the name we give to a piece of design when we cannot find a use for it. But it does indicate a certain unity in the nature that fiction imitates, and in the communicating activity of which fiction forms part. It is possible for a story about the sea (river) to be archetypal, to make a profound imaginative impact.⁹

The novel's text is built on binary relationships involving naturally formed pairs of literary heroes living their destinies in logically given binary local entities, which are bounded by Greece to the north and Sudan to the south. These entities are linked by the Nile, a real

⁸ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays by Northrop Frye*, London 1990, p. 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

and mystical river that plays an integral role in both Sudanese and Egyptian history.¹⁰ As an important element of the shared cultural and historical heritage of Sudan and Greece, Egypt plays a significant role in interpreting the events and fates of the fictional characters moving between these three geographical entities. As Freeman says, for the Greeks Egypt was the fount of wisdom, and some believed that Egypt was the origin of their own civilization.¹¹

Sources of inspiration

As mentioned above, Ḥammūr Ziyāda is a great expert on Sudanese history, drawing his knowledge from chronicles and other historical documents. In his book *Aqwāl man ‘āšarū aḥdāt 1884* (Testimonies of Witnesses to

¹⁰ “The stability of Egyptian civilization arose from the unique set of circumstances centred of the ecology of the Nile valley. The valley had virtually no rainfall of its own. The water for its irrigation came down the Nile in annual floods, most of which originated in summer rains in the Ethiopian mountains. With the floods came silt, and the combination of fertile soil and ready water could produce yields of crops three or four times those from normal rain-fed soil. As important as the wealth of water and soil was the regularity with which the floods came. The Nile started to rise in May, and from July to October was high enough to flow out over the flood-plain of the valley. This was akhet, the time of inundation. Four months later, by the beginning of November, the waters had begun to fall. The land could be marked out and ploughed and sowed. This was peret, the time ‘when the land reappeared’. The final four months of the year, shemu, from March to June, brought the harvest”. Ch. Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome. Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford 1996, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

the Events of 1884), Sudanese historian Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sālim claims that the literary character of *Baḥīt* was based on a real person who lived during the Mahdist state.¹²

Baḥīt's life revolved around two aspects of self-discovery: coming to terms with his own fate, and sharing his life with *Theodora*, a woman of Greek parents born in Alexandria.¹³ The fate of this couple forms the thematic and ideological basis of the novel's narrative structure. Their desire for love and freedom is portrayed as a theme with a series of mystical consequences. Within Arabic literature, there is a certain degree of similarity between the story of *Baḥīt* and *Theodora* and the tale of the ill-fated, platonic love between *Mağnūn* (*Qays Ibn al-Mullawwah*) and *Laylā* (of the al-Āmir tribe) during the Umayyad period.¹⁴

¹² M.N. Muḥammad 'Alī, *Šawq ad-darwīs – bayna al-maḥkī wa-al-maskūt*, al-Jazīra, <https://www.ajnet.me/culture/2014/10/30/%D8%B4%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%87> [Access date: 30.10.2014].

¹³ *Theodora* has strong ties to Alexandria, which she considers her home. The city's significance as a centre of Christianity undoubtedly plays a key role in this relationship. Unlike the Antioch school, which was grounded in realism and biblical teachings, the Alexandrian school combined the influences of Judaism and Hellenistic thought (including mysteries, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism) with Christianity. See *Christianity and Monasticism in Alexandria and the Egyptian Deserts*, G. Gabra G. and N.T. Hany, (eds.), Al-Qāhira 2020.

¹⁴ A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Longing for Love: The Romance of Layla and Majnun*, [in:] *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. K. Seigneurie, Hoboken, NJ 2020, Vol. II, pp. 1-12.

Muḥammad Nağīb Muḥammad ‘Alī draws a comparison between *The Longing of the Dervish* and the novel *Az-Zaynī Barakāt* (1974) by Ğamāl al-Ġīṭānī due to their similar narrative methods.¹⁵ This reflects a recent historical period (the reign of President Gamal Abdel Nasser) through the prism of political events during the reign of the last Mamluks, as well as the tabooing of certain historical facts and drawing of analogies and parallels with the present.

Another possible source of inspiration for *The Longing of the Dervish* is the novella *Fātīnat al-Mahdī aw isti‘ādat as-Sūdān* (Mahdī’s Beauty, or The Recapture of Sudan), written by Douglas London. Translated into Arabic by Wahba Effendi Fahmī and published in 1900 by Ilyās Anṭuān Ilyās, owner of the Al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Aşriyya printing house in Al-Fağğāla, under the title *Historical Romance Novel*. This opinion was expressed by the author of a previous article, literary critic ‘Āmir Muḥammad Aḥmad, among others. It is highly likely that Ḥammūr Ziyāda was familiar with this text and that it may therefore have inspired the creation of the character of *Theodora*. The heroine of the novel is an Italian girl living in Egypt, with whom an English officer falls in love. She and her family leave for Sudan, where she works in the governor’s palace. Following the outbreak of the Mahdist uprising, her father is imprisoned in Khartoum’s as-Sāyir prison, while the girl and her mother are captured by the Dervishes and the girl is handed over to the Mahdi as war booty.

¹⁵ Muḥammad ‘Alī, *Šawq ad-darwīš*.

Clearly, the only feature that both narrative works have in common is the time and place in which most of the events take place. While Douglas London's text corresponds to the traditional colonial discourse of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ḥammūr Ziyāda's novel is a postcolonial allegorical epic based on his in-depth knowledge of Sudanese society and its modern history. Both dramatic plots portray the Sudanese people's resistance to colonisers regardless of skin colour or nationality, paying special attention to the role of 'noble' Europeans who bring order and security yet become the target of violent rebel groups.

The Longing of the Dervish is an open-ended novel. While *Baḥīl's* life is characterised by an ongoing struggle for dignity, *Theodora* experiences various stages that shape her personality. Deprived of her name, she is called *Eve* instead of *Theodora*. Instead of enjoying work at a missionary school, she is a humiliated and persecuted slave. Her love for Khartoum turns to hatred. Despite her deep understanding of Sudanese people, she realises that this country on the banks of the Nile is not her home. She is not desperate; she is simply looking for answers to questions she never thought she would have to deal with.

The story culminates in a focus on the dramatic and revolutionary events that accompanied the changes in Sudanese society following the collapse of the Mahdist state. In this context, *Theodora* emerges as a literary character, revealing herself in a wholly new light. The reader discovers new beginnings, as well as *Theodora's*

ideas and plans for the future. The following lines speak of hope for a better tomorrow, one without suffering and pain. However, it is possible that the planned escape will only bring a crown of thorns.

“She will run away. She will return to her world. To the air of Alexandria and the whisper of her beloved sea. Tonight is her last night before she leaves. Once she’s back, she’ll forget all about this place. She will start her life over again. Perhaps she will go to Greece or emigrate to London and publish her notes there. She will have a new life. Maybe she will even get married. Her husband won’t be a black slave. She will not live in a courtyard with pigeons” (Ziyāda, p. 418).

The historical horizon of the novel’s narrative

The role of historical events in the novel’s narrative is based on the author’s intention to create a coherent text characterised by unexpected situations that draw the reader in. The transitions between chapters are a defining feature of *The Longing of the Dervish*. They increase the reader’s anticipation, making them eager to find out how the story will unfold. The almost lapidary statement that *Theodora* wrote down all the happy moments she experienced in this ‘black European country’ in her diary and in letters to her mother (p. 175, i.e. the end of Chapter 5, which begins with an explanation of the Orthodox mission residence on p. 172) is replaced

by a chapter that chronicles events with precise historical dates, emphasising the text's factual aspects.

“Sunday, 6 February 1881”

“The governor of Khartoum lives in great luxury. He has a magnificent palace with many servants and slaves, where he dwells with his family” (p. 176).

The description of the palace fits into the novel's text, which is full of colourful and other semantic elements. Various colours of everyday objects are featured, as well as the archetypal colour black, which occupies a very special place in the narrative of the novel. It is the colour of the skin of the African servants and guards, and symbolises all things Sudanese, subordinate and controlled.

“The palace is located on the banks of the Nile, next to an area adorned with colourful lamps and a spreading cypress tree. Black palace guards perform war dances”. There is also a portrait of the Egyptian ruler who left an indelible mark on Sudanese history... “The large square dining room contains a life-size portrait of Muhammad Ali Pasha, and the table is set with crystal and silver cutlery”. The European engineer seems well-mannered, yet in a narrative steeped in religious values and spiritual ideals, he makes a serious mistake... “Despite his polite behaviour, the British engineer, who sat down near Theodora, did not pray before eating” (p. 176).

“Thursday, 10 February 1881”

“The inhabitants of Khartoum are a diverse mix of people. Their affiliation to different groups can be dis-

tinguished by their skin colour. Each ethnic group has its own unique shade, ranging from white to the darkest black. They have strange names for the colour black. A 'blue' man is someone with very dark skin. A 'green' man is someone with a dark tan. 'White' man is an odd name. Dark-skinned Egyptians are considered white, just like Europeans. They think that Turks have red skin" (p. 177).

"Friday, 11 February 1881"

"The inhabitants of Sudan belong to various nations and tribes. The largest group are black-skinned people, the original inhabitants of Africa. They are at the bottom of the social ladder. In Khartoum, they are all slaves. Their lives are simple: they are uneducated and have no skills. In their native countries, they work in agriculture and fishing" (p. 177).

The description of conditions in Sudan continues with a mention of the Nubians, who are known to literary figures in Egypt as Berbers. Arabs, on the other hand, are described as being more generous, smart and civilised.

"We can easily rid them of the last traces of their wildness. Most people living in Khartoum are merchants who work for the authorities, smoke and wear Turkish clothing" (pp. 177–178).

In March 1881 on Aba Island, located in the White Nile 150 miles south of Khartoum, Muḥammad Aḥmad Ibn 'Abd Allāh experienced several visions in which the Prophet appointed him the Expected Mahdī ('guided one'). He first informed his confidant, 'Abd Allāh Ibn

Muḥammad of his revelation and then his small circle of disciples before proceeding to Al-Ubayḍ, the Turco-Egyptian Capital of Kordofan. Here he publicly proclaimed his Mahdship and emotionally appealed to the notables and the *nās* ('people') alike to abandon this world for the new age of righteousness and justice to follow.¹⁶

The author employs a variety of semantic levels and relatively unusual methods to incorporate historical facts into the narrative text, connecting the fictional and real worlds. A number of common motifs and elements take on new meaning in the context of the narrative, either thanks to the sequence of individual events, or as a result of the emotional charge that characterises the behaviour of the literary characters and their interactions with situations. These situations are arranged in such a way that their gradual revelation to the reader creates a tense atmosphere, full of anticipation for further developments within the temporal and spatial framework. A significant feature of this narrative technique is the author's focus on the consequences of historical events that affect the literary characters. Where can they live safely? Why can't they stay where they are, or where they were recently happy? What is more important in life? A feeling of happiness or security?

One of the most significant fictional episodes begins in mid-October 1882, with *Theodora* having only two

¹⁶ R.O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan*, Cambridge 2008, p. 21.

months left of her two-year stay in Sudan. At this time, a letter arrived at the mission containing confusing information about events in Egypt.¹⁷ *Dorotha* took the letter and ran to her friend's room, where she was begged to read it aloud. It is written by *Theodora's* mother, the beautiful *Lascarina*, who has recently become a widow. In it, she tells her daughter about the bloodshed that took place in Alexandria. She describes how angry crowds killed her father and several of their European acquaintances, and the brutal acts committed by peasants who supported *Aḥmad 'Urābī Pasha* (p. 187).

Following this clear reference to well-known historical facts, the author of the letter – a Greek woman from Alexandria – draws her daughter's attention to a detail that shifts the narrative towards colonial discourse. She claims that Egyptians hate Europeans, despite the fact that they have brought them nothing but good. She continues by saying that Alexandria is no longer what it used to be, and that the whole family's life is in danger. *Theodora's* brothers have decided to return to Greece. This means that the family will return to their country of origin. It is expected that *Theodora* will join

¹⁷ In 1882, Alexandria had a population of approximately 232,000, one in five of whom was of European origin. The exact cause of the so-called Alexandria Massacre was never revealed. Most of the British press believed that Urabi Pasha and his supporters, who wanted to expel foreigners from Egypt, were responsible for the unrest. However, according to Lowell Joseph Ragatz, it was more likely to have been spontaneous unrest, which fortunately stopped before it spread beyond the local region. J.L. Ragatz, *The Question of Egypt in Anglo-French Relations 1875–1904*, Edinburgh 1922, p. 107.

them once her work in the Khartoum mission is finished.

The novel's narrative, which is both patriotic and emotional, focuses on *Theodora's* world, which collapses under the influence of devastating information. She is orphaned when her burly, robust father is killed far from home. She only learns of his death a month later. She spends the entire month living happy, contented days. At the mission school, she tells the children about God, love and the teachings of St Paul, unaware that her father was killed on the doorstep of his home. Now, however, she knows that she will never return to Alexandria.

In the novel, the image of pain alternates with poetic reflections and contemplations about the future. Alexandria's genius loci plays an increasingly important role in her life whenever her hometown, family, or the foundations of her spiritual life and faith in God are threatened. The symbolic link between her homeland and Greece is the sea, which will never flirt with her again; just as she will never hear its waves whispering her name so that the seagulls do not hear. This impressive poetic passage is followed by the literary heroine's realistic concern, as she realises how bitter and painful her fate will be.

"As a stranger, she is about to leave for a Greek country she has never seen before.

Why did God give humans the gift of separation?"

(pp. 187–188).

The mystical horizons of the novel's narrative

The mystical framework of the narrative is overlaid by *Ibn 'Arabi's* philosophy of the divine importance of the value of man and love.

"What country do you come from where angels live?

... ..

Theodora is not from here.

She's from a far country. She's in a faraway land, but she belongs to a faraway world.

Theodora was born in Alexandria. In Lower Egypt. Her parents came by sea.

She never saw Greece, where her parents came from.

Andreas Elephtherius fled across the Mediterranean after the Greek revolution against King Otto I"

(p. 65).

In the last part of the novel, there is another mention to the land inhabited by angels, which symbolises *Theodora's* noble qualities. The 'black' brother has become a man with whom the protagonist would like to have children. The emphasis on skin and eye colour makes the following words a symbolic manifesto reflecting God's all-encompassing love, which provides people with peace and security. In this context, the question arises as to what the land inhabited by angels is like. It is a place that literary heroes long for, yet no one knows its location. The theme of hope is expressed very aptly and realistically here as part of the novel's open ending.

"What country do you come from? Is it inhabited by angels?"

He replied:

'You are a unique woman.'

She heard a confession of love in that sentence, in a language she never thought he could know. It pleased her.

'I love you like a brother.' We are all God's children.

And our mother is suffering, Bahīt.

Take me to the river. I want to see the sunset.

I want to have children with your eyes and my skin colour.

He tells her before he leaves.

"Tell me, Eve, can a person experience happiness?"

Like a frightened child, wanting certainty.

But she answers him painfully.

'I won't tell you anything hopeful.

As long as you live, you will carry the burden of worry.

If you love me, you will carry the burden of worry. I know myself better than you do. What is to come may be even worse"

(pp. 435–436).

An important perspective on the place where both protagonists of the novel find themselves emerges when observing the development of each of their relationships to the environment, especially to Khartoum, to which the author devoted extraordinary attention. The author successfully depicts the characters' changing attitudes towards the Sudanese capital based on their evolving understanding of the real state of affairs and the influence of *Bahīt Mandīl*, a native of Khartoum who is well acquainted with local conditions, as well as the dangers and pitfalls awaiting a woman from the Christian environment of Alexandria in Egypt.

Bahīt yearns for a life based on equal and just treatment and is well aware of the implications of *Theodora's* life in Khartoum during a period of political conflict and

clashes between supporters and opponents of the Mahdist state. In the context of binary relationships and meanings, his character is subject to permanent contradictory tendencies. For instance, he feels both joy at *Theodora's* presence in Sudan and fear for her life and safety. Driven by genuine curiosity, he attempts to discover the true purpose of her arrival in Khartoum, a city he perceives as rife with violence and traps.

“– What has brought you here?

– God guides my steps.

He turned, startled, and shouted at her.

– Don't talk like Christians. You could be hanged from the gallows in the marketplace for saying that.

... ..

– But if they want to hang me, you'll save me, won't you, Bahīt?

Did he answer enthusiastically?

– I will do the impossible to protect you.

– Why?

– Why what?

– Such as why? Why will you do the impossible to protect me?

He was shaking and at a loss for words. She waited for his answer, sad looks flitting from her face.

– Because I'm worried...

– You're my black brother”

(pp. 67–68).

Colour symbolism in the novel

Colours have a really important role in ancient Egyptian and Sudanese history and mythology. When studying a novel, it is essential to consider the role of colour in

the lives of literary characters and how this influences their thinking and behaviour. The Egyptians, as inhabitants of the Nile Valley, the Sudanese have shared this land with them throughout history, believed that they were set apart from the people who lived in the surrounding countries (Greece, Libya, Ethiopia). The ancient word *kemet*, usually translated as Egypt, literally means Black Land, referring to the rich black soil of the land on either bank of the great river Nile.¹⁸

Black was a 'good' colour standing for fertility and rebirth, whereas *red* was a 'bad' colour standing for danger and sometimes for evil.¹⁹ For this reason, the Egyptians called the vast desert areas that made up most of Egypt's territory the Red Land in contrast to the Black Land of the valley. For many years, the south of the country was often without rain. And when rain did come, it was in the form of violent desert storms that could lead to destructive flash floods. The usually cloudless skies made it particularly easy for Egyptians to observe the stars and planets. Much early mythology may have developed to explain the movement of celestial bodies.²⁰

The symbolic horizon of the novel's characters is the antagonistic relationship between the two basic colours of the colour spectrum: white and black. Their role as semantic signs and significant narrative traces is deeply rooted in the traditional concept of the dualistic

¹⁸ G. Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology. A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 2004, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

relationship between these colours, which clearly characterise and define properties, spaces and worlds. They are thus considered lexical universals.²¹

Dorothy, a friend of *Theodora's*, is an example of how the colour white is used to depict this female character, with whom *Theodora* shares many similarities. The two girls met in Suez. They are both around seventeen years old, fair-skinned, and consider themselves Egyptian. However, *Dorothy* is proud that God created her with light skin. She feels sorry for anyone whose appearance has been distorted by blackness (p. 131).

The two girls' decision to go to Khartoum is also set against the backdrop of the colour horizon. *Father Pavlos* is the person who can give them the most reliable information about this city. When they approach him, he is sitting with his fellow Catholic priests and he tells the girls that Khartoum is the place where the Nile begins, but it is very different from the places *Theodora* knows well. The priests' appearance is dominated by their distinctive white robes, which are said to symbolise nobility, knowledge and faith.

"They (the Catholic priests) always wear bright white robes and large crosses around their necks"

(p. 131).

The novel's narrative clearly shows the author's attempts to take a coherent approach to the themes and motifs explored. This is evident in the gradual develop-

²¹ A. Wierzbicka A., *Semantics: Primes and Universals*, Oxford 1996, p. 318.

ment of the colour horizon and the seamless transition from colours to scents as additional sensory objects. When discussing the two girls' destination of Khartoum, *Theodora* asks *Father Pavlos* a question that reveals the author's intention to present an image of Sudan and the Sudanese characterised by the superiority of Whites of non-African origin, as is usually the case in colonial and postcolonial literature.

"Is the smell of black people as ugly as the colour of their skin?"

Father Pavlos reminds her of the story of Noah's sons. Ham was condemned by his father to serve his brothers, and his sons were condemned to serve their uncles' children. We bring them the message of our Lord. The more we love them, the more our Lord loves us"

(p. 132)

Although the conversation is calm, the ideological framework continues to deepen and sharpen. *Dorothy* plays a role here, representing the Egyptian counterpart of *Theodora*, who speaks very harshly and dismissively about the Sudanese. She says that they stink and smell of rotten fruit, and that their sweat is poisonous. Then, she suddenly remembers the Egyptians, whom she admires for their personal charm and kindness. *Dorothy* knows a lot about the Sudanese people because her mother told her that they are wild and volatile, like domestic animals. From *Dorothy* and her mother, *Theodora* learns that she is meant to be a shepherd of the black-haired sheep of the Lord. If not in these terrifying lands, where else should our Lord be? (p. 132).

The Nile River's mystical horizons

In the novel, the Nile is an important symbol representing the vast array of similarities and differences between Egypt and Sudan. Flowing through both countries, the Nile influences the lives of Egyptians and Sudanese alike through the different cultural settings, natural landscapes, and historical events that take place on its banks. In the novel, the Nile in Khartoum is described as wild and untamed, untouched by human hands. In contrast to the calm, exhausted Nile in Egypt, which is full of shipping traffic, the Nile in Khartoum is a mighty, turbulent river.

The Nile appeareth at thy utterance, making man live through the effluxes that come forth from thy members, making all cultivated lands to be green by thy coming, great source of things which bloom, sap of crops and herbs, lord of millions of years, sustainer of wild animals, lord of cattle; the support of whatsoever is in the heavens is thine, what is in the waters is thine.²²

The narrative text places great emphasis on the setting and the image of climatic conditions. These conditions form an important framework for the plot and, in some parts of the novel, even become characters in their own right, characterised by great power and the ability to change people's destinies.

"The air is as clear as the Nile in summer. But it clouds over suddenly and without warning. When Theodora

²² E.A. Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, London 1911, p. 387-388.

first witnessed the autumn storms, she was horrified. The sky clouded over in the middle of the day, becoming covered in a red cloud reminiscent of hellfire. Sand rained down from the sky. The wind howled, lifting clothes, ceramic pots and tree branches with great noise. From her window, Theodora watched the orange tree bend until it almost broke.

When the city is flooded with heavy rain, it becomes a vast swamp that smells of rotten fruit. Everyone is trapped where they were when it started raining. They may have to stay there for several days until it clears up. When the rain stops, however, the city is clean and fresh again”

(pp. 180–181).

As the Nile connects both countries, its image is one of the dual narrative concepts that form the backbone of the story and are the fundamental source of aesthetic values in the novel.

“(Theodora) ... something told her that she was in the waves of a river that wanted to displace the affections of Alexandria. But she resisted, and the river whispered to her:

– Nothing but the service of God. From here I will enter the kingdom of heaven”

(p. 190).

Theodora developed a deep relationship with the Nile. For her, it was not only an important link between Sudan and Egypt, but also a mystical connection – an eternal river – that held an important place in Hellenistic culture. This culture was part of the Greek heritage from which she drew her identity and spiritual strength. She admired the gardens and orchards, where many species of fruit thrived thanks to the plentiful Nile irrigation. She liked

the banana trees laden with fruit the most. She often longed for the sea. She used to say that if Khartoum had a sea, it would be the most beautiful city in the world. Her friends agreed that the Nile has its charm (p. 170).

When the literary characters talk about the Nile, they use the metaphorical expression *baħr* (meaning 'sea' or 'a body of water whose waves wash over the land'). This contributes to creating a symbolic atmosphere framed by the Nile and reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, particularly from Theodora's perspective. As a literary character, she represents an important link between the novel's historical and symbolic levels. Theodora and her extended family have a deep connection to the Nile and the city of Khartoum, which sprawls along its banks. In particular, her *uncle Papunias* and *aunt Maria* demonstrate their belonging to this city at every turn, as if they were no longer Greek or Egyptian.

"Theodora prayed to belong to the astonishing city of Khartoum. God answered her prayer. When she died a few years later on the west bank of the Nile, her body was moved to the east bank and she was buried in the city she had loved for so long"

(pp. 171–172).

The journey as a multi-faceted, symbolic narrative concept

As an archetypal narrative element, the journey plays several irreplaceable roles in novelistic storytelling. The most important of these is the typology of places, both

as geographical entities and as smaller, more specific locations, which serve to depict literary figures and their behaviour more thoroughly. This goes beyond their belonging to a place in a region or country with which they are closely related; it also reflects the depth of their relationship with that place and its significance in their lives. The image of places as seen through the eyes of literary heroes is often contradictory, stemming from the author's intention to imbue the novel with tension based on the realities of colonial governance in Egypt and Sudan.

The recurring mingling of colour characteristics with other perceptual elements is an important narrative feature, appearing plot in local and temporal narrative contexts as a disjunctive element that alludes to one of the novel's main ideological themes. Upon arriving in the Sudanese port city of Sawākin, the two girls walk through its streets, surrounded by ancient houses that resemble the buildings from *The Thousand and One Nights*. *Theodora* is conceptualised as a character who longs to explore cultural or spiritual values and to be carried away by ideas rooted in her historical awareness or knowledge of religious or literary stories. The image of Sawākin is dominated by two- to three-story houses built from coral limestone quarried from the seabed, with wooden balconies overlooking narrow streets. *Theodora* imagines *Šahrazād* sleeping in one of these houses. The significance of the site's representation is enhanced by the characteristics of its permanent and temporary inhabitants. The more minimalist

the image of a location is, the greater the contrast it creates with the surrounding streets and buildings. Whenever *Theodora* expresses her fears about going to Khartoum, Father Pavlos, reassures her by saying that it is like a little Europe (p. 133).

“He walks through the narrow streets among a mix of people. There are Turks, many Egyptians and Europeans who look like vagrants.

The locals are black and have thick skin”

(p. 133).

Theodora's literary journeys are mainly directed towards the South. This choice is not random, and examining the text closely shows many semantic and symbolic ties to this geocultural entity. The South is where the story's heroine travels; a literary toponym where significant historical events of the Arab-Islamic world occur. Lastly, it is a symbolic space with which the characters identify real or hypothetical freedom. The South is a place of spiritual pilgrimage, synonymous with freedom. In the broader context of modern Sudanese prose, the south can be seen as analogous to the symbolic journey undertaken by the protagonist in aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's novel *Season of Migration to the North*. While Ṣāliḥ's novel features a male protagonist who travels North, Ziyāda's work focuses on a female character who journeys South.

The South, the destination of the novel's protagonist, is shrouded in a variety of expectations. It represents the antithesis of the North, namely Egypt and Greece, the original homeland of *Theodora*. However, the author

focuses his narrative on the spiritual side of the South, particularly Khartoum, which Ḥammūr Ziyāda deliberately idealises as a place endowed with spiritual power. As part of the South, Khartoum is the antithesis of the North and the counterpart of sites where historical events characterised by universal importance take place. The Mahdist revolution represents a significant stage in Sudanese history that greatly influenced Egyptian–Sudanese and Sudanese–British relations. However, the specific impact of the revolution on the development of the national liberation movement in various parts of the Ottoman Empire remains unclear.

On the appointed date, *Theodora Eleftherios* began her journey to Sudan (p. 127). She was accompanied by a number of close friends, *Father Pavlos*, and a large group of Catholic faithful. She trusts them all, and their presence makes her feel safe. She is full of anticipation for the new home and happy life that await her at the end of the journey. On 1 January 1881, they left Suez. Their ship sailed across the Red Sea for three days. *Theodora* was happy; she had followed God's call and felt free for the first time in her life.

Evidently, *Theodora* is enjoying her journey to Sudan. She has a clear idea of what awaits her in her new home. Driven by a desire to escape the sins that weigh her down, she seeks forgiveness in a faraway place.

“If the Lord is pleased with you, you will feel free”
(p. 128).

The ship on which she travels resembles a mythical ark, offering her the chance to contemplate human sins

under the clear, moonlit sky. *Theodora* is torn between her desire to serve God and her despair at the thought that a man – the son of God, *al-insān ibn ar-Rabb* – is committing acts that she herself bitterly regrets (p. 128).

Today, *Theodora* is sailing south from Suez to Sudan, eager to embrace her newfound freedom. The reader can follow her journey as she travels to Khartoum, where her services are in demand from both sinners and Orthodox believers who own grocery stores selling clothing, kitchenware, meat and vegetables. *Theodora* believes that it is only among these people, in this pagan land, that she can become a saint. In Alexandria, she served God because she was burdened by her sins. In Khartoum, however, she will be able to lay that burden to rest and devote herself to God. Now, only God can satisfy her soul (p. 130).

In the novel, the journey to Sudan takes the form of dreamlike visions that come true during the protagonist's stay in the port city of Sawākin, the first stop in Sudan. Although it might seem that the literary heroine, coming from Egypt, would not be surprised by the city's traditional oriental character, the opposite is true. Sudan is a dream destination for *Theodora*, and her journey to Khartoum, where she will live in future, is filled with insights and impressions that emphasise the novel's overall tone, in which wishes and desires seem within reach. *Theodora* lives in the thrall of her dreams and fantasies. These form the real and imaginary framework of her life in Sudan during one of the most dramatic periods of Sudanese modern history. The oriental

atmosphere of the following quotation has an Orientalist subtext and reflects the author's portrayal of Sudan during the Mahdī's reign, when the idealised journey to serve God was replaced by violence and oppression.

"Theodora is living a dream.

At dawn, to the sound of the muezzin's call, he rides out of the mosque of Sawākin in a caravan of camels.

It is as if she were Šahrazād leaving Baghdad in the midst of the glorious Arabian Nights ... a caravan of twenty-one camels ridden by the missionaries and three servants, the caravan leader 'Īsā and two guides, five horses for the guards, disappearing in a haze over the sea outside the city of Sawākin to plunge into the desert potholes behind the city.

... ..

Theodora watches them from above, on the back of a camel, and feels like an Abbasid princess travelling from Baghdad to al-Karkh. She could be the daughter of a Muslim caliph, being taken to marry a prominent king. She has never seen a desert like this, but she has read about it in books. It is more astonishing than all her imaginings"

(pp. 141–142).

The allegorical context of places

As Simon Schama says, landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructed of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. It should be also acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making

metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery.²³

The author pays great attention to places used for spiritual, educational or other pious purposes, describing them in detail. He provides a precise description of the Orthodox mission building and its site. This is located in a district surrounding the Great Mosque, which was constructed by Khurshid Pasha in 1830 when the foundations of the Khartoum agglomeration were being established.

“Behind the main entrance to the Orthodox mission building was a long corridor that ended in a spacious room. The morning sun shone through the large windows with colourful stained glass into this room”

(p. 173).

This is one of the city's largest and busiest quarters, consisting of four main streets and a number of magnificent palaces and consulates of European countries. Here you will also find the Catholic mission church, the Protestant mission temple of the Prussian church, and the seat of the Orthodox mission.

“The Mission Building is made of fired bricks and is divided into two wings: the North Wing and the South Wing. The building is surrounded by a large garden. The densely wooded garden resembles a small forest. Birds of all sizes frolic there. A small-stone-strewn path leads through the garden to the building's entrance, which is shaded by four ficus trees”

(p. 172).

²³ S. Schama, *Landscape and memory*, New York 1995, p. 61.

In comparison to the impressive mission building in the middle of a beautiful, spacious garden, the school where *Theodora* teaches appears simple. Its cramped conditions are offset by the activities carried out by this institution. The school is a modest building made of unfired bricks which the mission rents from a Turkish merchant to hold classes and provide health services (p. 178).

Theodora's life in Khartoum is filled with hard work. She teaches at the mission school on Tuesdays and Fridays, while *Dorothea* teaches on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Almost every aspect of *Theodora's* personality has a spiritual dimension. The author of the novel has created a mosaic in which her thoughts, behaviour and actions complement each other. A significant part of the narrative focuses on *Theodora's* emotional life, particularly love as a fundamental human emotion. She is portrayed as a highly educated and devout woman who has the ability to pass on her knowledge of faith, history and mythology to anyone willing to listen. One example of this is her retelling of the story of the ostrich who exalted himself above others and did not respect God the Creator.

“When God created the birds, they all said:
‘If God wants me to fly, then I will.’
But the ostrich said,
‘I have wings, so I will fly.’ He did not mention God’s will.
As a result, God punished the ostrich by depriving it of
the ability to fly, while the other birds could still fly”

(p. 168).

Theodora's character resembles that of a saint: a loving Mother of God who shares her affection with her neighbours. She has a close bond with the children she teaches, who listen joyfully to her interpretations of the Bible and stories from the lives of the saints. Most of the children are from Greek and Egyptian families, but there are also Ethiopians and black Sudanese children among them. Most of the black children were orphans, taken in by the mission. They live in poor neighbourhoods which *Theodora* never visited during her four-year stay in Khartoum, but she heard incredible stories about them.

"They watched the sun turn the whole world bright red
as it set in the west"

(p. 171)

Conclusion

The novel *The Longing of the Dervish* by Ḥammūr Ziyāda reveals several parallels and comparisons relating to the two areas of study. It is perhaps precisely this duality between history and mysticism that establishes the fundamental semantic and symbolic framework within which the fates of the literary characters unfold, thus fulfilling the author's intention of creating a novel that recounts the coexistence of Christians, Muslims, Sudanese, Egyptians and Europeans against the backdrop of dramatic historical events that shaped the destinies of Arab countries and the socio-political development of Muslim Africa in the 20th century.

The Longing of the Dervish is not a historical novel, but rather a narrative work based on rich material that stimulates the reader's imagination. The main theme is the story of literary protagonists who symbolise the journeys and fates of hundreds of real or fictional characters who could find themselves in similar situations to their literary counterparts. Understanding the novel's text undoubtedly requires the perception of a wide range of multi-layered fantasy images. Narrative imagination is an artistic starting point and a creative instrument that serves to create the fictional world or worlds of the novel.

The fundamental question, whether spoken or unspoken, concerns responsibility for the events with which the literary characters must deal in their lives. They live at the height of colonial rule in Sudan, a country torn apart by the competing power interests of Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. Set against a clear historical and political backdrop, *The Longing of the Dervish* explores the theme of responsibility for the past and present (in a fictional time frame), raising deeper and more thoroughly structured questions about Sudan's colonial past and postcolonial present. The most pressing theme is the obvious and hidden traces of a foreign presence in this African country, whether military, administrative, spiritual or cultural. These traces affect the human psyche and physical body, and are depicted in the novel's text, creating a timeless picture of colonial oppression and injustice.

The novel explores the symbolic connections (narrative traces) between geographical locations. Sudan is the central narrative toponym, while Egypt is depicted as a cultural and civilisational landscape stretching along the banks of the Nile. The Nile plays an important historical and mystical role in the novel. Given the context of the novel's events, it is clear that the Nile plays an important narrative role in the lives of the literary characters. Even though the novel's heroes travel far from the Nile, it remains in their memories and fantasies as a link between their homelands and a symbolic tie to their glorious history.

The novel is a multi-layered work with vast potential for interpretation. In terms of its content and, to a certain extent, its narrative structure, it can be considered a literary form that follows on from aṭ-Ṭayyib Šālih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*. The novel's protagonist, *Theodora*, is caught between two different worlds and cultures. She is a sensitive and perceptive girl searching for God. The natural path to God for her is to enter a convent and work in an Orthodox mission in Sudan, a peaceful and pleasant place to live. Her time in Khartoum is an extremely important period in *Theodora's* life. Here, events and stories intersect to shape the historical consciousness of the novel's heroine and the other characters who influence her fate.

Theodora is a fictional character with deep roots in the historical context of 19th century events. Her love for Khartoum develops into an iconic relationship involving allegorical images of the imaginary paradise

she conceived during her travels through Egypt and Sudan. Her desire to merge with the city and its inhabitants is what led her to find her way into their hearts. *Theodora* perceives Khartoum as the centre of Sudan, where historical events, spiritual currents and natural phenomena collide. She is an archetypal figure, balancing the fulfilment of sacred duties with a loving devotion to the people she meets and the places they inhabit.

The *desire* as keyword of this postcolonial text dies in much the same way as *Theodora*, who is taken captive, refuses to obey her new master's will, and is killed while trying to escape to Egypt, that is, out of Sudan, which has become her new home and, to some extent, a place of fulfilled desires. The *dervish* embodies a person with extraordinary qualities, determination and a strong sense of accountability.

The literary *dervish*, as represented by *Baḥīt*, forms the human counterpart to *Theodora*. Like him, she is convinced of the importance of freedom, spiritual values and ethical principles, which constitute the driving force behind their lives. The author of the novel has succeeded in creating an allegorical parallel between the two main characters, who represent different worlds, religions and cultures. However, the novel gives them the opportunity to share a common destiny and even exchange roles, meaning that *Theodora* could be considered a dervish too. The 'black' protector of noble values deserves the same, or even greater, appreciation and recognition as the man from the north who comes with good intentions to live in his country.

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Magdalena Kubarek

**Love, Oil and Power.
Reading Patriarchy and the Social
Status of Women in “Al-Ḥubb
fī Zaman an-Niṭṭ” by Nawāl as-Sa’dāwī**

Abstract: Researchers engaged in studies of Asian and African countries have identified existing correlations between the oil industry and the social status of women. American political scientist Michael L. Ross puts forth the hypothesis that in Muslim countries, it is not Islam itself, but rather the influence of oil, which is responsible for the discriminatory practices against women in the labor market and their consequently low status in oil-dependent societies. These issues are also reflected in the literary works of Arab male and female writers, particularly in the genre known as “petrofiction” (Ghosh, 1998). One of the most significant works examining the intricate interconnections between capitalism, patriarchal structures, the oil industry and the status of women in Arab society is the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-niṭṭ*, (Love in the Time of Oil; title of English translation: *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*), by the well-known Egyptian writer and activist Nawāl as-Sa’dāwī (Nawal El Saadawi, 1931–2021). This novel has not been subjected to significant analysis, particularly in Arabic, while in the Anglophone world it prompted academic reflection as part of a broader examination of the oil encounter in literature, including the

human-environment-oil relationship. The paper addresses issues that are part of the concerns of scholars engaged in the study of petrofiction. It poses a question regarding the portrayal of oil in Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī's novel and the ways in which it is represented and made visible as a source of women's enslavement in oil-dependent societies.

Keywords: Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī, Nawal El Saadawi, Oil, Modern Arabic Literature, Petrofiction, Petro-Patriarchy

*It's not," she says, "a matter of who's good, who's bad.
It's a matter of who has the power –
who has the power and writes books".¹*

Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī

Researchers engaged in studies of Asian and African countries have identified existing correlations between the oil industry and the social status of women. American political scientist Michael L. Ross suggests in his thought-provoking article that the oil-based economy favors conservative values and reinforces patriarchal structures. Interestingly, he challenges the popular belief that Islam is the main factor limiting women's rights in Middle Eastern countries. In his article, Ross conducted a statistical analysis in which he compared the influence of Islam and oil on various indicators of women's rights (labor market participation, political representation). Based on the study, he concluded that after taking oil's influence into account, Islam ceases to be crucial in limiting women's rights. Countries rich in oil resources show stronger patriarchal norms and institutions than

¹ Quoted in: A. Amireh, *Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World*, "Signs" 2000, Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 215.

countries with a similar cultural profile but without oil. In Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Bangladesh, but without large oil resources, women have a relatively strong position in politics and the economy. In Arab countries without large oil reserves (e.g. Morocco, Tunisia), women are doing much better than in oil-producing countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar). High oil revenues increase men's wages and state social transfers, which reduces the need for women to work. In turn, the lack of work outside the home weakens the ability of women to organize, leading to lower representation of women in governments and parliaments, which perpetuates male dominance in the political system.²

It is hard to disagree with Ross that women in Middle Eastern countries currently have limited rights and lower representation in the public sphere not so much because of Islam, but as a result of the influence of the oil industry, which has effectively hampered the emancipation of women in the 20th and 21st centuries. As history shows, although in the Middle East women's suffrage came later than in the West, the development of feminist movements was already evident in the 20th century. Turkey (1934) and Iran (1963) granted women the right to vote relatively early on, but many Gulf states did not do so until the end of the 20th century (e.g. Kuwait in 2005).³ In the Gulf countries, women did

² M.L. Ross, *Oil, Islam and Women*, "American Political Science Review", 2008, Vol. 102, No. 1, pp. 107–123.

³ For more on women's rights in the Middle East, see: *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights*, S. Franceschet, M.L. Krook, N. Tan (eds.), London 2018.

not start entering the labor market en masse until after the 21st century. However, the influence of petro-capitalism on Arab women's struggle for independence on the right to education, work, and control over their own bodies should not be overestimated. According to Meriem Aissa, gender and politics scholars have challenged the arguments of Ross, and the relationship between oil and women's rights is more nuanced, pointing out that women in the MENA region were already subject to subordination prior to the emergence of the oil economy⁴. It certainly depends on other factors, such as the conflict between feminism and religious tradition, and the role of authoritarian governments that are keen to maintain the status quo⁵. One of the most significant works examining the correlation between capitalism, patriarchal structures, the oil industry, and the status of women in Arab society is the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*,⁶ (Love in the Time of Oil; title of English translation: *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*)⁷, by Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī.

⁴ M. Aissa, *Kuwait: Why Did Women's Suffrage Take So Long?* [in:] *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights*, S. Franceschet, M. L. Krook, N. Tan (eds.), London 2018, p. 209

⁵ See also: S. Bush, *Jordan Quotas and Change in Women's Political Representation* [in:] *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights*, S. Franceschet, M.L. Krook, N. Tan (eds.), London 2018, p. 510.

⁶ N. as-Sa'dāwī, *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*, Al-Qāhira 1993. In the article, I rely on the edition released by N. as-Sa'dāwī, *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*, Windsor 2017.

⁷ N. El-Sadaawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, London 2001.

Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī (1931–2021) – Life and Works

There's no doubt that the life of Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī, a leading Egyptian doctor, feminist, writer, and psychiatrist, was marked by continuous resistance. According to Ramzi Saiti and Ramzi M. Salti, from the publication of her first novel, *Muḍakkirāt ṭabība* (1958; translated as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 1988), until her death in 2021, Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī has been subject to criticism from various groups, including local politicians, religious figures, readers, and literary critics. She was dismissed from her position as director of education in Egypt's Ministry of Health and as editor of "Health" magazine in 1972 following the publication of *Al-Mar'a wa-āl-ǧins* (*Woman and Sex*), which appeared in 1971⁸. Subsequently, she was imprisoned by the then-Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, an experience that served as a catalyst for her *Muḍakkirātī fī siġn an-nisā'* (1982, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*). It was not until his assassination in 1981 that she was released.⁹ Notwithstanding the challenges she has faced, As-Sa'dāwī has produced a prolific body of work, including theoretical studies as well as a wide range of literary works, including novels,

⁸ R. Saiti, and R. M. Salti, *Paradise, Heaven, and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El-Saadawi*, "Journal of Arabic Literature" 1994, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 153. According to other sources, this work was published in 1972: S. Smith, *Interview with Nawal El Saadawi (Cairo, 29th January 2006)*, "Feminist Review" 2007, No. 85, p. 59.

⁹ Smith, *Interview with Nawal El Saadawi*, p. 59.

short stories, essays, and plays¹⁰. Given Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī's prominent status and the controversy surrounding her views, it is not surprising that her literary and non-literary works have been the focus of much scholarly attention, most often in the context of Egyptian feminism. *Imra'a 'inda nuqtat aṣ-ṣifr* (1975; translated as *Woman at Point Zero*, 1983) is perhaps one of As-Sa'dāwī's best-known works.¹¹ Other well-known novels by her include *Maut ar-raḡul al-wahīd 'alā āl-arḍ* (1960, translated as *God Dies by the Nile*, 1985), *Al-Ġā'ib* (1970, translated as *Searching*, 1991), *Suqūṭ al-imām* (1987, translated as *The Fall of the Imam*, 1988), *Al-Uḡniyya ād-dā'iriyya* (1977, translated as *The Circling Song* 1989), *Ġannāt wa-Iblīs* (1992, translated as *The Innocence of the Devil*, 1994), *Aṣ-Ṣūra al-mumazzaqa: riwāya tamṭiliyya* (The Torn Picture: A Play-like Novel, 2006), *Zayna* (2009, translated as *Zeyna*, 2011). The novels As-Sa'dāwī has written were developed over many years, reflecting the various phases of her life and work. These novels certainly constitute a literary manifesto of her views, but as critics point out, they can also be categorized into different literary genres, and they are written in substantially different styles. Moreover, the central female character in each comes from a different class,¹² to show the complexity of women's experiences in the Arab world. As-Sa'dāwī's narratives often combine realism with elements of symbolism, allowing

¹⁰ Saiti, and Salti, *Paradise, Heaven, and*, p. 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹² Saiti, and Salti, *Paradise, Heaven, and*, p. 153.

for a deeper understanding of the psychological and social aspects of women's lives.¹³

Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī About Capitalism, Neocolonialism and Patriarchy

In many of her publications and statements, As-Sa'dāwī criticizes Western narratives about the "oppressed women of the East", which often fail to recognize that this control is not only local but part of global capitalist and colonial structures.

The oppression of women and poor classes constitutes an integral part of the capitalist patriarchal system preponderant in most of the world, West and East, North and South, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Hindu. Gender, class and race discrimination are born of developments in history that made one class rule over another, one race dominate over another, and men rule over women, in the state and in the family unit, which constitute the core of patriarchal class relations.¹⁴

What is more, As-Sa'dāwī goes much further in her accusations against the West. She links the discovery and exploitation of oil deposits with post-colonial expansion and an aggressive policy to secure the interests of the world's economic powers in the Middle East in order to maintain control over the world's energy resources. As-Sa'dāwī considers the establishment of

¹³ Smith, *Interview with Nawal El Saadawi*, p. 59.

¹⁴ El Saadawi, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi. A Reader*, London 2010, p. 13.

the State of Israel and the Iraq War as a result of this political, economic and military involvement of the West:

“Were it not for oil the Gulf War would not have been waged in January 1991. Were it not for oil thirty-one armies led by the United States would not have reduced Iraq to ruins, and the Iraqi people to a nation dying of starvation. Were it not for oil British politicians and generals would not have planted Israel in the land of Palestine, nor would the world have turned against Mossadeq in Iran, nor would our region still be ruled by kings and emirs who can hardly read and write.”¹⁵

She reiterates this stance in an interview, where she directly links oil to ongoing colonial aggression and regional suffering:

“Oil was the reason for the Gulf War. Oil has been the reason for the continuing colonial aggression against us in the Arab world for the past-half century Arab rulers including the Gulf kings and princes collaborated with the neocolonizers. Millions of women in our region and men suffer poverty, ignorance and disease.”¹⁶

She further expands on this idea by identifying oil as a long-standing driver of conflict across the globe:

“Since the discovery of oil in Iran, in Saudi Arabia, in the Arab world, in Venezuela, anywhere in Israel, war has not ceased. Even Israel has been planted in Palestine because of the oil. So, oil has been a disaster for all these countries, including Iraq.”¹⁷

¹⁵ N. El Saadawi, *Walking Through Fire: A Life of Nawal El Saadawi*, trans. S. Hetata, London 2009, p. 21.

¹⁶ El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi: Reader*, London 1997, p. 7.

¹⁷ Smith, *Interview with Nawal El Saadawi*, p. 61.

As-Sa'dāwī also criticizes Western narratives about the supposed benefits of economic development for oil-rich countries and challenges the widespread belief that financial aid flows from the Global North to the Global South. In her view, the reality is quite the opposite: money is in fact being funneled from South to North. Moreover, the so-called development, imposed and controlled by the West, serves to reinforce and deepen inequalities and the divide between rich and poor, not only on a global scale but also within regions. The technology exported from the North to the South, instead of stimulating genuine progress, perpetuates structures that protect the interests of the North.¹⁸

Development in such circles is visualized as a process of cultural change, of modernization along the lines of Western life, of technological advance which would permit better utilization of the resources, quicker and bigger profits, and more effective and efficient ways of pumping out oil from under the shifting desert sands or the depths of ocean beds. All this under one condition, and one condition only: such resources must continue to serve the interests of international capitalism and the multinational giants that still rule over a large part of the world. Development must be submitted to the laws of unequal exchange and ruthless exploitation. Some Arab and Islamic countries have been the theatre of such modernization processes at the hands of national governments and rulers largely controlled by

¹⁸ El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi: Reader*, pp. 12–13 and 29.

Western interests. The result has been nothing more than a form of pseudo-development¹⁹.

She also makes more provocative statements, challenging mainstream notions of progress and development. As she puts it: "Development is just another word for neocolonialism. We need to be very careful when we use the word development".²⁰

Without question, the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*, written in the aftermath of the 1991 Iraq War, like many of As-Sa'dāwī's fictional works, is a manifesto of her views on neo-colonialism and capitalism as forces that shape Arab societies and contribute to the strengthening of patriarchal structures of oppression of Arab women: "It deals, that is, in fictional terms with the ideas and themes contained in the non-fiction writings".²¹

***Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift* - the Plot and Main Ideas**

Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift, is seen as an important example of feminist petrofiction, which combines the issues of gender inequality in the face of the prevailing socio-cultural norms and social roles with an analysis of oil imperialism. The plot is set in a region that is evocative of the Arabian Peninsula, where women are subordinate to men and the entire reality is dominated

¹⁹ El Saadawi, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi*, p. 44

²⁰ El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi: Reader*, p. 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

by the oil industry. It tells the story of a young, unnamed woman who becomes a prisoner of an oppressive petro-patriarchal system. The main character, a married archaeologist working for an excavation institute, travels to deserts in search of evidence of pre-Islamic matriarchal cultures. The fact that she left without her husband's or her boss's permission constitutes a serious breach of social norms and results in an investigation into her disappearance. However, her expedition is spontaneous, lacking any logistical security or planning. When her efforts to unearth statues of goddesses prove fruitless, she is left without shelter and takes advantage of the help of the locals, who take her to a nearby island, surrounded by oil, and give her away as a wife to a man living there. So ultimately, the expedition ends in failure: escaping from a system that restricts her personal and professional development (subordination to a man in a loveless marriage and discrimination in a department managed by a misogynistic director) and becoming entangled in an even more oppressive system. Trapped on the island, the protagonist has to serve her husband. Like all the local women, she is forced to work for an oil company. Her duties include carrying oil-filled vessels. The protagonist, aware of her past, begins to question her current situation. She engages in acts of rebellion, refuses to serve men, tries to continue the excavations. She also attempts to spark resistance among other women, but is rejected. Her efforts are successfully neutralized by the forces around her, but this does not mean that *As-Sa'dāwī* denies the sense

of resistance; rather, she shows how complicated the network of oppressive structures in the Arab world is. As the author herself stated the novel: “describes what happens when its heroine tries to escape her oppression in all its forms”.²²

Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift employs elements of surrealism and hallucinatory narration to show the omnipresence of oil as both a material and ideological force. It is a metaphor for the oppression that influences social and political relations. Oil corporations and governments of oil-producing countries are presented as forces that not only exploit the land, but also the bodies and minds of their citizens.

Reception of *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*

Unlike As-Sa’dāwī’s other works, the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift* (Love in the Time of Oil) has received little analysis, commentary, or interpretation—particularly in Arabic-language scholarship. Most analyses of this novel are found in English-language publications. The only Arabic-language study I was able to locate is an undergraduate thesis authored by a student at Universitas Islam Negeri in Jakarta. The central argument of this thesis is that As-Sa’dāwī misrepresents historical reality by claiming that Egyptian women once enjoyed greater autonomy than they do today. Interestingly, the

²² Ibid., pp. 7–8.

thesis entirely overlooks the fact that the novel is set in an oil-producing country, instead focusing solely on the author's interpretation of Egyptian history.²³ The analyses of the novel published in English language deals mostly with the phenomenon are part of a broader examination of the oil encounter in literature, including the human-environment-oil relationship.²⁴ It is noteworthy that this particular novel by As-Sa'dāwī has received research primarily from female scholars. The author of this article is one among them. The reasons for the lack of interest in the novel's themes among male scholars are not easy to ascertain.

One of the researchers reflecting on *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nifṭ* is Bushra Mahzabeen, who published an article entitled *Petro-culture as an Oppressor of Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Nawal El Saadawi's Love in the Kingdom of Oil*.²⁵ Mahzabeen's article touches upon issues frequently explored within feminist frameworks, although the researcher broadens the research perspective by incorporating elements, exploring the relationship between man and power; the dynamics of sexuality, power, and religion;

²³ I.N. al-'Azīza, *Riwāya Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nifṭ li-Nawāl as-Sa'dawī. Dirasa iġtimā'iyya adabiyya*, unpublished master's thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri, Jakarta 2013.

²⁴ S. Deckard, *Gendering Petrofiction: Energy, Imperialism, and Social Reproduction* [in:] *Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere*, S. Balkan and S. Nandi (eds.), Pennsylvania 2021, pp. 41–58.

²⁵ Bushra Mahzabeen is an assistant professor at Dhaka University in Bangladesh. It is not surprising that she took an interest in El Saadawi's novel, as her research focuses on petrofiction, the subject of her ongoing doctoral dissertation.

and the power dimensions among oil, women, and the environment.²⁶ Mahzabeen identifies ideas in the novel that align with theories viewing oil not as a driver of technical, industrial, or social progress, but rather as a destructive and oppressive force. The development of the oil industry and the excessive exploitation of resources in the pursuit of profit, according to the researcher, result in the devastation of the natural environment and the strengthening of the traditional patriarchal system. For Mahzabeen, oil in *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nifṭ* functions as an oppressor of both nature and women: “Here, oil acts as a double-edged tool in the hands of the existing misogynistic patriarchal social structure as an oppressor of nature and women.” However, while the novel does suggest a certain parallel between the fate of women under petro-patriarchy and that of nature exploited by petro-capitalism, it may be an overreach to interpret As-Sa’dāwī’s 1992 novel as articulating the specific anxieties of the Anthropocene, particularly those tied to ecological catastrophe.

Sharae Deckard²⁷, in contrast, places *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nifṭ* in dialogue with *The Dark Bride*, a work by Colombian writer Laura Restrepo. The researcher refers to the postulates of Sheen Wilson²⁸, a well-known

²⁶ B. Mahzabeen, *Petro-culture as an Oppressor of Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Nawal El Saadawi’s Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, “Crossings” 2028, Vol. 9, 2018, p. 75.

²⁷ Sharae Deckard is Associate Professor in World Literature at UCD. Her research interests intersect environmental criticism and world-systems approaches to world literature, ecology, and culture.

²⁸ Sheen Wilson is professor at the University of Alberta, co-founder & director of the international Petrocultures Research

American representative of humanities research on energy and fuels, who claims that patriarchy and the oil industry are interrelated and support each other. Deckard emphasizes that the oil economy has an impact on the shape of the social structure. She points out that in *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*, oil becomes a metaphor for the omnipresent control, violence and exploitation of women, from forced labor to the patriarchal system to the mechanisms of reproducing the class structure of society.

The last of the three articles is a publication by Leyla Hendow,²⁹ who analyzes *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift* in terms of its depiction of the issues of power, visibility, and invisibility of women in a patriarchal world centered on oil³⁰. Like Mahzabeen, Hendow points out that for As-Sa'dāwī, women and oil are two valuable but male-controlled "resources" that are simultaneously objectified and subordinated.

Group (an interdisciplinary, international network focused on exploring how oil and energy shape society, culture, politics, and the environment. Founded in 2011 by scholars like Sheena Wilson and Imre Szeman).

²⁹ Layla Hendow was awarded her PhD by the University of Hull. Her research focuses on the intersection between environmental studies and contemporary literature, and the ways in which literature can promote change and environmental consciousness.

³⁰ L. Hendow, *Oil and Women: Invisibility as Power in Nawal El-Saadawi's Love in the Kingdom of Oil* [in:] *Seen and Unseen: Visual Cultures of Imperialism*, S. Fotouhi and E. Zeiny (ed.), Leiden 2017, pp. 93–94

***Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift* and Petro-Patriarchy**

It is impossible to understate the uniqueness of As-Sa'dāwī's text, which is, first of all, one of the few examples of petro-prose by women in world literature, and secondly, one of the few female voices addressing the impact of oil on the shape of contemporary Arab societies and the implications of their material and immaterial dependence on the hydrocarbon market. As-Sa'dāwī's novel also stands out for the extremely tangible presence of oil, which is virtually present on every page. It thus contradicts the principle formulated by Amitav Ghosh³¹ – the scholar who coined the term and formulated the definition of petrofictions – who claimed that oil is “invisible in literature”. *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift* is one of the few petrofictions in which oil is not only thematically central but also openly and almost tangibly present. The protagonist inhabits a world where oil seems to fall from the sky, seeping into her home and daily existence, emphasizing that in oil-producing countries, oil is never invisible or abstract, but violently and overwhelmingly present. Sharae Deckard characterizes As-Sa'dāwī's portrayal of oil as a form of “oil pornography” – the continuous, violent penetration of this raw substance into private space. The scenes in which the protagonist sees black spots of oil on the bed, in the kitchen, in taps, symbolize not only society's depen-

³¹ A. Ghosh, *Petrofiction*, “New Republic”, 02.03.1992, pp. 29–34.

dence on oil, but also its destructive impact on the body and psyche of women.³²

Layla Hendow takes up a similar reflection on the visibility and invisibility of oil and the visibility and invisibility of the Arab woman in As-Sa'dāwī's novel. In the patriarchal regime of oil, women are constantly watched by patriarchal institutions, husbands and employers. Hendow refers to Foucault's model of the *panopticon*, pointing out that women are trapped in a surveillance system in which they are aware that their behavior is being judged and controlled, even if there is no one physically watching them.³³

As Deckard notes in the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*, the woman is reduced to the role of "oil wife", where her value is measured in terms of her work for the system. She refers to the concept of Matthew Huber, who wrote that oil in Western societies was presented as "domestic help" for women, while in petro-states, as Deckard notes, it becomes a tool of female enslavement:

"This oil-suffused household is neither a paradise of petrolic good life nor a domestic refuge from the toil of work but rather an infernal nightmare. Within the novel's allegorical society, all women are wives of oil, and the hidden abode of reproduction is cast as a horror show in which oil suffuses every aspect of daily life down to the walls, wherein the housewife is doomed to perform eerily repetitive chores, evicted from the sphere of formal labor."³⁴

³² Deckard, *Gendering Petrofiction*, p. 49.

³³ Hendow, *Oil and Women*, pp. 80–81.

³⁴ Deckard, *Gendering Petrofiction*, p. 49.

In *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-niḥt*, the patriarchal society not only exercises control over women but also deploys religious and economic narratives to justify their subjugation. As-Sa'dāwī consistently critiques ruling elites for instrumentalizing religion to legitimize their power and maintain control over citizens, not only within the Islamic world but also globally. She points to the Saudi, Iranian, and Israeli regimes as examples of such abuse, asserting: "I am against the religious state, whether Islamic, Christian, or Jewish".³⁵

On the one hand, traditional patriarchal culture, with the advent of oil, acquired new resources and mechanisms of control, evolving into what can be described as petro-patriarchy – a structure that mirrors broader systems of domination over women within petro-regimes. On the other hand, reading As-Sa'dāwī's text, it is hard to resist the impression that both women and men are victims of the prevailing patriarchal relations. While men may occupy a slightly higher position within the social hierarchy, they too suffer under the oppressive conditions imposed by the oil industry – an industry governed by Western capital and local oil despots, bolstered by repressive police apparatuses. By depicting men as both perpetrators and victims, As-Sa'dāwī highlights the contradictions at the heart of masculinities shaped by the intersecting forces of patriarchy and petro-power.

According to Cara Daggett, petro-masculinity analyses examine how fossil fuel-based political and economic

³⁵ Smith, *Interview with Nawal El Saadawi*, p. 61.

systems are intertwined with forms of hegemonic masculinity and authoritarian male dominance:

“Petro-masculinity derives from hegemonic masculinity, which encourages men to dominate both the social sphere and nature. Hegemonic masculinity inherently expresses misogyny, a “system that polices and enforces the norms of patriarchal rule,” as described by feminist philosopher Kate Manne.”³⁶

As Deckard observes, petro-masculinity in As-Sa’dāwī’s novel is portrayed as inherently unstable, grounded in the hollow promises of oil wealth and the illusion of power it creates.³⁷ Their masculinity is performative and fragile, constantly threatened by the very systems that claim to empower them. In this context, oil does not solidify male dominance but rather exposes its vulnerabilities, revealing how petro-power relies on symbolic gestures of control rather than genuine agency.

As Hendow notes, As-Sa’dāwī critique encompasses not only the internal patriarchy prevalent in Arab countries but also Western narratives concerning Muslim women. A prevalent tendency among Western thinkers and feminists is to portray Muslim women as passive victims of Islam, disregarding their own voices and perspectives. Contrary to this stereotype, As-Sa’dāwī presents a heroine who is active, thinking, and actively

³⁶ K. Myles, *Anthro Talks: Petro-masculinity*, <https://www.tufts-daily.com/article/2021/04/anthro-talks-petro-masculinity> [Access date: 28.02.2025].

³⁷ Deckard, *Gendering Petrofiction*, p. 46.

striving to liberate herself from oppression. However, this heroine is also confronted with the limitations imposed by both patriarchy and the political economies sustained by oil wealth and authoritarian governance.

Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift ***Versus Love in the Kingdom of Oil***

From an Arabist perspective, it is noteworthy that all English-language publication, irrespective of the theories (feminism, ecofeminism, ecocriticism) and cultural and sociological concepts implicated in the analysis and interpretation of As-Sa'dāwī's text, are based on the English translation of the novel. They analyze it in the context of petrofiction as part of world literature. The significance of the Arabic linguistic and cultural context becomes apparent in the very change of the novel's title in its English translation. The replacement of the Arabic word for "time" (*zaman*) with the English word "kingdom" reflects a conceptual shift – from a temporal framework to a spatial one. While time suggests abstraction, intangibility, and fluidity, its pairing with oil in the original title gives it a more concrete, definable dimension. The English term "kingdom", by contrast, carries specific spatial and political connotations, evoking territorial sovereignty, state structures, and particularly, the so-called oil kingdoms. This subtle but meaningful change alters the interpretive frame through which the novel is read. Although seemingly insignificant, it has an impact on the optics of interpretation.

The novel's protagonist, an archaeologist, is driven by an obsession to uncover evidence that matriarchal cultures once flourished in regions now dominated by patriarchy. These cultures venerated female deities. This narrative thread opens up an interpretive framework in *As-Sa'dāwī's* work that suggests a historical continuum: the rise of Islam – and more broadly, monotheistic religions – led to the decline of ancient goddesses, a shift that was later reinforced by modern ideologies such as capitalism and imperialism, both of which draw their material power from oil. In this view, patriarchy motivated and legitimized by religious, cultural, political, and economic forces evolved into petro-patriarchy as the global economy became increasingly dependent on oil. This structure continues to dominate, physically, emotionally, and psychologically oppressing women – and, in some respects, men as well. At the top of this system stand authoritarian rulers, shaped by traditional clan-based hierarchies and supported by Western powers eager to secure a stable oil supply. The alliance between Western-backed oil corporations and regional despots guarantees the persistent entrenchment of patriarchy in Arab societies.

The Arabic title of the novel closely echoes Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. In *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nift*, *As-Sa'dāwī* presents the discovery of oil not as a source of prosperity, but as a kind of plague – a traumatic experience endured by individuals and entire generations. While Márquez offers a saga of love as a force capable of transcending time and defying

death, As-Sa'dāwī also places love at the heart of her narrative, but here it is entangled with destruction, annihilation, longing, enslavement, and the struggle for freedom. As the author herself stated, this is a novel about suffering.³⁸ Thus, the story of the relationship between the characters isolated on the island acquires a deeply personal dimension. It explores not only the traditional gender roles perpetuated by petroculture but also delves into the psychological and biological dynamics of male and female relations. The pervasive presence of oil, both literal and symbolic, amplifies the characters' sense of alienation and helplessness, highlighting the profound emotional distance between men and women in the age of oil.

Summary

In conclusion, although the immediate catalyst for *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nifṭ* was the war in Iraq, the novel should not be reduced to a direct commentary on a single geopolitical event. Instead, it offers a broader examination of the overlapping political, cultural, and economic structures that shape contemporary Arab societies. Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī draws attention to how the rise of the oil economy has contributed to the consolidation of patriarchal and authoritarian systems, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and power relations.

The narrative demonstrates that oil functions not only as an economic resource but also as a symbol of broader

³⁸ El Saadawi, *Nawal El Saadawi: A Reader*, pp. 7–8

systemic control. It highlights how petro-capitalism, supported by both local elites and foreign powers, impacts everyday life, particularly in the context of gender relations. In this setting, patriarchy takes on new forms, sustained by the structures of the oil industry and aligned with both religious and political ideologies.

Rather than presenting women as passive victims, the novel explores their complex responses to oppression. As-Sa'dāwī portrays women navigating restrictive environments shaped by petro-patriarchal norms while seeking forms of expression and agency. This representation challenges simplified narratives and aligns with a broader feminist critique that accounts for historical, cultural, and economic factors.

The novel also draws attention to the role of storytelling as a means of articulating resistance. In one of her interviews, Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī states, "whoever writes books has the power," underscoring the potential of narrative as a tool for social and political commentary. This perspective resonates with the literary tradition of the Arab world, in which storytelling serves as a vehicle for negotiating power and asserting voice. The reference to Scheherazade illustrates this dynamic, as for her storytelling becomes a strategy for survival and influence. In this context, *Al-Ḥubb fī zaman an-nifṭ* contributes not only to the critique of petro-capitalism and patriarchy, but also to an understanding of literature as a site of critical reflection and cultural intervention.

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Hany Ismaiel Mohammad Ismaiel Abo Retaba

**Capitalism and Social Change:
A Marxist Perspective
in the Novel *Ġūʿ* (“Hunger”)
by Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī**

Abstract: Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī’s (1937–2012) literary works present the groups of the marginalized, oppressed, and simple people. His literature describes the lives of these individuals in light of the processes of marginalization and the neglect of their struggles. His novels focus on them and replicate their reality through the community of the narrative text. Therefore, this research chose the novel *Al-Ġūʿ* (“Hunger”), which is considered one of his most significant works that depicts the lives of the marginalized and oppressed, to be its theme. It is a critical study that seeks to reveal the ideological thoughts adopted by the novel “Hunger”, based on Marxist epistemology, especially since the novel has taken Marxist ideology as a central theme in its intellectual and artistic structure. The study addresses several topics, including: historical context, consumption and the commodification of the body, the creation of capitalist elites, and the capitalist heir. The study aims to reveal the role of the contemporary creator in discussing the social and economic reality of the nation, and their contribution to critiquing and opposing those changes; with the objective

of reform and continuation of modern renaissance processes. The creator with an ideological orientation focuses – through his creativity – on discussing some of the negative aspects of reality; with the aim of reforming them and spreading knowledge that enables the reader to engage positively in their cultural and social environment. The study adopted a historical analytical method to examine the intellectual and cultural structure of the narrative text, and how it resonates with social reality and its history. The conclusion highlights the role of the ideological creator in disseminating knowledge and involving the audience in creating positive interaction with the narrative text and social changes.

Keywords: Socialism, Commodification, Heir, Marginalization, Prologue, Class Struggle

Introduction

The literary work of Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī expresses the life of the marginalized, oppressed, and simple people, portraying their lives in light of the neglect they face regarding their suffering. His novels focus on them and recreate their reality within the framework of the narrative text. “The countryside remains the score of the most flowing artistic imagination for Al-Bisāṭī; likely due to his rural background and the memories rooted in it he concerns about the modesty of the countryside in comparison to the capital and the major cities of the nation, in terms of civilization, social, and cultural interest. Although the countryside in his works opens up to the city in its marginality, whether to accompany the centers of regional influence or for the strangers

to come to connect with the global context, as in the case of the glass café.¹

Al-Bisāṭī highlights the neglected details of rural life with the aim of announcing the existence of these people and placing them back on the map of the nation, so that they may be reconsidered as citizens needing more care and attention, and to be included in the national economic policies, just like others of major cities. The suffering that affects everyone is revealed in light of the important changes that have occurred in Egyptian society, and under the capitalist trend, which has begun to show its influence in everyone's life.

The narrative, with its adopted intellectual logic, serves as an epistemic document that aims – through narrative storytelling – to spread political economic knowledge and to highlight the reality of the significant ideological transformation that occurred in Egypt in the early twenty-first century, which created a kind of class struggle that had not been witnessed since the 1952 revolution.

Therefore, the study aimed to analyze the text according to Marxist theory, as it aligns closely with the direction of the novel and its author, who focuses in his writings on the marginalized and socially, economically, and politically oppressed individuals.

Analyzing the novel according to Marxist theory gives us the ability to understand the semantic struc-

¹ U. 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Muḥammad, *As-Sīra al-muḡtami'īyya wa-sard mā ba'd al-wāqi'īyya as-siḥriyya. Dirāsa fī riwāyat Ġū' li-Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī*, "Fikr wa-ibdā'" 2014, Vol. 82, p. 71.

ture of the text and also to delve into its depths by analyzing it internally, reading the social, economic, and political context that the novel witnessed or emerged through, represented in the community of the text, where class struggles were apparent, which are fundamentally economic and political conflicts.

The novel does not adopt a vision that opposes the unexamined shift towards capitalism, rather, it adopts a comprehensive opposition to capitalism in all its phases, from a standpoint of complete rejection, and emphasizes the growing differences between the two economic theories in their interaction with various societal classes. Additionally, the novel focuses on making comparisons between Marxism or Nasserist socialism and capitalism, by portraying the lives of individuals from both classes, revealing the flaws of capitalist classism and its loss of means for a healthy human life, while depicting people who related to the Marxist class in images of psychological peace and social reconciliation despite poverty and need.

The narrative aims to clarify through its allegiance to the Marxist theory that it is more close to human nature, by emphasizing the ethics of the village, which presents social solidarity, cooperation and sharing, to confirm that the idea of drifting away from human nature and shifting towards consumption and commodification endangers society.

The novel "Hunger," with its logic and adopted vision, is a significant social narrative that addresses the lives of the marginalized and oppressed, and in its study, it

provides an account and grounding for the historical and social context in which it originated. It aims to herald a future in light of the major changes internally and externally, and the effects of these changes on the structure of society.

The study adopted a historical analytical method to examine the intellectual and cultural structure of the narrative text, and its response to societal reality and its history. Therefore, the study was divided into several sections, as follows:

- The historical context of the narrative text;
- The prologue and paradox;
- The place and capitalist dimension;
- Alienation;
- Class struggle;
- Consumption and the creation of the exalted self;
- Capitalism and the commodification of the body;
- The making of capitalist elites;
- The capitalist heir;
- The community... Marxist cooperation and social reality.

And the conclusion highlights the role of the ideological creator in disseminating knowledge and engaging the audience in creating a positive interaction with the narrative text and social changes.

The historical context of the narrative text

Before delving into the analysis of the narrative text and interpreting it according to the Marxist perspective, it is essential to consider the historical context in which the narrative text emerged. In other words, according to Marxist criticism, the produced historical context of this narrative text. Every literary text has a historical context that influenced it and contributed to its production, whether that context is a general to the entire society: its systems, economic and social policies, or the specific historical context of its author.

Economic conditions in Marxist theory are referred to as “material conditions”, and the political, social, and ideological situation that arises from these conditions is called the historical situation. Therefore, the Marxist critic – the writer – insists that human events, whether political or personal, and human products, ranging from nuclear submarines to television programs, cannot be understood without comprehending the specific historical and material conditions in which these programs appeared.

If we want to illustrate this idea more clearly, it can be said that the Marxist critic believes that all human products and events are the result of specific material and historical causes. It is impossible to achieve an accurate image of human affairs by investigating abstract issues. Rather, it is by understanding the tangible material conditions in the world. For this reason, Marxist

analysis of human events and products focuses on the relationships between economic-social classes within a society on one hand, and between them and the classes of other societies on the other hand.

It also concentrates on understanding human activities by examining the distribution and effectiveness of economic power. Therefore, the Marxist theory insists that the significance of theoretical ideas can only be evaluated through the lens of their practical applicability in this world.²

From this Marxist perspective emerged the novel "Hunger" by Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, which discusses the political, social, and economic issues of Egyptian society, influenced or produced by the socio-economic changes adopted by the political administration of Egypt in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the attempts to shift from the socialist economic system – the public sector – to the capitalist economic system – the private sector.

This change is considered by Marxist thought or Marxist intellectuals to be an economic and intellectual coup against Nasserite socialism or the Revolution of 1952, a revolution that placed the Egyptian citizen at the center of the Egyptian economy and re-evaluated from the Marxist perspective, the distribution of wealth and land among Egyptians through agrarian reform and public ownership, which have become deeply rooted psychologically, emotionally, socially, and economically over the fifty years preceding the writing of the novel.

² L. Tyson, *An-Nazariyyāt an-naqdiyya al-mu'āšira. Ad-Dalīl al-muyassar li-āl-qāri'*, transl. by A. 'A.R. Maktabī, Ar-Riyāḍ 2014, p. 58.

The Marxist thought reflected in the novel expresses those deep fears of the economic change that will affect the structure of Egyptian society and establish the encroachment of capitalism, subsequently undermining the idea of public ownership and social solidarity that Marxism advocates.

This idea had been applied in Egypt throughout the periods preceding that transformation, which began with the concept of privatization and the sale of the public sector, without any planning to protect the wealth of Egyptian society and ensure a gradual transition in any economic change adopted by the state.

However, Marxist thought entirely rejects this transformation, along with its methods and approaches, as this transformation would disrupt the social and economic status of Egyptians and lay the foundations for an exploiting economic class structure, creating a significant gap among the various segments and classes of Egyptian society, as is the case with the university professor Sheikh Riḍwān.

This transformation will change the religious composition and will reproduce the idea of the preachers of capitalism, those who preach patience and endurance, and make poverty appealing to people, all to serve the new capitalism.

The novel "Hunger" is a Marxist literary attempt to present the consequences of that economic transformation adopted by the state, which desires to turn it into a social ideology embraced by political elites, thus becoming an accepted social reality. Therefore, the

narrative discourse presents the social and economic battle that will take place in Egypt between the capitalist landowners and the deprived and homeless class, between the bourgeoisie who control natural, economic, and human resources and the laborers who form the majority of society and work with their hands to fill the coffers of the rich, not their own pockets.

Unfortunately, these workers are the last to realize this truth³ in which the Zaġlūl family was an important cog in enriching the new landowners, like the 'café owner', or attempting to support them morally, emotionally, and humanely, like Ḥāġġ 'Abd ar-Raḥīm and Ḥāġġ Hāšim without having any material rights that preserve the dignity of themselves and their families. The novel was a social cry against the harsh, random capitalist transformations that prevailed in the early twenty-first century, these transformations that did not strive to ensure the rights of the simple Egyptian society. It appeared random and disturbed, devoid of any system or guarantees to protect the working and poor classes in Egypt. The novel is based on a Marxist perspective that sees literature as a product of the material economic environment that drives positive interaction with the superstructure.

Literature and art – as conceived by Marxism – are a part of the superstructure of society, a part of the ideology of society or an element of that complex structure of social perception that highlights the position in which one social class dominates over others. Therefore,

³ Ibid., p. 58.

understanding literature means understanding the social process that encompasses it.

As Georgi Plekhanov asserts, the social mentality of any era is conditioned by the social relations of that era, which is most evident in the history of literature and art. This means that literary works are not a mysterious inspiration or works subject to simple interpretation based on the psychology of their authors. They are forms of perception and specific ways of seeing the world,⁴ they represent a socio-economic vision based on influence and interaction, and the positive interaction between the different structures of society to produce that text.

The novel "Hunger" is a creative discourse that depicts a country undergoing troubled economic conditions. The text serves as a positive reaction revealing these economic changes, which have cast shadows over the social structure of society. Therefore, the novel endeavored to carefully choose the setting where most of its events take place, which is the community characterized by innocence, primitivism, and proximity to the Marxist vision based on social solidarity, cooperation, and sharing.

Thus, the village emerged as the pure and innocent place where the events unfold. The village is unnamed to emphasize the Marxist discourse of the novel that these events occur throughout Egypt, and that the more stable and cooperative society, preserving important

⁴ T. Eagleton, *Al-Mārksiyya wa-ān-naqd al-adabī*, transl. by Ğābir 'Uşūr, "Fuşūl" 1985, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 23.

Egyptian traits, has become threatened by economic and social poverty, the collapse of values, and the dissolution of genuine morals.

From the perspective of the narrative discourse, capitalism has succeeded in invading the rural community and threatening it socially and humanly amid a phase of turbulent changes that have come across the nation socially and economically.

The novel "Hunger" monitors the transformation of society to affirm that "one must not understand reality as a biological existence, but rather as a primarily social existence because man is the sum of social relationships and their completeness".⁵ The Egyptian person is living through a phase of chaotic economic transformation, and his behaviors influenced by the economic material structure interact with reality. This is alongside the Egyptian political administration, which, with its ideology, possesses the ability to direct economic change and transition from socialism to capitalism, despite the fact that the 1952 Revolution's constitution emphasized socialism, public ownership, and social solidarity that ensures a dignified life for the Egyptian citizen.

The Prologue and the Paradox

The title holds significant importance in revealing the content of the literary text. It is closely related to the text and its deep meanings, guiding us to produce a new

⁵ 'Imād ad-Dīn Ḥalīl, *Naqd li-ār-ru'ya āl-mārksiyya li-āl-ġamāl*, "Al-Adab ai-Islāmī" 1993, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 9.

literary text related to the narrative text, establishing a positive communicative relationship with it, resulting in a parallel text that either aligns with or contradicts the narrative discourse in order to explore its deeper layers through paradox.

The title is the main base in the subject chosen by Al-Bisāṭī, as it attracts the attention of the recipient, keeps them engaged, and intellectually directs them to establish an interpretative relationship between themselves and the text that reveals the intellectual trajectory adopted by the novel and guides its reader.

The title of the novel "Hunger" apprises the audience of the fate that awaits them due to the new economic laws adopted by the state, neglecting the socialist inclination that prevailed since July 1952. This inclination imposed a kind of contentment, tolerance, and social solidarity among the people of Egypt. However, the title produced a predictable text that informs about this capitalist strike that will let to hunger. Hence, the title is indefinite, emphasizing the generality of hunger and its inclusiveness across all of Egypt, without distinction between a hamlet, village, or city.

The power of greedy capitalism is too great to resist, and to deepen the meaning, the title is complemented by an additional title, or let's say the narrative opening, to create a paradox through intertextuality with the Holy Qur'ān. The opening with the holy verse "Enter ye there [Paradise], in Peace and Security" (Al-Qur'ān, 15:46⁶)

⁶ *The Holy Qur'ān with full Arabic Text*, trans. A.Y. Ali Beirut [n.d.].

confirms that the prevailing peace and security in Egypt, which was seen as a paradise from the perspective of the narrative text, have changed due to the replacement of Nasserist socialism with capitalism. Thus, souls changed, and spirits, hearts, and bellies became hungry. Egoism and opportunism spread, and everyone turned into capitalists, even if they were not actually able to be so, but their morals, practices, and behaviors became constraint capitalistic, striving to achieve private benefits at the expense of society and the homeland.

The title and the narrative opening that resonates with the Qur'ān produced a profound implication or a parallel text that complements what is presented in the novel regarding the depiction of the human suffering endured by the simple people of this nation due to capitalism and its practices. The title and the opening have prepared the audience to receive the Marxist discourse of the novel and engage with it through narrative imagination, which integrates the audience with the text before they intellectually delve into it through the horizon of expectation aligned with the text in its title "Hunger" or contrary to it in the Qur'ānic resonance. In both cases, the parallel text succeeds in creating an imagined and anticipated mental image of the text, helping in its interpretation and continued reading, as well as the realistic imagination through it.

Place and Capitalist Dimension

“The author did not provide a name for the place where the events of his novel took place, except for the abstract description which confirms that it is dealing with a rural location, which is not confined to any specific rural area, whether in the Delta or Upper Egypt. The omission of a specific place carries profound significance; the writer does not want poverty to be associated with a particular location”.⁷ Rather, he wants to engage the audience with him in interpretation and expectation. The reader from Upper Egypt will see the village as his own, and the poverty as his own, and the hunger he suffers from. The reader from the Delta will see in the experienced reality his own reality, as the images of poverty, need, and cases of inability reflect his life with all its suffering.

These images represent a state of continual transformation in their calm environment that is characterized by compassion, cooperation, and sharing of the morsel of bread; greedy capitalism has started to invade the Egyptian village. The cleric who occasionally gives sermons in their mosque has turned into a capitalist religious figure who possesses wealth and trades in everything, even in religion, people’s thoughts, and their pains. “The language and law professor from the university accidentally⁸ come to the town during the holidays, the most evident change in the Egyptian village is the poverty

⁷ M.F. an-Nābī, *Ĝū’ Al-Bisāṭi wa-ǧawāyāt al-ma’rifa wa-āl-ik-tiṣāf wa-āl-ħirmān*, “Ar-Riwāya: Qaḍāyā wa-Āfāq” 2010, Vol. 4, p. 161.

⁸ M. al-Bisāṭi, *Al-A’ māl al-kāmila*, Al-Qāhira 2013, Vol III, p. 167.

and hunger that have begun to penetrate the environment that is closest to human socialist solidarity. The signs of hunger have started to consume families, and they find no means of livelihood, going to bed hungry as the spirit of solidarity fades away from the behaviors of the villagers. The wealthy family of Ḥāḡḡ Hāšim, which faces the house of the Zaḡlūl family, does not open its doors, nor does it offer them anything to help them live or to fight hunger, even if it is through work and not charity. In fact, their doors are always closed to them, “there’s nothing behind them but a locked door”.⁹

Al-Bisāṭī reveals this change that seeks to kill the spirit of cooperation and social solidarity; therefore, he chose the village to be the main setting of the novel’s events to proclaim the Marxist narrative about the capitalist danger that seeks to change the peaceful phase of Egypt, turning it into a capitalist deluge that sweeps away everything in its path: human values, purity, and the social solidarity that the village represents as the homeland of Egypt.

In a spatial transition, the text oscillates between the spirit of the pure village with a Marxist character and the city with a capitalist orientation, clarifying that a poor person can live in peace in the village despite poverty, need, and hardship, without compromising their principles, morals, and dignity. This contrasts with the capitalist city, which is based on the idea of consumption, where everything is up for sale, including human, in the absence of a spirit of social solidarity. This was revealed

⁹ Ibid., p. 203.

in the dialogue among students studying at various Egyptian universities.

The place (setting) in the novel plays a revealing role in the capitalist strike on Egypt in the early twenty-first century, a strike that sought to change the socialist spirit in Egypt and its people, or succeeded in doing so. The human qualities in the Egyptian character began to change and be replaced. The spirit of solidarity and cooperation was replaced by the spirit of selfishness and consumption, which produced hunger and poverty. The village, with its ancient history, stood against greedy capitalism and consumer values, and the human spirit was evident in the poor of the village and the simple folks around him, who surround him and offer him what satisfies his hunger and the hunger of his children, but that spirit began to disappear, and the spirit of capitalism, wealth, and consumption took over.

Alienation

“The distinction between freedom and alienation was the main theme in the development of Marx’s philosophical and political thought. And what Hegel and Feuerbach saw in the history of human thought, Marx saw in the history of human production and social life. Alienation was what Marx discovered in the facts of political economy.”¹⁰ Alienation affects human, stripping them of the ability to feel their humanity or the value

¹⁰ E. Kamenka, *Al-Usus al-iḥlāqiyya li-āl-mārksiyya*, transl. by M. ‘A.M. Muḡāhid, Al-Qāhira 2011, p. 194.

of the work they perform, forcing them under the pressure of a wasted human situation to retreat, leaving their work and withdrawing from life, as did Zağlül, the hero of the novel "Hunger", who suffered from the loss of his freedom and his ability to adapt to the capitalist system at work, a system that devalues his dignity in all situations. He tried to adapt to it or ignore it, but he could not because the loss of a person's ability to control or manage their work materially and spiritually is a stripping away of their humanity, as Marx calls it, and the loss of a person's control over the production of their work is what Marx refers to as 'exploitation,' a term that does not mean that Marx intends to imply that the capitalist receives more than they should or more than what is 'reasonable' includes the term that what pertains to a person or a group of people in general actually belongs to others or some others in particular.¹¹

The process of exploitation goes beyond practical and material aspects to human aspects, attempting to damage human dignity. Zağlül, the strong man devoted to his work, cannot continue in his job for long due to the feeling of alienation resulting from human exploitation and the waste of dignity.

- "And what do you like about staying at home? – he does not respond.
- I do not like anyone insulting my mother.
- And who insulted her?
- The customers sometimes. And the owner of the coffee shop, sometimes. There it is.

¹¹ Ibid., s. 195.

- And why do they insult her?
- Ask them, insulting the mother is their attitude".¹²

Capitalism seeks to turn the worker into a material commodity that receives wages for being a commodity, and he must accept all the capitalist exploitation processes that in the case of Zağlül surpassed the limits of material exploitation to moral and human exploitation, demanding that he endure the process of exploitation and the waste of human dignity. However, he does not accept this, and the process of alienation deepens within him; he leaves his job and retreats to his home despite his poverty, "he remains asleep for two days with two nights".¹³

The processes of capitalist exploitation address the needs and poverty of the poor worker who is striving for a living, pushing him towards psychological alienation and surrendering to these attempts. To first understand that he is receiving his wage in exchange for turning into a commodity submissive to the employer. This is what leads Sukayna, the wife of Zağlül, to underestimate what is happening with her husband and wonders: "Every time he has a reason, and what if they insulted his mother or father, the world would not collapse. The boy hears their insults and remains silent".¹⁴

Sukayna relinquished her humanity and accepted that she or her husband would turn into a commodity, estranged in it, losing her human dignity in exchange

¹² Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A'māl*, p. 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

for the wages she receives, fulfilling the desires of capitalism. "The proletarian class, in Hegel's expression, is in humiliation; a revolution against this humiliation is driven by the contradiction between its human nature and the living conditions that are a comprehensive and immediate denial of that nature",¹⁵ this contradiction is what led Sukayna to enquire about her husband's resignation from work due to insults, and it is the contradiction and poverty that drove Zaġlūl to work again, despite the recurring insults from his employer, but it was a temporary return.

Zaġlūl worked in a café by the river. He had seen the customers there before, and he said they were not the type to insult a mother.¹⁶ Zaġlūl pacified himself and killed the fear within her of disrespect and humiliation, as he started to believe in his illusions, but he could not enjoy these illusions; capitalism encourages its followers to the idea of dominance and strict control over the workers through superiority, the traits of arrogance and the decline of human values become among their most distinctive characteristics, and their behaviors are filled with arrogance and material and moral overstepping towards the working class.

Two hours before he received his pay, some customers insulted his mother and father, he swallowed it and remained silent, and he accepted his weekly wage and stayed in his job.¹⁷ The proletariat executes the

¹⁵ K. Marx, F. Engels, *Al-ʿĀ'ila al-muqaddasa aw naqd an-naqd an-naqdī*, transl. by Ḥ. ʿAbbūd, Dimašq [n.d.], p. 41.

¹⁶ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A ʿmāl*, p. 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

judgment by private ownership that pronounced on itself by giving birth to the proletariat, just as it executes the judgment issued by the wage laborer on itself by producing wealth for others and misery for itself.¹⁸ The narrative text portrays the misery that Zaġlūl endures and his forced acceptance of it, as he has become a commodity, linking the receipt of wages with the act of insult. Two hours before Zaġlūl received his payment, he was insulted, as if it were a systematic humiliation of the human soul, specifically the working class. For if he dared to rebel and react to the humiliation and the attempts at domination by the capitalist owners, he would be deprived of his wages. Therefore, Zaġlūl submits to the humiliation and accepts his pay, not only in return for his work, but also for his surrender to the idea of capitalist domination. And he remained in his work, it is an attempt to accept the misery imposed on him by greedy capitalism. However, the acceptance was temporary, for the precious soul of Zaġlūl refuses to continue in the process of systematic humiliation and surrender to the waste of dignity. Thus, "they cursed his mother and he remained silent, then the second time he remained silent, and on the third time he responded to the curse, and they fell upon him with blows until even the café owner joined them, and they threw him out of the chairs; his injuries were numerous".¹⁹ The idealistic Marxist human soul rebelled against the attempts of capitalist dominance, rose for itself, and responded to

¹⁸ Marx, Engels, *Al-Ā'īla al-muqaddasa*, p. 41

¹⁹ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A'māl*, p. 240

the insult. It was subjected to beatings, but it did not surrender to them. He then said upon his return, "But the *galabiyya* (shirt like worn by most Egyptian men) is intact, not a single tear",²⁰ so the *galabiyya* here symbolizes the psychological covering for the human self, dignity is intact without any scratches or emotional or psychological wounds; the covering is present and dignity is preserved; because the insult was met with a similar one, and the equality remains between the ruling proletariat and the ruling capitalism".

Capitalist societies suffer from alienation and its consequences. In order to maintain materialism and capital, a person sacrifices the most important reasons for their human happiness. The capitalist class "finds in this self-alienation its stability and prosperity, and its own strength; it finds in it a manifestation of human existence."²¹ The heroes of the novel "Hunger" are capitalists who attached to wealth amid alienation, never considering giving up their capitalist existence; they believe that money is the only means to happiness in light of their view of the misery of the lower classes. In their pursuit of capitalism, they do not hesitate to engage in oppression and arrogance, which leads them to alienation.

Ḥāğğ 'Abd ar-Raḥīm surrendered to capitalism. He allowed himself to become isolated and alienated, believing that it was the only path to happiness and comfort. When he returned to his homeland, he suffered

²⁰ Ibid., p. 240.

²¹ Marx, Engels, *Al-Ā'ila al-muqaddasa*, p. 40.

from alienation within himself (his home). "He had returned from a distant land, and those who saw him were astonished by the size he had grown to five times larger and his neck which had disappeared, and his voice was hoarse, and it was said that it was due to illness. His feet could not bear all this weight".²²

The situation that Ḥāğğ 'Abd ar-Raḥīm reached in his private and public life affected him, he isolated himself. When he thought about returning to life, he turned to Zağlūl, the poor man from the lower class, who with his simplicity and sincerity was able to bring life back to Ḥāğğ 'Abd ar-Raḥīm. "Ḥāğğ lay down on the bed. He sighed and said: 'Oh Zağlūl, bring me some water!' He drank and stretched to the corner of the ceiling as he was used to: Oh Zağlūl, sometimes one can die like this and not be upset".²³

Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī presents to us the alienation of the capitalist class through a comparison between the capitalist and proletarian classes, to highlight the state of contentment, satisfaction, health, and loyalty that characterizes the people of this class in comparison to those of the capitalist class. A quick glance reveals the distinct psychological, emotional, and health condition of Zağlūl compared to that of Ḥāğğ 'Abd ar-Raḥīm, the wealthy capitalist, who has lost his ability to continue living. He has gained weight and became immobile, his wife and elderly maid left him, and had it not been for that proletarian who believes in human solidarity. Ḥāğğ

²² Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A'māl*, p. 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

‘Abd ar-Raḥīm would not have been able to return to life and enjoy it. He was not the only capitalist character suffering from alienation due to capitalist greed. There was a second model of human and emotional alienation. Ḥāğğ Hāšim’s daughter, despite her work and wealth and her father’s wealth, could not find happiness for herself, because she married on a capitalist basis, giving up her first fiancé due to capitalist ambition. When she saw him at her father’s funeral, she wanted to resist emotional alienation and regain her life. She asked him, “Do you see the gentleman who is in front of me, far away, wearing a suit, with a full face, and his mustache is very thin, like a thread on his lip and his eye on the ground? Go to him and pretend to carry the tray, and tell him secretly that Mrs. Widād needs you... And where is Mrs. Widād? I looked at her and she looked at me and said be careful when you whisper to him, keep your distance, he doesn’t like to have it close to him, so I did as she said... And the gentleman turned his face away, his color changed, he looked at me and was silent, and it was clear that his mood had soured. Then suddenly stand up as he said, come, listen... and then remain silent... Tell her the story is over, did you got it?... In this moment, she looked at me and it was clear she understood without me saying a word, so she remained silent. After a while, she asked: Did he leave? Yes, he left. He misunderstood, I just wanted to ask him about his children and hear him console me, and she silenced for a moment and said: He was my fiancé years ago, we had recite the

Al-Fātiha (a chapter of Holy Qur'ān), and got separated after all.²⁴

Capitalism did not redeem its owners, nor did it sometimes enable them to engage in life spontaneously; rather, it pushed them towards spatial alienation and disengagement from the surrounding society, under the pretext of preserving customs and traditions, or driven by classism and capitalist arrogance that made them live in isolated islands.

The family of the university professor Riḍwān places itself in a state of severe spatial alienation: "Throughout their time in the town, they do not go out, do not visit anyone, nor does anyone visit them. The house's windows are always closed during the day, and they are opened wide at night with the lights off; the house is silent, even the sound of the radio is not heard".²⁵

Class Struggle

The novel highlights the class struggle in the Egyptian society that is transforming into capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century. It describes the nature of the new struggle between classes, where each social class fights to maintain its social and economic status or seeks to improve that status both economically and socially. The conflict emphasized by the narrative of the novel "Hunger" is not a struggle between the ruling wealthy class and the working class, but rather between

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 213–214.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 169.

two oppressed classes, both subject to the ruling wealthy class, and both resisting for a decent life in the shadow of the dominance of the rich class that owns and governs. The novel reflects the success of greedy capitalism in creating a clear gap between the classes that it subjugates, ensuring its continued dominance over society.

The middle class fears the lower class, and this fear has developed into intense hatred, because it fears the aspirations of the people of this class to obtain advantages that would guarantee them a decent life, and these aspirations threaten the survival of the middle class and its relatively unique existence if they succeed in displacing them from their position.

Therefore, this class seeks to keep them from reaching the dominant class, so they cannot take their positions and benefits. The two girls working for Ḥāğğ Hāšim are afraid of Sukayna, the daughter of the struggling lower class, who aspires to gain favor with the wealthy, dominant Hāšim family, helping her and her family bear the burdens of harsh life. Sukayna was looking for work or assistance to quell her family's hunger, but the fear of the middle-class people was strong, so her attempts were met with coldness and cruelty. "Sukayna said she wants the lady of the house. What does she want her for?"²⁶ The sharpness was evident in the girl's response to Sukayna, because she is defending her existence in the service of the wealthy class and their financial privilege.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 200.

I want it for a reason, the girl's head tilted to the side and an uncomfortable look appeared in her eyes, she said, "What do you want?" The sharp reaction continues, followed by a look of suspicion and anxiety, tilting her head to the side as if to say, "I actually understand you and your tricks",²⁷ issuing a warning that she will not allow anyone to approach her status and her masters to protect her position from any breach.

Therefore, the response was "What do you want?" as if declaring her guardianship over the family of Ḥāğğ Hāšim, affirming her hold on their trust. The shout of anger and harshness rose to scold her, urging her to refrain from those attempts; to confirm the clear class struggle between them. "And the girl did not let her off easily. She said harshly, 'You are the one searching through the junk every time'".²⁸ The text reveals the heated class struggle between the middle and lower classes to gain favor with the capitalists. The two girls maintain their distinguished positions, and Sukayna, the struggling one, seeks to achieve her ambition represented in her help to feed her hungry family. However, the fear of the two girls, who represent the anxious middle class, has deprived them of fulfilling the simple human ambition. The scene of closing the door and its repetition confirms the struggle, fear, and anxiety, and each one's insistence on their position. And she heard nothing but the sound of the door closing,

²⁷ Ibid., p. 200.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 201.

and she said to herself, "It's always like this, they close it".²⁹

It is a signal of the desperate attempts to confront the aspirations of Sukayna, who represents the lower class; hence, the girl's goal was achieved, and Sukayna no longer tried to approach Ḥāḡḡ Hāšim's house. "After that, she fell out with the big house; she no longer went there, nor did she watch its door".³⁰ The middle class submitted to the upper capitalist class and managed to use its consciousness, becoming a tool in its hands to achieve its main goal, which is to incite conflict between the middle and lower classes to ensure its dominance, control, and manipulation of affairs in reality. The middle class became the main enemy of the lower class; it fears the aspirations of the lower class and the attempts of its people to ascend to the upper class, thus excluding them from their positions. The middle class believes it is obliged to show compassion toward that class to limit their growing ambitions and ensure their submission, preventing any revolt or gathering to demand a decent life. Therefore, it can be said that their struggle for survival is the politics originating to keep them crushed.³¹

The narrative text maintained the status of the Zaḡlūl family, the 'poor' oppressed, so that capitalism could ensure the loyalty of the upper class and its need for it. He could not change his life or that of his wife and children except through grants or gifts from the wealthy

²⁹ Ibid., p. 202.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

³¹ L. Tyson, *An-Nazāriyyāt*, p. 60.

master of the capitalist class. Thus, the stations of rest and stability in living were merely grants provided to him by the capitalist class, represented by the family of Ḥāğğ Hāšim. "I understood that they wanted to share their food with me, I almost moved towards them, when I noticed an arm extended to me with a loaf of bread topped with a piece of cheese, and I took it".³²

The livelihood provided to Sukayna was a grant from the middle class subordinate to the upper class – the family of Ḥāğğ Hāšim. Therefore, this class deceived Sukayna with the idea of participation, but soon adjusted its stance to ensure the maintenance of the differences between them, without breaking them, to ensure her subordination. "She almost... moved... she glimpsed... the outstretched arm" – it is a phrase illustrating capitalist tricks through deception, then stimulation, then fragmenting all this in a grant that ensures dominance and superiority, and keeps the class status quo unchanged. "No, Zahra, you prepare the tea, the aunt is tired",³³ another attempt for psychological stimulation and preparation for acceptance of subordination with the illusion of equality and participation, which quickly dissipates. "I make it, I am good".³⁴ They exploit the energies of deprivation and need within the poor human soul, to employ their physical and craft capabilities for their benefit, "I made the tea and carried the cups and small plates on a tray and went to them".³⁵

³² Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A' māl*, p. 216.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The two girls from the middle class managed to subdue Sukayna from the lower class and prepare her to accept what is offered to her without objection, while limiting her ambitions; so that she would accept what the two girls wanted. Therefore, appeared the announcement of the large scholarship for Sukayna from Ḥāğğ Hāšim, a scholarship that guarantees Sukayna and her family's dependence.

“Zubayda said that the Ḥāğğ spoke to her when she entered to come in with the tray, she said: He wants someone to stay here”.³⁶ A large grant to a destitute class, through which it guarantees a living, dependence and submission in exchange for a living for Sukayna and her family, it is the psychological class struggle that eventually succeeded in subjugating the lower class, and convincing it of its miserable situation that will not change, because they do not have the ingredients for success, and because according to the capitalist view, they were created to be so with qualities that accept humiliation and humiliation, because they do not have the personal and mental elements capable of changing their reality.

The discourse of ‘hunger’ revealed the practices of the upper class towards the middle and lower classes. It ignited the conflict between them, as the middle class mistreated the lower class and tried to psychologically defeat it to ensure that it would not threaten the structure of class power. The narrative aimed to emphasize

³⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

that “such pressures and lack of human independence cannot be undermined without dismantling capitalism and the comprehensive system of private ownership from which capitalism has grown”.³⁷

Consumption and the creation of the exalted self

One of the ideologies on which the capitalist dream is based on, is a theory called consumption, which presents that the degree of a person’s worth is linked to what they buy, what they own or possess. Hence, we observe that it simultaneously achieves three ideological goals: the first relates to the illusion that I am as good a person as the wealthy as long as I purchase what they buy. This achieves the second goal, which is to fill the pockets of manufacturers. The third goal is the diminishing of the poor self in the face of what the rich possess and what adorns their lives.

These causes drive the poor self to submit to the wealthy class, following their footsteps and executing their desires. This was highlighted in the narrative when the poor Zaġlūl stood in the mourning tent for the wife of the merchant Hāšim, and his daughter wanted to elevate or flaunt herself before the poor man who came to assist them. She went on to emphasize to him, in a tone that carried between its folds a sense of pride and material superiority, the size and value of the

³⁷ Kamenka, *Al-Usus al-iḥlāqiyya*, p. 5.

mourning tent, and the prestigious reader they had brought in especially for the funeral.

“And she asked me if I had heard him? They say it’s good. We brought it from the town. They thank him for it. It’s the first time it comes to the country. The original price is very expensive. The daughter of the deceased capitalist confirms her influence and wealth through her ability to attract the reader who only comes to the town for them. As mentioned, its price is ‘very expensive’³⁸, so the reference to the price is a consumerist reference, confirming that as much as they possess, they are above those around them.

Capitalism relies on the doctrine of consumption. It encourages the concept of exchange value, to be the main principle of interaction with the world around us.³⁹ There is nothing that helps capitalism more than instilling the idea of dissatisfaction with what I possess, thus pushing towards consuming more of what may seem better and more impressive to others.⁴⁰

“Hunger” expresses the state of Egyptian society during the economic transformations at the beginning of the twenty-first century, presenting it to us so that we can understand through interpretation what will happen to us in terms of consumption changes, which will turn society into a terrifying race around possession and consumption; so that a person within capitalist society

³⁸ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A‘māl*, p. 211.

³⁹ The value of the exchange attribute: is the social status achieved by the commodity for its owner.

⁴⁰ Tyson, *An-Nazāriyyāt*, p. 66.

feels their value and worth, which are tied to how much they own and consume.

Capitalism and the Commodification of the Body

Capitalism has turned everything into a commodity, and with it, society has transformed into a large market based on systematic commodification processes. Everything in this life is subject to capitalist commodification, and with commodification, values, ethics, and sanctities are defeated, replaced by market visions and values.

“The pattern of producing material life determines the processes of social, political, and intellectual life in general. It is not the consciousness of people that determines their existence, rather, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness”.⁴¹ The consciousness of the poor woman who lives in a modest room is determined by her social and material situation; likewise, poverty and modesty shape her consciousness, which will inevitably construct the commodification of the self and body, so she can face the consequences of life or secure her survival in the vast market created by capitalism.

“The other room is occupied by a woman in her forties, living alone. She goes out early in the evening and returns the next morning, and there are days when she stays in her room without making any sound or

⁴¹ Eagleton, *Al-Mārksiyya wa-ān-naqd*, p. 95.

noise coming from her direction. Her clothes are modest, and she does not wear makeup... The bathroom is shared, and they used to cough loudly without agreement to alert the other that he was on his way to the bathroom.⁴² The state of extreme poverty shapes the concept of commodification, which the poor woman resorts to in order to secure the means of living.

“He was surprised by her sitting at a table facing the door, and his eyes came into hers... He peeped at her with a man of fifty or a little older, his hand falls times on her hand on the table, a finger of her moves lightly between the fingers of her hand and then pushes her away, the waiter when he came with the orders leaned a little... He leaned his empty hand on her shoulder, and then she and the man went out and got into a taxi... They shouted out and said ‘one of disrespected women’.”⁴³ They are clear commodification, body for money.

The sound of capitalism invades the text community, reinforcing the idea that “human value is material according to what one owns”.⁴⁴ The image of the narrative text community reveals the greed and dominance of capitalism, pushing society toward deviation and commodification that deprives humans of their dignity and empties human life of its essence.

Middle-class learners and intellectuals have been influenced by the capitalist commodification idea, practicing and bragging about it; because it reflects their sta-

⁴² Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A‘māl*, p. 161.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163.

⁴⁴ Tyson, *An-Nazāriyyāt*, p. 73.

tus or their material and physical manliness: "As soon as I saw a green *shawl* (scarf) on a black outfit, I knew; not one came to me without that *shawl* on her shoulder".⁴⁵

The events of the narrative text revealed that capitalism succeeded in "reducing the essence of man to an economic relationship, imposing an absolute character on productive relations, and considering man primarily as an economic product".⁴⁶ In other words, a commodity subject to the logic of the market; where supply and demand, buying and selling, and the body of women holds a primary position in this process, pleasure in exchange for money, the pleasure of the wealthy, in exchange for the bodies of the poor and needy.

The Making of Capitalist Elites

Marx presented a philosophy of history rooted in the material conditions of life; that is, the exploration of what Hegel referred to as civil society is interpreted in light of political economy. Members of society enter into various relationships independent of their will, specifically production relationships that correspond to the mode of production unique to a certain stage of their development. The sum of these relationships constitutes the economic structure of society, which in turn forms the basis for the legal and political structure that

⁴⁵ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A'māl*, pp. 162–163.

⁴⁶ I. Fathi: *Al-Iṣṭirākīyya wa-ḥuṣūṣīyyat al-adab*, "Adab wa-Naqd" 1986, Vol. 27, p. 26.

emerges above it, defining a limited representation of social consciousness. On this basis, modes of material production influence social and political life and thought in general.⁴⁷ The economic climate of the new capitalism era in Egypt necessitates the creation of a new awareness among the members of society. This awareness is what forms the relationships within society, and these relationships are what create the emerging ideology through the evolution of economic thought in Egyptian society, along with the transition to capitalism.

This era produces the elites of capitalism or creates what is known as the capitalist selection of individuals and professions that will adopt, promote, and theorize this thought to dominate society. Hence, the idea of the capitalist scholar announced, who combines the sanctity of thought among the members of society with the power of money, and through his thought and knowledge imposes the existence of capitalism as an accepted and religiously sanctioned system.

He was a professor of jurisprudence and *šarīʿa* at the university, and he came to the town during vacations to oversee his estates and other interests that he did not disclose.⁴⁸ Capitalism selects individuals with social effectiveness to emphasize its essence and value, and to legitimize its existence. The university professor, especially respected in rural communities, transformed into a merchant who exploits his academic and religious

⁴⁷ A. Hilmī Maṭar, *Al-Falsafa ʾas-siyāsiyya min Aflātūn ilá Mārks*, Al-Qāhira 2017, p. 114.

⁴⁸ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-Aʿmāl*, p. 167.

status to solidify his capitalist position and lay the groundwork for the community's acceptance of economic transformation. This was revealed in the narrative discourse when it pointed to the people's discovery of his numerous possessions. The socialist or idealistic perception of the university professor and the rural scholar concealed the villagers' view of his capitalism. "The locals discover it by chance; who would have believed that he is the owner of the Renaissance fabric shop in the market, managed by one of his mother's relatives from another town, or that he is involved in raising calves?"⁴⁹ The transformation touched every member of society, and the culture of the historical era began to assert itself on everyone; to fit the era of capitalist transformation in Egypt. The religious scholar became preoccupied with his trade rather than his knowledge, and the university professor, engineer, and doctor all transformed into capitalists, employing their professions as effective means of investment. Therefore, we find Riḍwān, the university professor and religious scholar, promoting himself as a capitalist by elevating his status as an imam, preacher, and mufti in his village, which grants him a good reputation in trade and economics. He is, as they see him from atop the pulpit or in the mosque, a dignified and charitable figure, and his knowledge spread widely, earning him fame. He made his engagement with people's legal inquiries a confirmation of his integrity and successes, as the man announced himself from above the pulpit of the village mosque.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

The mosque is crowded, prayer mats are spread outside to accommodate worshippers who have come from afar, having left the mosques closer to them. The notables of the town have donated to purchase new mats and faucets, and the plumbers have cleared the sewage pipes which are always overflowing, their odors spreading into the street.⁵⁰ It seems like a political election campaign, as the village notables donate mats and money to fix the faucets and pipes, which only happens when Sheikh Riḍwān comes to deliver the sermon at the mosque, even though the faucets and pipes are defective throughout the year, and no one tries to fix them. Everyone rushes to promote themselves economically, taking advantage of the presence of a businessman distinguished by religious knowledge. Everyone promotes capitalist thought through their donations, which are essentially a capitalist announcement for themselves and their ideas, manipulating religion to fit the Friday sermon. Everything has lost its sanctity in the face of capitalist transformation and has become a means to succeed in the economic transformation process.

Sheikh Riḍwān has several characters; in life with the simple people and seekers, there is a face of cheerfulness. In the mosque, where the mask of the scholar immersed in knowledge presents a different face than his reality, "once he ascends the pulpit, he becomes a man different from the one he was known as, his cheerfulness vanishes, and he takes on a foreboding

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 170.

demeanor, his sermon becomes fierce”.⁵¹ Thus, the features change, and the words and phrases warn the simple farmer crowds who came to listen to him as a scholarly elite. He does not miss the opportunity to threaten them, far away from reality and life and how to solve its problems. He does not talk about the hunger and greed among them, but instead promotes himself, sketching an elitist and superior image before the worshippers who came from nearby villages, an image that drives the bewildered simple people to turn to him for answers to their questions that their minds cannot resolve.

In this simple scenario, Zaġlūl turns to the Sheikh to answer the philosophical questions that occupy his mind. Through Zaġlūl’s inquiries, the true image of the Sheikh is revealed, not the one he has drawn of himself, but it unveils his personality and the state of dissociation he suffers from. When Zaġlūl approached him and sat down to ask, the capitalist man, Sheikh Doctor, was thinking in a way completely different from the ideal image he portrayed in the minds of his followers and audience, including Zaġlūl. The comparison between the two images highlights the reality of the man. “Zaġlūl squatted not far from him, slightly retracting his neck, moving it from side to side. The Sheikh caught sight of him and mumbled hastily, ‘Who is that? Aren’t you the one who came in?’ Zaġlūl turned and saw no one, then returned to looking at the Sheikh, who had settled in

⁵¹ Ibid.

his seat, his eyes on the shop's door. Zaġlūl said, digging the ground with his feet: 'The first time I saw you, my teacher, I thought you were the one who would enlighten me'. The Sheikh glanced at him with displeasure and muttered, 'Hussh, stop talking, later!'.⁵²

The townspeople painted an idealized image of the Sheikh, but the reality is completely different. The Sheikh is preoccupied with his women's business, thinking about the beautiful, plump woman who entered the store. She distracted him from everyone, revealing his psychological depths tied to capitalism, which aims to hoard women in his home just as he hoards money and goods. Since his thoughts were focused on his desires, he did not notice Zaġlūl, or in other words, the commodity value of Zaġlūl diminished significantly in the face of the higher and targeted commodity sought by the Sheikh.

Therefore, he met Zaġlūl's questions or his quest for understanding with annoyance and irritability. "The Sheikh looked at him with displeasure", and when the distress overwhelmed him, his condescending world-view in dealing with the simple people became evident. He treated the poor Zaġlūl as if he were dealing with a beast, reprimanding him by saying "Hussh". The term 'Hussh' is used by rural people when dealing with animals, birds, and flies, as if the Sheikh, with his capitalistic and condescending perspective, did not notice Zaġlūl's humanity.

⁵² Ibid., p. 173.

The novel's discourse presents a comparison between the Sheikh's view of two individuals he interacts with: one represents a commodity he desires, which is a woman, and he becomes engrossed in following her with his gaze and inquiring about her; the other is the poor Zaġlūl, with whom he interacts with great arrogance, not speaking to him, ignoring his words, and treating him according to a capitalist view as a commodity or not a commodity at all. This is the logic of merchants, not of Sheikhs and scholars. Through this comparison, the novel reveals the effects of capitalism on its proponents' souls, how it destroys the human and moral aspects within a person, pushes them towards the commodification of people, and forces them to evaluate human beings according to the benefit they can derive from them.

Zaġlūl's questions were philosophical inquiries that needed a scholar who understands human freedom and the intellectual evolution that occurs in a person, in order to comprehend those questions and subsequently answer them, while taking into account human differences, and attempting to encompass the inquiring self-according to the religion that commands kindness and compassion towards humanity. "Wert thou severe [in speech] or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee" (Al-Qur'ān, 3:159⁵³). However, the capitalist Sheikh forgot this divine guidance, overwhelmed by his capitalist human inclination, and became annoyed with the questioner; because he was distracted

⁵³ *The Holy Qur'ān.*

from pursuing his popular commodity, which he sought through the desire for marriage and ownership; thus, he responded to Zaġlūl with violence and hostility, accusing him of disbelief. This violence stemmed from a condescending psyche that belittled the questioner as a poor man with no economic influence. "God Almighty created the world and the people, and everything, and commanded them to worship Him. I say to myself, if He created all this, why does He want their worship, and if they do not worship Him, He becomes angry and threatens them with punishment".⁵⁴

Questions of Zaġlūl, are fundamental philosophical inquiries that touch on human confusion and his search for identity and existence in the universe. They do not belittle or mock faith, but rather are questions that everyone with a conscious mind seeking the truth encounters. However, the capitalist Sheikh could not easily grasp that these questions were coming from this poor man. "The Sheikh was completely taken aback. His eyes widened, and he looked around in amazement".⁵⁵ The mindset immersed in trade and money struggled to understand these questions raised by a simple man. "Well, I understand a little, but I still think".⁵⁶

Zaġlūl revealed his simple, rational self-capable of thinking and in need of someone to understand it, for it is not just the wealthy who think. This is a truth that the mentality of the elitist Sheikh could not comprehend.

⁵⁴ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A'māl*, p. 173.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

I wonder, glory be to Him, He sent many prophets, every few years one; I know three of them: Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, peace be upon them. All three call for the worship of God, and each call has its own path, and those who follow them claim they are the best in the sight of God, while denying others. Time comes and we see the three calls at the same time, clashing with one another through violence and killing. I ask myself, why? If it were necessary, one prophet would be enough.⁵⁷ Zaḡlūl continues his philosophical questions, which come from a simple man who understands life more than an arrogant Sheikh who responds to the man's questioning with harshness and violence, "You are questioning God, you son of a dog".⁵⁸

This was the strong response that the capitalist Sheikh directed at the poor man, which he completed with a strong blow. "Zaḡlūl avoided a strong punch aimed at his stomach, and stood there, engulfed by the Sheikh's grip, pulling him back onto the couch".⁵⁹ Thus, the Sheikh responded to Zaḡlūl's questions with violence and humiliation. If Zaḡlūl had been wealthy or powerful and had influence, would he have treated him the same way? The Sheikh lost his composure because the questions came from a simple man – not as he claimed that they contradicted God's law or constituted an assault on religion—he received them with a condescending attitude towards himself and a sense of superiority over

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the “infidel” questioner. “I... you told me such things”.⁶⁰ How could someone like him dare to confront the Sheikh and ask him without permission while he was preoccupied with his desires? Therefore, he accused him of being an infidel, saying, “O infidel, son of a slipper”.⁶¹

Sheikh insulted Zaġlūl, and wasted his dignity in front of everyone, and tore his clothes, and before that tore his humanity, and humiliated him, and took him out of the sect, and when he thought about reforming what he did, his materialist capitalism prevailed over him, “cut the *galabiyya*. Joining the sides of the long incision around his body, the Sheikh shouted, to his relative who runs the shop, “Cut five meters and throw it in his face”.⁶² The Sheikh did not think of the wounds Zaġlūl emotionally, psychologically and humanly, but with complete arrogance asked his relative to give him a piece of cloth instead of his robes, which was torn, with extreme contempt said: “Throw it in his face”. Sheikh did not think about his crime against his religion and humanity and the humanity of Zaġlūl when he smashed the pride of a human being just because he thinks, and did not respond to him from the logic of religion, science and reform, but underestimated the poor who came to ask him, thinking that the Sheikh is an ideal model for the world of religion as he saw him standing above the pulpit, but the truth is that he is

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 175.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 174.

⁶² Ibid., p. 176.

a merchant dealing with the logic of trade, capitalism and superiority.

The Capitalist Heir

In human societies – before capitalism – family life was characterized by sanctity and respect; thus, there was ‘great respect for the mother’s right in the inheritance of property and social status from the females’.⁶³ The mother had an important role in the economic life of the family, a role that Sukayna plays in the Zaġlūl family. She is the one who manages the family’s needs and seeks them out, and she is also the one who encourages her husband and children to look for work and strive for the means of livelihood. She works alongside them in seeking the family’s sustenance, creating a kind of sharing and community cooperation with other women in the rural community. However, this role began to decline with the developments that occurred in the world at the beginning of the industrial revolution, and the emergence of capitalism as an economic alternative to those economic systems based on the family unit as the most important economic model. “Capitalism, because it is based on the ownership of private property exclusively by men, has undermined the mother’s rights and brought about what Engels refers to as the historical global defeat of the female gender”.⁶⁴

⁶³ A. Heywood, *Madħal ilá āl-aydyūlūġiyyāt as-siyāsīyya*, transl. by M. Šaffār, Al-Qāhira 2012, p. 296.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

That defeat transformed women into symbols of pleasure and procreation, and they no longer possess any economic advantage as they once did. Thus, the novel "Hunger" depicts them as means for pleasure and child-birth. The capitalist elder always thinks of marriage for the sake of procreation, and by procreation here, I mean giving birth to a male 'heir'. Capitalism has succeeded in establishing the idea of male ownership, through which every capitalist seeks to find a legitimate heir to inherit his possessions and work on enhancing them. In reality, a female will not be that heir; the elder suffers from having daughters, thus he diligently seeks to marry someone who will give him an heir. "Those close to him mention his virtues and, out of pity for him, say that he wishes for a boy, and God does not grant him this, yet he is patient".⁶⁵ In societies that believe in the idea of capitalist inheritance, the inability to have a male heir becomes a reason for pity, compassion, and encouragement to marry in order to achieve this goal. "He has often mentioned in private that he is always thinking of who will inherit him and carry on his name".⁶⁶

The Sheikh spoke of his psychological pain resulting from the capitalist belief in the idea of inheritance; he is constantly thinking about who will inherit him and carry his name, as if his daughters will not bear his name. However, this belief in capitalist thought has overshadowed his faith in God and equality between males and females, and between all humans; capitalism

⁶⁵ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A 'māl*, p. 169.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

has killed the idea of equality among people and between children within the same family. Based on the idea of inheritance, advisors urge him, "Marry, O Sheikh Riḍwān, and no one will blame you; your request is legitimate".⁶⁷ And the Sheikh does not wait for advice, as he believes in the idea and pursues it with urgency stemming from the idea of inheritance, "I told you I am married to three, it is my right... and glory be to God, the boy has not come yet, and the fourth is surely on the way".⁶⁸

The group... Marxist cooperation and social reality

"Marxist socialism presents a comprehensive vision of humans as social creatures capable of overcoming economic and social hardships by relying on the strength of the group rather than simple individual effort. This is a collective vision because it emphasizes human ability for collective action and their desire and capacity to pursue specific goals by working together, which contradicts the solitary pursuit of self-interest".⁶⁹ This is the intellectual vision on which the novel "Hunger" by Al-Bisāṭī is based.

The novel is considered an artistic representation that highlights the importance and value of collective work in building communities in situations of social

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 170.

⁶⁹ Heywood, *Madḥal*, p. 129–130.

peace, which leads to the success of those communities. It draws a comparison between the Zağlūl family – which is the main focus of the novel – and the cases of selfishness that prevail in societies under the control of capitalism and the absence of a constructive spirit of collective work.

Zağlūl, the socialist hero, firmly believes in collective work and cooperation not only at the intellectual and theoretical level but also at the practical level. “There isn’t a funeral in the town that he doesn’t visit; he walks over to it, stays under the tent until the reciter finishes, and helps gather the chairs”.⁷⁰ He rushes to comfort and serve everyone, affirming the spirit of humanity that grants a person calmness, peace of mind, psychological stability, and self-satisfaction.

The sanctity of the idea of community and cooperation is highlighted in the narrative moment when the bridal procession arrives, and during the moment of moving the bridal cupboard when they were reminded of the memory of the bride’s cupboard that tragically fell, in those moments when the bridal procession entered, “They remembered the deceased; everyone from the moment they entered the alley remembered, and some whispered – May God have mercy on her – she went suddenly”.⁷¹ The psychological tension escalates, painful memories resurface, and everyone fears the recurrence of what happened: “The four on the cart hesitated... the four watched them from above the car-

⁷⁰ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A ‘māl*, p. 147.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

riage, silent and unmoving".⁷² At that moment, Zağlül appears, believing that humans are 'companions, or brothers or sisters who are connected to one another by shared human connections, which is expressed by the principle of fraternity.⁷³

Zağlül advanced from the cart and spoke with the four, who turned to him and evaluate him with their looks; perhaps they were the only ones among all who knew his worth.⁷⁴ Zağlül elevated the value of cooperation, sharing, and the spirit of the group, and he stepped forward to save the tense situation. Finally, he arrived and entered the house, and the neighborhood erupted with ululations, but there was no sign of Zağlül. He looked around but could not spot him.⁷⁵ Zağlül saved the situation and then left; no one noticed him because he acted out of belief in the principle of brotherhood, not expecting any reward or thanks, as it satisfied his human conscience. Therefore, he responds to his wife when she asks him, "Did you receive anything for this? I seek forgiveness from God, there is a reward, oh woman, a reward".⁷⁶

Socialists believed that humans are social animals, so their natural relationships will be based on cooperation.⁷⁷ It is cooperation that guarantees the Zağlül family life in their social environment despite the severe poverty

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Heywood, *Madħal*, p. 130.

⁷⁴ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A māl*, p. 152.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 153.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Heywood, *Madħal*, p. 132.

they suffer from. The idea of cooperation ensures their survival and ability to continue their journey: "Every time she waits for dawn to pass by those she knows to borrow two loaves".⁷⁸ It is the spirit of human cooperation – advocated by Marxism – that should prevail among individuals in society, allowing such a family to live and obtain what keeps them from starvation when they do not have money to buy food for their children. With the same spirit of cooperation prevailing in the rural community of the novel, Sukayna joyfully and happily returns what she borrowed, "As soon as she returns from the bakery, she starts to pay it back; she goes herself because it is shameful to send the boy with it".⁷⁹

The tranquility of a believing woman Sukayna in the idea of human cooperation values human dignity, preserves feelings, and appreciates her neighbors who lent her bread and food in times of need; she returns it when she has the means, and she goes by herself to express her appreciation for them and for the spirit of cooperation that prevails among them.

This image is the ideal that Marxism strives to achieve and promote, so that it may prevail in societies for life to be orderly and to continue without class struggles that harm humanity, undermine it in the depths of its soul, and push it toward deviation, conflict, and violence based on capitalist classism.

The Marxist (socialist) character within the context of the novel's narrative believes in cooperation, adopting

⁷⁸ Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-A 'māl*, p. 146.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

the idea of cooperative projects instead of the competitive hierarchical projects that prevail and proliferate under the incoming capitalism in rural society. Therefore, the baker's character is based on directing the energies of collective joint work among human groups to achieve the greatest possible mutual benefit. "He told me I can come to take the leftover bread every four days; the other days are reserved. Before that, he used to give it to someone who fed her chickens with it, and she offered to bring him three boiled eggs every day, but he told her he doesn't eat them. Then another woman appeared and asked him to give her some for her children; she has four children and her husband works for two days and is sick for two days, working daily in the fields, she told him, without complaining".⁸⁰

The spirit of human cooperation drove 'Abduh (the baker) to offer bread scraps to the poor, preferring them over the lady who offered monetary compensation in exchange for obtaining bread for her poultry. The cooperative human self-realized that the poor individual is in greater need of bread than others, so feeding a person is a noble goal that must prevail for the spirit of human peace to prosper. "He gives them food for two consecutive days, and what remains with her is enough for a third day, so she does not come again, cutting off from the woman with the eggs and another woman who came to care for her children – she too takes for a day and has enough left for another day".⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 245.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 276.

‘Abduh exhibits a Marxist socialist behavior. He provides for the poor and helps them while preserving their dignity, ceasing cooperation with the wealthy because they are more capable of meeting their own needs. His behavior resembles the ‘cooperative societies’ that emerged in the early nineteenth century, which purchased goods in bulk and sold them at low prices to their members from the working class.⁸² However, ‘Abduh is more cooperative than them; he distributes to every needy person he sees, and his work is not limited to a specific group close to him or sharing his work and thoughts.

Conclusion

This study represents a Marxist social reading of the novel “Hunger”, which was able to portray society in all its aspects: its changes, its old and new class struggles, and to illustrate the effects of capitalism and its attempts to establish its existence through the rural text community. The characteristics of rural society, combined with its customs and traditions, alongside the incoming capitalist habits, create a new image of rural social life in the midst of the economic and social winds of change that have swept through society under the trend towards capitalist globalization, and the extent of suffering faced by all social classes, both rich and poor.

The study highlights the Marxist discourse of the novel, emphasizing the negative effects produced by

⁸² Heywood, *Madḥal*, p. 133.

the transition to capitalism, and adopting the theory of knowledge to reveal the historical context of the homeland and the major transformations it is undergoing, resulting from the significant developments in the international environment.

The study revealed the role of Marxist literature in the development of modern Arabic novels, and an attempt to engage readers in a process of positive interaction with the text, and the infiltration of Marxist thought within the narrative text, following its methodology and its relationship with reality. It highlighted images of social solidarity and cooperation to affirm the Marxist vision and its relevance to Egyptian society. The novel showcased the processes of societal deception carried out by some religious scholars to achieve their narrow interests at the expense of both religion and humanity.

The narrative in "Hunger" is considered an artistic and cognitive document that interprets the present and re-produces history in its best forms, aiming to preserve the sound traditions of society and revive the spirit of cooperation and sharing that was known in ancient rural communities.

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Sebastian Gadowski

“The Trilogy of Future Memory” – Tunisian Reality in Theatrical Vision of Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ğa‘āybī

Abstract: Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ğa‘āybī have for years been among the most creative and original theatre artists in Tunisia. Their innovative, collaborative approach to artistic work and the clear vision of tackling the most topical contemporary issues on stage have led them to numerous theatrical productions being appreciated both in the Arab world and in the West. The paramount objective of this article is to attempt to critically examine the collection of dramas by Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ğa‘āybī entitled “The Trilogy of Future Memory”, which constitutes a uniquely valuable and original record of the difficult experiences that Tunisia has been going through in recent decades. Through a semantic-semiotic analysis of the three dramas, the author of the article seeks to reveal the common compositional strategy of the theatrical works of Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ğa‘āybī, who, starting from historical, political and social experiences, create an artistic message deeply rooted in Tunisian reality. Identifying the archetypes of complex Tunisian identity, dominant motifs and themes allows “The Trilogy of Future Memory” to emerge

as a coherent theatrical project that, on the one hand becomes a vivid part of the cultural and social debate on contemporary Tunisia and, on the other, is a testimony to the creativity of the Tunisian theatre artists.

Keywords: Theatre in Tunisia, Tunisian Dramaturgy, Fadhel Jaïbi, Jalila Baccar

July 2002 marked the fifty-sixth edition of the Avignon Theatre Festival, which has long enjoyed a reputation as the most prestigious theatre festival in Europe. Among the many foreign troupes invited to participate in the festival, for the first time there was a group of artists from an Arab country. They were a Tunisian ensemble from the company Familia Productions, founded by the couple Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ğa‘āybī. The artists presented their performance entitled Ğunūn (Madness), which had been a huge success in their country the year before. Marion Vignal of the L’Express newspaper wrote: “Like the fans, Tunisian audiences react immediately, laughing out loud, rising in one movement to give a standing ovation. Impressive”.¹ The play was inspired by a psychoanalytical study that Nejia Zemni conducted with one of her patients over fifteen years. She later published the findings in a book titled *Chronique d’un discours schizophrène. Récits d’une psychanalyse sans divan*, released in France in 1999. The play serves as a metaphor for Tunisian society,

¹ M. Vignal, *Junun, l’éloge de la folie*, www.lexpress.fr, https://www.lexpress.fr/informations/junun-l-elogue-de-la-folie_648851.html [Access date: 12.01.2025].

torn by internal conflict and grappling with an oppressive system. The Avignon Festival newsletter described the performance as one that “places the audience right in the eye of the storm. It seats us at the heart of the theatre—the place, par excellence, where words are born and first spoken, and leads us into the most intimate parts of human identity, where it starts to fray and fall apart under the relentless assault of dementia. Then, made sublime by art and magnificent by theatre, this whirlwind of language returns like a boomerang, restored in all its layered truth by the actors, reaching out to us like a mirror through a bold staging of the play”.²

The success in Avignon brought Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī international recognition, and their company was invited in the autumn of 2002 to take part in the Berliner Festspiele in the German capital. Familia Productions created a new play for the occasion, titled *Araberlin*, written specifically for German actors. The play addresses the German response to Islamic fundamentalism and also explores the situation of immigrants in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. It is worth noting that the play continues to be popular. Its most recent staging, directed by Malik Zirari, took place in 2024 at the Comédie Nation in Paris. Guillaume d’Azémar de Fabrègues wrote: “There are words we’d rather not use: integration, assimilation, radicalisation, fundamentalism. They’re at the heart of *Araberlin*, they’re the consequence of xenophobia alone. Fear of

² *Junun*, www.festival-avignon.com, <https://festival-avignon.com/en/edition-2002/programme/junun-29100> [Access date: 20.12.2024].

the Other. (...) *Araberlin* is one of those texts that are right on target, that raise a problem”.³

Following their successes in Avignon and Berlin, Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī began receiving invitations to collaborate with some of the most renowned theatres across Europe, and theatrical projects of Tunisian artists were more and more frequently staged in theatres around the world. It is worth mentioning that Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī first began working together in the Qafsa Theatre, founded in 1972. During the 21st edition of the Carthage Theatre Days (*Ayyām Qartāğ al-Masraḥiyya*) in 2019, when the anniversary of the Qafsa Theatre company was being celebrated, Bakkār recalled how much of an impact working with the group had on her artistic life. She even stated that her time at Qafsa was a turning point in her career. She added: “there I learned that theatre, in order to exist, has to be a team effort”⁴ – a principle that remains central to Familia Productions’ work ethos and continues to define its unique identity. In 1975, both artists moved to Tunis, where they co-founded the Al-Masraḥ al-Ġadīd company, or ‘New Theatre’, which largely continued and expanded upon the theatrical work initiated in Qafsa. Comparing the two companies,

³ G. d’Azémar de Fabrègues, *Araberlin : une belle exposition des conséquences de la xénophobie*, www.jenaiquunevie.com, <https://jenaiquunevie.com/2024/03/17/araberlin-une-belle-exposition-des-sequences-de-la-xenophobie/> [Access date: 20.12.2024].

⁴ Y. aš-Šayḥāwī, *Masraḥ Qafsa... ḍākira wa-ḍikrayāt*, www.ultra-tunisa.ultrasawt.com, <http://ultratunisia.ultrasawt.com/> مسرح-قفصة-ذاكرة-وتكريات/يسرى-الشيخاوي/ثقافة-وفنون/تقارير [Access date: 20.12.2024].

Rafika Zahrouni wrote: “Among the features that did not change significantly are the process of collective writing, language choice, the portrayal of political power dynamics, and the use of Brechtian techniques to increase the audience’s political understanding”.⁵

The New Theatre went on to produce many ambitious plays that left a lasting mark on the history of Tunisian theatre. Notable examples include *Al-Urs* (The Wedding, 1976), *Al-Warṭa* (Inheritance, 1976), *At-Taḥqīq* (Report, 1977) *Ġassālat an-nawādir* (Autumn Storm, 1980), and *Lām* (Arabic Letter ‘Lām’, 1982), all of which were well received by audiences and highly praised by critics. In 1993, Ġalīla Bakkār, Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī and al-Ḥabīb Bilhādī founded a new theatre company called *Familyā li-l-Intāġ* (Familia Productions). The company debuted in 1993 with the play *Familyā* (Family, 1993). Subsequent productions by Tunisian artists such as *Uššāq al-maḥḥā al-mahġūr* (Lovers of a Deserted Cafe, 1995), *Al-Baḥṭ ‘an Ā’ida* (Searching for Aida, 1998) and *Ġunūn* (Madness, 2001) confirmed their exceptional artistic quality and creative independence. Anaïs Heluin, seeking to summarise the company’s mission in a concise way, wrote: “Familia Productions champions theatre of the highest political and aesthetic standards, rooted in Tunisia’s complex present”.⁶

⁵ R. Zahrouni, *Tunisian Theater at the Turn of the Century: “Hammering the Same Nail” in Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi’s Theater (2014). All Theses and Dissertations (ETDs)*, www.openscholarship.wustl.edu, <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/etd/1274> [Access date: 18.12.2024].

⁶ A. Heluin, *ENTRETIEN. Auteur de “Violence(s)” – la dernière création de la compagnie Familia Productions –, la dramaturge*

The success *Ġalīla Bakkār* and *Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybī* enjoyed in Avignon and later at the Festspiele in Berlin led to an invitation to create a performance for the fiftieth anniversary of Tunisia's independence. The project the artists embarked on evolved into a complex three-part theatrical project that, in the words of *Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybī*, "traces Tunisia's history since its independence".⁷ The trilogy opens with a play entitled *Ḥamsūn* (Fifteen, 2006), whose title refers to the aforementioned fiftieth anniversary of Tunisia's independence in 1956. It was followed by *Yaḥyà Ya'īš* (Amnesia, 2010)⁸ and *Tsūnāmī* (Tsunami, 2013).

Due to censorship problems, the play *Ḥamsūn* premiered in Paris at the Odéon theatre under the title *Corps otages*. The main character, Amal, is a young woman from a liberal, left-leaning family. Her father, Youssef, is a former opposition activist. While studying in France, Amal turns to Salafi Islam, which becomes her way of life and a lifestyle and a coping mechanism in response to a harsh reality. Rejected by her father, who is disappointed with her attitude, she ends up living with two friends who share her beliefs—one of whom, Jouda, a schoolteacher, dies by suicide, blowing herself

dresse un bilan accablant des cinq ans qui séparent la Tunisie de sa révolution, www.lepoint.fr, https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/jalila-baccar-la-tunisie-doit-apprendre-a-se-penser-comme-le-centre-du-monde-14-12-2016-2090381_3.php [Access date: 18.12.2024].

⁷ *Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybī* cited in: J.-F. Perrier, *Tsunami, entretien avec Fadhel Jaibi par Jean-François Perrier*, www.fr.readkong.com, <https://fr.readkong.com/page/tsunami-de-jalila-baccar-et-fadhel-jaibi-1497121> [Access date: 18.12.2024].

⁸ *Amnesia* is the French title of the play.

up in a schoolyard. This event, along with the subsequent police investigation into the reasons behind the act and the network of people associated with Jouda, forms the central thread of the play’s plot.

Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġā‘āybī wrote that: “*Corps otages*, the first part of this trilogy, explored the crushing of collective memory and the annihilation of dissident progressive forces by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, providing a breeding ground for obscurantist and retrograde forces, only to repress them and turn them into expiatory victims and ideal martyrs of absolute authoritarianism”.⁹

The second part of the trilogy premiered in 2010 in Tunis, at the Le Mondial Theatre Hall. The very title of the play *Yaḥyà Ya‘īš. Amnesia* is quite enigmatic and leaves space for a wide range of interpretations. The word ‘yaḥyà’, meaning ‘he who lives’ or ‘he who survives’, is also a common Arabic name. The verb ‘ya‘īš’ can, in principle, have a meaning synonymous with yaḥyà. At the same time, ‘ya‘īš’ is also used in the expression ‘long live’, as in ‘ta‘īš Tūnus’ – long live Tunisia. This specific play on words allows for various possible translations, and in the play itself, the name Yaḥyà Ya‘īš is the name of the main character. Yaḥyà Ya‘īš, a high-ranking official – possibly the president – learns from the media during his birthday party that he has been removed from office. Agents show up at his home

⁹ J. Baccar, F. Jaibi, *Tsunami le 3ème volet d’une trilogie*, www.fr.readkong.com, <https://fr.readkong.com/page/tsunami-de-jalila-baccar-et-fadhel-jaibi-1497121> [Access date: 18.12.2024].

to conduct a search. Yaḥyà Ya‘iš is placed under house arrest. Following a fire that breaks out in his library, he is taken to a hospital. There he is confronted by hospital staff, journalists, and ordinary citizens. Eventually, as we can surmise, Yaḥyà Ya‘iš leaves the hospital, escapes the country, and waits in his home for media updates on his fate.

Jean-François Perrier wrote: “Rather than offering a simplistic, direct condemnation, Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi orchestrate a genuine tragedy about a despot who is suddenly ousted, about a long-muzzled press struggling to rid itself of cant and a people with a numb conscience. (...) There is no parody here, only an eloquent gallery of profoundly human characters – in their courage and their cowardice – who take part, voluntarily or not, in a kind of individual and collective nightmare”.¹⁰

The premiere of the final part of the trilogy, *Tsūnāmī* took place in France at the Palais de Chaillot, in 2013. Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī wrote that “Tsunami is a reflection on the eye of the storm, the chronicle of a radical upheaval – not only of nature, but also of goods and people – with the advent of an unprecedented disorder that sweeps away, submerges, and destroys all the landmarks acquired and the order long accepted, suffered... Above all, it presents the Tunisian, suddenly laid bare, face to face with himself, his illu-

¹⁰ J.-F. Perrier, *Yahia Yaïch – Amnesia. Presentation*, www.festival-avignon.com, <https://festival-avignon.com/en/edition-2011/programme/yahia-yaich-amnesia-22071> [Access date: 18.12.2024].

sions, his lies, his fantasies, his murdered dreams, confronted as never before with his buried nightmares”.¹¹

As in *Ḥamsūn*, the main character of the drama is a young woman called Dorra. The central conflict in *Tsūnāmī* revolves around a dispute between Dorra and her uncle Sheikh as-Sahbi, who, as her guardian, tries to force her to marry a cousin. Dorra, however, wants to marry the man she loves – Amin, a journalist. She runs away from home and hides at the apartment of Hayat, an academic she met during the Jasmine Revolution. Eventually, Dorra is found by her cousins and locked up in her uncle’s house. Meanwhile, radicals come to power in the country and, in an effort to suppress the opposition, declare a state of emergency. Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb wrote that the most valuable aspect about the play is that it “anticipates events. It draws on current events to wind the clock toward to the future”.¹²

The trilogy of the Tunisian artists is the result of years of painstaking work and a genuine belief that, as Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī put it, “the task that art must bear in the process of social change is essential”.¹³ The theatrical

¹¹ J. Baccar, F. Jaïbi, *Tsunami*.

¹² A. Meddeb, *Le cauchemar islamiste (Notes sur la dernière pièce de Jelila Baccar & Fadhel Jaïbi)*, www.v3.leaders.com.tn, <https://v3.leaders.com.tn/article/11581-abdelwahab-meddeb-le-cauchemar-islamiste-notes-sur-la-derniere-piece-de-jelila-baccar-fadhel-jaibi> [Access date: 17.12.2024].

¹³ Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī cited in: S. Šāndā, *Muqāwamat al-anẓima al-mustabidda. bayna ma‘ārik aš-šawāri’ wa-ḥašbāt al-masāriḥ*, www.swissinfo.ch, قاومة الأنظمة المستبدة بين معارك الشوارع وختبات المسارح – SWI swissinfo.ch [Access date: 18.12.2024].

project that began in 2006 with the premiere of the *Corps otages*, stems from a profound creative reflection on the historical, social and political changes that Tunisians have experienced in recent decades. It also represents a kind of response by Fāmilyā Productions to the current events in their country because, in the words of Ğalīla Bakkār, the theatre they create “is a theatre of urgency, even if it also raises the question of memory. It’s a theatre that takes the risk of saying things without taking a step back”.¹⁴ However, it is worth noting that the Tunisian artists’ theatrical project is not homogeneous and was not initially conceived as a three-part narrative about contemporary Tunisia. Therefore, at first glance, the plays *Ḥamsūn*, *Yaḥyà Ya ʿīš* and *Tsūnāmī* appear to have little in common. While *Ḥamsūn* and *Tsūnāmī* are set in Tunisia, the setting for *Yaḥyà Ya ʿīš* is not clearly defined. Each of the plays portrays completely different characters, whose life stories and experiences are distinct from one another. The plot layers of the three dramas also have few common elements. Nevertheless, the coherence of the trilogy created by Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġʿāybī lies in the essential components of the works, which not only bind them together but also complement each other. These elements are the proximity to Tunisian realities, an insightful analysis of a complex identity – ‘homo tunisianus’, socio-historical memory, and the theme of family. These elements provide the

¹⁴ Ğamīla Bakkār cited in: Heluin, *ENTRETIEN*.

key to understanding the theatrical story written by the Tunisian artists.

Ġalīla Bakkār in an interview with Anaïs Heluin said: “Familia Productions defends theatre that is both politically and aesthetically demanding, rooted in a complex Tunisian present”.¹⁵ This grounding in the realities of everyday life stems from the artists’ previously mentioned belief in the role of art in today’s world and a deep conviction that, as Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī put it, “theatre is nothing other than a reflection of society”.¹⁶ The entire trilogy of *Ḥamsūn*, *Yaḥyà Ya īš* and *Tsūnāmī* is saturated with Tunisian everyday life. However, it is not portrayed purely veristic manner. Tunisian reality is instead reflected here through art, focusing our attention on specific issues such as the constant fear of the regime and its security agents, the suppression of political freedoms, mutual distrust, the need to hide one’s views and live in hypocrisy, a sense of hopelessness, and the radicalisation of opinions. The works also address the clash between past and present, the struggle with the legacy of colonisation, and the complex relationship with the West. These are the key issues that shape the image of contemporary Tunisia and its society. We can see it clearly in each of the three plays.

The drama *Ḥamsūn*, which, in a way attempts to summarise fifty years of Tunisian independence, does

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī cited in: M. Da Silva, *En Tunisie, le théâtre comme une bataille*, www.orientxxi.info, <https://orientxxi.info/lu-vu-entendu/en-tunisie-le-theatre-comme-une-bataille,1851> [Access date:19.12.2024].

not indulge in the sentimental patriotism that the representatives of then-president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali expected. Instead, it focuses on Tunisia in the first decade of the 21st century, a country that, although it has made significant strides in its post-independence history, still faces fundamental questions about the nature and structure of the state, as well as the essence of its people's identity. The play paints a vivid picture of a country still grappling with the difficult task of defining itself. The act of suicide carried out in the school yard is a cry of despair and a premonition of the self-immolation by Muḥammad al-Bū'azīzī in 2010, which sparked the Jasmine Revolution. At the very beginning of the play, the Voice offstage says: "Friday, November 11, 2005, at 1:15 PM sharp, a teacher in the Rose School, dressed in white from head to toe, walks through the courtyard, stops in the middle, kneels, prays, pulls a trigger attached to her waist, and BOOM! She blows herself up! The country explodes too!"¹⁷ The explosion, which shocked public opinion and made the authorities anxious about their future, is the result of dynamic social processes and a clash of extreme ideological concepts. It represents an eruption of latent, growing tensions in a society that has been ordered to remain silent, deprived of the right to discuss, argue, or learn to disagree without mutual exclusion. This exclusion, combined with the radicalisation of views and opinions, casts a dark shadow over 'green Tunisia'. Youssef, the father of the

¹⁷ J. Baccar, *Khamsoun* [in:] *The Trilogy of Future Memory*, M. Carlson (ed.), New York 2015, p. 5.

play’s protagonist, despite having taught her openness and tolerance, cannot come to terms with the fact that his daughter has become a Salafist. He does not even attempt to understand her decision, does not talk to her, and does not give her a chance to present her arguments. He simply rejects her, asserting his absolute parental power, much as he himself was treated by the state regime. Amal says: “My father! Who raised me on freedom and respect for differences, sends me out of his house because I am different!”¹⁸

A conflicted society, silenced by an oppressive regime, radicalises its views and attitudes. However, as the play shows, not everyone is willing to participate in this madness fuelled by the regime. Mariem, Amal’s mother, speaks clearly, addressing both her husband and her own daughter: “I refuse to be the hostage of fundamentalists from both sides!”¹⁹ Despite this, she remains deeply disillusioned by the realities she faces, saying: “It looks like a nightmare. (...) Youssef’s illness, Amal is veiled! That’s ridiculous! We had dream; we believed in it. Everything seemed possible! What was our mistake? What went wrong? I don’t know”.²⁰ A symbolic explosion in the school yard, triggers a series of events and sparks a discussion among the characters about themselves and about contemporary Tunisians.

We see a similar eruption of emotion in *Yaḥyà Ya ʿiš*, in which, as Al-Fāḍil al-Ġaʿaybī puts it, “people from

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

different spheres finally express what has been suppressed".²¹ During Yaḥyà Ya'īš's stay in a psychiatric clinic, one of the doctors finds the courage to voice the anxiety of her unborn child and addresses the deposed leader with the words: "I am afraid of speaking a free word which will be fatal to me. I am afraid of seeing the right flouted, trampled upon, and dignity humiliated (...)"²² Also, one of the journalists who wants to finally have a frank conversation with Yaḥyà Ya'īš, asks somewhat sarcastically: "Despite all the achievements and despite all the wealth, why this general state of depression in the streets and homes? Why this verbal and physical violence, this frustration and panic? Why the sealed mouths, the closed horizons? Why do the young people no longer believe in anything? Not in Thought, not in Art, not in Morality, not in sacred values?"²³ The accusations made by the characters in the play are only a small part of a long list of charges against a regime that has driven the country and its people to the brink of despair. This regime has intimidated, persecuted, tortured and deprived them of their sense of dignity and national pride.

At the beginning of *Tsūnāmī*, the Voice states: "In the beginning there was pain, a slap, a kick, an insult (...)"²⁴

²¹ Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybi cited in: C. Broué, H. Gardette, *Grand entretien avec Fadhel Jaïbi et Jalila Baccar*, www.radiofrance.fr, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-grande-table-1ere-partie/grand-entretien-avec-fadhel-jaibi-et-jalila-baccar-7522322> [Access date: 20.12.2024].

²² Baccar, *Amnesia*, pp. 156–157.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁴ Baccar, *Tsunami*, p. 204.

The relentless suppression of freedoms and the curtailment of citizens' rights over many years gave rise to widespread frustration and a state of permanent tension, which found expression in everyday relationships, casting a shadow over Tunisian reality. As it turned out, the revolution that was supposed to mark a new phase in the history of the state and society was also hijacked at some point –this time by religious radicals. Once again, division, fear and the threat of a new form of tyranny emerged. One of the characters in *Tsūnāmī*, Hayet, after a fierce confrontation with Abdelkahhar, Dorra's cousin, exclaims: “A curse! Cursed be he who sowed discord, treated citizens as disbelievers, and proclaimed himself the Prince of Believers. (...) A curse on all those who nipped our dream in the bud, turning it into a bloody nightmare”.²⁵ The nightmare is that the oppressive system does not disappear with the fall of the ancien régime, but is inherited by the new power. The old dividing lines are replaced by new ones.

The proximity of Tunisian realities in the trilogy by Ğalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ĝa'āybī is the proximity of more or less visible ‘cracks’ in a terrorised society. We see them clearly in the relationships between Amal and her father, Dorra and her uncle Sheikh Essahbi, Yaḥyà Ya'īš and the characters who appear in the hospital. These dividing lines or fractures that threaten the stability of society are reflected in the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes expressed in the everyday relationships

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 222–223.

of Tunisians. The analysis of Tunisian reality is at the same time an analysis of 'homo tunisianus', shaped not only by the surrounding reality, but also by history, religion, memory, and various ideological currents.

The theme of the prison-state, which appears in all three dramas, plays a vital role here. It carries a clear division between those who condemn to prison and those who are imprisoned – the oppressors and the persecuted. This situation not only affects the characters' life stories, but also shapes their personalities and beliefs. It is not uncommon to get the impression that in many cases, the experience of staying behind bars overlaps and intertwines with life in a 'huge cell' of restrictions and limitations. Shortly after leaving prison, Mariem's father in the play *Ḥamsūn* commits suicide. Her husband's life is also completely changed by his long imprisonment and the torture he endured. Dorra's father in *Tsūnāmī* was also a political prisoner. The theme of detention and imprisonment also appears in *Yaḥyà Ya 'īš* in the statements of those who meet the deposed leader in hospital. The burden of being convicted and publicly stigmatised is inherited by society as a whole. When Mariem is called to the security office building by the police, she remembers her previous visits there. She says: "Looks like some words have been written on these walls to stay there forever! (...) They will never be erased! You hear them again and again! 'The situation is serious', 'Involved', 'Say the truth', 'Speak', 'Admit'. The same words—if these walls could speak, they would tell you fifty years of this country's

life!”²⁶ The sense of constant threat and insecurity leave their mark on those who have become victims of the system, on prisoners of the “common cell” into which Tunisia has turned.

In *Tsūnāmī*, a lawyer reminds Hayet of the slogan chanted during the revolution – “No more fear!” – and adds, “Yes, now it is a question of terror! Terror that lives within us, makes us still, drives us insane, makes us flee, hiding to weep”.²⁷ On the other hand, we also see people associated with the regime, its beneficiaries, and even the leader himself, as in the play *Yaḥyà Ya ʿiš*.

In the drama *Ḥamsūn*, Mariem accidentally encounters Gaddour, a former security officer who tortured her husband. She starts a conversation with him. The former police officer, now a lonely alcoholic, speaks bluntly: “(...) I executed the orders without arguing... without even thinking. (...) I never had an opinion, not about politics, not about art, not even about the weather! Everything was fine. I cared about nothing except my work”.²⁸ Gaddour is the perfect tool in the hands of the regime: loyal, obedient, fully relinquishing responsibility for his actions to his superiors. However, years later, even he admits: “I’m of no interest to anyone. No family, no friends! (...) It was my fault”.²⁹ Like many others who collaborated with the regime, he is left with disappointment and isolation, haunted by the choices he made.

²⁶ Baccar, *Khamsoun*, p. 36.

²⁷ Baccar, *Tsunami*, p. 227.

²⁸ Baccar, *Khamsoun*, pp. 76–77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

There are also those like Mehrez in the play *Yaḥyà Ya 'iš*, who stand by the deposed leader to the very end. Mehrez continues to repeat the empty slogans instilled in their minds over the years that Yaḥyà Ya 'iš defended the values of "the Muslim nation and the Arabic language throughout his life".³⁰ Only Mehrez's wife reminds him that his leader and his entire entourage were "drunk with power". In contrast, one of the doctors at the hospital confronts Yaḥyà Ya 'iš: "At the height of your power, you were cut off from reality and refused to hear or accept any opposition or disagreement. The syndrome of a child king. Narcissistic. A megalomaniac. Paranoid".³¹ This raises the question of justice and personal accountability for the decisions and actions that one takes. In Gaddour's case, his punishment comes in the form of what fate delivers – loneliness and endless grief after the death of his beloved wife. But for Yaḥyà Ya 'iš, one of the doctors demands a more direct form of responsibility: "You are accountable for all your actions. (...) We have decided to keep you here until your image fades from people's memories... forever!"³² For the megalomaniac leader, being forgotten – pushed to the margins of history – is certainly a severe punishment, though not one that the people would have hoped for. But for Tunisians themselves, just as crucial as punishment is the chance to free themselves from the psychological burden of living in the shadow

³⁰ Baccar, *Amnesia*, p. 169.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

of a ‘great leader’ and under a regime of terror. As *Tsūnāmī*, the final part of the trilogy, shows, this opportunity can easily be squandered. That is why memory plays such a vital role. Ġalīla Bakkār said: “Fadhel Jaïbi and I have always worked on memory”.³³ In all three plays, memory is not just important – it is perhaps the crucial element of both individual and collective identity. Collective memory is born from personal memories and the lived experiences of individuals. On the one hand, memory serves as a bridge between the past and the present. On the other, it acts as a repository of a nation’s wisdom, drawn from its painful experiences. However, memory is often appropriated by various interest groups or becomes an unnecessary burden. In *Ĥamsūn*, the Policeman remarks: “Kids! These young kids! They know nothing about the past... It’s just something from their history books... (...) A lesson among other lessons at school. Doesn’t mean a damn thing to them. To the older ones, it’s ancient history... long buried with the dead”.³⁴

The library in the home of the deposed leader Yaḥyà Ya‘īš – full of documents, testimonies and memories – goes up in flames. It remains unclear whether he himself set fire to his past, as a symbol of guilt and responsibility, or if someone else sought to erase the memory of ‘the leader’. Meanwhile, Sheikh Essahbi seeks to completely appropriate the memory of the recent past and manipulate it for his own political ends.

³³ Bakkār in: Heluin, *ENTRETIEN*.

³⁴ Baccar, *Khamsoun*, p. 49.

Yet the memory of building a community and sacrificing oneself for it can also be source of great strength. It is to this memory that Mariem repeatedly refers in *Ḥamsūn*, and it is what inspires Dorra and Amine *Tsūnāmī*. Recalling the Jasmine Revolution, the young journalist declares: “Everyone, hand in hand, to build the Tunisia of the future. The chain of solidarity, it’s you... today, it’s you I need”.³⁵

The memory of community is closely tied to the memory of family – a prominent theme in the plays by Ġālīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī. The characters in all three works are embedded in both micro and macro community contexts. In *Ḥamsūn* and *Tsūnāmī*, we encounter images of a divided and conflicted family, a metaphor for a divided and conflicted national community. Yet, alongside the vivid depiction of disputes, we also see the strong bonds that unite the family. It is in the context of the family that issues of memory, responsibility, and identity arise. Family, despite any animosity – as in the case of Amal – is a support and a blessing. In contrast, for Dorra, family becomes a curse. The situation of Yaḥyà Ya‘īš’s family is slightly different: they fully take advantage of their position and power, creating a network of dependencies and mutual interests with those linked to the regime. As a result, the deposed leader eventually manages to leave the country. Thus, this diverse and nuanced portrayal of the family complements what Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī described as “a surgical operation, a scalpel operation that gets to

³⁵ Baccar, *Tsunami*, p. 211.

the bottom of things, dissecting the social body and that of ‘homo tunisianus’.³⁶

Marvin Carlson wrote that in recent, turbulent decades, “no Tunisian artist was more closely involved with the ongoing events, nor a more astute critic of the constantly shifting political scene, than Jalila Baccar, whose dramatic works, staged by her husband, Fadhel Jaïbi, are key to understanding the cross-currents of a country like Tunisia at the opening of the twenty-first century”.³⁷ Looking at Tunisia’s rich artistic scene, the list of artists exceptionally committed to the fate of their country could certainly be extended to include many more names. Nevertheless, the theatrical project of Familia Productions, led by Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī and the result of their long-term efforts, the trilogy *Ḥamsūn*, *Yaḥyà Ya īš* and *Tsūnāmī* deserves special recognition. These works are not only an artistic record of the landmark events that Tunisia has gone through in recent years, but they also focus on one key element: the human being. A human being who becomes embroiled in history and, driven by love or hate, lust for power or selflessness, confronts himself, his relatives, and the society in which he lives.

Ġalīla Bakkār and Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī search for archetypes of the complex Tunisian identity, rooted in history and local tradition, but at the same time distinctly

³⁶ Al-Ġa‘āybī [in]: Perrier, *Tsunami, entretien*.

³⁷ M. Carlson, M. Carlson, *The Tunisian Revolution and After in the Work of Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi* [in:] *Post-Conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts, Contemporary Performance InterActions*, D. O’Rawe, M. Phelan (eds.), London 2016, p. 234.

shaped by the present. They place these archetypes in the space of current events, integrating them into the context of political realities, ideological disputes, social tensions, and family life. They combine poetic monologue with authentic dialogue, expressing the polyphony of the Tunisian microcosm. Drawing on the tradition of the ancient chorus, they give voice to the community, to the conscience of the nation in search of its indestructible wisdom. All this is done in order to tell the story of the here and now, of what is most important for Tunisians and their country as they look toward the future.

Al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybī and Ġalīla Bakkār, echoing Antoine Vitez, reiterated his goal of creating “an elite theatre for all”.³⁸ It is a theatre that invites social debate, tackles taboo subjects, strives to rise above divisions, and seeks to build a conscious civic community. In its form, it blends the best traditions of theatre with his own artistic sensibility and vision of a lively, energetic stage.

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³⁸ *Fadhel Jaïbi. Auteur, formateur, metteur en scène*, www.theatreonline.com, <https://www.theatreonline.com/Artiste/Fadhel-Jaibi/28194> [Access date: 20.12.2024].

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Jamila Oueslati

**Selected Issues
from Life and literature
of Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī/
Mahmoud Messadi (1911–2004)¹**

Abstract: Mahmoud Messadi (محمود المسعدي) is known as the icon of Tunisian Modern literature both in Tunisia and internationally. Besides his deep culture and knowledge, the quality of his writings has earned him, throughout the years and up to the present day a distinguished place among authorities in Arabic literature, like Ṭāha Ḥusayn. As a prominent Tunisian novelist, Messadi was a writer with whom Tunisian literature moved into a new stage. His best-known works *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl* ("Thus Spoke Abū Hurayra", 1973), *As-Sudd* ("The Dam", 1955), *Min ayyām ‘Imrān* ("From the days of ‘Imrān") and *Mawlid an-nisyān* ("The Birth of Forgetfulness", 1945).

Keywords: Mahmoud Messadi, Tunisian Modern Literature, *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl*, *As-Sudd*, Tunisian Novelists

¹ Mahmoud Messadi, Mahmoud Masadi is also used. In this work, Mahmoud Messadi will be used.

1. Biography Highlights²

The Tunisian writer Mahmoud Messadi passed away on Thursday, December 16, 2004, at the age of 93. He was buried at Al-Ġallāz Cemetery in Tunis, in the same grave as his wife, the late Sharifa Messadi, who had passed away fourteen years earlier, an arrangement he had requested. His death resonated deeply across Tunisia’s cultural and political spheres. Both international and national media widely covered news of his passing, while tributes to his life and work filled Arabic- and French-language newspapers, highlighting his contributions to literature and national liberation.

In his official tribute, Minister of Culture Mohamed Aziz Ben Achour stated that Tunisia was bidding farewell to “a towering figure of the nation, who raised its flag high, spread its eternal values, and contributed to shaping its modern history in various fields from resistance

² A reference to the biography of Mahmoud Messadi can be found in: M. al-Mas‘adī, *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, Tūnus 2002–2003, Vol. I, pp. 15–20 by M. Ṭaršūna, as well as in the introduction by N.D. Şammūd in his book *Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī wa-kitābuhu As-Sudd*, Tūnus 1973, pp. 7–14. There are also many interviews with Mahmoud Messadi, which can be found in his *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila*. Among these is, in particular, the interview conducted by F. Chouchane on the program *Bilā ḥudūd*, broadcast by Tunisian television in 1997 in six episodes, and included in the third volume of *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila* under the title *Riḥlat al-‘umr*, pp. 327–374. Another interview, conducted by M. as-Sāmarrāī, can also be found in the third volume of *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, pp. 187–208. In Polish, a biography of Mahmoud Messadi is presented in the book: J. Bielawski, J. Kozłowska, E. Machut-Mendecka, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w. Literatura arabskiego Maghrebu*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 388–399.

to colonialism, to trade union activism in defense of social dignity for both individuals and groups, to educational reform to instill values and principles in the heart of youth, and culture to elevate the status of humanity in life".³ Mohamed Driss, Director of the National Theatre of Tunisia, said: "Al-Messadi was not only a writer, but a teacher and educator. He shaped a whole generation... Even when he was Minister of Culture, he remained an educator, an activist, and a unionist whose influence is deeply felt in Tunisia's cultural and educational institutions".⁴ Moreover, Tunisian critic and novelist Mahmūd Ṭaršūna⁵ added: "I feel deep sorrow for

³ "Aṣ-Ṣarīḥ", 18.12.2004, p. 21.

⁴ "Le Quotidien", 18.12.2014, p. 13.

⁵ Maḥmūd Ṭaršūna is a critic, novelist, and professor of higher education at the University of Tunis since 1971. He studied at the "École Normale Supérieure" of Tunis from 1963 to 1966, and at the Sorbonne University in Paris. He obtained a *State Doctorate* in Comparative Literature in 1980. He has supervised many doctoral dissertations and master's theses. He served as Director General of Studies and Research at the Beit Al-Hikma Foundation in Tunis from 1987 to 1992. He is a member of the judging panel for the King Faisal Prize, a member of the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Arts in Tunis, of the Executive Office of the Union of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and the board of the Tunisian Writers' Union. He has participated in conferences of Arab writers in Amman, Sanaa, Aden, Baghdad, and Tunis. He has also lectured at numerous institutions around the world, including the Institute of Arab Studies, Tashkent University in Uzbekistan, Cairo University (during the Tāha Ḥusayn Centennial and the Comparative Literature Conference), Ain Shams University (Conference on Literary Criticism), the Conference on the Arabic Novel (Supreme Council for Culture in Egypt), and in universities in Tunis, Algeria, Tripoli, Morocco, Bahrain, Yarmouk, Granada, Sicily, Paris, Toulouse, Aix, London, Madrid, as well as visits to China, Russia, and the United States. In recognition of his work, he received the Award of Distinction for Arts and Humanities in 1998.

the loss of a dear friend with whom I shared decades of intellectual companionship. He was a creator and a thinker who elevated Tunisia's name through his literary and philosophical works, as well as his vision for a pioneering educational system. His legacy is a rich literary treasure. We considered him a phenomenon because he was the complete intellectual, uniting literary creation, social and political commitment, and philosophical thought. He created literary models that reflect his thoughts and emotions, so action and writing did not contradict his personality. Rather, they complement each other, as in the character of an organic intellectual who is a pioneer in many fields".⁶ Chadli Kli-bi, former Secretary-General of the Arab League, said: "Mahmoud Messadi will always speak through the voices of his characters Ġaylān, Maymūna, and Abū Hurayra. His essential voice will continue to echo, exploring humanity's eternal quest for the absolute".⁷ The numerous eulogies delivered by prominent figures both within Tunisia and internationally reflect the profound impact Mahmoud Messadi had on Tunisia's literary, cultural, educational, and political history.

He has authored many critical studies, including *Al-Adab al-murīd fī mu'allafāt Al-Mas'adī*, *Mabāḥiṭ fī al-adab at-tūnusī āl-mu'āšir*, *Madḥal ilā āl-adab al-muuqārīn wa-taṭbīquhu 'alā Alf layla wa-layla*, *Al-Hāmišyyūn fī āl-maqāmāt al-'arabiyya wa-qīṣaṣ aš-ṣuttār al-isbāniyya*, *'Mi'at layla wa-layla*, *Ṣalāt al-Ġayb*, *Min a'lām ar-riwāya fī Tūnus*, *Iškāliyyāt al-manhaġ fī ān-naqd al-adabī*, *'Tārīḥ al-adab at-tūnusī āl-ḥadīṭ wa-āl-mu'āšir*, *'Naqd ar-riwāya ān-nisā'iyya fī Tūnus*, and *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī wa-Al-A'māl al-kāmila*.

⁶ "Aṣ-Ṣabāḥ", 17.12.2004, p. 13.

⁷ "Aṣ-Ṣabāḥ", 17.12.2004, p. 13.

Mahmoud Messadi was born on January 28, 1911, in the village of Tazarka⁸, which at the time was considered one of the poorest villages in Tunisia due to its lack of fertile land and agricultural resources⁹. Tazarka is situated in Nabeul Governorate in northeastern Tunisia, in a region known as 'Cap Bon. From an early age, his father was committed to giving him a strong religious education. He enrolled him in the *kuttāb* (religious school), where Mahmoud memorized parts of the Qur'an and learned to read and write under the guidance of a teacher. In 1922, five years beyond the legal age for school enrollment¹⁰, Messadi joined the primary school after spending approximately five to six years at the *kuttāb*¹¹. He quickly demonstrated outstanding intellectual ability, which allowed him to pass his studies easily. Since the capital, Tunis, was the center of education and culture at the time, he had to leave his hometown of Tazarka to continue his education at Ṣādiqiyya Primary School¹² and later at Ṣādiqī High School. In an interview, Messadi said: "Since schools didn't exist every-

⁸ Mahmoud Messadi was born in the same year as the renowned Egyptian novelist Naḡīb Maḥfūz.

⁹ Interview with Mahmoud Messadi on the television program *Bilā ḥudūd* broadcast by Tunisian Television in 1997, included in Vol. III of *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, p. 327.

¹⁰ This situation was widespread in most Arab countries due to the limited availability of education and schools on one hand, and the lack of strict enrollment regulations in schools on the other.

¹¹ Al-Mas'adī, *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. III, p. 328.

¹² Ṣādiqiyya Primary School was established at the beginning of the last century by the renowned Tunisian reformer Ḥayr ad-Dīn Bāṣā to cultivate an enlightened elite capable of leading national reform and modernization across economic, political, scientific, and cultural fields through engagement with European civilization.

where, my father had no choice but to send me to the capital with my elder brother, who had already memorized the entire Quran. He was sent to study at Az-Zaytūna Mosque, while I was sent to a modern Franco-Arabic primary school".¹³ In 1932, he obtained the first part of the Baccalaureate, and the following year, in 1933, he completed the second part at the Carnot High School in Tunis.¹⁴

In 1933, at the beginning of the 1930s, Mahmoud Messadi traveled to Paris to pursue higher education. He enrolled in the Faculty of Arts at the Sorbonne University, where he specialized in Arabic language and literature. He obtained his bachelor's degree in 1936, followed by a postgraduate diploma in 1939, with a dissertation entitled "Rhythm in Arabic rhymed prose". In 1947, he passed the aggregation¹⁵, and later registered for a doctoral degree with a dissertation titled *Madrasat Abī Nuwās aš-ši'riyya. Ši'r al-ḥamr* ("The School of Abū Nuwās. The Poetry of Wine"), under the supervision of the French Orientalist R. Blachère. In addition, he prepared a complementary dissertation on *Al-Īqā' fi as-sağ' al-'arabī* ("Rhythm in Arabic Sağ'). Although the Sorbonne approved the printing and defense of his doctoral thesis on March 12, 1957, Messadi never submitted it for a formal defense.¹⁶

¹³ Al-Mas‘adī, *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. III, p. 188.

¹⁴ One of the oldest and most renowned High Schools in Tunisia.

¹⁵ Messadi was forced to interrupt his studies due to the war, which led him to take the *aggregation* examination in 1947.

¹⁶ Concerning his decision not to pursue the examination for obtaining the State Doctorate, Mahmoud Messadi addressed this

During his stay in France, he deepened his knowledge of major French and European thinkers and writers and discovered Greek theatre and the works of Schopenhauer. Messadi once said commenting on Ṭāha Ḥusayn's article¹⁷ "The authors I immersed myself in during my literary formation included the likes of Baudelaire, Valéry, Gide, de Saint-Exupéry, Sartre, and Giraudoux, along with these French writers other European authors such as Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, and Unamuno also shaped my literary journey".¹⁸

Mahmud Messadi's life in Tunisia was characterized by a rich career encompassing education, politics, and creativity. Upon his return to his homeland, Tunisia, in 1936, he began working as a certified teacher at the Carnot High School (the same institution where he had completed the second part of his Baccalaureate). In 1938, he transferred to Ṣādiqiyya High School (where he had obtained his first Baccalaureate) and continued teaching until 1946. The outbreak of World War II and

topic in his interviews. He presented some reasons, particularly his involvement in political affairs and his transition between various positions, which left him neither the opportunity nor the time to focus on academic research. See, for example, Vol. III of *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, pp. 305–311, and especially the appendix to the book *Al-Īqā' fī as-sağ' al-'arabī*, found in Volume II of *Al-A'māl al-kāmila* under the title *Qiṣṣat haḍā āl-baḥt*, pp. 435–439. Despite not defending the dissertation formally, Mahmoud Messadi eventually published the work, which is listed among his works.

¹⁷ A literary relationship united the two professors and writers, Ṭāha Ḥusayn and Mahmud Messadi. Ṭāha Ḥusayn wrote two articles on Messadi's literature, which had a profound impact on the opinions of literary critics, both his contemporaries and those who came after him.

¹⁸ Ṣammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī wa-kitābuhu* As-Sudd, p. 58.

the socio-political situation in Tunisia likely prevented him from continuing his studies¹⁹, prompting him to devote himself fully to teaching during that period. Between 1944 and 1947, Messadi co-directed the influential literary journal “Al-Mabāḥiṭ” alongside Muḥammad al-Bašrūš. The journal played a pivotal role in shaping Tunisia’s intellectual landscape. It published, among other works, Messadi’s novella *Mawlid an-nisyān* (“Birth of forgetfulness”) from April 13 to July 16, 1945, and excerpts from his acclaimed philosophical novel *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl* (“Thus Spoke Abu Hurayrah”) between August 5 and November 8, 1944. This journal greatly contributed to the rise of Messadi’s fame and his distinctive stylistic and thematic contributions to Arabic literature.

After obtaining the aggregation in 1947, Mahmoud Messadi continued working for a year at Sadiqi College as a professor of Arabic language and literature. Many well-known Tunisian figures in literature, thought, and politics graduated under his instruction. Mahmoud Messadi also fought within the national movement during the colonial period. He had been a member of the Tunisian Liberal Constitutional Party since its founding in 1933. He later joined the labor union movement and was elected, from 1948 to 1954, as Deputy Secretary-General of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and President of the National Federation of Education Unions. Messadi played an active political role and par-

¹⁹ The bachelor’s degree in 1936, the postgraduate studies in 1939, the aggregation in 1947.

ticipated in the liberation struggle that erupted after the events of January 18, 1952, and the arrest of nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba. In the wake of the assassination of union leader Farhat Hached, Messadi was exiled to southern Tunisia (Medenine, Remada, Tataouine, Kebili) from December 6, 1952, until his release on June 2, 1953.

Afterwards, he was entrusted with several political missions, including his participation in the 1954 Tunisian-French negotiations that led to internal independence. Following Tunisia's independence on March 20, 1956, Messadi assumed numerous high-ranking positions. He served as a professor of higher education and Director of Literary and Linguistic Studies at the Higher Institute of Studies in Tunis for seven years (1948–1955). In 1955, he was appointed Head of Secondary Education at the Ministry of National Education, a position he held until 1958. From 1956 to 1957, he was a member of the Tunisian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. In 1957, he was also a member of the Tunisian delegation to the "Conference of Arab Writers" in Cairo, which gathered many of the most prominent Arab intellectuals and writers. In 1958, Mahmoud Messadi was appointed Inspector General of Secondary Education. However, his tenure in that position was brief, as he was soon appointed Secretary of State for National Education and Youth, thereby assuming full ministerial responsibilities.²⁰ He held this posi-

²⁰ Mahmoud Messadi was the third minister to assume the duties of the Ministry of Education after independence.

tion for ten years, during which he prepared and oversaw the implementation of the first national education reform in independent Tunisia. During his tenure, he laid the foundations for the Tunisian University by drafting its founding law, establishing its faculties, higher institutes, and affiliated research centers. This ambitious program led to a substantial expansion of the education sector: secondary schools were built in all governorates of the country, and the number of primary schools increased in cities, extending even to rural areas. As a result, universities became crowded with students.

In 1964, Mahmoud Messadi was elected as a Deputy of the People, representing the Nabeul Governorate in the National Assembly and became a member of the Political Bureau. He served as Minister of State from November 1969 to June 1970. He later took over the Ministry of Culture from March 1974 to November 1976. During this tenure, he founded the journal “*Al-Ḥayāt at-Ṭaqāfiyya*”, which he perhaps intended as a revival of the journal “*Al-Mabāḥiṭ*”, which he had directed between 1944 and 1948²¹. In this period, he also held numerous responsibilities in UNESCO and ALECSO. He became known for advocating a global cultural vision that would benefit both developed nations and those of the Third World equally.

Within UNESCO, he served as an advisory member of the International Institute for Educational Planning for four years, as a member of the drafting committee,

²¹ From the introduction to Mahmoud Messadi by M. Ṭaršūna, in *Al-Mas‘adī, Al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, p. 17.

and as the editor of a book on the *Different Aspects of Islamic Civilization*. He was one of seven international experts consulted by the Director-General of UNESCO on the topic "Where is education heading?" His contribution, a study entitled *Education Today and Tomorrow*, later turned into two books: *Learning to Be* and *Education in Transition*. His study *Cultural Development in the Cultural Region of the Arab States* was included in a UNESCO publication on global culture. He also served as a UNESCO expert in several Arab countries, participating in the Arab Culture Experts Committee, the committee tasked with evaluating UNESCO regional centers in the Middle East, the committee for establishing an international university, and the committee on the status of artists. As for ALECSO, he was a member of the Council of Arab Cultural Elders, served on the drafting committee of the Great Arab Encyclopedia, and was a member of the Jordan Academy of the Arabic Language in 1980.

2. The Collected Works of Mahmoud Messadi

The collected works of Mahmoud Messadi are numerous and varied, including books, articles, lectures, prefaces and interviews. It is not feasible to enumerate all of his works in this context. Therefore, the present focus will be limited to his published books.

The books are divided into literary works and critical studies. In fact, organizing these works – whether

literary or scholarly – by date of composition or publication presents certain challenges, as Messadi did not adhere to a strict chronological order in writing or releasing his works. However, we have tried to arrange them according to their date of composition, relying on some statements by Messadi himself as well as on the classification established by Professor Maḥmūd Ṭaršūna of Messadi’s works. In an interview with Mahmoud Messadi, published in “An-Nadwa” magazine (February 1956), and republished in volume II of *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila* (pp. 53–54), he responded to a question concerning the origins of his interest in literature by saying: “That was in the distant days of my youth. I wrote, while I was still a student at Sadiqi High School, a story whose title I have now forgotten and of which I have kept no copy. All I remember is that its subject was related to the revolt of Ibn al-Aš‘aṭ in Kairouan, that I signed it under a pseudonym, and that it was published in one of the issues of the Tunisian magazine “Al-‘Ālam al-Adabī”. Almost a quarter of a century has passed since those childish writings, which time has erased along with other things, and afterwards came the seriousness. I then wrote *Al-Musāfir* (“The Traveler”) (first in French, then in Arabic), followed by “Thus Spoke Abū Hurayra”, “The Dam”, and “Birth of Forgetfulness”, along with scattered articles here and there”.²²

M. Ṭaršūna worked on collecting and publishing all of Messadi’s works, including those unpublished or lesser-known, among them the story of *Ibn al-Aš‘aṭ*,

²² Al-Mas‘adī, *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, Vol. II, pp. 53–54.

which appears in volume I of *Al-A'māl al-kāmila* under the title *Bi-Zāhir al-Qayrawān*.

2.1. Literary Books

2.1.1. *Bi-Zāhir al-Qayrawān* ("On the Outskirts of Kairouan"), a one-act, one-scene play.

- First published in "Al-Ālam al-Adabī", March 1930, pp. 22–24.
- In *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tūnus 2002, pp. 449–455.

2.1.2. *Al-Musāfir* ("The Traveler"), contemplations in narrative form.

- First published in French in "At-Tafāhum" magazine (Vichy), October 1942.
- First published in Arabic in "An-Nadwa" magazine, June 1954, pp. 25–29.
- Appeared in the book *As-Sudd* (The Dam), 1st ed. 1955, pp. 195–198.
- Included in *Mawlid an-nisyān* ("The Birth of Forgetfulness"), 2nd ed. 1974, pp. 119–133.
- Included in *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tūnus 2002, pp. 317–326.

2.1.3. *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl* ("Thus Spoke Abū Hurayra"), written before June 1940.

He published also the following narratives:

- *Ḥadīṭ al-Qiyāma* ("Resurrection"), "Al-Mabāḥiṭ", August 1944.
- *Ḥadīṭ al-ba't al-awwal* ("The First Awakening"), "Al-Mabāḥiṭ", September 1944.

- *‘Hadīṭ al-kalb* (“The dog”), “Al-Mabāḥiṭ”, October 1944.
- *Ḥadīṭ al-‘adad* (“Multitude”), “Al-Mabāḥiṭ”, November 1944.
- *Ḥadīṭ al-ḡayba tuṭlab fa-lā tudrak* (“Absence Sought and Never Achieved”), “Al-Fikr”, March 1956.
- Published in full (22 narratives) by Ad-Dār At-Tūnisiyya li-ān-Našr, Tūnus 1973, 209 pp.
- Published in the series “Uyūn al- Mu‘āšara” with an introduction by Tawfiq Bakkār, 1st ed. 1980, 2nd ed. 1985.
- Included in *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tunis 2002, pp. 129–246.

2.1.4. *As-Sudd* (“The Dam”), a novel in eight scenes, written from September 1939 to June 1940, illustrated by Ḥātim al-Makkī.

- 1st ed.: Šarikat an-Našr li-Šamāl Ifriqiyyā, Tūnus, 1955, 202 pp.
- 2nd ed.: Ad-Dār at-Tūnisiyya li-ān-Našr 1974, 294 pp. Multiple later editions.
- Translated into French by Izzedine Gellouz with an introduction and a preface by Jacques Berque. *Na‘mān li-ān-Našr* (Naaman Publications), Canada 1981, 89 pp., 2nd ed. Paris 1994.

Selected chapters translated earlier into French:

- Férid Ghazi, “Orient”, 4th Quarter 1959, pp. 157–163.
- Maurice Bormanns (partial translation reviewed by Salah Garmadi, Hamadi Ben Halima, and Mahmoud Messadi), *IBLA*, 1961, pp. 1–16.

- Vincent Monteil, *Bilingual Anthology of Contemporary Arabic Literature*, Beirut 1961, pp. 252–264.
- Mahmoud Messadi, “Carthage”, December 1965–February 1966.
- Included in *Al-A ‘māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tunis 2002, pp. 23–128.

2.1.5. *Mawlid an-nisyān* (“The Birth of Forgetfulness”), a novel in seven chapters.

- 1st ed.: in “Al-Mabāḥiṭ”, April–July 1945.
- 2nd ed.: Ad-Dār at-Tūnusiyya li-ān-Našr, 1974, 153 pages.
- Translated into French by Tawfiq Bakkar, Bayt Al-Ḥikma 1993.
- Translated into Dutch by Marcelle Van de Pol, Amsterdam 1995.
- Included in *Al-A ‘māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tunis 2002, pp. 253–315.

2.1.6. *As-Sindbād wa-āṭ-Ṭahāra* (“Sindbad and Purity”), short story, published in:

- “Al-Mabāḥiṭ”, September–October 1947.
- Included in *Mawlid an-nisyān*, 2nd ed. 1974, pp. 135–151.
- Translated by the author into French, published by “Fā’iza” 1960, No. 10.
- Included in *Al-A ‘māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tūnus 2002, pp. 327–336.

2.1.7. *Min ayyām ‘Imrān* (“From the Days of Imran”), selections published in:

2.1.7.1. *Yawm al-qatī'a* ("Day of Severance"), published in:

- "An-Nadwa", August 1954, p. 3.
- "Al-Ḥayāt at-Ṭaqāfiyya", September–October 1976, p. 4.

2.1.7.2. *Yawm al-qaḥṭ* ("Day of Drought"), published in:

- "An-Nadwa", August 1954, p. 4
- "Al-Ḥayāt At-Ṭaqāfiyya", September–October 1976, p. 4.
- Included in *Ta'ṣīlan li-kiyān* ("Asserting an Identity"), Tūnus 1981, pp. 194–196.

2.1.7.3. *Ḥadīṭ ad-ḍaḥiyya* ("The victim"), published in:

- "Al-Fikr", April 1957, p. 2.
- "Al-Ḥayāt at-Ṭaqāfiyya", September–October 1976, p. 4.

2.1.7.4. *Ḥadīṭ aṣ-ṣamt* ("The silence"), published in:

- In the conclusion of *Ta'ṣīlan li-kiyān*, p. 197.

2.1.7.5. *Yawm al-kaffāra wa-ḥr-rahma* ("Day of Atonement and Mercy"), published in:

- *Ta'ṣīlan li-kayān*, 2nd ed., undated, p. 206.

After M. Ṭarṣūna's interest in the works of Mahmoud Messadi, it became possible to publish the complete book "From the days of Imran":

- 1st ed.: Tūnus, 2002.
- 2nd ed. included in *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. I, Tūnus 2002, pp. 337–434.

2.2. Critical Works

2.2.1. *Ta'ṣīlan li-kiyān* ("Asserting an Identity"), Collection of essays; first essay dates to 1940):

- 1st ed. 1979.
- 2nd ed. 1981.
- 3rd ed. included in *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. II, Tūnus 2002, pp. 7–250.

2.2.2. *Al-Īqā' fī ās-sağ' al-'arabī* ("Rhythm in Arabic Sağ') (academic thesis):

- Originally submitted as a master's thesis to the Sorbonne in 1939.
- Later presented as a doctoral dissertation under Orientalist Régis Blachère in 1957.
- First published in French in 1981 by Abdelkarim Ben Abdallah's Foundation.
- First published in Arabic in 1996 by the same foundation.
- Included in *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. II, Tūnus 2002.

3. A Brief Introduction to Messadi's Literature

Most of Mahmoud Messadi's literary works are primarily distinguished by their structural composition. His texts are often divided into scenes, as in *As-Sudd*, 'Mawlid An-Nisyān', into chapters, as in *Ḥaddṭa Abū Hurayra qāl...*, by days, as in *Min ayyam Imran'*, or into a single scene and a chapter, as in 'Bi-Zāhir al-Qayrawān. A second defining feature of his writings is

their strong reliance on dialogue. Thirdly, there is the prominent presence of the narrator – often the author himself – making his presence felt through narrative interjections within the dialogue or in introductory and prefatory passages. Fourthly, his works often center on a conflict between the protagonist and the other characters, such as Ġaylān in *As-Sudd*, Abū Hurayrah in *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl...*, ‘Imrān in *Min ayyām ‘Imrān*, and Madīn in *Mawlid An-Nisyān*. Fifthly, his language is marked by eloquent, classical Arabic that avoids obscure or archaic terms, often bordering on the rhythm and cadence of poetry.

This formal and thematic consistency across Messadi’s works – along with other factors, such as his mastery of modern literary forms and his ability to adapt them to the Arabic tradition, as well as his engagement with Arab cultural heritage – makes his literature a fertile ground for academic study. Indeed, numerous scholarly studies, including journal articles and university theses, explored various aspects of his oeuvre, whether through comparative approaches or through the analyses of recurring themes in his writing. We will return to this subject in further detail throughout this study. Reference may also be made to Messadi’s annotated bibliography, compiled by M. Ṭaršūna in the first volume of *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila li-Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī*.

The nature of our study necessitates a brief overview of the most significant writings on Mahmoud Messadi and his literary work, particularly his book *As-Sudd*. While Maghrebian literature has often been underrep-

resented in academic research, it is noteworthy that Messadi and his writings have garnered considerable scholarly attention, both within Tunisia and abroad²³. These esarlist studies appeared as articles in newspapers and literary journals, with a particular focus on *As-Sudd* – likely due to its precedence over his other works.²⁴ Despite the book's delayed publication (written between 1933 and 1939 but not released until 1955)²⁵ and its limited circulation, especially outside Tunisia,²⁶ its release stirred considerable interest among intellectuals. This interest intensified notably after the renowned Egyptian writer Ṭāha Ḥusayn²⁷ published two successive

²³ Refer to the *Al-Mas'adi Library*, compiled by M. Ṭaršūna at the end of the first volume of *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, pp. 457–472, which contains works written about Messadi and his literature. Ṭaršūna categorized these references into books and academic theses (31 in total), articles and book chapters (120 in total), foreign-language references (23 in total), and translations (16 in total).

²⁴ Refer to the list of Messadi works and their years of publication.

²⁵ Messadi says in his response to Ṭāha Ḥusayn's article (found in *Soumoud's Collection* pp. 53–66, and in *Al-Mas'adi, Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, pp. 51–62: "before I wrote my story between 1933–1939" (this passage is found in *Soumoud's Collection*, p. 58, and in *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, p. 55). The first edition of *As-Sudd* was published in 1955.

²⁶ This delay was due to the historical circumstances the country was going through (the wartime situation), which made the publishing and distribution of books difficult.

²⁷ Ṭāha Ḥusayn (1889–1973) was an Egyptian writer and critic, known as the "Dean of Arabic Literature". He was born and spent his childhood in a village in the Egyptian countryside. At the age of three, he contracted ophthalmia, which caused the loss of his eyesight. Ṭāha Ḥusayn moved from his village to Cairo to join Al-Azhar University, which he was dissatisfied with, both in terms of the institution and its teachers, so he left it and enrolled in the

articles about the book.²⁸ The attention given to *As-Sudd* can be attributed to two main factors: first is the uniqueness of the book itself. In *As-Sudd*, Messadi pursued a novel path in modern Arabic literature, distinguished by its theme, language, and style. This innovation was emphasized by numerous critics, including Maḥğūb Bin Milād²⁹, who opened a roundtable discussion on the book with the following statement: "I have no doubt whatsoever that if we were to lay before us the towering piles of literary works produced in Arabic publishing houses across both the East and the West over the past half-century, and were asked to select from them a single work that surpasses the rest in essence, purity of inspiration, brilliance of style, ingenuity of composition, boldness of vision, sincerity of expression, enchantment of tone, and power to provoke thought and stir the deepest of Eastern emotions, we would find no work superior to *As-Sudd*".³⁰ Another reason for attention *As-Sudd* has received is the author's fame on the cultural and political stage.

Egyptian University. He graduated from there with a university degree, and then traveled to Paris to continue his higher studies, returning with a doctoral degree. After his return to Egypt, he produced numerous works, including *Al-Ayyām* ("The Days"), *'Alā hāmiš as-sira* ("On the Margins of the Biography"), *Mus-taqbal at-Ṭaqāfa fī Miṣr* ("The Future of Culture in Egypt") and *Fī aš-sī'r al-ğāhili* ("On Pre-Islamic Poetry"). He became the president of Alexandria University in 1943 and later, in 1950, the Minister of Education.

²⁸ Refer to the two articles in Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī* (the first article, pp. 43–52; the second article, pp. 67–75).

²⁹ Professor of philosophy at the University of Tunis.

³⁰ Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, pp. 97–98.

The inclusion of *As-Sudd* in both secondary and university curricula further heightened interest in the book³¹. This academic integration gave rise to a new wave of studies; ranging from independent books focused on *As-Sudd* or on Messadi's complete works³², as well as numerous academic theses.³³ While these studies generally converged on the philosophical vision presented in *As-Sudd* and other works namely, the question of human action and the individual's place in the universe they diverged in how they defined the nature of this action and the limits of human capacity. Over time, Mahmoud Messadi's name became almost inseparable from *As-Sudd* and its protagonists Ġaylān, Abū Hurayra, the traveler, Madīn, and As-Sindibād. Many of his expressions, such as *Al-Adab ma'sā aw lā yakūn* (Literature is tragedy, or it is not literature), have attained proverbial status and are frequently cited by both literary scholars and lay readers.

³¹ Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, (1st ed., 1973; 4th ed., 1993).

³² M. Ṭaršūna, *Al-Adab al-murīd fī mu'allafāt al-Mas'adī*, (1st ed., 1978; 5th ed., 1996); A. aṭ-Ṭuwaylī, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī wa-kitābuhu Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl...*, Tūnus 1987.

³³ F. Al-Aḥḍar, *Ḥaşā'is al-uslūb fī adab Al-Mas'adī*; M. aš-Şarīf, *Al-Ġumla 'inda Al-Mas'adī*, Tūnus 1973; M. az-Zubayr, *As-Sudd: Al-Haykal ad-drāmī wa-madlūluhu al-iğtimā'ī*; M. az-Zubayr, *Al-Hayākil al-fanniyya wa-madlūluhā al-iğtimā'ī fī qişaş Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*.

4. Overview of Selected Studies on Messadi’s Works

These studies can be broadly categorized into two phases, based on their publication date³⁴ and approach:³⁵

- **The first phase**, from the book’s release until the 1970s.³⁶
- **The second phase**, from the 1970s onward.

4.1. The first group of studies

The first published studies focused almost exclusively on *As-Sudd*, to the exclusion of Messadi’s other works. These early writings typically addressed a single aspect of the text, as reflected in the titles of the articles: *Al-Mar’a fī As-Sudd* (“Women in *As-Sudd*”), *Al-Ḥayāl fī As-Sudd* (“Imagination in *As-Sudd*”), *Šaḥṣiyyat Al-Mas‘adī fī As-Sudd* (“Messadi’s Personality in *As-Sudd*”), *‘Muškilat al-fi’l fī As-Sudd* (“The Problem of Action in *As-Sudd*”), and simply *As-Sudd*)³⁷, among others. These studies followed the same general path as Ṭāha Ḥusayn and Aš-Šādīlī al-Qalībī³⁸ in introducing the work. Con-

³⁴ Refer to the reference list.

³⁵ The nature of these works (their subject matter and value in terms of introducing and analyzing the book *As-Sudd*).

³⁶ The 1950s (1955).

³⁷ Refer to the Reference list.

³⁸ Aš-Šādīlī al-Qalībī (Chedli Klibi) was the fourth Secretary-General of the Arab League, and the first to hold this position after the League moved from Cairo to Tunis, serving for ten years. Born on September 6, 1925, in Tunis, he received his secondary education at Sadiqi High School, and then moved to Paris to pursue higher studies in literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne

sequently, most of these early analyses relied on selected quotations from the text or descriptive commentary without in-depth analysis³⁹. The dominant tone in these writings was one of fascination with the book's language and style, often at the expense of deeper engagement with its themes or formal structure. Some critics even compared *As-Sudd* to other works of world literature. Ṭāha Ḥusayn, for instance, highlighted Messadi's exposure to French literature and noted especially the influence of the famous writer Albert Camus, stating: "This Tunisian writer was deeply educated in Arabic literature in the finest way possible, then completed his

University. He obtained a degree in Arabic language and literature in 1947 and passed the *aggregation* exam in 1950. He taught in secondary schools and at the Institute of Advanced Studies, and in 1957 joined the university faculty. In 1961, he established the Ministry of Culture and headed it until 1970. He was later appointed Minister of Culture twice, from 1971 to 1973 and from 1976 to 1978. From 1974 to 1976, he served as Chief of Staff to the President of the Republic, and from 1978 to 1979, he was Minister of Information before being elected Secretary-General of the Arab League. He was elected a member of the Central Committee of the Tunisian party in 1964 and was re-elected at each subsequent congress, later becoming a member of the Political Bureau of the Liberal Constitutional Party from 1968 to 1979. He has served as mayor of Carthage since 1963. He contributed to most national newspapers and magazines, publishing many political articles and studies, and delivered many literary lectures. He has been a member of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo since February 1970. He authored numerous works on literature, culture, and politics and holds the highest rank of the two Orders of the Republic and Independence, as well as many foreign orders.

³⁹ Although we find some references to his language and style in the intervention of Professor Maḥğūb Bin Milād during the discussion about *As-Sudd*, this can be reviewed in Şammūd's collection, pp. 9–129.

studies in France, where he mastered French literature thoroughly and was strongly influenced by the renowned philosophical writer Albert Camus⁴⁰ Ṭāha Ḥusayn compared Messadi's hero Ġaylān to Camus's Sisyphus, while Š. al-Qalibī identified elements of Nietzsche in Ġaylān's character.⁴¹ Meanwhile, 'Īsá an-Nūrī attempted to draw correspondences between *As-Sudd* and certain Italian plays.⁴²

The symbolic nature of *As-Sudd*, identified early on by many scholars, including Ṭāha Ḥusayn, may have contributed to these interpretations. Ṭāha Ḥusayn remarked, "It is very clear that this story can only be symbolic".⁴³ Likewise, 'Īsá an-Nūrī noted, "We can already perceive from the outset that the play takes place in a symbolic and imaginary atmosphere".⁴⁴ This pervasive symbolism, combined with the ambiguity of the work's formal structure⁴⁵, has often posed challenges for readers attempting to interpret the text. Ṭāha Ḥusayn himself frequently acknowledged the challenge of understanding *As-Sudd*. He wrote: "The Tunisian work I wish to discuss today is a magnificent dramatic story, though it is quiet unusual. It was written by the man of letters Mahmoud Messadi not intended for the stage, but rather to be read thoughtfully, requiring rereading,

⁴⁰ Šammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, pp. 45–46.

⁴¹ Introduction to *As-Sudd* 2nd edition, p. 36.

⁴² Šammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, pp. 131–147.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁵ Critics were uncertain whether to classify the book as a short story, a novel, or a play. We will return to this point in more detail.

repetition and contemplation. I read it twice and still felt compelled to return to it before dictating this commentary".⁴⁶ He went on to admit, "I do not know whether I have truly understood the story... It is no surprise that I am unsure whether I fully understood the author's intent, even after reading it two or three times".⁴⁷ He continued, "This story was introduced by two respected Tunisian professors: Professor Maḥḡūb Bin Milād, a professor of philosophy, and Aš-Šādīlī al-Qalībī, a professor of language and literature. Both understood and admired the story and analyzed it. I join them in their admiration and praise of the work, even if I am not fully confident that I understood it as clearly as they did".⁴⁸

Despite the multiplicity of these articles and the diversity of their titles, in reality, they ultimately offer nothing new when compared to earlier works.

Regarding the nature and subject of these studies, these scholars⁴⁹ considered *As-Sudd* a tragic work. They view Ġaylān's struggle as ultimately doomed, culminating in the collapse of the dam and the failure of his efforts. To them, the Dam represents "a resonant lament" (*As-Sudd 'awīl muḡnim*)⁵⁰, and a tragedy of a deified human being (*ma'sat bašar muta'alliha*)⁵¹. "Ġaylān is a rebel, yet deep inside, he believes in disap-

⁴⁶ Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, pp. 44–45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Those whose articles were compiled by N. Şammūd in his book *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*.

⁵⁰ Bin Milād, in his introduction to *As-Sudd*, 1st edition, p. 17.

⁵¹ Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, pp. 89–99.

pointment and failure".⁵² Both Ṭāha Ḥusayn and Aš-Šāḍilī al-Qalībī tried to find an image of Ġaylān in ancient Greek mythology, likening him to Sisyphus.⁵³ Aš-Šāḍilī al-Qalībī says: "Ġaylān lives in an atmosphere that is similar to that of ancient Greek narratives... dominated by fate... He is therefore like those Greek characters, certain of doom but still determined to be daring... Thus, he believes in his action as much as he believes in his failure and disappointment".⁵⁴ He further notes: "Human action, therefore, for both Ġaylān and Messadi... is similar to the work of Sisyphus... in Greek thought".⁵⁵ Therefore, "Messadi's hero Ġaylān exerts a futile effort"⁵⁶ and "Ġaylān's world" ('*alam Ġaylān*)⁵⁷ is a "world of failure" ('*alam fāšil*)⁵⁸, while *As-Sudd* is a "lost and doomed adventure" (*muġāmara ḥāsira fāšila*).⁵⁹

Moreover, these studies extended beyond literary analysis to explore the social, political, and psychological backgrounds of the text. Ṭāha Ḥusayn placed *As-Sudd* in its historical context with all its political and social circumstances: "The writer is a Tunisian who lived in

⁵² Ibid., pp. 118–128.

⁵³ A comparison that Mahmoud Al-Messadi did not approve of and rejected in his response to Ṭāha Ḥusayn's article; this response can be found in Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, pp. 53–66, and in Al-Mas'adī, *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, pp. 51–62.

⁵⁴ Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, p. 120.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 122.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

a country burdened by foreign colonialism that deprived its people of freedom and stifled their fertile activity".⁶⁰ He added: "I do not believe that this rebellion... in Messadi's writing is anything but the result of the conditions he witnessed in his country and his people... Thus, for him, the play was also a form of resistance".⁶¹

However, Maḥḡūb Bin Milād, while acknowledging the political and social dimension of the book, refused the idea of reducing its purpose to those specific conditions. Instead, he gave the work a universal human: "I have no doubt that *As-Sudd* was written during a well-known historical period, meaning the pre-war era... However, I do not see *As-Sudd* as a work tied solely to that time. If *As-Sudd* were merely the product of that era alone, it would not have endured. This means that, although those circumstances influenced our author ... the problem he posed in the book transcends those narrow and temporal circumstances... *As-Sudd* can be considered a rebellion against the human condition... in its entirety".⁶²

4.2. The Second group

We previously stated that the book *As-Sudd* attracted significantly more scholarly attention than Messadi's other works, and we outlined the reasons behind this. In this context, the 1978 publication of M. Ṭaršūna's book *Al-Adab al-murīd fī mu'allafāt Al-Mas'adī* rep-

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 137.

⁶² Ibid., p. 123.

resented a major turning point in the academic study of Messadi's work, both in terms of approach and substance. For the first time, a dedicated book was written on Messadi's works,⁶³ whereas earlier studies had been limited to articles. Unlike his predecessors, Ṭaršūna did not confine his analysis to *As-Sudd* alone, but extended his study to several of Messadi's other works, including *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl...*, *Mawlid an-nisyān*, *Al-Musāfir*, *As-Sindibād*.

Ṭaršūna analyzed these texts, searching for the common thread connecting them, and concluded: "Many of Mahmoud Messadi's works... aim to clarify the place of human beings in the universe, to explore their existential condition, their limits, and their possibilities"⁶⁴. He further observed that "human will" (*al-irāda al-bašariyya*)⁶⁵ continues to endure "even after the heroes' attempts end in failure"⁶⁶.

Thus, Maḥmūd Ṭaršūna went beyond mere description or commentary to a deeper analytical engagement with the text. It was through this critical approach that was he able to arrive at his conclusion – an approach that set him apart from his predecessors and opened a new door for exploring Messadi's literature. Ṭaršūna did not see in Ġaylān, or in other characters of Messadi's stories, a defeated hero. On the contrary, even if the

⁶³ This list excludes the following works: Aḥḍar's *Ḥašā'iṣ al-uslūb*, Tūnus 2002, Šammūd's book *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*; and Aš-Šarīf's Diploma of Research Competence *Al-Ġumla 'inda Al-Mas'adī*.

⁶⁴ M. Ṭaršūna, *Al-Adab al-murīd fī mu'allafāt Al-Mas'adī*, Tūnus 1978, p. 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

heroes' attempts fail, this failure is a positive one because it always ends with hope. Ṭaršūna says: "Some of those who critiqued Messadi's works thought that pessimism dominated them because they saw in them a failure that crowned human will. However, they overlooked the underlying spirit that drives all the characters, pushing them persistently toward the will to create in *As-Sudd*, the will to immortality in *Mawlid an-nisyān*, the will for the absolute in *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl...*, and the will to act in *Al-Musāfir*. These critics mistakenly equated human action in Messadi's works with absurdity, likening it to Sisyphus' work, attributing it to the influence of Western existentialism. However, they did not delve into the depths of this willful literature nor attempt to study all its texts".⁶⁷ Even though Messadi's protagonists often fail, Ṭaršūna argues that Messadi's world "is not a world of failure, but a world of struggle and renewed effort. Ġaylān's failure in *As-Sudd* is only temporary because he and Mayārā do not settle for the earth, nor do they seek it, but rather they embrace and rise, and the storm carries them away as they say, 'Let us rise with our heads high and open for them a gate in the sky'.⁶⁸ "It is natural for these characters to encounter obstacles and difficulties, to win and to fail. But failure never crowns their efforts; it is only a stage that leads them to renew their experience and to hope for great victory".⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁹ Introduction to *Al-'A'māl al-kāmila li-Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, p. 9.

This perspective, different from that of his predecessors although it intersects with them on some points, such as situating the book within its historical, political, and social context, and acknowledging the book's distinctiveness in subject, language, and style. It is the approach that Ṭaršūna introduced in 1978 with the publication of *Al-Adab al-murīd fī mu'allafāt Al-Mas'adī*, which later prevailed. It also characterizes the second wave of books and studies that have examined Messadī's literature from that time to the present. In his preface to *Al-A'māl al-kāmila li-Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, published between 2002 and 2003, M. Ṭaršūna states: "His literature focuses on certain issues of human existence, such as life and death, will, freedom, responsibility, creation, sensation, action, faith, time, and other questions that perplex human existence and constantly urge one to search for oneself, one's possibilities, and one's limits... Many critics stopped at the stage of failure and judged this literature to be defeatist and pessimistic, while in reality, it is literature of determination, action, and renewed struggle".⁷⁰

Thus, he was the first to adopt this positive approach to reading Messadī's works⁷¹. The writer himself applied this same perspective across all his stories. He expressed this explicitly in his response to Ṭāha Ḥusayn, stating: "...But what clearly distinguishes the condition of 'Sisyphus' from that of Ġaylān is that the former

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Aš-Šādīlī al-Qalībī also understood this, but his opinion ultimately concluded that Ġaylān's attempts ended in failure.

symbolizes the futility or absurdity of existence... Sisyphus's efforts are pure futility and sheer cruelty of fate, whereas Ġaylān's struggle is full and fertile with meaning and purpose, even if it ultimately ends in failure. I know that I have never seen in Ġaylān's experience a meaningless life that leads to bitter absurdity, nor have I seen Ġaylān's efforts as lacking wisdom or purpose".⁷²

Throughout his interviews and encounters, Mahmoud Messadi consistently emphasized the optimistic aspect of his writing, highlighting the open-ended conclusions of his protagonists' journeys. For instance, when commenting on the discussion about *As-Sudd* among a group of university professors, he remarked: "I know that some readers found a tinge of pessimism in *As-Sudd*, or felt that its atmosphere was somewhat dark. I believe this is because they did not pay enough attention to all that Maymūna says in praise of life's beauty, pleasure, and joy."⁷³

Messadi's protagonists are the human beings chosen and honored by God, and entrusted with the responsibility of serving as His vicegerent on Earth. It is humanity's duty to work and strive to achieve a dignified life, regardless of the challenges faced, even with the awareness that the death is inevitable. The fate of

⁷² M. Messadi's commentary on Ṭāha Ḥusayn's critique of *As-Sudd* can be found in Ṣammūd, *Maḥmūd Al-Mas'adī*, pp. 53–66, and in Vol. III of *Al-'A'māl al-kāmila*, pp. 51–62 (the quotation from, p. 59).

⁷³ Ṣammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, p. 127; *Al-Mas'adī*, *Al-'A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. III, p. 48.

his heroes mirrors the fate of every human being, and indeed every living creature; thus, their endings should not come as a surprise to readers. In one of his interviews, Messadi said: "...The endings of the various stories and the fate of the heroes are not strange at all, but are the simplest of truths: the end of every living being, whether a fictional character or a real person, is death and extinction. Such is the human condition; such is the destiny of all human endeavors".⁷⁴

He further elaborates on his perspective by drawing a comparison between the lives and destinies of his heroes and the fall of civilizations in their growth, development, and eventual decline. He explains: "Take, for example, the civilizations and creations of humanity: the Greek civilization, with all its intellectual triumphs, has passed away, as have other civilizations before it, like the ancient Egyptian civilization. What remains of them? Their traces?"⁷⁵

Despite their efforts to uncover the meaning of *As-Sudd*, most of these studies ultimately fell short of fully grasping it, circling the concept without truly reaching its essence. Critics continued to view *As-Sudd* with admiration and wonder, filled with ambiguity and perplexity. Most of these studies⁷⁶ remained influenced by the opinions of Al-Qalībī, Maḥğūb Bin Mīlād, Ṭāha Ḥusayn, and Maḥmūd Ṭaršūna. Moreover, these studies largely neglected the artistic dimension of the book,

⁷⁴ Al-Mas'adī, *Al-A'māl al-kāmila*, Vol. III, p. 128.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁷⁶ The studies that appeared mainly during the first phase.

except for occasional passing references, which we will address in this second part of our commentary.

As-Sudd seems to have presented a significant challenge for scholars, many of whom hesitated to classify the work, referring to it merely as “the book,” *As-Sudd*, or “the text.” Perhaps Ṭāha Ḥusayn came closest to offering a clear classification, as he described *As-Sudd*, from the outset of his first article⁷⁷, as “a dramatic story” (*qiṣṣa tamṭīliyya*)⁷⁸ adding as he analyzed its content: “It is a philosophical story, as deep as philosophy can be”.⁷⁹

He expressed his uncertainty about whether he had understood the work or not by stating: “I do not know whether I have understood the story or not”.⁸⁰ He continued speaking about the *As-Sudd*, repeating the word “story” many times, including in his second article⁸¹, saying for instance: “Three months ago, I published in “*Al-Ġumhūriyya*” an article about the magnificent dramatic story *As-Sudd* by the talented Tunisian writer Mahmoud Messadi, and I said, among other things, that this rare story reflects the author’s influence from both Arab-Islamic culture on one hand, and French

⁷⁷ The article he published in “*Al-Ġumhūriyya*” newspaper on February 27, 1957, is included in Ṣammūd’s book *Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī*, pp. 43–52.

⁷⁸ Ṣammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī*, p. 44.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸¹ A second article, commenting on Mahmoud Messadi’s response, was published in “*Al-Ġumhūriyya*” newspaper’ on May 29, 1957, and can be found in Ṣammūd’s book *Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī*, pp. 67–75.

culture on the other hand. I also mentioned that the author of the story was influenced by the philosophy of the French writer Camus".⁸² Speaking about Mahmoud Messadi and his reasons for writing *As-Sudd Ṭāha Ḥusayn* added: "He wrote his story in despair."⁸³ "And he wrote his story during that phase of his life and the lives of his compatriots".⁸⁴

It is therefore very clear how insistent Ṭāha Ḥusayn was on referring to "The Dam" as a story. Aṣ-Šāḡilī al-Qalībī, too, maintained that this work is a novel, even though he did not repeat this claim frequently. Still, his conviction was evident in his statement: "I wish to point out a problem which, in my opinion, is among the most important aspects of this novel and one that concerns the author's personality. We cannot understand the direction of this book, this novel, while we often forget that *The Dam* is a novel and instead refer to it merely as a book. In fact, it is a theatrical novel, or at least its author claims it is a theatrical piece".⁸⁵ Similarly, A. Bin al-Aḥḍar referred to *As-Sudd* as a novel, saying: "The aim of this novel".⁸⁶ When defining the temporal and spatial framework of its events, he wrote: "*The events of this novel begin on the slope of a mountain*".⁸⁷ The author himself also used the term "novel" when introducing the main characters of the work, Ġaylān and

⁸² Şammūd, *Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī*, p. 67.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Maymūna, saying: “Allow me to begin with a statement that may sound like a defense of the character I love the most in the novel”.⁸⁸ He continues, speaking about Maymūna: “It is, if you want... half the novel”.⁸⁹ Moreover, when speaking of Ġaylān, he says: “But in any case, Ġaylān in the novel”.⁹⁰

Others saw in *As-Sudd* an undeniable dramatic aspect, despite acknowledging its narrative nature. Among them is the Egyptian literary critic ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Yūnus, who said: “In fact, *The Dam* is, on the surface, prose, but in its outer form, it is drama”.⁹¹ While analyzing the structure of *As-Sudd* he noted: “I imagined it as a free story, but its division into scenes and its reliance on dialogue gave it elements of drama, while other elements belong to free narrative. We should consider *As-Sudd* as something between poetry and prose, between drama and story”.⁹²

Perhaps this dual nature of *As-Sudd* is what led some to call it a “play-novel”. Al-Hādī Ġābirī, for instance, used this term in his book *Aš-Šakl al-fannī fī masraḥiyyat As-Sudd*, dedicating a chapter to the concept of “play-novel” in *As-Sudd*, considering Messadi as a pioneer of the “play-novel” in modern Arabic literature. Similarly, ‘Isā an-Nūrī, in his article on *As-Sudd*, emphasized the dramatic aspect by consistently using the term “play”. When dating the work, he wrote: “The

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁹² Ibid.

play *As-Sudd* by Professor Mahmoud Messadi was published".⁹³ And when defining the motives behind the book, he stated: "Perhaps this truth is the key to understanding the atmosphere in which Messadi wrote his play".⁹⁴ In addition, while analyzing the artistic aspect of the work, he said: "The narrative of *As-Sudd* unfolds in eight scenes... The play takes place in a symbolic, imaginary setting".⁹⁵ Regarding Messadi's purpose for writing the book, he added: "For him, the play was a form of struggle".⁹⁶

In recent years, however, new titles have emerged either in the form of academic research, books, articles that have focused on the artistic structure of *As-Sudd* and attempted to trace its dramatic elements. Among these are two books by Maḥmūd Ṭaršūna. The first, *Al-Adab al-murīd fī mu'allafāt Al-Mas'adī*, was published in its first edition in 1978 and its fifth edition in 1996, after the author revised it, adding a chapter entitled *Takāmul al-funūn fī As-Sudd*. In this chapter, he discussed *As-Sudd* with great certainty, stating that "The Dam" can only be classified as a play. His second book, *Dirāsāt fī al-adab at-tūnusī āl-mu'āšir'*, first published in 1989 and its second edition in 1997, includes a chapter entitled *Tawzīf al-fann al-masraḥī fī As-Sudd*. In *Al-Adab al-murīd*, after analyzing some dramatic elements in *As-Sudd*, Ṭaršūna wrote: "Is there

⁹³ Ibid., p. 131.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

still any reason for Ṭāha Ḥusayn's hesitation and confusion between calling the work a 'dramatic story' and a 'poetic story'? In our opinion, there is no reason for doubt; we are facing a well-defined play".⁹⁷

Also worth mentioning is the book by Ulfa Yūsuf and 'Ādil Ḥuḍr, published in 1994, entitled *Buḥūt fī kitāb As-Sudd al-masraḥī*. Moreover, "Al-Ḥurriya" newspaper, in its issue 813 of December 23, 2004, dedicated its cultural supplement entirely to the late Mahmoud Messadi. That issue featured an article by Professor Kamāl 'Umrān (professor of literature and civilization at the University of Tunis) entitled: *As-Sudd naṣṣan masraḥiyyan* ("As-Sudd – A Dramatic Text").

Given the complexity of *As-Sudd* and the predominance of its symbolic character in both content and form, it is understandable that critics faced significant challenges in interpreting this work. While their attempts did not achieve complete success, they deserved credit for shedding light on many aspects of Messadi's literature. "Messadi was ambitious for innovation and change in everything, starting from the static setting to the mode of expression of his characters. To achieve this, he had to invent a unique artistic path, particularly one grounded in symbolism, to address the most intricate issues".⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ṭaršūna, *Al-Adab al-murīd*, p. 88.

⁹⁸ H. Gābirī, *Aṣ-Šakl al-fannī fī masraḥiyyat As-Sudd*, Tūnus 1993, p. 27.

Concluding Remarks

Mahmoud Messadi passed away on December 16, 2004, at the age of 93 in the city of La Marsa, located in the capital, Tunis. He left behind a rich literary legacy comprising books, articles, and interviews. Although he had almost ceased writing by the 1940s, due in part to his engagement in various official roles – including serving as Minister of National Education and later as Minister of Culture from 1973 to 1976, in addition to his extensive involvement and high-level responsibilities within UNESCO and ALECSO since 1958, he has never lost his leading position in the Tunisian and Arab literary landscape to this day. His intellectual journey began in the *kuttāb* of the village, and his mastery of the Arabic language and literature deepened during his studies at the prestigious Sadiqi High School in Tunis, followed by his studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris. From an early age, his creative talents were evident, and he went on to produce notable literary works such as *As-Sudd*, *Ḥaddaṭa Abū Hurayra qāl...*, *Al-Musāfir* and *Min ayyām ‘Imrān*.

His writings have generated significant scholarly attention, inspiring over 30 books and academic theses, along with dozens of articles and radio and television features. His works have also been translated into several languages, including French, Spanish, Polish and Dutch.

Messadi is considered one of the most important figures in modern Arabic literature. His oeuvre centers

on fundamental human concerns such as life and death, will and freedom, responsibility, creativity, action, and faith issues that probe the complexities of human existence and continually urge individuals to seek self-understanding, explore their inner potential, and confront their existential limits.

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Rashad Hasanov

Symbolism of Birth, Insect, Earthquake, and Sea in Amin Zaoui's *Al-Aṣnām*

Abstract: This study explores the multilayered potential of symbolism in literary texts by analyzing the functions of four key symbols—birth, insect, earthquake, and sea—in Amin Zaoui's (Amīn az-Zāwī) novel *Al-Aṣnām*. In this context, symbolism is not merely a poetic ornament, but it is also presented as an expression of epistemological, ideological, and psychological systems of meaning. Since the 19th century, approaches such as comparative anthropology, depth psychology, and archetypal theory have highlighted that symbols carry not only aesthetic value but also deep semantic layers rooted in collective memory and individual experience. In contemporary literary studies – especially in postcolonial literature—symbolism has become a key methodological tool for articulating trauma, identity crises, and ideological language. In this context, issues of language, religion, gender, and identity in Zaoui's novel are presented through symbolic and mythological structures against the backdrop of postcolonial upheavals. The study shows that these symbols are interpreted not only within the internal structure of the text but also through theoretical frameworks such as existential philosophy, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology. The symbol of birth is

analyzed as a metaphor for ideological and socio-political contradictions; insects represent existential solitude and psychological resilience; the earthquake symbolizes social and ontological ruptures; and the sea signifies the protagonist's psychological journey and rebirth through a liminal transition. This research reveals how symbolism in *Al-Aṣnām* conveys the complex manifestations of individual and collective identity in a postcolonial context, on both poetic and ideological levels.

Keywords: Amin Zaoui, Algerian Literature, Literary Symbolism, Trauma and Identity, Postcolonial Studies, Existentialism, Psychoanalytic Criticism

1. Introduction

Symbolism is one of the core interdisciplinary concepts in literary studies that allows the multilayered interpretation of texts. The term etymologically is derived from the Greek words *symballein* ("to throw together") and *symbolon* ("mark," "emblem," "token"), and in its broader sense refers to a structure in which objects, events, and figures represent more abstract ideas.¹

The evolution of the concept of symbolism has deepened since the late 19th century through various theoretical schools. Approaches such as comparative anthropology (John G. Frazer), depth psychology (Carl G. Jung), and archetypal criticism (Northrop Frye) have proposed that the symbol functions not only as an aesthetic but also as a bearer of psychological and collective

¹ J.A. Cuddon and C.E. Preston, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, London 2000, pp. 884–885.

meaning. Maud Bodkin's (1875–1967) work *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934) is considered one of the key sources demonstrating how symbolism operates within literary discourse.² These theoretical contexts confirm that the symbol is not merely a poetic ornament, but also an expression of epistemological and ideological systems of meaning.

In contemporary literary analysis, symbolism functions as an artistic expression of individual experience, collective memory, and social disintegration. Particularly in postcolonial literature, symbolic structures have become a key tool for understanding trauma, identity crises, and the ideological functions of language. Here, the function of symbolism extends beyond the transmission of meaning to include its deconstruction and reconstruction, thereby enabling the analysis of complex social and psychological realities. In this context, the Algerian writer Amin Zaoui³ stands out in contemporary Arab and Francophone literature for his distinctive symbolic style and ideological audacity. His works

² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³ Amin Zaoui (b. 1956, M'sirda, Tlemcen) is a prominent Algerian writer whose literary identity was largely shaped in Oran. Initially writing in Arabic, he later adopted French, addressing postcolonial identity, trauma, and censorship. Following threats during the 1990s Algerian Civil War, Zaoui lived in exile in France before returning in 1999. Oran acts as a symbolic place in his works, reflecting cultural fragmentation and ideological conflict. For further reading on Amin Zaoui's literary contributions, see: F. Abu-Haidar, *Angst and Rebellion in the Fiction of Amin Zaoui*, "Research in African Literatures" 1999, No. 3, pp. 164–175. See also in this regard: A. Zaoui, R. Bekkar and R. Nami, *Interview with: Amin Zaoui: Algerian Writer*, "The Arab Studies Journal" 2000/2001, No. 2/1, pp. 130–141.

address themes such as language, religion, gender, and identity against the backdrop of postcolonial upheavals and traumas. His novel *Al-Aṣṇām*, published in 2024, is particularly notable for its symbolic depth and intertextual engagement with mythological structures.

This study aims to analyze the multilayered functions of four main symbols in *Al-Aṣṇām*: birth, insect, earthquake, and sea. The core objective is to explore how these symbols are meaningful not only within the narrative structure but also within broader theoretical contexts, including existential philosophy, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology. This approach demonstrates how symbols transcend their artistic and poetic levels to become tools for ideological and psychological analysis.

The present study seeks to answer the following key questions:

- What individual and collective experiences are represented through the symbols of birth, insect, earthquake, and sea in Zaoui's novel?
- How are these symbols interpreted within various theoretical frameworks?
- What relationships does the novel's symbolic structure establish between trauma, ideology, and identity?

The research reveals that symbolism in Zaoui's *Al-Aṣṇām* is not merely a poetic structure but also a semantic code of trauma, a metaphorical expression of ideological conflict, and a representation of the fragmentation and reconstruction of postcolonial identity.

Thus, the novel demonstrates how symbolism, at the intersection of classical and contemporary theoretical approaches, opens up new possibilities for literary interpretation.

2. Symbolism of Birth

In Amin Zaoui's *Al-Aṣnām*, the symbol of birth departs from its classical archetypal semantics and undergoes an alternative re-signification. In traditional mythological and psychological discourse, birth is conventionally associated with renewal, the beginning of life, hope, and spiritual elevation. Within transpersonal psychology and various spiritual traditions, birth is interpreted not merely as a biological event, but also as a symbol of an archetypal transition and inner transformation, where the individual confronts the experience of archetypal "re-birth".⁴ However, in *Al-Aṣnām*, this symbolic structure is deconstructed. Birth loses its traditional function as a life-giving and hopeful beginning, becoming instead a metaphor for trauma, destruction, and spiritual disintegration. For the novel's protagonist, birth is not a gateway to personal development or spiritual ascent, but rather a threshold into ideological violence and internal fragmentation. Through this approach, Zaoui inverts the archetype of birth, transforming it into a symbol of destructive transformation—a representation of an inhumane and harmful beginning.

⁴ A. Samuels, B. Shorter, F. Plaut, *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis*, London and New York 1987, p. 126.

2.1. Political and Historical Codification of Birth

In the novel, the event of birth is presented not merely as an individual biological beginning, but also as a symbol of political and ideological transformation. In particular, the birth date of the novel's protagonists – Hmimed and his sister Hamida – coincides with the military coup carried out by Colonel Houari Boumédiène (1932–1978) against President Ahmed Ben Bella (1916–2012) on June 19, 1965. This is not a randomly chosen detail – the author encodes birth not as a “beginning”, but as an “entry into catastrophe”. The opening of the novel recalls the event as follows:

“My sister and I came into this world together, from the same womb: I am Hmimed, and she is Hamida. We were born on a dusty and hot day – the day Colonel Houari Boumédiène overthrew President Ahmed Ben Bella, June 19, 1965”.⁵

The phrase “a dusty and hot day” evokes an atmosphere that undermines the natural and joyful character typically associated with birth – here, the weather is not a neutral physical condition, but is loaded with metaphorical weight: suffocating, chaotic, and dangerous. Thus, the fact of birth is not signified as the beginning of an individual life, but rather as the point of emergence into political instability and national conflict. Through this narrative strategy, the author reframes birth not as

⁵ A. Zaoui, *Al-Aṣnām: Qābil al-laḍī raqqa qalbahu li-aḥīhi Hābil*, Al-Qāhira 2024, p. 7.

a life-giving event but as a trauma tied to ideological cataclysm. The coincidence of birth with an episode of historical violence becomes a symbolic foreshadowing of the novel's central themes: identity crises, ideological violence, and the fragmentation of personal memory.

2.2. Inversion of Symbol

A particularly striking element in the opening of the novel is the protagonist Hmimid's ironic observation:

"Everyone kept repeating the phrase: 'revolutionary correction'. Those who made the revolution are now correcting the revolution – by killing, imprisoning, or removing the very revolutionaries who carried it out, together with the so-called correctors of the revolution".⁶

This ironic statement in the novel indicates that "birth" – that is, the emergence of a new political system – is not depicted as a life-giving process, but as an authoritarian structure that destroys its own "parents". Thus, birth here is no longer the beginning of life, but a metaphor for a self-negating, cannibalistic ideological system. The newly born ideology denies its own "father" and "mother" – that is, its historical past – and silences them through violence. This represents a deliberate deconstruction of the classical symbolic archetype. Such an approach aligns with Paul A. Kruger's theory of symbolic inversion, which he defines as follows:

"Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abro-

⁶ Ibid.

gates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political".⁷

Here, birth becomes the entry point into both political "cleansing" and the forced construction of identity. This symbolic structure creates a sense of unease and aesthetic dissonance by highlighting the tension between mythical birth and ideological birth. Zaoui deliberately transgresses the semiotic boundaries of the symbol. Because of this approach, the symbol of birth becomes not only an aesthetic element but also a vehicle of ideological polysemy.

2.3. Traumatic Birth and the Deformation of Identity

In the novel, the event of birth is also presented as the starting point of political and ideological violence. Birth becomes a symbol of both individual and collective trauma. The protagonist Hmimed's statement underscores this traumatic landscape:

"I am the great curse. I lost my father the first time I entered the family home..."⁸

The protagonist's birth produces destructive consequences not only within the family structure but also at

⁷ P.A. Kruger, *Symbolic Inversion in Death: Some Examples from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near Eastern World*, "Verbum et Ecclesia" 2005, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 398-399.

⁸ Zaoui, *Al-Aṣnām*, p. 10.

the level of personal self-awareness. Hmimed's birth leads to his father's imprisonment, causing the protagonist to perceive himself as "cursed" and as the bearer of an "ill-fated beginning". This traumatic experience is explicitly linked to political causes. His father, Allala Flita, is arrested by security forces for giving his son the name "Hmimed", which is interpreted as a diminutive form of the name of the overthrown president, Ahmed Ben Bella:

"They abducted me not for engaging in politics or union activity [...] They detained me for another reason – because I named our son Hmimed, which is a diminutive of Ahmed [...]"⁹

Thus, birth becomes identified with ideological disruption, and the initial moment of life is presented as a political crime. Through postcolonial critique, Zaoui challenges the tendency to idealize the "born" systems of post-independence Algeria. In other words, "birth" functions not only as the metaphor for an individual but also as the metaphor for the damaged identity of a nation.

In the subsequent part of the novel, the alteration of the protagonist's name by the society indicates that this trauma has entered a stage of social consolidation:

"As soon as the people of the neighborhood learned the details of my father's story with the security forces – that his disappearance was because of my name, Hmimed – everyone dropped my real name from their tongues, and each group chose a name for me that they thought suited me".¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

This event can be interpreted within postcolonial and psychoanalytic lenses as a symbolic erasure of identity. The protagonist's name being erased from social memory and replaced with various labels results in the deformation of his subjective identity. Thus, in this novel, birth offers neither biological renewal nor spiritual elevation. On the contrary, it is encoded as a traumatic act employed for the destabilization of identity, social marginalization, and the structuring of ideological violence. This approach represents a postcolonial and deconstructive reinterpretation of the birth archetype, unsettling the reader on both an individual psychological level and within the broader historical-political context.

3. Symbolism of Insect

In the novel *Al-Aṣnām*, insect – particularly the cockroach – is presented not only as a marginalized and worthless creature within society but also as a symbol of existential loneliness, spiritual resilience, and even the struggle with trauma. In the history of literature, the image of insects has been accompanied by a strong metaphorical weight related to alienation, isolation, and social exclusion. In this regard, Franz Kafka's (1883–1924) *The Metamorphosis* (1915), in which Gregor Samsa is transformed into a cockroach-like creature, expresses the dehumanization of the individual and the condition of radical solitary existence. However, in contemporary literature, this image is not solely associated

with defeat. Authors like Marc Estrin, Rawi Hage, Clarice Lispector, and Scholastique Mukasonga reinterpret the cockroach metaphor within the context of the resilience and survival power of individuals and groups who have confronted trauma and violence. These authors either revive Kafka's protagonist or present his metamorphosis in reverse – from cockroach to human – thereby transforming the cockroach image into a means of positive transformation.¹¹ Within this framework, although *Al-Aṣnām* aligns with Kafka's tradition, it does not merely replicate it. Zaoui presents the cockroach not as a symbol of destruction and decay, but rather as a spiritual refuge and a support for existence amid the protagonist's psychological isolation. This image embodies resilience born from trauma and the search for meaning within the existential void. Thus, through the cockroach metaphor, Zaoui offers a new, positive, and resistance-oriented perspective on the modern human's existential crisis.

3.1. Existential Function of the Cockroach

In the novel, the cockroach transcends the classical symbolism of insects and is presented as a model of existential being. For the father, Allala Flita, this “small but powerful” creature is the sole witness and companion of life in his solitary cell. The protagonist describes the cockroach as follows:

¹¹ P. Arnds, *From Defeat to Resilience: The Human Cockroach in World Literature after Kafka*, “World Literature Studies” 2023, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 56–57.

“A small insect the size of a precious companionship and an elevated memory. Creators are great by their impact, not by their size”.¹²

Through this phrase, the author presents the cockroach as a symbol expressing psychological consolation and an emotional attachment tied to memory. Even in solitary confinement, the cockroach becomes a symbolic ally that the protagonist finds against despair. Thus, the cockroach symbolizes the persistence of existence against annihilation—that is, the endurance of being amid loneliness. While the archetype of “birth” is deconstructed as a destructive and traumatic act, the cockroach symbol appears as an attempt to preserve existence and meaning within a broken system.

The protagonist’s reaction upon seeing the cockroach further reinforces this function:

“Suddenly, a cockroach appeared in the room. I started playing with it as it approached me. I said: Who threw this innocent creature into this stifling, damp place that resembles a grave?”¹³

The cockroach acts as an impulse of vitality within the protagonist’s loneliness. Its appearance in a “place resembling a grave” symbolizes the transitional point between death and life. This depiction presents the cockroach as a bridge between the fundamental drives of life and the human’s natural world, as well as a symbol of the instinct to live. This approach resonates par-

¹² Zaoui, *Al-Aṣṇām*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

ticularly with the existentialist idea, articulated in Albert Camus's (1913–1960) *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–1980) *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), that in an absurd world, meaning must originate from the individual.

3.2. Dialogue and the Art of Survival

In the novel, the cockroach is not merely a passive companion or an object of consolation; it also becomes a carrier of a spiritual dialogue and a lesson in vitality formed within solitude. The protagonist's following statement emphasizes that the cockroach has transcended the realm of the real to become a symbolic and symbiotic presence:

"I must teach it the art of speaking, conversation, and speech, and it must teach me the art of living in such dark, damp, and enclosed places".¹⁴

Through this exchange metaphor, the cockroach assumes the role of a spiritual teacher, while the human takes on the position of a learner. In this scene, the author deconstructs the classical human–insect hierarchy, emphasizing the life lesson derived from the seemingly most insignificant creature. As a result, the cockroach transforms into a symbol carrying not only primal instinct but also the ironic wisdom of human existence.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

3.3. Psychological Resistance to Death

At a later stage, the cockroach transcends the role of mere consolation and spiritual companionship, assuming a metaphysical function. The most powerful expression of this symbolic transformation is found in the protagonist's following thoughts:

"With it, we overcome death, suicide, and despair. This cockroach made me forget time".¹⁵

The phrase "*to forget time*" should be interpreted as a powerful metaphor for distancing oneself from a depressive and nihilistic rhythm of life, and for attaining spiritual grounding and psychological renewal. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this moment can be understood as a rupture in the traumatic temporality and the restoration of the life instinct—what Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) conceptualized as *Eros*.¹⁶ As a result, a creature socially condemned and considered repulsive acquires a new ontological significance: it becomes the metaphorical weight of the protagonist's psychological resistance, desire to live, and inner stability.

Thus, in *Al-Aṣṇām*, the image of the cockroach is presented as a multilayered symbol expressing human psychological stability, the instinctive will to live, and the potential for meaning within a being devalued by society. Through this symbol, Zaoui demonstrates that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, New York 1973, p. 153.

even in the darkest moments of human consciousness, primitive yet resilient forms of hope remain possible.

4. Symbolism of Earthquake

In the novel, the 1980 Asnam earthquake is not merely a geological disaster or a local natural event, but as a multilayered symbol related to the collapse of socio-psychological and ideological foundations as well as the destabilization of individual and collective identities. The earthquake represents a point of rupture, both in a physical and metaphorical sense. The novel presents this event as a moment and space where historical upheaval intersects with an ontological crisis.

4.1. Collapse of the Illusion of Chosenness

In the novel, the earthquake is presented as a symbolic catalyst accelerating the collapse of religious and ideological structures. One of the most powerful scenes in the novel – where the earthquake occurs in a former Jewish synagogue that has been converted into a mosque – is open for a profound semantic analysis within the context of the sacred space's mutability and the tension between form and essence of faith:

“We are in the day of the Muslims, O Lord, neither Sunday nor Saturday, O Lord. We are in Your house, O God, even if this house was once a synagogue of the Jews, today it is the mosque on a Jewish synagogue”.¹⁷

¹⁷ Zaoui, *Al-Aṣṇām*, p. 21.

This scene symbolizes not only a spatial transformation but also a profound questioning of sacralized identity and the notion of sacred space. The belief that the place is protected by “divine guardianship” is here ironically deconstructed. The claim that religious formation is based not on “essence” but on “form” becomes an object of critical scrutiny.

The earthquake also marks a critical moment in the character’s consciousness where individual trauma intersects with collective metaphysical doubt. In this regard, Hmimed’s internal turmoil deserves particular emphasis:

“I had always believed that God protects His house from collapse and His guests from harm. [...] So why did God let the roof of His house – or part of it – fall on the heads of the women prayers? And worse, on a Friday, the Muslims’ most blessed day?”¹⁸

These questions are not a denial but rather an expression of the shock arising from the collapse of the illusion of chosenness. In other words, this is not a rejection of faith itself, but an observation of the breakdown of claims to superiority based on form. The automatic association between God and rituals—that is, the belief that the “sacred day,” “sacred place,” and “sacred activity” will be preserved—is shattered by the earthquake. This represents the deconstruction of the ideological certainties underpinning both the metaphysical status of the space, as well as the collective religious identity.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

The collapse of the roof of the synagogue-turned-mosque upon women prayers on Friday is not merely a physical disaster. This event symbolically signifies the failure of ritual faith, the form-centered concept of sacredness, and the idea of divine protection. Thus, in this scene, the earthquake acts as the “self-collapse of the sacred” – presented as a critical gesture emphasizing the necessity of focusing on faith toward its essence rather than its form.

4.2. From Trauma to Ontological Renewal

In the symbolic universe of the novel, the earthquake is not only an expression of physical and collective trauma but is also the inception point of ontological renewal and radical identity mutation at the individual level. Within this transformative process, trauma becomes a catalyst for the subject’s transition from passive victimhood to an active ideological stance.

For the protagonist Hmimed, the earthquake signifies both material destruction and metaphysical disruption. His response to the trauma is not characterized by classic post-traumatic collapse; rather, it marks the birth of a new, transformed “self” emerging from the fragmentation of the previous identity structure:

“I was like a child born from the womb of the earthquake, from the sperm of the earthquake. Much of its genes are within me. I am the coming seismic explosion”.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 130.

This metaphor is open to a multilayered interpretation: being born from the “womb” of the earthquake is presented as a subversive version of the classical birth archetype. Here, birth emerges not from nature’s creative force but from its destructive violence. The idea of “carrying the genes of the earthquake” indicates that Hmimed’s new identity is not merely a consequence of trauma but an ontological act of identification with it. At this point, Hmimed is no longer simply a witness to the earthquake – he becomes its continuation, its anthropomorphic manifestation.

Hmimed’s words, “I am the coming seismic explosion,” expresses the potential of his trauma to evolve into a broader social upheaval. Here, the cracks opened in individual consciousness transform into voids filled by ideological awareness. This process of transformation culminates later in Hmimed’s journey to Afghanistan, where he joins radical jihadists.

Towards the end of the novel, we read from the protagonist’s perspective:

“When I returned from Afghanistan [...] and entered the city of Asnam, I found it had changed—the mindset of the people had transformed, the language, and the clothing had all changed; everything had been overturned. An earthquake had struck everything; everything was shaken from its place. I too, had changed a lot”.²⁰

This passage emphasizes the parallel transformations of both Hmimed and the city of Asnam. Here, the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 214.

earthquake ceases to be merely a past physical event and becomes an ontologically recurring act: the earthquake that once physically shook the city now permeates the very structures of its culture, language, clothing, and modes of thought. Hmimed's transformation appears as an individual echo of this collective upheaval—the dramatic filling of a spiritual void with radical ideology is vividly described.

4.3. Political-Ideological Upheaval

In the novel, the symbolic significance of the earthquake is not limited to religious and individual dimensions—it also acts as a multilayered metaphor representing the upheaval of social and ideological contexts. Here, the earthquake becomes a profound metaphorical indicator of the contradictions between the existing political system and cultural identities. At one point in the text, the author highlights this parallel as follows:

“The country is experiencing two violent earthquakes: one, the Amazigh Spring earthquake in the Kabylia region east of the capital, which was ignited after the banning of a lecture on Amazigh poetry scheduled at the University of Tizi Ouzou, to be given by the novelist and anthropologist Mouloud Mammeri; and the other, the Asnam earthquake in the Oran region west of the capital. [...] Two earthquakes: the first with a magnitude of 9 on the political conflict scale, and the second with a magnitude of 7.3 on the geophysical Richter scale”.²¹

²¹ Ibid., p. 112.

Through this depiction, geophysical and ideological upheavals are presented in parallel within the same coordinate system. The author's use of the phrase "the political conflict scale" indicates that the earthquake has been transformed into a metaphor not only for physical destruction, but also for the structural tensions and ideological fractures within society. Whereas previous sections linked the earthquake to the collapse of metaphysical and individual belief systems, in this part, it explicitly symbolizes social upheavals related to cultural pressures, political repression, and the denial of identity recognition. The suppression of freedom of expression regarding Amazigh identity is presented as a catalyst for the Tizi Ouzou events (1980), creating a symbolic parallel with the Asnam earthquake, revealing an ideological tremor beneath the physical destruction.

Consequently, in *Al-Aṣnām*, the earthquake emerges as a multilayered symbol representing not only the disruption of religious and ideological structures, the individual self-transformation, but also the fractures occurring on the political and cultural level.

5. Symbolism of Sea

The role of sea symbolism in ancient mythologies affirms its multilayered and complex significance in literature. In Mesopotamian, Greek, Hindu, and Eastern mythologies, the sea is associated with both creation and death; it is depicted as the primal source of life, a realm

of knowledge and salvation, while simultaneously embodying the fears encountered by humans and the harshness of nature. For example, the “Sea of Death” that Utnapishtim crosses for salvation in Mesopotamian myth, the grandeur and volatility of Oceanus in Greek mythology, and the fantastical elements like Dragon Palace in Hindu culture all highlight the symbolic richness of the sea.²² This symbolism is a metaphor for the human confrontation with inner trials and the process of transformation.

According to Svend Erik Larsen, the sea should be understood as a multilayered symbolic space that defines the boundaries of human identity:

“Everywhere the sea marks the limits of collective and individual human identity, both on a social level as a question of survival, on an anthropological level as a non-human space we are bound to, and on an ontological level as the boundary between life and death”.²³

This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the multilayered symbolism of the sea in *Al-Aṣṇām*, where the sea functions simultaneously as a metaphorical center of trauma, fear, internal transformation, and rebirth.

²² M. Riotto, *The Sea as a Literary Metaphor and Its Representation in the Suijōn*, “Acta Koreana” 2023, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 130–132.

²³ S.E. Larsen, *Sea, Identity and Literature*, “1616: Anuario de Literatura Comparada” 2012, No. 2, pp. 171–172.

5.1. Symbol of Loss and Longing

In the novel, a subtle connection is established between personal loss and mythological symbolism. The sea motif enters Hmimed's life through the mysterious disappearance of his uncle Younes. The rumors surrounding Younes's alleged drowning at sea—never definitively confirmed—create an inexplicable and unhealed void within the family. This void is not only a matter of physical absence but also a spiritual lack that permeates the protagonist's psyche. His mother calling him by Younes's name strengthens the identification between Hmimed and the missing figure, resulting in a metaphorical attraction to the sea:

“As soon as I took on the name Younes, I embodied my uncle and became the other, enamored with the sea, even without seeing it with my own eyes [...] Whenever I opened the book to review it, I would quickly flip through its pages and go straight to that image, gazing at it and imagining myself enjoying swimming in it”.²⁴

At this stage, the sea appears in Hmimed's experience not as a physical reality, but rather as a metaphysical and symbolic space. Though invisible, it is a presence that both attracts and frightens him. Here, the sea is both an object of fascination and a bearer of trauma. His mother's opposition to this fascination and her prohibition against looking at the page depicting the sea further intensify the sea's status as a taboo space:

²⁴ Zaoui, *Al-Aṣṇām*, pp. 49–50.

“My mother forbade me from looking at that page and lingering on it”.²⁵

At this point, the motif of the sea, in a psychoanalytic sense, transforms into the “other space” – a realm of the unknown, of absence, of death, and rebirth—that is both desired and feared. Thus, the sea emerges as a dual-natured symbol: it embodies both personal loss and unhealed longing, as well as undefined desires and fears.

5.2. Fear and Courage

At the next stage, the sea is no longer merely an imagined and distant image, but becomes a moment of real confrontation. This encounter brings to the surface the fear Hmimed has carried within himself for years:

“I went to the sea – the real sea, with its water and its salt, not the imagined one [...] The sea appeared to me as a terrifying being, a blue monster, blue tinged with darkness, without waves, without motion, curled into a mysterious silence, setting a trap for me, lying in wait to pounce on me with its slack, sleeping wave – a wave I had always been enchanted by in drawings”.²⁶

In this scene, the sea emerges as a space that simultaneously embodies the fear of drowning, psychological paralysis, and the confrontation with a tangible physical presence. For Hmimed, the sound of the sea and the movement of its waves are transformed into a silent and invisible source of danger.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 70, 71.

In contrast, the perspective of his sister's husband, Mustafa, is markedly different – he approaches the sea as a symbol of spiritual purification and transformation:

“If you want to swim, the sea is calm, and don't believe the story about your cowardly uncle Younes drowning. [...] The sea never swallows cowards. When the sea wants to take one of the fishermen, it chooses the most beautiful, the noblest, and the bravest among them. [...] It is in the nature of the sea to cast all waste onto the shore”.²⁷

For Mustafa, the sea represents the starting point of a struggle with the self. He perceives the sea as a space of reconciliation, transcendence, and metaphorical purification. In this regard, Mustafa's stance in response to Hmimed's fear – a quiet, composed courage – grants him a distinctive perspective. The sea, therefore, is no longer merely a space of loss; it is reimagined as a space of personal transformation and existential choice. The tension between fear and courage here can be interpreted as Hmimed's confrontation with his psychological boundaries and his latent potential to transcend them.

5.3. Reconciliation and Rebirth

Hmimed's relationship with the sea gradually transforms into an expression of reconciliation and inner change. The sea is no longer an enemy or a threat, but

²⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

becomes a symbol of self-reconstruction and the aspiration for freedom. Hmimed articulates this transformation as follows:

“Since that visit to the sea, I came to admire Mustafa Oubakhti. Many things changed within me. Revolution. I reconciled with the sea and opened a front against myself”.²⁸

At this stage, the sea symbolizes personal growth and inner harmony. Hmimed’s reconciliation with the sea signifies self-acceptance and confrontation with past traumas.

He later declares resolutely:

“I decided not to be Younes the drowned, but to be the swimmer in all waters – the waters of seas, oceans, valleys, and rivers”.²⁹

This statement symbolizes his inner strength and desire for freedom; he is no longer a victim but seeks to become the master of his fate.

When he resolves to avenge his brother Mehdi from the leader of the jihadists in Afghanistan, the symbolism of the sea is revived once again:

“I found myself drawing the sea in a notebook among my personal belongings, as if I wanted to reconcile with the sea – another sea, one where I would not be the drowned, nor the story of the false drowned. I wanted a different sea”.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

This drawing is a symbolic expression of psychological renewal and victory. Hmimed no longer perceives himself as a victim but as a fighter, moving from passivity to avenge his brother.

Thus, the sea becomes for him both a space of trauma and a realm of freedom and revenge – a symbol of breaking the chains of the past and stepping confidently into the future. Larsen's concept of the sea as a paradoxical symbol of boundaries and infinity within human identity aligns with this analysis. Hmimed's changing relationship with the sea—his transcendence of internal limits and simultaneous acceptance of the sea as both a source of fear and strength—provides a concrete exemplification of Larsen's theory.

6. Conclusion

In Amin Zaoui's novel *Al-Aṣnām*, symbolic motifs act as multilayered structures reflecting the complex interplay of individual and collective traumas, identity transformations, and political oppression. The birth symbol not only signifies archetypal renewal, but also encompasses the clash of postcolonial hegemonic discourses and the poetic expression of cultural-political contradictions. The image of an insect metaphorically represents social marginalization and existential loneliness while also emphasizing the individual's psychological resilience and instinct for survival. The earthquake symbol, as a poetic embodiment of both physical and ideological processes of destruction and reconstruction,

represents the individual's transition from a passive stance to an active phase of self-formation. The sea motif occupies a central place in themes such as fear, freedom, the transgression of identity boundaries, and the discovery of inner strength, functioning as a liminal space that becomes a transitional zone for the protagonist's psychological and cultural transitions. Overall, symbolism in *Al-Aṣṇām* acts not merely as a poetic method but as a complex metaphorical system through which psychological and social transformations, as well as the contradictory and multilayered expressions of identity in a postcolonial context, with a profound ideological and philosophical level.

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Marek M. Dziekan

**From Karbalā' to Fez.
The History of Moroccan
Al-‘Irāqī Family in XV–XIX C.
according to *Ad-Durr an-nafīs*
by Al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī (1794–1849)**

Abstract: This paper is devoted to the personality and work of an eminent Moroccan historian of 19th century Abū Muḥammad al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī al-Ḥusaynī (1794–1849), an author of several works, from which the most important is a history of his family, and whole ‘Irāqī Ḥusaynī community (*aš-šu‘ba ʿal-irāqiyya*) that came to Morocco in the 15th Century and settled in Fez. This family – widely known in French as “Laraki” – has always played and continues to play a prominent role in Moroccan economic and political life. The above-mentioned book, titled *Ad-Durr an-nafīs fīman bi-Fās min Banī Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs* (“A Precious Pearl about Whom in Fez from the Sons of Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs”) was written in 1826. The work covers, among others, about 50 biographies (*tarğama*) of eminent people from this family. The first one who came to Morocco from Iraq in times of the Marīnid Sultan Abū Sa‘īd ‘Uṭmān (d. 1421) was Muḥammad Ibn an-Nafīs called Al-Hādī, a renowned *šīr‘alīn* of his times. He decided to go to Morocco after having a dream in which the Prophet Muḥammad

ordered him to do so, and, at the same time, the Prophet ordered the Moroccan Sultan to receive Ibn Nafīs in his country. The corpus of biographies in *Ad-Durr* ends with a *tarǧama* of the Author himself; it is also a sort of short “intellectual biography” of Al-‘Irāqī.

Keywords: Al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī, Morocco, Iraq, History, Politics

The 19th century in the Arab world was at in its early stages of political and intellectual renaissance which was mostly – as it is traditionally framed – a reaction to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt. In chronological terms, this renaissance began in Egypt and then spread further to the Levant and Iraq. For a long time the Maghreb was on the margins of the revival tendencies, and in case of Morocco, it is Muḥammad al-Ḥiǧawī (al-Ḥaǧwī, 1874–1956) who is regarded as the first thinker of the new period.¹

It is a fact that the Western ideas, which indicated change in the Mashreq, were reaching Morocco very slowly and, in the 19th century, one can only recognise a trace of this thought, which was at the same time hotly contested, and that in turn is evidenced by, for

¹ Az-Z. aš-Šanḥaǧī, *Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥiǧawī mu-fakkiran wa-muṣliḥan*, “Maǧallat al-Baḥṭiyya li-āl-‘Ulūm al-Insāniyya wa-āl-Iǧtimā‘iyya” 2018, No. 9-10 (2018), <https://search.emarefa.net/ar/detail/BIM-970319-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%81%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A7> [Access date: 19.07.2025].

example, the case of Aḥmad an-Nāṣirī (1830–1897) who represented the most enlightened social class of 19th century Morocco.²

All this, however, did not mean that Morocco was a country of intellectual stagnation. Numerous branches of knowledge and culture were flourishing, especially historical writings whose representative, Al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī is the subject of this paper. The article shall focus on his best-known work, *Ad-Durr an-nafīs fīman bi-Fās min Banī Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs* [“A Precious Pearl about Whom in Fez from the Sons of Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs”]. It is an example of self-strengthening of the various minority groups in Morocco, and in this case, a community originating from Iraq, referred to by the contemporary authors as *aš-šu‘ba ʿāl-‘irāqiyya* – “Iraqi party/group/community”. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised, Al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī is regarded in the history of Moroccan writing as a historian.³ The author himself refers to his work as *taqyīd*, which could be translated as a “report.”⁴

² See: B. Dennerlein, *Entre «restauration» et «réorganisation». L'appropriation savante de la réforme chez Ahmad b. Khālid an-Nāsirī (m. 1897)*, [in:] O. Moreau (ed.) *Réformes de l'Etat et réformismes au Maghreb (XIXè-XXè siècles)*, Paris 2009, pp. 197–210; A.I.H. an-Nāṣirī, *XIX-wieczne Maroko w Kitāb al-istiṣā*. Przekład z języka arabskiego, wstęp, opracowanie i przypisy M.M. Dziekan, Łódź 2018.

³ In this context, one is reminded of the words of Franz Rosenthal: “In many Muslim minds, history thus became almost synonymous with biography” (F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim History*, Leiden 1968, p. 101).

⁴ This is a term characteristic for Moroccan writing, rarely seen anywhere else, and used to refer to various types of writings –

1. The Author

Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh al-Walīd Ibn al-'Arabī Ibn al-Walīd al-'Irāqī āl-Ḥusaynī (1793–1849)⁵ is one of the most eminent Muslim scholars and independent Moroccan historians of the 19th century. He never was connected with the Sultan's court and did not play the role of the Sultan's chronicler, and his work was of an entirely different nature than those by Muḥammad al-Kansūsī (Akansūs)⁶ or Aḥmad an-Nāṣirī. His literary output is not well known outside of his home country, perhaps because of the rather narrow range of issues that remain within the biography genre. Above all, he was interested in the history of his own family which came to Morocco

this is one of the names Aḥmad al-Kardūdī uses to describe his report of his voyage to Spain in 1885.

⁵ Biographical data, comp. Ğ.I.I. al-Kattānī, *Fahrasa*, Ad-Dār al-Bayḍā'-Bayrūt 2004, pp. 168–170; M. al-Kattānī, *Salwat al-anfās wa-muḥādāṭat al-akyās bi-man aqbara min al-'ulamā' wa-āṣ-ṣulahā' bi-Fās*, Ad-Dār al-Bayḍā' [n.d.], Vol. III, pp. 48–49; 'A.S. Ibn Sūda, *Ithāf al-muṭālī' bi-wafayāt a'lām al-qarn aṭ-ṭālit' aṣar wa-ār-rābi'*, Bayrūt 1997, Vol. I, p. 191; M. Maḥlūf, *Šaḡarat an-nūr az-zakiyya fi ṭabaqāt al-mālikiyya*, Bayrūt 2003, Vol. I, p. 570; M. al-Ḥiḡawī, *Al-Fikr as-sāmī fi tāriḥ al-fiqh al-islāmī*, Ar-Ribāt 1340 h.-Fās 1345 h., Vol. IV, pp. 132–133; Al-W.I.'A. al-'Irāqī, *Ad-Durr an-nafis fiman bi-Fās min Banī Muḥammad Ibn Nafis*, Fās 2008, pp. 395–405; A. al-'Irāqī, *Al-Walīd al-'Irāqī* [in:] Al-'Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 9–14; C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur. Zweiter Supplementband*, Leiden 1938, p. 881; É. Lévi-Provençal, *Les Historiens des chorfa. Essai sur la littérature historique et biographique au Maroc du XVIe au XXe siècle*, Paris 1922, p. 341.

⁶ See: Lévi-Provençal, *Les Historiens*, pp. 200–213; Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, pp. 884–885; M. Lakhdar, *La vie littéraire au Maroc sous la dynastie 'Alawide (1075–1311 = 1664–1894)*, Rabat 1971, pp. 342–351; M.M. Dziekan, *O piśmienictwie marokańskim w XIX w.: Muḥammad Akansūs (1796–1877 – życie i dzieło*, "Przegląd Orientalistyczny" 2017, No. 1–2, pp. 45–55.

from Iraq in the 15th century. He wrote several biographies (*tarāġim*⁷) and works in genealogy ('*ilm an-nasab*), the most important of which is the monograph titled *Ad-Durr an-nafīs fīman bi-Fās min Banī Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs*⁸ which is the subject of this paper.

Al-ʿIrāqī was born in Fez. The author himself, in his biographical note, states that this was year 1208 or 1209 h.,⁹ which covers the years 1793–1795. Considering this information, supplied by him personally, another dates provided by his biographers should rather be considered approximates (including the one given on the title page of the work discussed herein, provided by the modern publisher). An analysis of biographical accounts by later scholars indicates that most of the data concerning the period up to 1826 (one year after the completion of *Ad-Durr*), which constitutes the period of this study, is based primarily on information provided by the author himself. According to the research by the author of this paper, the widest and oldest biographical note for Al-Walīd al-ʿIrāqī was left by his student, Ġaʿfar Ibn Idrīs al-Kattānī (approx. 1829–1905) in his work *Fahrasa* ("Index"), which begins precisely with

⁷ Comp. Rosenthal, *A History*, pp. 100–106; W. al-Qāḍī, *biography, medieval* [in:] J.S. Meisani and P. Starkey (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, London and New York 1998, Vol. I, pp. 150–152; J.A. Nawas, *Biography and biographical works* [in:] J.W. Meri (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Civilisation. An Encyclopedia*, New York–London 2006, Vol. I, pp. 110–112; D.F. Eickelman, *Tardjama. 1. In literature* [in:] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM Edition v.1.1.*, Leiden 2001.

⁸ ʿA.S. Ibn Sūda, *Dalīl muʿarriḥ Al-Maġrib al-Aqṣā*, Bayrūt 1997, p. 61.

⁹ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 396.

a biographical note concerning Al-Walīd. By contrast, the text by A. al-'Irāqī in the introduction to an edition of *Ad-Durr* should be regarded as a summary of all the subsequent biographical notes.

Although all emphasise the great contributions made by Al-Walīd to Muslim studies and history, in fact the accounts concerning Al-'Irāqī are very scant and the biographical notes, except for the first and last one, as referenced above, are limited to the typical praise found in Arab biographical dictionaries. Al-Kattānī reports that Al-'Irāqī was a lecturer and preacher at the mausoleum of Idrīs I in Fez, where the author was tutored by him. He was also a professor at the Al-Qaraw-iyyīn University. The biographers reiterate a list of his mentors below Al-Walīd's name. He was an authority on the hadith, "roots" of the law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and rhetoric (*bayān*). The biographers also report that *kaṭīr aṣ-ṣamt wa-qalīl aḍ-ḍaḥk* ("he was taciturn and laughed infrequently").¹⁰ Al-Kattānī adds an account stating that "the Prophet himself would appear at the lectures at the mausoleum of Idrīs, when he elaborated on *Hamziyya* by Al-Būṣīrī."¹¹ The same author speaks about the day of Al-Walīd's death in the following words: "He died, may God be gracious to him, in the morning on a Sunday, on the eighth of¹² *rabi' at-tānī* the year 1265

¹⁰ E.g. Al-Kattānī, *Fahrāsa*, p. 170; Al-Kattānī, *Salwat*, p. 48.

¹¹ Al-Kattānī, *Fahrāsa*, p. 170. *Hamziyya* is the most famous panegyric, except for *Al-Burda*, praising the Prophet and written by Al-Būṣīrī.

¹² Muḥammad al-Kattānī added that it could have been the seventh *rabi' at-tānī*, *Salwat*, Vol. III, p. 49.

[2nd March 1849]. The day of his funeral was memorable. The burial was attended by elites as well as simple people, and even women and children. A prayer for him was said by the ‘*allāma sīdī* Aḥmad al-Mirnāsī. He was buried at their famous cemetery, behind Bāb al-Futūḥ. A morning prayer was said for him, and numerous elegies were written for this occasion.”¹³ Muḥammad al-Kattānī adds that the ceremony was held at the Al-Andalus mosque, and he also describes his headstone and quotes the inscription carved onto it.¹⁴ Of course, in accordance with the tradition of a typical *tarğama*, the biographers also provide a list of the most eminent students of Al-‘Irāqī and the scholars he met.

From among the works by Al-Walīd, Ğ. al-Kattānī mentions only *Ad-Durr an-nafīs*. Lévi-Provençal reports that “after finishing, he added a rather important supplement.”¹⁵ Its title is provided by ‘Abd as-Salām Ibn Sūda in *Ithāf al-muṭālī* ‘ as *Aḍ-Ḍayl al-muntaḥab fīmā li-fuḍalā’ aš-šu‘ba ʾl-‘irāqīyya wağib*, while in *Dalīl mu‘arriḥ Al-Mağrib al-Aqṣā* it is given as *At-Taḍyīl al-muntaḥab fīmā li-fuḍalā’ aš-šu‘ba ʾl-‘irāqīyya min al-ma‘āṭīr wağib*. Here the author also states that Al-Walīd intended for this text to be a supplement (*ḍayl*) to *Ad-Durr an-nafīs*.¹⁶ In the face of these inconsisten-

¹³ Al-Kattānī, *Salwat*, Vol. III, p. 49.

¹⁴ Ibid. Inscription on the headstone: *Al-Ḥamdu li-ʾAllāhi waḥdahu wa-ṣallā ʾalā sayyidīnā Muḥammad wa-ʾlihi. Haḍā ḍarīḥ aš-ṣarīf al-munīf al-ʾalīm al-ʾallāma, nuḥbat al-muḥaqqiqīn, mawlāy Al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī al-Ḥusaynī, al-mutawaffā ʾām ḥamsa wa-sittīn wa-māʾitayn wa-alf. Razaqanā ʾAllāhu ḥayrahu.*

¹⁵ Lévi-Provençal, *Historiens*, p. 341.

¹⁶ Ibn Sūda, *Dalīl*, p. 55.

cies, it is difficult to ascertain which text is referenced – the author of this article shall elaborate on that further. M. al-Kattānī and Ibn Sūda complement the works by Al-Walīd with the biography (*tarğama*) of a Muslim scholar, Abū al-‘Alā’ Idrīs Ibn Muḥammad al-‘Irāqī al-Ḥusaynī (died 1183/1769–1770).

At the end of this section I would like to examine Al-Walīd’s autobiography. It is the last biographical note in the last part of *Ad-Durr*, which the editor of that volume titled *Tarāğim a’lām aš-šu‘ba āl-‘irāqīyya*. I suspect that this may indeed be the supplement mentioned by Lévi-Provençal and Ibn Sūda in *Dalīl*. Although, on the other hand, this is contradicted by the fact that, according to the latter, the supplement begins with the words *Al-Ḥamdu li-Āllāh al-mufīd ‘alā ‘ibādihi*, and this formula is absent in the edition available to the author of this paper, but it might have also been omitted by the editor.

2. *Ad-Durr an-nafīs*

The presentation of this work herein is based on its critical edition from 2008, prepared by a descendant of Al-Walīd al-‘Irāqī, a historian at the university in Fez, a specialist in editing literary and historical sources, Aḥmad al-‘Irāqī.¹⁷ As the author himself confirms in the colophon, he finished writing the book on 15th

¹⁷ H. at-Tawāzini, *Ḥafl takrīm ad-duktūr Aḥmad al-‘Irāqī*, “Hespress”, 25.04.2018, <https://www.hespress.com/opinions/389275.html> [Access date: 19.07.2025].

rabīʿ at-tānī 1242, that is on 11th November 1826.¹⁸ The first, lithographic edition in Fez, which is referenced by Lévi-Provençal¹⁹ (most likely from the turn of the 19th and 20th century), was unavailable to me. In case of *Ad-Durr* one can again witness how the descendants of great scholars of the past care for the legacy and work of their predecessors. This is also true for the writers already mentioned earlier, Aḥmad al-Kansūsī and the An-Nāṣirī family.

2.1. The Most Important Sources of *Ad-Durr an-naftis*

Al-Walīd al-ʿIrāqī's work is not the only one elaborating on the Iraqi immigration to Morocco. Such works were written both earlier and later, and their authors included established Moroccan historians, not just those who arrived in Maghreb from Mesopotamia. The first such group initially landed at the beginning of 8th c. in Scilly (Aṣ-Ṣiqilliyyūn / Aṣ-Ṣaqalliyyūn) or in Andalusia (here, the Al-Qādirī family was especially famous as they claimed to be descendants from the circles of the mystic, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī). In his book, Al-Walīd mostly uses the works of his predecessors, mainly those who came from Iraq, both from the first and second wave immigration. The brief profile below does not include work of general character, such as *Tārīḥ Baġdād* by Al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī. The most important authors referenced by Al-ʿIrāqī are:

¹⁸ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 417.

¹⁹ Lévi-Provençal, *Historiens*, p. 341.

‘Abd as-Salām Ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib al-Qādirī (1648–1698), the author of *Maṭla‘ al-išrāq*²⁰. Born in Fez, ‘Abd as-Salām was the descendant of the Iraqis who emigrated to Andalusia after the fall of Baghdad in 1258, and then, as a result of the Reconquista, to Morocco. He was one of the most eminent Moroccan historians of the 17th century.²¹

Muḥammad al-Masnāwī (1661/1662–1724)²² – various works, the majority of which were untitled. He is an author of several works on genealogy, above all about the Qādirī line of Moroccan *šarīf* and various aspects of Muslim law. Al-Walīd quotes, for example, directly from *Ġahd al-muqill al-qāšir fī nuṣrat ġawṭ al-warā‘ al-akābir*.²³

Aḥmad al-Wazīr al-Ġassānī (1653–1733)²⁴, author of several biographical works, including the biography of ‘Abd as-Salām al-Qādirī and Al-Masnāwī. However, Al-Walīd quotes his commentary (extended and small) on *Al-Burda* by Al-Būšīrī especially often.²⁵

Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Banānī (1727–1780)²⁶, was above all a scholar of Muslim law of the Maliki

²⁰ Comp. Ibn Sūda, *Dalīl*, p. 70. The edition – most likely the first one – was published by Aḥmad al-‘Irāqī in Fez in 2006.

²¹ Lakhdar, *La vie littéraire au Maroc*, pp. 112–115.

²² Muḥammad al-Qādirī, *Našr al-maṭānī li-ahl al-qarn al-ḥādī ‘ašar wa-āt-ṭānī*, Ar-Ribāṭ 1977, Vol. III, pp. 265–278; Maḥlūf, *Šaġarat an-nūr*, Vol. I, p. 481; Lévi-Provençal, *Historiens*, pp. 301–302.

²³ Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 324.

²⁴ Al-Qādirī, *Našr*, Vol. III, pp. 364–366; Al-Kattānī, *Salwat*, Vol. II, pp. 337–338; Lévi-Provençal, *Historiens*, p. 304.

²⁵ Muḥammad Faṭḥ Allāh Mišbāḥ, *Burdat Al-Būšīrī wa-aṭāruhā fī ‘l-adab al-‘arabī ‘l-qadīm*, Bayrūt 2011, pp. 227–228.

²⁶ Aḥmad Ibn Ḥalīd an-Nāšīrī, *Kitāb al-istiṣā‘ li-aḥbār duwal Al-Maġrib al-Aqšā*, Ar-Ribāṭ 2001, Vol. VII, p. 112; Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 238–240.

school, one of the most prominent scholars of his time. He was also the author of the report (*taqyīd*) dedicated to *aš-šu‘ba ʾl-irāqiyya* in Morocco.

Muḥammad at-Tāwudī Ibn Sūda (died 1795)²⁷ was regarded as one of the greatest Moroccan intellectuals and scholars and not just of his time, as Lévi-Provençal states. Aḥmad an-Nāṣirī calls him *ḥātimat aš-šuyūḥ bi-Fās* – “The Seal of the Sheikhs in Fes”.²⁸ His family originally came from Andalusia, and after the Reconquista, settled near Fez.²⁹ At-Tāwudī was the author of several works in Muslim law, hadith, literature, history and genealogy, including a register (*taqyīd*) concerning the *aš-šu‘ba ʾl-irāqiyya* in Morocco, which Al-Walīd references directly and describes in brief.³⁰ This book is also mentioned, but without its proper title, by Lévi-Provençal and Lakhdar.

Lévi-Provençal also lists the works that Al-Walīd used as source material, again without providing the titles, the works by ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Fāsī, but the author here is most likely ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Fāsī (1631–1685)³¹, who was called the “Moroccan As-Suyūṭī”, an

²⁷ Al-Kattānī, *Salwat*, Vol. I, pp. 118–120; An-Nāṣirī, *Kitāb al-istiṣā*, Vol. VII, p. 127; Ibn Sūda, *Ithāf*, Vol. I, pp. 78–79; Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 242–243; Lévi-Provençal, *Historiens*, pp. 332–334; Lakhdar, *La vie littéraire au Maroc*, pp. 257–262.

²⁸ An-Nāṣirī, *Kitāb al-istiṣā*, Vol. VII, p. 127.

²⁹ It is worth noting that his descendants continue his research.

³⁰ Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 242.

³¹ Al-Kattānī, *Salwat*, Vol. I, pp. 357–358; M. aš-Šaḡir al-Yafrānī, *Ṣafwat man intašar min aḥbār šulaḥā’ al-qarn al-ḥādī ‘ašar*, *Ad-Dār al-Bayḍā’* 2004, p. 88–90; An-Nāṣirī, *Kitāb al-istiṣā*, Vol. VI, p. 134; Lévi-Provençal, *Historiens*, pp. 266–269; Lakhdar, *La vie littéraire au Maroc*, pp. 88–95.

author of many publications on Muslim law. Al-Walīd provides his biographical note further in his work.³²

Amongst his numerous works in this field, one must mention, for example, *Asnā al-marāqī fī an-nasab al-'irāqī* by 'Abd as-Salām al-Qādirī (died 1698), a work dedicated to the descendants of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī, authored by Abū Ḥāmid al-'Arabī al-Qādirī (1646–1693)³³, or the monograph on *aš-šu'ba āl-'irāqiyya āl-Ḥusayniyya* by Zayyān al-'Irāqī (died 1799).³⁴ Over 20 authors who wrote on the subject are listed by Al-Walīd in his work, mainly on pages 166–253.³⁵ And so the monograph by Al-Walīd al-'Irāqī remains part of the Moroccan literary trend, which lasted until the end of 16th century, where authors emphasised the Iraqi origins of a segment of the Al-Mağrib al-Aqṣā society, thereby strengthening the identity of some of their *šarīfa*.

2.2. The Content

When presenting *Ad-Durr* this paper shall focus on only a few of its sections, which the author found most interesting in the context of past Iraqi-Moroccan relations. The proper chapters of the book, which the author calls *maqṣad*, are preceded by two short introductions. The first one in the original bears no title, and the

³² Al-'Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 193–198.

³³ Ibn Sūda, *Dalīl*, p. 50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁵ A definite majority of these works remains in manuscript form until today.

publisher titled it *Muqaddima*. Here, Al-Walīd explains his reasons for undertaking the task of writing the history of the “Iraqi party.” The second introduction was titled by the author – *As-Sābiqa*, where the editor then elaborated this title by adding: *Aṣl an-nasab aš-šarīf wa-maziyyat dārriyyat Fāṭima Bint Rasūl Allāh ṣallā ʿAllāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*. This text includes some theoretical elaborations and an enumeration of all of the Prophet’s children and emphasises the special importance of Fāṭima and, thus, her descendants. In doing so, Al-Walīd invokes his predecessors, including Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī and Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, that is, classical authors, which is a rare occurrence in the work discussed in this paper. However, he adds his own explanation of the term *šarīf* “noble”: “These descendants [of the Prophet] were called *ašrāf*, in singular *šarīf*. Know that, in the first period, the term *šaraf* was assigned to anyone from the People of the House, regardless if they came from the Ḥusayni or the Ḥasanid line [...].”³⁶ At the same time, he stresses that this manner of address was already common in Morocco during the time of Idrīs I (died 791) and continued until this day. “The *Šarīf* enjoy a special respect in Morocco, especially in the capital city of Fez”.³⁷

Another part is titled *Al-Maqṣad al-awwal fī dīkr baʿd al-baʿd min maʿāṭir mawlānā ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib*

³⁶ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 49; comp. A. Sebti, *Au Maroc: shari-fisme citadin, charisme et historiographie*, “Annales ESC” 1986, No. 2, p. 440.

³⁷ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 50.

wa-waladayhi As-Sibṭayn aṭ-Ṭāhirayn Qurrat al-ʿAynayn Al-Ḥasan wa-Āl-Ḥusayn raḍiya Āllāhu ʿanhum. This rather extensive chapter includes, among others, a biographical note for ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib. On numerous occasions Al-ʿIrāqī emphasises ʿAlī's role in the first years of Islam and his close relationship with the Prophet, referring to Al-Buḥārī's and Muslim's account that Muḥammad chose ʿAlī as his successor after the battle of Tabūk in 630.³⁸ This statement is supported by accounts from other authors. What is characteristic, however, is that he does not include any writers who displayed Shia sympathies, referring, among others, to Al-Qāḍī ʿIyād, Muslim, Al-Buḥārī, Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn al-Ġawzī. The Moroccan relates the stories of miracles performed by ʿAlī. Al-ʿIrāqī devotes relatively little attention to this man, but focuses much more on his sons. The life of Al-Ḥasan is, nevertheless, presented very concisely and covers only one page of the contemporary edition of the text. Next is the extensive account concerning Al-Ḥusayn, but several of the stories are about both brothers. In their case, the narratives also originate from Sunni authors. The account devoted to the battle of Karbalā' (680) and the stories that foreshadow this event, originating in the Prophet's lifetime,³⁹ occupy an important place in this work.

Further accounts concern the subsequent Shia imams. Generally speaking, the author maintains his distance away from Shia beliefs on more than one occasion, for

³⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 62–88.

example, in the case of the 12th *imām*. Although he is recounting a well-known narrative about awaiting his arrival, he repeats the phrase “according to the beliefs of the Twelvers” and ends this section in the following words: *wa-aqāwiluhum fīhi kaṭīra wa-Āllāh a‘lam ayy ḍalika kān*.⁴⁰ What is distinctive here, is that he never invokes any of the *maqātil* or *manāqib* works, which were written in the Shia circles.⁴¹

Then, Al-‘Irāqī turns to discuss his own lineage. It begins with the younger son of Mūsa al-Kāẓim, Ibrāhīm al-Murtaḍa also known as Al-Muğāb (died between 825 and 837), who emigrated to Yemen, where he started a revolt against the ‘Abbāsids. His son was Ismā‘īl, father of Muḥammad, known as Abū al-Ḥārīṭ. He was the father of Abū aṭ-Ṭayyib Aḥmad, an eminent conduit of hadith. The chapter ends with Al-Walīd elaborating in detail on genealogy, which ends with him stating that “the descendants *mawlānā* of Ibrāhīm al-Muğāb were the Iraqi *sayyids* who are the subject of this narrative”.⁴²

The second section of this *maqṣad* was titled *Al-Amr al-awwal: At-Ta rīf bi-sayyidinā āl-ğadd al-qādim min al-bilād al-‘irāqīyya ‘alā haḍihi āl-ḥaḍra āl-Idrīsiyya*.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴¹ Comp. on this subject, e.g. S. Günther, *Maqātil Literature in Medieval Islam*, “Journal of Arabic Literature” 1994, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 192–212; K. Morimoto, *Keeping the Prophet’s Family Alive: Profile of a Genealogical Discipline* [in:] S. Bowen Savant, H. de Felipe (ed.), *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies. Understanding the Past*, Edinburgh–[Karachi] 2014, pp. 11–23.

⁴² Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 125.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 128–165.

The predecessor of *aš-šu'ba ʾl-ʾirāqīyya*, who came to Morocco, the so-called *al-ǧadd al-qādim*, “the ancestor who arrived”, who was always regarded as especially important, was⁴⁴ Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs. His *nasab*, which reaches directly to Al-Ḥusayn, Al-Walīd provides at the beginning of the chapter.⁴⁵ He arrived in Morocco in the early 14th century during the reign of a Marīnid, Abū Saʿīd Uṭmān (reigned 1310–1331). His *nisba* was Al-ʿIrāqī and Al-Karbalāʾī.⁴⁶ Muḥammad enjoyed great respect in Iraq as a Muslim scholar and he was known both in Mašriq and in Maghreb. In Iraq he maintained relations, among others, with the well-known poet, Ṣafī ʾād-Dīn al-Ḥillī (1278–1349). The arrival of Ibn Nafīs in Morocco was the result of an order from the Prophet. The account is not entirely clear on this, but one can guess that, on the one hand, Ibn Nafīs was ordered to go to Morocco, and the Moroccan ruler – to receive him.⁴⁷ Here Al-ʿIrāqī invokes directly the account of ʿAbd as-Salām al-Qādirī from *Maṭlaʿ al-išrāq* and *Ibtihāǧ al-qulūb* by ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān al-Fāsī, while Abdelaḥad Sebti adds from *Ad-Durr al-muntaḥab* by Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ as-Sulamī⁴⁸. Hosting newcomers from the *šarīf*

⁴⁴ Sebti, *Au Maroc*, p. 441.

⁴⁵ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 128.

⁴⁶ It is not clear where the *nisba* Karbalāʾī comes from. Al-Walīd explains on p. 157 that this is connected to the mention by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (comp. below), because during his stay in Karbalāʾ he could have met with Ibn Nafīs. However, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa mentions Ibn Nafīs not in the context of describing Karbalāʾ, but in an entirely different narrative, quoted below.

⁴⁷ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 130; Sebti, ‘Au Maroc’, p. 449.

⁴⁸ Sebti, *Au Maroc*, p. 449.

line in one's land was a form of legitimisation for the ruling powers. Another narrative connected with the arrival of Ibn an-Nafīs, related as a brief summary and in fact mentioned by Al-Walīd,⁴⁹ is quoted by the Andalusian historian, Ibn al-Aḥmar in *Naṭīr al-ǧumān*.⁵⁰ It also shows that Ibn Nafīs was also a poet. This is evidenced by the fact that his name can be found in the anthology *Naṭīr farā'id al-ǧumān* where he was listed by the above mentioned Ibn al-Aḥmar.

That Ibn Nafīs enjoyed fame and esteem is evidenced, among others, by the fact that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa mentions him in his *Riḥla*.⁵¹ Another such proof of his high standing, according to Al-ʿIrāqī, was that he was the addressee of a letter from Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb. This letter is quoted by Al-Maqqarī in *Nafḥ at-ṭīb*,⁵² and in turn, Al-Walīd relates a short biography of Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb.⁵³

Once Ibn Nafīs settled in Morocco, he married the daughter of a *ṣarīf*, also from Iraq, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ibrāhīm also known as Al-Makki.⁵⁴ This matter is fur-

⁴⁹ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 139, 143–144.

⁵⁰ I. Ibn al-Aḥmar, *Naṭīr al-ǧumān fī šī'r man nazamanī wa-ıyyāhu āz-zamān*, Bayrūt 1987, pp. 336–342.

⁵¹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat an-nuzzār fī ǧarā'ib al-amṣār wa-ʿaǧā'ib al-asfār*, Bayrūt 1987, Vol. I, pp. 193–194.

⁵² Aḥmad al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ at-ṭīb fī ǧusn Al-Andalus ar-raṭīb*, Bayrūt 1968, Vol. VI, pp. 41–42.

⁵³ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 146–148; in accordance with the custom among Arab writers, which had definitely been influenced by the classical adab style, in his work, Al-Walīd also includes short biographies of persons connected to Ibn Nafīs, except Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb, such as the Sultan ʿUṭmān (Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 132–133) or Ṣafī ad-Dīn al-Ḥilli (Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 140–143), to name but a few.

⁵⁴ Al-ʿIrāqī, *Ad-Durr*, p. 148.

ther elaborated by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: "This Sharif Abu Ghurra had a brother named Qasim, who lived for a time in Granada. He married there the daughter of the Sharif Abu 'Abdallah b. Ibrahim, known as al-Makkī, and thereafter removed to Ġabal Ṭāriq [Gibraltar] where he remained until he gained martyrdom in Wādī Kurra, in the province of al-Ġazira al-Ḥaḍra' [Algeciras]. He was a hero of heroes; none ventured to be scorched in his fire, and he performed miracles of valour. His bravery is the subject of many stories which are widely known amongst the people. He left two sons, who are still under ward of their stepfather, the worthy Sharif Abu 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Abi'l-Qāsīm b. Nafīs al-Ḥusainī al-Karbalā'ī, well known in the Maghrib by the name of al-'Irāqī (he had | married their mother after their father's death, and she died while with him) and he continues his benevolent care of them, God reward him well!"⁵⁵

After describing the family of Ibn an-Nafīs's wife and the city of Karbalā', Al-Walīd turns to discuss the death of his ancestor. The date of death is unknown, however it most likely occurred during the reign of sultan Abū Sālim Ibrāhīm (1359–1361) and he was buried near the Fez gate of Bāb al-Futūḥ, and from his headstone spread a cemetery for the members of *aš-šu'ba āl-'irāqiyya*.⁵⁶

The chapter ends with further accounts confirming the earlier information, including the description of

⁵⁵ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat*, pp. 193–194; *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa A.D. 1325–1354*. Vol. I, trans. H.A.R. Gibb, Cambridge 1958, pp. 259–260.

⁵⁶ Al-'Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 151–152.

Iraq and Baghdad⁵⁷ and various details concerning the origins of Ibn Nafis. Especially significant passages can be found on p. 158, where Al-‘Irāqī explains why Muḥammad was called Ibn Nafis, and not Ibn Abī al-Qāsim: “Earlier as well as quite frequently now, a man is referred to by the name of the one who precedes his father in fame.” This matter is further elaborated using examples from history. The author also returns to some of the ancestors of Muḥammad Ibn Nafis to whom he referred earlier, above all to Ibrāhīm al-Muḡāb and his son, Ismā‘īl, however, this does not provide any new information about Ibn Nafis’s life.

The second section of this *maqṣad* is the list, mentioned earlier, of authors writing about the *aš-šu‘ba ʾal-‘irāqiyya* which is *Al-Amr at-tānī*. This section of the work in majority can be best described as the “state of research” and comprises biographical notes of varying length for over 20 Moroccan and one Egyptian author – Zayn al-‘Ābidīn aṣ-Ṣadiqī al-Miṣrī (died around 1585).⁵⁸ This list begins with Aḥmad aš-Šafšāwinī (died around 1592, pp. 166–168);⁵⁹ and ends with Aḥmad al-Wazīr al-Ġassānī.

The subsequent pages present extensive deliberations by Al-‘Irāqī concerning the history of the “Moroccan Iraqis.” These are divided into six *tanbīhāt* of dif-

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 154–155.

⁵⁸ Al-Yafrānī, *Nuzhat al-hādī bi-aḥbār mulūk al-qarn al-ḥādī*, ed. of the text in Arabic O. Houdas, Paris 1888, pp. 131–132 text in Arabic. Zayn al-‘Ābidīn was an Egyptian who wrote about *Maṭla‘ al-iṣrāq*.

⁵⁹ Al-Qādirī, *Naṣr*, Vol. I, p. 33.

fering length and various character. They cover such matters as theoretical problems of genealogy, criticism of the sources, and frequently highly detailed presentation of the history of the *aš-šu'ba āl-'irāqiyya*, including life stories of Muḥammad Ibn Nafīs's descendants and its internal divisions. As it is common for Arabic literature of that era, there are numerous repetitions in relation to the earlier sections of the work. At this point, Al-Walīd's critical attitude towards some of the accounts appears significant. He does not present them in the typical manner, known from classic Arabic chronicles, but attempts to explain and confront the accounts from various authors⁶⁰ indicating the true ones in accordance with his knowledge of the events or their interpretation.

The next section of the work, Al-Walīd titled *Al-Lāḥiqā*, although in terms of its factual content this fragment appears of great significance. Its main subject matter is the biographical notes of the most eminent representatives of the Iraqī Ḥusaynids in Morocco. The author already presented narratives of important people from this group, but these were a different group. Here Al-'Irāqī focuses on those he refers to as *'arifūn*. By another name, one could call them the "intellectual and religious elite." This section includes 20 biographical notes, the last of which is the author's own. These men include primarily the distinguished Muslim scholars, Sufis, and ascetics. Among them, there are the following scholars: Muḥammad al-Hādī, died 1750 (pp. 357–364)⁶¹,

⁶⁰ E.g. *At-Tanbīh as-sādis*, pp. 281–283)

⁶¹ Al-Qādirī, *Našr*, Vol. IV, pp. 70–73.

Idrīs Ibn Muḥammad al-‘Irāqī, died around 1769 (pp. 364–368)⁶², Abū ‘Abd Allāh az-Zayyān, died around 1769 (pp. 371–379), grandfather of the author, Al-Walīd Ibn as-Sayyid, died in 1782 (pp. 385–388) and ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Abī āl-‘Alā’, died in 1818 (pp. 388–389).

The list of men of learning from the Al-‘Irāqī family ends with an autobiography of Al-Walīd, which spans over a few pages. As Šawqī Ḍayf emphasises, this is not uncommon in Arabic literature. In his monograph on biographies, the Egyptian lists several writers who used this principle in their dictionaries, including Al-Ġazarī (died 1429), As-Saḥāwī (died in 1492), and As-Suyūṭī (died in 1505).⁶³

Al-Walīd begins this work with the following words: “And among their elites was the grandfather, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Hādī, who came to Fez, and who was already mentioned [...]. Among these is also the author of this report, the poor servant of God, the Rich and Worshipped, ‘Abd Allāh al-Walīd Ibn al-‘Arabī.⁶⁴ The autobiography is the last section of *Al-Maqṣad at-tāni. Al-Amr at-tāni*.

His *tarğama* Al-Walīd wrote in the first person, which was not common practice. Ibn al-Ġazarī in *Ġāyat an-nihāya*⁶⁵ wrote his own biographical note in third person, while As-Suyūṭī (died 1505) in *Ḥusn al-muḥā-*

⁶² Ibid., pp. 193–195.

⁶³ Š. Ḍayf, *At-Tarğama aš-šaḥṣiyya*, Al-Qāhira 1987, p. 52–58.

⁶⁴ Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 343, 395.

⁶⁵ M. Ibn al-Ġazarī, *Ġāyat an-nihāya fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrā’*, Bayrūt 1971, Vol. II, pp. 217–220.

*ḍara*⁶⁶ also refers to himself in first person. The latter also stresses that he included his own biographical note following the example of his predecessors. Therefore, one can confirm this was one of the principles of writing biographical dictionaries. A similar biographical note, covering a part of the life and written in first person was left by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥalīd an-Nāṣirī, slightly younger than the author of *Ad-Durr*.⁶⁷

The author begins his autobiographical note by mentioning his father, whom he earlier described in a more extensive manner, and then continues by describing his efforts to attain highest levels of knowledge, emphasising that one is very much responsible for their own achievements. Next he states the name that his father gave him, which is the same as his father's and – as Al-Walīd stresses – a name also borne by many other pious people (*walī*) and the year of his birth – unfortunately, not certain (“In was born in 1209 or the previous year”, p. 396). He provides no information about his mother, which can be found in some autobiographies. The next piece of information concerns the subsequent levels of education of Al-Walīd, beginning with the madrasah. The subsequent stages of education included the study of *Alfiyya* by Ibn Mālik and *Muḥtaṣar Ḥalīl* or *Muḥtaṣar al-'allāma Ḥalīl fī fiqh al-imām Mālik* by Ḥalīl Ibn Iṣḥāq al-Mālikī (14th century). The following works he studied included *Al-Aḡurrūmiyya*,

⁶⁶ Ğ.D. as-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-muḥāḍara fī tāriḥ Miṣr wa-Āl-Qāhira*, Al-Qāhira 1967, Vol I, pp. 225–344.

⁶⁷ An-Nāṣirī, *XIX-wieczne Maroko*, mainly pp. IX–XXXI.

Al-Muršid al-mu‘īn or *Al-Muršid al-mu‘īn ‘alā āḍ-ḍurūrī min ‘ulūm ad-dīn* by ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Ibn ‘Āšir (died 1631). Among other works typical for the well-educated scholar from the Maliki school (including, obviously, *Al-Muwatṭa’* by Ibn Mālik), there is a work of mystical nature, *Šarḥ Aṣ-Šuḡrā* by Muḥammad Ibn Yūsuf as-Sanūsī (died around 1486) which accompanied his work titled *‘Aqīdat ahl at-tawḥīd aṣ-šuḡrā* also known as *Umm al-barāhīn*. The studying of panegyrics praising the Prophet is also typical of Maghreb and that era – for example, a five-volume work titled *Šarḥ ‘uqūd al-Fātiḥa*, which was taught by its author, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ḥamdūn al-Fāsī (1760–1817). Other textbooks included also the hadith and *‘arūḍ*. Of course, Al-Walīd enumerates all his teachers, providing the dates of their deaths and place of burial wherever possible. He also recalls his teachers connected with Moroccan mysticism, emphasising his close scientific and personal relations with some of the mystics from various brotherhoods.⁶⁸

This biographical note is in fact a narrative of the intellectual foundations for the young Al-Walīd (it was written in 1826 at the latest so the author was 32 years old) and in fact he dedicates more time to describe his teachers rather than himself. The text is devoid of any purely personal stories and therefore in this respect it is no different from many other, similar biographies of this type, written in the 19th century.

The book ends with a handful of reflections on the superiority of *šurafā’*, collected in five short texts titled

⁶⁸ Al-‘Irāqī, *Ad-Durr*, pp. 401–405.

*Fawā'id aḥtam bihā al-kitāb wa-akmil bihā haḍā ʾl-bāb.*⁶⁹

Conclusion

The genres of classical historiographic biography *ṭabaqāt*, *wafayāt* or *tarāḡim*, including *tarāḡim šaḥṣiyya* (*dātiyya*) blend together in the work discussed in this paper. This book, similarly to many others written by “Moroccan Iraqis” (but not exclusively), should be partially included in the genealogy genre (*ʿilm an-nasab*⁷⁰), which flourished in the post-classical period of Arab literature and later, frequently transformed into biographical dictionaries. These were the unique result of the interest in the works and origins of eminent representatives of the social, political, and intellectual life of the Arab-Muslim cultural realm. On the other hand, it would be difficult to find any extremely apologetic tendencies or attempts at creating any “imagined origins”, although in some cases the author includes accounts relating miracles these people performed. Al-ʿIrāqī was more interested in the actual historical basis of Al-ʿIrāqī al-Ḥusaynīs therefore the works he quotes include few that are purely religious literature.

For these reasons, it is very difficult to determine the genre of Al-Walīd’s work. Firstly, it is hard to estimate to what extent *Ad-Durr* is a work in genealogy,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 407–416)

⁷⁰ About the role of *ansāb* in Moroccan literature, comp: Sebti, ‘Au Maroc’, pp. 433–457; F. Rosenthal, *Nasab*, [in:] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM Edition v.1.1.*, Leiden 2001.

and to what extent it is the so-called “family history”⁷¹. Definitely it is not a typical biographical dictionary of the family (clan) of Al-‘Irāqī. Additionally, one of the sections presents a type of history of Moroccan historiography in the form of biographical notes, although it is arranged to include those of Moroccan historians (except for one Egyptian) who had an interest in the Moroccan Iraqis. The writing process of this work is not known and, in its present form, it appears arranged inconsistently. The typically biographical segments are interspersed with contemplations on genealogy and history, which can be classified as theoretical. The biographical notes devoted to family members constitute one layer of the subject matter although it is spread throughout the monograph, and another layer consists of the biographical notes of Moroccan historians. It should be emphasised that although the book has an unsystematic structure, it includes elements that make it closer to a historiography rather than a chronicle. The author displays a critical approach to the statements made by his predecessors, he compares and verifies them, thereby coming closer to the modern method of history writing which is not a simple record of events.

The history of the Al-‘Irāqī clan who, even today, play an important role in the political, social and economic life of Morocco,⁷² is an interesting example of

⁷¹ Comp. Rosenthal, *A History*, pp. 57, 97, 122, 157; Sebti, *Au Maroc*, p. 435.

⁷² Comp.: R. Bidwell, *Dictionary of Modern Arab History*, London–New York 2010, pp. 246–247; Th.K. Park, A. Boum, *Historical Dictionary of Morocco*, Lanham–Toronto–Oxford 2005, p. 212.

what, on the one hand, can be termed as “Arab unity”, and on the other hand, as Muslim unity. Descendants of the imam Al-Ḥusayn, especially venerated by the Shia, the Moroccan “Iraqis” are Sunni and have comprised an important segment of the Moroccan society.⁷³

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⁷³ S. Rubā'ī, *Al-Ā'ilāt al-'arīqa bi-Āl-Mağrib*, <https://www.maghress.com/alittihad/190352> [Access date: 19.07.2025]. This article focuses on the work connected with the history of that family until early 19th century, leaving behind any of their later histories.

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Basilus Bawardi

“Speaking in the Second Person”: A Discussion of the Moroccan Author Malika Mustazraf’s Short Story “A Mere Difference”

Abstract: This paper delves into Malika Mustazraf’s short story, “A Mere Difference”, examining the portrayal of the androgynous figure and its implications within Moroccan society. It explores how Mustazraf challenges conventional gender divisions and critiques societal attitudes toward those who deviate from established norms. The analysis incorporates literary theory, gender studies, and cultural criticism to illuminate the story’s complex themes of identity, marginalization, and the potential for literature to foster empathy and cultural change. By analyzing the androgynous figure, the paper seeks to gain insights into the status of women and the broader socio-ethical inquiries that arise from the existence of “others” within a society.

Keywords: Malika Mustazraf, Androgynous, The Other, Moroccan Women’s Writing, Identity

Narrative, or storytelling, stands as the most recognized and widely accepted mode of text through which humans organize their world and articulate their experiences.

Stories serve the crucial function of imbuing deviations from the established order with meaning, thus enabling continued existence by providing explanation and justification for anomalies within the framework of values upheld by the “world” – specifically, the culture in which these stories are embedded. Consequently, the narrator recounting the tale of an individual who has strayed from societal norms invariably seeks to attribute intent, to uncover reasons for their actions, and ultimately, to discern a purpose that elucidates the departure from the accepted framework.

In this paper, I propose a discussion of the androgynous figure at the heart of the short story *Muğarrad iḥtilāf* (A Mere Difference), from the collection *Trānt Sīs* by the Moroccan author Malīka Mustazraf, published in 2004.¹ By positioning this “other” figure, I seek to gain insights into Moroccan society as a whole and the status of women within it. I posit that no society can exist without an ‘other’, regardless of how I categorize them, as it is only through this ‘other’ that profound reflection and socio-ethical inquiry can occur.

I operate under the assumption that women’s literature is no longer a discrete entity within modern Arabic literature but an integral part of it. It is also considered an additional prism, from which it is possible to learn about the social and cultural reality of the time and place in which they are written.

Etymologically, the term ‘androgyny’ is a composite of the Greek words ‘andros’ – meaning male, and ‘gyne’ –

¹ M. Mustazraf, *Trānt Sīs*, Ad-Dār al-Bayḍā’ 2004, pp. 9–15.

meaning female. In a biological context, it describes the presence of both male and female reproductive organs within a single organism. Culturally, it represents a position aligned with feminist theory and is presented as a potential alternative to male sexism². Resistance to the binary structure that serves male dominance takes on an androgynous form. In this state, the woman belongs to neither sex or belongs to both sexes as one. Androgyny as a cultural position may serve utopian trends of freedom and personal radicalism.³

The Moroccan literary scholar Qāsim Muṛġātā emphasizes in his writings that the term ‘androgyny’ has found expression in many areas, such as literature, folk tales, in art and even in religion. Moreover, this is a universal global phenomenon, rather than a local one.⁴

As this paper will demonstrate, this state of fractured and subversive identity serves the author as a tool to challenge clear and well-defined notions within a traditional and conservative society like Moroccan society – a society that does not yet reject acceptance of different identities.

Here, it is important to note that the question of how to read, how to organize meaning within a literary text, stands at the epicenter of contemporary cultural interpretation. Diverse theories propose varying modes of reading reality. The question that arises is whether

² G.H. Carolyn, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, New York 1973.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Q. Muṛġātā, *As-Sārid al-ḥunthā: maḥlūq al-hāmish wa-āt-ta ‘addud*, “Qāf Ṣād” 2007, No. 5, pp. 33–38.

a singular meaning exists within the text, the intention of which must be painstakingly pursued, or whether meaning is a process of multiplicity, not produced by the object of inquiry but by the subject and the historical-cultural context in which they exist. According to the latter possibility, the encounter between the reader and the text (the world) gives rise to shifting meanings. Thus, it is no longer a matter of reconstructing the creator's intent, but of attempting to reconstruct the way in which the text conveys meaning to the reader. In other words, the decision on how to read is a preliminary decision, which largely determines the results – that is, the meaning extracted from the literary text.⁵

The mode of reading the literary text at the heart of this paper is a subversive one, a reading that exposes the hegemonic construction of the text and enables marginalized forces to come to light. In other words, such a reading deconstructs the system of values and the cultural ideologies inherent in the text and portrays their ambivalence.⁶

The uniqueness of this story, which opens Mustazraf's collection, lies in dismantling the perception of the term gender "as an analytical category" from its essentialist meaning, that is, one that unites the experiences of dif-

⁵ U. Eco, *Between author and text* [in:]: U. Eco and others, *Interpretation and Over interpretation*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 67–88.

⁶ For more on subversive reading, see: P. Schweickart, *Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading* [in:]: E. Flynn and P. Schweickart (eds.), *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*, Baltimore 1986, pp. 31–62; Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, Bloomington 1978.

ferent women in a uniform and generalizing epistemological critique, and blurs differences of class, ethnicity, and sexuality between women. Mustazraf’s short story does not present femininity as a general principle of identity but offers another voice, different, another identity, non-conformist, fictitious, and subversive.

Through a literary analysis of the androgynous figure, this paper will emphasize the overt and covert messages the author directs at Moroccan society as a whole. However, before delving into the central theme of the paper, I seek to introduce the author Malika Mustazraf, as well as women’s writing in the Moroccan sphere.

Malika Mustazraf (1969–2006), a native of Casablanca, stands as one of the most prominent and highly esteemed authors within the Moroccan literary landscape of the past two decades.⁷ This author has garnered numerous epithets, attesting to her distinctive voice within the Moroccan literary sphere.⁸ One such

⁷ To illustrate, in 2002, a controversy erupted following the publication of a false report in the Moroccan press, which stated that Mustazraf was slated to receive a prestigious and highly regarded prize instead of the Moroccan author Aḥmad Būzfūr. The latter claimed he was uninterested in accepting this prize in protest of the government’s insufficient efforts to raise literacy rates among the Moroccan population: “I cannot accept a prize for a book with 1,000 printed copies, of which only 500 are distributed in a country of 30 million people”. See: A. Elinson, *Opening the Circle: Storyteller and Audience in Moroccan Prison Literature*, “Middle Eastern Literatures” 2009, No. 12,3, p. 302.

⁸ The most comprehensive interview with the author Malika Mustazraf was conducted by journalist Munā Wafīq in the newspaper “Ar-Riyāḍ”: *Al-Mušmila annanī lā amtalik sīqānan wa-āfhāḍan ḥattā u ‘arrihā*, http://aslimnet.free.fr/div/Malika_2.htm [Access date: 18.07.2025].

designation is “The female Muḥammad Šukrī”. According to literary scholar Salim Jay, Mustazraf shares with Muḥammad Šukrī (1935–2003), a preeminent author on the Moroccan literary scene, the art of candor, lending her stories a tone that is both forceful and authentic.⁹ Furthermore, it is not only the writing style that the two share, but also the subject matter of their work, such as the figure of the father and the fraught relationship between him and the speaker in their works.

Moreover, Mustazraf cultivated friendships with other authors from Morocco and beyond. Noteworthy are her special connections with the Moroccan author Muḥammad Zafzāf (1945–2001), whose works give voice to local figures and particularly to Moroccans living on the margins of society.¹⁰

The first book published by Mustazraf was in 1999; it was an autobiographical novel entitle *Ġirāḥ ar-rūḥ wa-āl-ġasad* (Wounds of the Soul and Body).¹¹ Furthermore, in 2004, she released a collection of stories under the title *Trānt Sīs* (Thirty-six).¹² Similar to female

⁹ S. Jay, *Dictionnaire des écrivains marocains*, Paris 2005, p. 282.

¹⁰ R. Husni and D.L. Newman, *Modern Arabic Short Stories: Bilingual Reader*, London 2008.

¹¹ See on the book: R. Ashour and others (eds.), *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999*, Cairo-New York 2008, p. 251.

¹² The title of this collection of short stories mirrors the title of one of its narratives. According to the story, the narrator’s father was nicknamed “36” by the neighbors. As noted by the author, this nickname refers to the section housing individuals with mental health issues, as referenced in: Mustazraf, *Trānt Sīs*, p. 21. Mustazraf employs a codified language, using a rebellious and confrontational approach through a newly forged expression that

authors across the Arab world in general and Moroccan women writers in particular, Mustazraf dedicates her storytelling to personal themes related to the female experience, including her own struggle with illness. Additionally, her stories explore pressing issues impacting her immediate environment, such as social corruption, the disintegration of family values, violence, and poverty – subjects she depicts with bravery and clarity.

Some argue that her literary works constitute a meaningful qualitative addition not only to the realm of female writing in Morocco but also to Arabic literary and artistic creation as a whole. This is attributed to her distinctive mode of expression and literary talent, as she deeply engages with issues related to women and gender within a traditional, conservative, and devout society. Consequently, Mustazraf has firmly left her personal mark on this literary genre, enriching it with her unique perspective and profound exploration of gender-related themes.¹³

targets two forms of oppression – two tyrants: one colonial ruler and the other societal. On one occasion, she symbolizes the former by using the Arabic numeral 36 in French script, representing the colonial occupier, and on another, she addresses the current local oppressor – her father – who embodies the patriarchal order. He is labeled as schizophrenic by others, not explicitly by her, conveying a clear, indirect critique of the societal and patriarchal structures that perpetuate repression.

¹³ It is worth noting that Mustazraf’s stories have been published in literary journals and on websites in various languages, including Arabic and foreign languages, both within Morocco and abroad. For example, the short story *Al-Wahm* (Illusion) is included in a trilogy of short stories by young Moroccan authors titled “A Space For an Impossible Dream”. Additionally, the story discussed in this article, entitled “A Mere Difference”, was published

In the following section of the article, I seek to briefly overview the figure of the androgynous individual as reflected in global literature and culture. Subsequently, I will analyze the story “A Mere Difference”, with a particular focus on the portrayal of the androgynous character – an entity that oscillates between two spheres: an internal realm, comprising her thoughts and feelings, and an external domain, encompassing her family and the broader society surrounding her.

The figure of the androgynous individual appears in a distinctive manner in Malika Mustazraf’s story *Muğar-rad iḥtilāf* (A Mere Difference), published in 2004. Moroccan literary scholar Qāsim Muṛḡāṭā contends that one of the key traits of an androgynous character, as reflected in Mustazraf’s story, is the duality or binariness of the figure – an entity that embodies two poles: male and female. According to him, this duality enables the creation of a fictional human being comprising two opposing yet complementary sides. Another characteristic of this androgynous figure within the story is the notion of amalgamation or fusion. Mustazraf crafts this character from imagination, yet it remains captivating, multidimensional, and profound.

In other words, although the author creates this imaginative figure, she intentionally evokes empathy from the audience. She centers her narrative on this character to amplify and highlight her social and gender critique.

in “Banipal”, a magazine dedicated to contemporary Arabic literature. The magazine’s editor is the Iraqi writer and journalist Samuel Shimon (born 1956).

As Murġātā explains, the way others or the immediate environment perceive this figure can evoke concern or even foster feelings of alienation and estrangement towards similar characters, who are perceived by society as “different”. All of this is contextualized within a broader cultural rupture. These themes are reflected in the narrator’s words, as she shares her thoughts and feelings with the readers: “As above, what is wrong with my form? No one chooses their shape. This is God’s creation. The doctor I visited kept rubbing the tip of his nose and sneezing. After several appointments, a flood of words, money, and some lab tests, he told me a few things I didn’t fully grasp: hormones, genes, chromosomes... and in the end, he told me I must accept my body as it is”.¹⁴

According to Murġātā, Mustazraf portrays the androgynous figure in this work as an incomplete and dynamic entity, continuously seeking a singular, genuine, and refined identity – an essence that, as the narrator suggests, can be defined as an anti-hero within this literary text:

“I don’t understand why they address me in such a coarse manner, sometimes with cruel indifference. On the street, they look at me as if I fell from another planet, yet I carry a head between my shoulders that is not vastly different from all the others”.

Another dimension Murġātā highlights is the marginality and detachment of the androgynous narrator.

¹⁴ Q. Murġātā, *As-Sārid al-ḥuntā: maḥlūq al-hāmish wa-āt-ta’addud*, “Qāf Ṣād” 2007, No. 5, p. 50.

It is precisely through the presentation of this “deviant” character – alien to the environment in terms of her sexual/gender identity – that questions arise regarding the legitimacy of societal and cultural standards or criteria. More specifically, it prompts reflection on whether, by positioning such a character, the author calls for a profound and fundamental cognitive change in the established yardsticks.

On one hand, the character is in a continual quest for her sexual identity – however, she perceives her gender positively. On the other, the “others” around her are unable to accept or accommodate her. The tone and style – deliberately expressed in colloquial Arabic rather than literary, in direct, personal speech, using language that most accurately reflects everyday life and reality – strengthen and emphasize this notion.

As stated, this “deviant” figure, different and outside the conventional gender division, amplifies her solitude, alienation, and marginality within her society. It is also worth noting that the details introduced at the beginning of the story – including the vivid description of the atmosphere conveyed directly by the narrator – are connected in some way to her condition. Throughout the text, she shares her thoughts and feelings about how others perceive her:

“During these late hours of the night, Muḥammad Fifth Street is silent, empty, and gloomy, except for a few stray cats. Their cries are frightening, resembling a baby’s wail. A female dog in front of me raises her tail and turns toward a limping black dog. She manages

to seduce him. The dog climbs on her, they cling to each other, merge. The female dog closes her eyes in ecstasy, addicted to his tempting movements. A sweet numbness spreads through my body – how fortunate they are! Doing this in front of everyone: ‘God sees, and so do humans,’ they are unafraid of the police or gossip”.¹⁵

The purpose of this opening is not to describe the space, the gloom, or the city streets’ fear, but rather to accentuate the condition of the central figure in this story: she is disconnected from the world, solitary, isolated, observing events passively, and transmitting them to the reader with cold indifference. Furthermore, attention should be paid both to the subject of this description and to the use of language – coded, indirect, rather than explicit – and to how the narrator relates to the actions of animals (unlike humans), which indulge openly and without shame.

Moroccan literary scholar Aḥmad Būzfūr argues that Mustazraf employs what is termed an “Objective Correlative”¹⁶ in this creation, as she does not focus on

¹⁵ Mustazraf, *Trānt Sīs*, p. 9.

¹⁶ This term is associated with the concept of the “Objective Correlative”, and some scholars refer to it as the “Objective Parallel”. It was developed by T.S. Eliot in his essay on *Hamlet*. The idea encapsulated in this term posits that the most effective means of expressing emotions in art is to find an intermediary device that conveys them indirectly – through actions, objects, or tangible symbols – rather than through direct or descriptive methods. For a more detailed discussion, see: J.T. Shipley (ed.), *Dictionary of World Literature*, Totowa 1972, p. 289; C. Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford 2008 (3rd ed), p. 236; Van Gropp, *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires*, Paris 2001, pp. 334–335; J.A. Cuddon, *Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Oxford 1998 (4th ed), p. 605.

the differences of the narrator but rather on her playful awareness of these differences and her steadfastness in embracing them – alongside convincing others of her right to do so, which she claims is no less valid than that of the normative and familiar.

Moreover, it is no coincidence that Mustazraf places an exceptional character at the center of this short story; her external features – such as her style of dress – and other attributes are not the focus. Instead, her inner world – her thoughts and feelings – and, critically, others' attitudes toward her, are what matter. While she is willing to accept others as they are, they refuse to accept her. In their view, she does not behave as they wish or expect her to, and she may even hide her true identity. This might explain why the narrator is diligent in carrying an electric shaver in her pocket, fearing that bearded men – whom she refers to – will shave her head, an act intended solely to suppress her femininity:

“The razor is still in my fingers. I’ve practiced using it ever since those bearded men attacked me. They said they wanted to purify society. Since that day, I hate men with beards. They started shaving my hair, shamefully, they walked away, leaving me. If it weren’t for the police intervention, it could have been worse. This is the first time I love and am glad to see the police. I ran toward them, after always fleeing from them. Yet, losing my hair wounds my heart”.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mustazraf, *Trānt Sīs*, p. 15.

The narrator’s words also contain critique directed at the police – an institution responsible for maintaining order, enforcing laws, and safeguarding citizens’ personal security. While in the past she feared encountering the police randomly (a concern also mentioned in the story’s opening paragraph), during moments when she is alone and without assistance, she feels threatened by those seeking to “purify society”. In these instances, the narrator seeks the protection of the police, confident that if she encounters officers this time (her first, as she claims), she will not be harmed.

According to Murġātā, Mustazraf’s narration also contains critique directed at the police – an institution responsible for maintaining order and enforcing laws, as well as ensuring the personal safety of citizens. While in the past she feared encountering the police randomly (a concern also mentioned in the opening paragraph of the story), in moments when she finds herself alone and without aid, she feels threatened by those who seek to “purify the society”. During these instances, the narrator seeks the protection of the police, trusting that if she encounters officers this time (her first, as she claims), she will not be harmed.

Murġātā further argues that Malika Mustazraf constructs in this short story an imaginary, complex figure embodying contradictions – no coincidence, as the author seeks to challenge the conventional gender divisions from an artistic and aesthetic perspective.¹⁸ The

¹⁸ Q. Murġātā, *As-Sārid al-ḥuntā*, p. 53.

fact that this character combines both genders, and is perceived by her close, distant, and broader environment as incomprehensible, is in some ways reflective of similar experiences of others – often marginalized, societal outsiders, who they too find difficult to categorize.

Moreover, it is unsurprising that the androgynous narrator repeatedly fails to establish a connection with the opposite sex, despite both women and men treating her ambivalently rather than unequivocally. On one hand, women neglect her, and she becomes loved for her own sake; on the other hand, her masculinity is constrained, and she is flattered for her femininity. In this way, her masculinity diminishes and softens into femininity.¹⁹ Murġātā even goes so far as to suggest that the attitude of men towards this character not only reflects tenderness and flexibility but also symbolizes the castration of masculinity itself – implying that the loss of masculinity is associated with a decline in vitality and even death.²⁰

The narrator's alienation, therefore, is doubled: she remains a stranger in both worlds. On the one hand, she experiences a loss of vitality in her masculine realm; on the other, as she "enters" the world of women, she enters a space to which she inherently does not belong.

Mustazraf presents in this literary work a figure that believes in difference – one willing to accept and contain

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 53.

both the marginal and the excessive, internally and externally, despite her negative experiences with others in her immediate and broader environment. Similar to other stories by Mustazraf, the narrative is linear (chronological) and contains the following elements: an introduction that provides essential background for understanding the work, followed by a complication, and ultimately a resolution – closing the loop.

The closing lines of the story underscore the narrator’s disillusionment with her immediate and distant surroundings. This involves characters from her private sphere – such as her father – as well as figures from the public domain she encounters at the *Ḥammām* – perhaps the only place where a woman can spend time outside her home and family – whether with other women she meets or with authority figures like teachers, who exude authority and dominance, or when visiting the clinic, where, according to her account, she has been numerous times.²¹ Yet, these concluding

²¹ This passage invites a thoughtful comparison between Mustazraf’s story and that of the Egyptian novelist, journalist, and literary critic Su‘ād Bakr (1949–). In Bakr’s story, titled “All That Beautiful Voice Rising From Within” – featuring the protagonist Sayyida, who is not given a personal name – the character discovers her new voice, longs to express it, and refuses to silence it. Only after some time does she confide in her husband, describing her realization as a “problem”, and this is no coincidence. Her husband is convinced that the voice indicates pregnancy. Bakr employs various literary devices to establish a symbolic connection between voice and sexual identity (specifically, a forbidden female voice) and divine forces. The conservative husband perceives the woman as mentally ill, takes her to a specialist, and swears her to secrecy, warning her not to tell their children about her condition, describing it in monstrous terms. Once Sayyida

words emphasize not only her disappointment but also her hesitation and confusion:

“It is two in the morning. My fingers nearly froze from the cold. This night feels unreal (falsus – originally from Italian). I will return home, pour myself a little wine, and enjoy a plate of seafood in hot pepper”.²²

The ending of this story is conclusive and not open-ended – clear and unequivocal – though, at its climax, it does not provide a definitive resolution to the troubles of the unconventional character at its center,

and her husband, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, arrive at the clinic, the psychiatrist asks her to narrate her story, listening silently to her account. In response, he prescribes her a sedative. Much like Mustazraf’s story, Bakr’s narrative uses this beautiful voice as a lens to explore the woman’s environment, revealing that she has no close confidants with whom she can share her discovery and who might understand her inner turmoil. Even the psychiatrist, to whom she is brought, prescribes medication and furnishes detailed instructions on how she should behave in her private space, emphasizing that if her condition worsens, she must seek immediate help. Furthermore, both authors incorporate elements of fiction and absurdity, blending imaginary and supernatural events into realistic settings. They employ irony to depict the woman’s experiences: Mustazraf portrays the androgynous character as a symbol of internal contradiction, while Bakr describes the plight of the innocent woman and her terrified husband. Unlike Mustazraf’s story, although Sayyida, the heroine of Bakr’s tale, ultimately attempts to free her voice – trapped within her throat – without success, she chooses to act – rebelling against societal dictates. She does so by emptying her medication bottles into the toilet at the story’s end. This act serves as a rebellion against Arab society in general and men in particular, offering an alternative to lives of repression and silencing. The story is included in the collection *Kull hādā aṣ-ṣawt al-ġamīl al-laḏī ya’fī min dāhilihā*, Al-Qāhira 1994, edited by the Egyptian writer and literary critic L. az-Zayyāt (1923–1996). See: Az-Zayyāt, *Kull hādā aṣ-ṣawt al-ġamīl*, pp. 83–93.

²² Mustazraf, *Trānt Sīs*, p. 15.

nor does the narrator clarify the obscure details, as one might expect.

The structure of this story relies on a sequence of narrative segments, each framed within a specific context or setting. The narrative shifts between different states of the character within this framework, often returning to the initial situation, creating a cyclical impression.²³ In truth, the character remains static throughout the entire story: a nameless figure who remains unchanged, primarily listening to what she is forbidden to do or where she is not allowed to be. Despite the doctor’s advice to accept her body as it is, and despite another female character, Naimah – whom the narrator portrays negatively, even though her name symbolizes comfort, happiness, and serenity – to “shut her ears with cotton and live her life as she desires”, she does not find happiness or salvation – contrary to expectations. Instead, she is etched into the reader’s consciousness as a miserable figure, compelled to accept her condition against her will.

Her situation intensifies when there is no dialogue between her and Na’Īma. The narrator questions herself how she might convince others that she is “different”, an “other”. This question remains unanswered. Such an ending might evoke disappointment or anger in the reader, yet it also prompts reflection on the status of women within Moroccan society: women are not free; they are bound and limited by societal dictates.

²³ M. Ğabbārī, *Muğarrad iḥtilāf fī at-tağrubā al-qāṣaṣiyya li-Malika Mustazraf*, “Qāf Ṣād” 2007, No. 5, p. 35.

They are depicted as weak, oppressed, dependent, and voiceless before a patriarchal, misogynistic authority.

Through her portrayal of this fictional character who occupies the story's core, Mustazraf crosses the barrier of silence and suppression imposed by society, giving herself a voice and space to protest, suffer, and rebel. Her critique is especially directed at men within Moroccan society – in particular, her father – who bears almost sole responsibility for the oppression of women. Moreover, this figure plays a significant role in shaping not only her personal identity but also her social identity.

As the narrator states, her father refused to acknowledge her female identity, treating her for a long period as a boy. He sought to suppress her femininity by every possible means. The narrator, his daughter, recounts her experiences of violence, curses, and humiliation: for example, she describes how she and mother were severely beaten upon his return after a long absence, after seeing her wearing lipstick – a feminine accessory – and her braided hair. He beat her mother until she soiled herself and made it explicitly clear that this boy eventually would become an androgynous person.

The narrator then describes how her father forced her to recite the “Opening Chapter” (*Al-Fātiḥa*) from the Quran, because he believed it was her duty as a son to demonstrate familiarity with the holy book:

“We return home, and he takes the Quran between his two hands, reciting the opening verse, opening his mouth fully, with his rotten teeth and exposed vocal cords. My heart pounds painfully inside my ribs. ‘In the name of

Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate.’ I stammer. Are you not familiar with the opening verse, son of the unbelievers?” he presses his false teeth against his lower lip. “You will go to hell, son of a bitch. Hell – filled with women and... people like you”.²⁴

He deliberately demands she read this opening verse from the Quran, which is the first chapter, consisting of seven verses, recited in each of the five daily prayers Muslims are obliged to perform. The division into seven verses is also employed in other methods of segmentation, intended to lend this chapter an aura of greater sanctity. It is regarded as the essence of Islam and is often called “the Mother of the Book”.

Additionally, in this segment, the father refers to the narrator as “son of the unbelievers”, a Zoroastrian – meaning a follower of the ancient Persian religion. The word “unbelievers” appears once in the Quran (22:17), in a verse stating that on the Day of Resurrection, God will judge between Jews, Sabians, Christians, unbelievers (referred to as *mušrikūn*), and idolaters – those who worship both idols and God. While God is seen as the highest deity in their view, the idols are regarded as his offspring or associates. It is noteworthy that after the Muslim conquest of Persia, Zoroastrians were considered part of the “People of the Book”, a designation from the Quran referring to Judaism and Christianity. Both religions are based on scriptures containing words of the living God, but over time, both have distorted this divine message.

²⁴ Mustazraf, *Trānt Sīs*, p. 11.

The author deliberately attributes this designation to the father's speech – an archetypal symbol – representing patriarchal, misogynistic authority and a dichotomous worldview aligned with Zoroastrian dualism. According to this religion, the world is built on pairs of opposites – in a cosmic struggle between forces of good and evil competing for control over human souls.

Subsequently, the abusive and deeply hated father repeatedly demands the narrator to write a thousand times: "I am a man, I a m...". However, the speaker feels confused and embarrassed: "I bow my head, look at my hand, clutching my little finger: I am a man; at the pinky finger: I am a woman, w... woman".²⁵ The negative attitude toward the daughter is also emphasized in another segment of the story, where a dialogue unfolds between the narrator and her father regarding her future aspirations to become a pilot. According to the father's worldview, the daughter is confined to the private domain and is not permitted to leave it; certainly, she cannot realize her potential. She is obliged to follow a predetermined path, with no room for deviation or self-fulfillment.

Mustazraf also critiques in this story the attitude of women towards this deviant figure. For example, when the narrator encounters women in the *ḥammām* – a public bathhouse and gathering place for the women of the city – after one woman's invasive inspection of her body, they decisively declare that she is a man, and firmly command her to go to the men's bathhouse. According to the narrator, one of the women inserted her

²⁵ Ibid.

hand under her abdomen “to verify something”. Here, too, similar to other segments of the story, the author refuses to employ accepted, even crude, language. Yet, the attitude of the men towards this androgynous figure does not differ: when the men encounter her, they grasp her shoulder and expel her from the space immediately, without hesitation or delay. For them, she is perceived as a woman, not a man. The reactions of the women and men in the Ḥammām underscore how, in a patriarchal society like Moroccan society, gender division is clear: man or woman – there is no other, third category.

Besides serving as a place for washing, purification, and muscle relaxation, the Ḥammām also functions as a social space for exchanging opinions. In this context, it is worthwhile to note that gossip (*kalām an-nās*) – the use of community-held rumors as a mechanism to disseminate information related to personal matters – serves in women’s literature as a crucial supervisory tool, since public opinion is what determines whether a woman behaves as expected or not. From this, it can be concluded that the reputation in the mouths of others – both women and men – becomes a factor equal in importance to the events themselves, and sometimes even decisive.

This story does not feature any outward expression of Mustazraf’s protest as a writer. Her protest remains within the inner layers of the soul, expressed exclusively through the internal monologues of the first-person narrator (as opposed to a third-person narrative, which

tends to be more report-like and sometimes less reliable) without breaking through to the outside. Perhaps this is why her social, gender, and religious critique resonates so strongly. Through this stylistic device, Mustazraf – the novelist, the woman, who is regarded as marginalized and sidelined because of her differences – seems to liberate her literary self from the shackles of silence, pulling her out of the circles of social death. In this way, she is able to give voice to herself and to express her identity as different and other.

Mustazraf centers this story around an androgynous figure, describing, in essence, a single day – the most difficult day of her life, as she claims – while presenting the most significant and essential details necessary to illustrate the theme: whether focusing on the events she experienced, her feelings following the violence and harsh words directed at her by her father, and the negative language she uses to describe her external appearance, in contrast to her mother, who is portrayed as a submissive, weak, and voiceless figure, forced to accept her condition and do nothing to change it; or on the clear, firm words directed at her, which she heard from others as she left the house – a space that was supposed to protect her, provide warmth, understanding, acceptance, and tenderness, which are notably absent, and not by accident.

Through her representation of this character in this literary text, the author seeks not only to reflect society's attitude towards the other but, more broadly, towards the other as such. That is, not only to shed light on how

others (society, government, religion) treat the different – a relationship often expressed through contempt, indifference, and violence, as indicated in the text – but also to instigate a cognitive and perceptual change. Mustazraf, through this short story, calls not only for openness and awareness of the diversity of each character as it is but also for respecting her identity.²⁶

These considerations lead to the following question: Is literature a mechanism for cultural change? On one hand, some argue that literature lacks the power to effect any change in reality. On the other hand, others claim that literature, unlike other fields of knowledge, strives toward achieving a deeper empathy with the other, with the different, and with the foreign – an empathy that challenges preconceptions and presents the reader with questions rather than answers.

Summary

The paper opens by establishing the significance of storytelling as a means of organizing human experiences and understanding deviations from established norms. It then introduces Mustazraf’s short story and proposes a discussion of the androgynous figure at its core.

The etymology of androgyny is explored, highlighting its biological and cultural implications. The analysis emphasizes how Mustazraf uses this figure to challenge

²⁶ See: H. al-Muwaddan, *Malika Mustazraf – bayn ar-rağul wa-ğl-mar’a*, <http://aflcine.ahlamontada.com/t361-topic> [Access: 28.07.2025].

clear-cut notions of gender within a traditional Moroccan society, examining the marginality and detachment of the androgynous narrator.

The paper examines the author's critique of societal attitudes, including those of both women and men, towards the androgynous figure. It underscores how Mustazraf challenges pre-conceived notions and promotes respect for diverse identities.

Drawing on literary theory, the paper identifies the story's use of the "objective correlative", a stylistic device that indirectly conveys emotions through tangible symbols. It also analyzes the father figure as a symbol of patriarchal oppression and explores the story's ending as a reflection of the narrator's disillusionment and the limited freedom of women in Moroccan society.

The paper concludes by raising the question of whether literature can serve as a mechanism for cultural change. It acknowledges differing perspectives on this issue but highlights the potential of literature to foster empathy, challenge prejudices, and promote a deeper understanding of the "other".

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Oumaassou Raja, Babalahcen Rajaa, Fathi Adil

The Desire in *Le Chaos de la liberté* by Halima Hamdane: a Stylistic Study

Abstract: This article offers a stylistic reading of *Le Chaos de la liberté* ("Chaos of Freedom") by Halima Hamdane, using the theory of desire as a central interpretive framework. Far from being a mere socio-political denunciation, the novel unfolds an aesthetic of absence, lack, and quest, revealing a female subject consumed by a polymorphous desire: desire for freedom, desire for speech, desire to exist. This desire innervates the language itself, shaped by the tension between silence and expression, cultural heritage and subjectivation. The stylistic analysis highlights a fragmented, poetic, and transgressive form of writing, where broken structures and discontinuous rhythms reflect the erratic movement of an overflowing desire, always at odds with the established order. Drawing on psychoanalysis and feminist literary criticism, the article argues that chaos is not merely thematic but structural: it is the language of desire, resistant to any narrative closure. Language thus becomes a space of exploration, where female identity is reconfigured through the ongoing tension between lack and creation, between alienation and the possibility of a desiring freedom. The study is therefore situated within a dual perspective: on the one hand, an exploration of the formal

specificities of “Halima Hamdane”’s writing; on the other, an articulation between stylistic form and thematic content, demonstrating that stylistic chaos reflects an existential chaos, while also serving as a space for the reinvention of the language of freedom.

Keywords: Desire, Freedom, Chaos. Writing, Fragmentation, Orality, Identity.

Introduction

For a long time relegated to the margins of the literary field, the voices of Maghrebi women have gradually emerged as one of the most dynamic centers of post-colonial Francophone literary production. Situated between collective memory, identity quests, and individual assertions, women’s Maghrebi literature is written at the intersection of multiple tensions: between tradition and modernity, mother tongue and inherited language, imposed silence and the need for expression. In a post-colonial context still marked by socio-cultural and political divides, Maghrebi women writers have transformed writing into a space of resistance, reinvention, and emancipation.

Halima Ben Haddou, with *Aïcha, la rebelle*, and Nafissa Sbai, with *L’Enfant endormi*, were among the first to inaugurate a growing corpus of female contributions to this literature. These authors offer narratives in which the body, memory, exile, and voice lie at the heart of a constantly evolving subjectivity. Their writing often adopts hybrid forms, intertwining narrative, poetry, autofiction, and orality, in order to capture the frag-

mented experiences of women in societies undergoing profound transformation. To these major figures of contemporary Moroccan women novelists, we may add Halima Hamdane, who, before establishing herself as a writer, revived, through her storytelling, childhood tales long thought forgotten.

Too often confined to sociological readings, this literary field deserves to be examined in its aesthetic and stylistic dimensions as well: what language can express oppression? What formal devices can render the unspeakable audible? How does women's writing deconstruct imposed norms and propose new narrative forms, new temporalities, and new modes of subjectivation?

I. *Le Chaos de la liberté*: A Feminine Work

1. The Aesthetic of the Novelistic Genre

It is this freedom afforded by the new Maghrebi novel, together with a form of editorial estrangement that has made it possible to dismantle the barriers surrounding themes considered taboo in Moroccan society. Far from being compared to masculine literature historically more established or to major Western female works, Moroccan women's literature, still relatively young, carves out a new place within the Moroccan literary landscape. It does so through strategies that transform cries into written words and paint suffering with the brush of language.

Some female-authored works adopt a technique of disguise, enabling boldness by adopting "a point of view

external to the sexual or national identity of the author".¹ Others display a tangible continuity between the author's life and that of the main character, simulated in the text through the use of the first-person pronoun "I". This projection of the biographical into the fictional appears at varying degrees, ranging from autobiography to autobiographical novels, autofiction, or fictionalized autobiographies. The themes addressed through Maghrebi literature are diverse: rebellion, parental authority, identity, tradition, the emancipation of women, and the transgression of taboos. In the name of identity struggles and the aspiration to freedom, both male and female writers have raised their voices, not only to claim their rights but also to discuss traditions and daily life, denouncing all forms of domination. Driss Chraïbi exemplifies this in his *Passé simple* ("Simple Past"):

"Au lendemain des indépendances, les écrivains marocains, plus proches de Driss Chraïbi, seront plus à l'écoute de cette voix qui traduisait le traumatisme historique colonial et postcolonial; et chacun, à sa façon, essaiera d'y trouver remède tout en s'inscrivant dans cette esthétique de la 'violence du texte'".²

("In the wake of independence, Moroccan writers, Closer to Driss Chraïbi, were more attuned to this voice that translated the historical trauma of colonialism and post-colonialism. Each, in their own way, attempted to find remedies while adhering to this aesthetic of the 'violence of the text'.")

¹ A. Mdarhri Alaoui, *Aspects du roman marocain*, Rabat 2006, p. 92.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Maghrebi women writers are equally inhabited by this language, engaging with it in a raw and unfiltered way, rather than with a concern for rationality. They share the mission of giving voice to those who have none.

The present study focuses on the feminine pen in Morocco and its contribution to the framework of Maghrebi literature. It offers a critical perspective on this literary genre that both originates from and is addressed to women.

2. The So-Called “Women’s Literature”

When speaking of a “women’s literature”, numerous questions arise: How can writing itself be gendered? Does a man create from his masculinity? Does writing by women necessarily imply writing of the feminine? One must distinguish between the biological condition and the feminine or masculine dimension of the act of writing:

“Tout sujet parlant porte en lui une bisexualité qui est précisément la possibilité d’explorer toutes les ressources de la signification, aussi bien ce qui pose un sens que ce qui le multiplie, le pulvérise, le rénove”.³

(“Every speaking subject carries within them a bisexuality, which is precisely the ability to explore all the resources of meaning, both those that stabilize meaning and those that multiply, dismantle, or renew it”.)

³ J. Kristeva, *Luttes de femmes*, “Tel Quel” 1974, No. 58, p. 99.

How many Moroccan or Maghrebi male authors have approached the feminine subject without being able to probe its darker recesses? This inability or, more bluntly, this impotence stems from men's constant reliance, when writing about women, on the image and experiences they have known themselves. As a result, there is always a gap to fill, a part of lived experience left unwritten. This void begins to be filled only when women themselves begin to write, to speak about themselves.

Alongside Driss Chraïbi, authors like Abdelhak Serhane and Tahar Ben Jelloun have also "denounced women's condition or depicted the body, voice, inner thoughts, sensations, and suffering of women".⁴ Yet, the woman portrayed by a man is never the same as the woman portrayed by a woman, as the latter approaches her subject from a different perspective, both thematically and stylistically:

"Nous connaissons, plus intimement que les hommes, le monde féminin parce que nous y avons nos racines; nous saisissons plus immédiatement ce que signifie pour un être humain le fait d'être féminin; et nous nous soucions davantage de le savoir".⁵

("We know the feminine world more intimately than men do, because we are rooted within it; we immediately grasp what it means for a human being to be female, and we are more concerned with understanding it".)

Historically, since writing was long tied to the sacred, Moroccan men resisted acknowledging women's

⁴ Mdarhri Alaoui, *Aspects*, p. 85.

⁵ S. de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I*, Paris 1976, p. 32.

contributions to written forms of cultural expression. Women were recognized only belatedly for their role in the written tradition. Prior to that, Maghrebi women expressed themselves “underground”⁶ through oral literature tales, songs, and proverbs representing “Une mine de savoir sur les comportements sociaux et culturels des hommes et des femmes ainsi que leurs rapports”.⁷ (“A treasure trove of knowledge on the social and cultural behaviors of men and women and their relationships”).

Looking back, it was only in the 1980s that so-called “women’s literature” truly emerged in Morocco. It stands between two narrative categories autobiography and the novel:

“La littérature féminine au Maroc, et en particulier le roman, est très récente; son esthétique est pour l’instant modeste, mais son écriture soulève des problématiques essentielles dans la situation actuelle du Maroc”.⁸

(“Women’s literature in Morocco, particularly the novel, is still very recent. Its aesthetic remains modest for now, but its writing raises essential questions about Morocco’s current situation”).

Women’s condition, the weight of tradition, modernity, and filial relationships are diverse themes which, under the female pen, take on different dimensions formal, stylistic, and narrative. Though there are thematic similarities with works by male authors, female-authored

⁶ Mdarhri Alaoui, *Aspects*, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

texts approach a familiar world from a distinct, often unacknowledged perspective:

“Au- Delà de la libération par l’écriture, la femme a maintenant le devoir d’étendre sa réflexion au vécu sociétal de ses consœurs muettes, parce que muselées et entravées. Elle a en charge le présent brumeux et l’avenir incertain de ces femmes. Elles devaient donc dépasser les fractures personnelles pour se pencher sur les fractures sociales. Arrêter de se nombriliser pour se mettre à l’écoute et faire un travail de proximité libérateur et salvateur pour la condition féminine”.⁹

(“Beyond liberation through writing, women now have a duty to extend their reflection to the societal realities of their silenced sisters, those who are gagged and shackled. Women writers must shoulder the burden of the murky present and uncertain future of these women. They must move beyond personal wounds to address social fractures, abandon self-centered narratives, and engage in liberating, life-saving work for the female condition”.)

Halima Hamdane’s contribution is no less significant. She stands alongside those women writers who denounce humiliating male behaviors and demand their right to freedom.

a. Halima Hamdane

Leaving her teaching career to devote herself to storytelling and writing, Halima Hamdane, born in Morocco, pursued her literary studies there before teaching at the secondary and high school levels. Since 1986,

⁹ N. Radouan, *Écritures féminines au Maroc. Continuité et évolution*, Paris 2006, p. 35.

she has lived in France, where she is currently a professor of methodology at the University of Évry-Val-d'Essonne.

Her works include two novels¹⁰. Following *Laissez-moi parler* (Let me speak) (2006), her novel *Le Chaos de la liberté*, as its title suggests, tells the story of a character named Habiba, a woman torn between a culture marked by modesty, fear, and obedience, and another culture that opens the doors to freedom and to chaos.

Transitioning from orality to writing, Hamdane's voice continues to rise loud and clear, externalizing her pain, suffering, and longings as a modern woman in a world where women are still denied the right to express themselves with force.

A proponent of therapeutic writing, Halima Hamdane writes to suffer less. For her, the act of writing helps us endure our wounds, heal the scars of the past, and move forward toward the future. Her novel *Le Chaos de la liberté*, as we shall see, is a kind of redemption, a return to a painful past, while seeking consolation, justification, and forgiveness to bear its repercussions.

b. The Title as a Revealing Element

First and foremost, the title is intriguing and arouses curiosity. Yet, everything related to women is a source

¹⁰ She has also published several bilingual stories, in Arabic and French: *Mahboul le Sage* (2017), *Le roi qui aimait les devinettes* (2018), *La Bonne purée* (2018), *Moummou et l'ogresse* (2018).

of curiosity. Freud himself asserted that a woman's sexual life is a "dark continent" for psychology¹¹. Moreover, Chaos is the god of disorder in Greek mythology, a bottomless abyss symbolizing the danger that threatens cosmic order. What connection, then, could exist with the term "freedom"?

Le Chaos de la liberté ("Chaos of freedom") is a syntagm composed of the noun "chaos" and its complement "freedom". The link between these two nouns is one of cause and effect, since any form of freedom is liable to bring about chaos, understood here as disorder.

The word "chaos" was borrowed from the field of cosmology: "Chaos is a force of the unformed, unordered world... which surrounds ordered creation, as the ocean surrounds the earth".¹² It is an impersonal god representing danger, emptiness, and nothingness.

The antonym of chaos, etymologically speaking, is cosmos, which means "by extension, all that is perfect, full, harmonious, and fertile".¹³ Order restrains freedom, which is why Zeus, after imprisoning the Titans – his brothers and sisters – in Tartarus, first established order to prevent a return to chaos. Disorder, therefore, is an inevitable condition when freedom becomes excessive, leading to a chaotic state.

Furthermore, beyond the cause-and-effect relationship between "chaos" and "freedom", we might also

¹¹ S. Freud, *Psychanalyse et médecine (La question de l'analyse profane)*, Paris 1950, p. 133.

¹² J. Chevalier, A. Cheerbrant, *Dictionnaire Des symboles*, Paris 1997, p. 207.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

speak of a form of semantic redundancy, or pleonasm. Freedom calls forth chaos, and chaos inevitably calls forth freedom.

c. What is the Novel About?

Le Chaos de la liberté is the story of a chaotic life, of a woman who cannot find her place in a society that listens only to male voices. It is the story of a woman, written by a woman, for all women who lack a voice.

The entire narrative centers on Habiba, who is determined to escape suffering at any cost, leaving lives suspended in her wake. She refuses to belong to the cohort of hunted and humiliated women. She does not protest she leaves, she flees.

Seeking emancipation from the marital bond, Habiba abandons her only daughter, Basma, whose name meaning "smile" is highly symbolic, as she represents the sole source of joy in Habiba's life. Moving from café to café, from one man's arms to another, Habiba learns to appreciate her body, reconcile with herself, and love her new image. Her departure sows chaos both behind her and within her. Her distance brings her both balance and imbalance.

She evokes her past, her childhood as if to recall those serene moments when she owed nothing to anyone, when she took refuge in the world of books, when everything seemed perfect, when all was "cosmos". But, in truth, these were only illusions. The reality is quite different.

II. The Writing of Chaos

1. Duty or Desire?

In contemporary Moroccan society, there is little need to dwell on the status of women, their freedom, or their emancipation, since they have now gained many of the rights they once demanded. Habiba, who lives between two cultures, criticizes the passivity of those women who, despite all these changes, continue to be “prisoners of a sterile system”¹⁴ and feel compelled consciously and willingly to conform “to behavioral models from another era”.¹⁵

As a rebellious woman, she did not hesitate to demand a divorce when she was mistreated by her husband: “She wanted to leave (...) she had believed that marriage would bring her something different”.¹⁶ Yet she had to carry on because she did not want “to be the one who causes scandal”.¹⁷ Paralyzed by her sense of duty to remain “a blameless wife”,¹⁸ she left, abandoning a heavy burden that had long weighed on her shoulders.

The notion of duty is defined as:

- a moral obligation considered in itself, independent of its particular application.
- what one must do, a specific ethical obligation defined by the system.

¹⁴ H. Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, Paris 2012, p. 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

- a hardship one accepts due to social conventions or circumstances.
- a burden or responsibility.¹⁹

All these meanings, as given by the dictionary, form a regulated world that Habiba refuses to obey. She does nothing but transgress. She revolts against her feminine nature, showing boyish behavior and playful tendencies as a child. In high school, she chose dance classes as a way to break free from social constraints.

Everything in Habiba rejects propriety, conformity, commitment, and cosmos. She is a modern-day Antigone, defying the laws of servitude. For her, there is no question of living in humiliation under the pretext of maintaining family stability. The object of her desire lies far beyond her own circle.

Desire is defined as “a tendency toward a known or imagined object”,²⁰ which is not far from its Arabic synonymic sense. Moroccan sociologist and writer Fatima Mernissi warns:

“Décoder le *hawa* (désir), le plus dangereux des 50 noms de l’amour vous évite le piège du narcissisme. (...) Le *hawa* est l’inclination de l’ego vers la chose désirée (...) on l’a ainsi nommé. Car il fait basculer dans le vide celui qui le ressent”.²¹

(“Decoding *hawa* (desire), the most dangerous of the 50 names of love, saves you from the trap of narcissism. (...) *Hawa* is the inclination of the ego toward the desired object (...) it is named thus because it plunges into the void the one who feels it”.)

¹⁹ *Le Petit Robert de la langue française*, Paris 2025.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ F. Mernissi, *Les 50 noms de l’amour*, Rabat 2011, p. 8.

It is worth noting that the Arabic synonym of hawa is “to fall”, a strikingly revealing coincidence.

Habiba ultimately falls into this void: “She feels neither mother, nor wife, nor woman. She is nothingness”. The word nothingness here amplifies Habiba’s downfall. She has lost everything, even her social status. Void is also the first synonym given by *Le Petit Robert* for the word chaos, which forms the title of the corpus *Le Chaos de la liberté*. According to the “Dictionary of Symbols and Myths”, chaos is “the personification of the primordial void”.²²

When speaking of the void as an inevitable consequence of desire, “the desiring subject grasps nothing but emptiness when seizing the object”.²³ Habiba, after reaching the object of her quest, “once again faced her inability to exist in life”.²⁴ To be reborn, Habiba needs to “recreate obstacles in order to desire once again, to elevate this desire to the proportions of a conscious, intense, infinitely captivating passion”.²⁵

As a fighter woman, she decides to “change her life, start exercising. (...) She feels light, calm, serene”,²⁶ because “desire misses its object at the very moment it seems to grasp it, for once visible, it triggers rival desires that stand in its way”.²⁷

²² J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire Des symboles*, Paris, p. 1982, p. 206.

²³ R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris 2011, p. 191.

²⁴ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 153.

²⁵ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 192.

²⁶ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 158.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.193

Another synonym highlighted by Ibn Qayyim in his "50 Names of Love" is *tabala*²⁸, which "denotes the act of annihilation (...) it is the same with love, one of whose effects is to destroy and to render the subject neurasthenic".²⁹

Neurasthenia is a psychological condition characterized by "great fatigability, mental disorders (anxiety, insomnia), cardiovascular, digestive, or sexual issues".³⁰ The protagonist exhibits all these symptoms once she realizes that her daughter's forgiveness remains out of reach:

- "I feel so guilty that I lose sleep".³¹
- "I often cry at night when I remember one of her words".³²
- "She was far from being at peace with herself (...) tormented by anxiety for no reason".³³
- "A heavy shroud of fatigue, even despair, descended upon Habiba's shoulders".³⁴

Ibn Qayyim also underscores the link between desire and failure:

"La poursuite effrénée du désir ferme devant l'être humain la porte du succès. Celui qui est piégé par son désir et la poursuite déchainée des plaisirs (*shahawat*), réalise soudain que les chemins du succès lui sont barrés".³⁵

²⁸ Mernissi, *Les 50 noms de l'amour*, p. 82.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *Le Petit Robert*.

³¹ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 149.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 193.

³⁵ Mernissi, *Les 50 noms de l'amour*, p. 84.

("The reckless pursuit of desire closes the door to success before the human being. Whoever is trapped by desire and the frenzied pursuit of pleasures (*shahawat*) suddenly finds that the paths to success are blocked".)

This is equivalent to Girardian reasoning, which states that "it is the Others who hinder the individual's activity (...), and from desire to desire, (...) he always walks toward his own destruction".³⁶ A destruction that breeds nothing but fear.

Her teenage dreams collapsed, and fear began to take hold. After her marriage, this feeling grew, fueled by her inability to satisfy her husband: "a door now wide open to anxiety and fear. The fear that he would speak of it, and that she would be cast aside".³⁷ The word fear is repeated throughout the text, in the voice that constantly blames Habiba:

- "la peur est en toi, elle ne te quitte pas et jubile quand elle prend le dessus".
- "à l'horreur de ne plus s'appartenir, s'ajoute la peur d'être dépossédée d'elle-même".
- "tu peux dire que c'est le virus de la peur qui te fait perdre la tête".
- ("Fear is within you; it never leaves you and rejoices when it takes over".)
- ("To the horror of no longer belonging to oneself is added the fear of being dispossessed of oneself".)
- ("You could say it's the virus of fear that's driving you mad".)³⁸

³⁶ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 193.

³⁷ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Fear can be defined as an anxious state accompanying the awareness of an objective danger or threat, as perceived by each individual. Throughout her emotional journey, Habiba is steeped in fear, threatened by the dangers her decisions have created, and trapped in this pursuit of the impossible where she ultimately declares defeat: "She locked herself away to escape the whirlwind of her social life".³⁹

Remaining within the realm of desire, the narrator denounces this prudish society, where all the women around her, on the eve of her wedding, turned into "true sex-obsessed beings".⁴⁰ These women, who in daily life are nothing but "mute bodies",⁴¹ mere machines built by men and for men's benefit.

Allusions to the wedding night, laughter, innuendos, and strange connotations "left Habiba perplexed",⁴² as she often saw these women as "neglected housewives" and "struggled to imagine them in the role of passionate lovers";⁴³ the only form of intimate contact she remembered was the hand-kiss.

A discourse filled with taboos prevailed even within the intimacy of the newlyweds: "Conjugal duty was performed with the lights turned off",⁴⁴ few words spoken, no nudity; yet, as it is known:

³⁹ Hamdane, *Epilogue* [in:] *Le Chaos de la liberté*.

⁴⁰ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91

“Dans le plaisir de regarder-et-de-s’exhiber, l’œil correspond à une zone érogène” et “l’impression optique reste la voie par laquelle l’excitation libidinale est le plus fréquemment éveillée et la sélection naturelle compte sur la praticabilité de cette voie”.⁴⁵

(“In the pleasure of looking and being looked at, the eye corresponds to an erogenous zone”, and “the optical impression remains the most frequent pathway to awaken libidinal arousal, with natural selection relying on the viability of this pathway”.)

As an active woman whose desire has only recently been acknowledged, for “the generation of women before hers was raised differently”.⁴⁶ She should already feel fortunate to be able to express her desire, whether positive or absent. Her mother endured, and her peers continue to endure, for “in traditional society, the only audible voice was that of men”,⁴⁷ victims of conquering husbands who scarcely care whether their overwhelming desire corresponds to the will of the conquered land.

Unions in the dark, where physical love is devoid of affection and the carnal act is purely mechanical, are thus the direct consequence of the non-intersection of two confronting desires.

Habiba’s body does not truly belong to her, so she cannot engage in the act freely, cannot choose to give and to receive when she wishes. A woman, too, claims the right to equality and parity of desire, for sexual culture is by no means an exclusively masculine domain.

⁴⁵ S. Freud, *Trois essais sur la théorie sexuelle*, Paris 2011, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 97.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

It is also worth noting *that* “female sexuality is much more diffuse and latent than that of men”⁴⁸ and “is always strongly connected to emotionality”.⁴⁹ It is mysterious, more complex, and less constant over time, as it is marked by stations (menstruation, motherhood, and menopause). By contrast, male sexuality is often more mechanical.

For intersection to occur, “the sexual act must be a perfect cooperation in which both partners actively participate”,⁵⁰ and any violation of this rule may have detrimental consequences for the quality of the encounter. Frigidity being one of them. This frigidity echoes in Habiba’s mind when she recalls Bachir: “Words are like spit once expelled, there is no taking them back”.⁵¹

If, for him, there is heart and body, for her, the body has reasons the heart does not know. Habiba uses her body to express her malaise because the body functions as a language that speaks to us, which means that, rather than us controlling it, it is the body that manipulates us. Certainly, humans have the ability to exercise control, but this is nothing more than repression, blocked desires, not buried ones. It is the demands of our bodies that determine our actions.

What she retains from her first night of love is nothing but sharp pain, tied to deep disappointment: “She no

⁴⁸ P. Daco, *Les prodigieuses victoires de la psychologie moderne*, Paris 1982, p. 391

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁵¹ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 86.

longer saw herself as anything but a woman, without desire or pleasure".⁵² The following nights were no different: on the evenings when her husband came home late, "she would go to bed and caress herself gently. A wave of well-being enveloped her from head to toe".⁵³

Marie-Annick Gervais-Zaninger aptly notes that:

"Le corps souffrant fonctionne comme un langage dont l'interprète n'est pas seulement le médecin appelé à déchiffrer des symptômes, mais aussi le lecteur invité à considérer le corps malade comme une construction de sens".⁵⁴

("The suffering body functions like a language whose interpreter is not only the doctor called upon to decipher its symptoms, but also the reader invited to consider the sick body as a construction of meaning".)

Habiba's body is not pathologically ill, but it suffers from an existential malaise so profound that she comes to hate it:

- "Engoncée dans son corps de femme, Habiba le toise avec haine. Pourquoi est-il pointé de la sorte? Souillure, impureté, menstrues, sang, hymen, honneur, horreur, honte".
- "Corps de femme, convoité, dédaigné, fantasmé, nié, voilé, vendu, rêvé, brutalisé".
- ("Encased in her woman's body, Habiba stares at it with hatred. Why is it so stigmatized? Stain, impurity, menstruation, blood, hymen, honor, horror, shame".)

⁵² Ibid., p. 91.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵⁴ After: M. Belarbi, *Métamorphoses du corps féminin dans la littérature marocaine et japonaise*, <http://www.sens-public.org/spip.php?article812>, Access date: 02.08.2025].

- (“Woman’s body, desired, despised, fantasized, denied, veiled, sold, dreamed of, brutalized”).⁵⁵

Hating one’s body reveals a hatred of the Other, because it is the Other who is perceived as the cause of this self-loathing. Habiba is not an ugly woman comparing herself to others who are more beautiful. She is fully aware of her beauty, yet she cannot understand why her body has not been enough to keep her husband’s desire alive. Here, guilt masks her hatred of the Other.

2. The Text Between Analepsis, Prolepsis, and Ellipsis

The text begins at the end, with a quarrel between Basma and her mother, accusing her of all the harm she has caused, and especially of the kind of mother she has become:

“Les personnes de ton âge passent leur temps à se prosterner devant Dieu, et toi ce sont les bistrots qui t’attirent, tu finiras en enfer”.⁵⁶

(“People your age spend their time bowing before God, and you it’s the bars that draw you in. You’ll end up in hell”.)

This leaves Habiba alone with the inner voice that constantly reminds her of her mistakes. She would have liked to “lock her memory away from her past mistakes, from her recklessness”.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 121.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The text is entirely driven by memories. Habiba thus resurrects her life as a child, an adolescent, a mother, and finally as a lover who changes men constantly. Returning to her childhood, going back to her past, proves to be an essential step in explaining her present:

“Le nostalgique ne désire pas l’endroit de sa jeunesse, mais sa jeunesse même, que son désir est en quête du temps et non pas de la chose à retrouver”.⁵⁸

(“The nostalgic does not desire the place of their youth, but their youth itself; what their desire seeks is time, not the thing to be recovered”.)

During a moment of meditation, a retrospective scene is triggered: “She closes her eyes. Her mind wanders through the twists of her memories”⁵⁹ an announcement of an analepsis, as Habiba vividly recalls “her father seating her”⁶⁰ to cut her hair.

Such a narrative reversal confuses the reader, who would normally expect a chronological sequence of events. This flashback constitutes an obstacle to the narrative; rather than ensuring continuity, it generates discontinuity.

According to Gérard Genette, analepsis is defined as:

“Any evocation, after the fact, of an event prior to the point of the story where one currently is”.⁶¹ This device shifts the character’s state of mind to its opposite: at the beginning of the story, Habiba was crying all

⁵⁸ J. Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, Paris 1987, p. 17.

⁵⁹ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶¹ G. Genette, *Figure III*, Paris 1972, p. 83.

her tears“ the pain within her takes up all the space”;⁶² whereas the simple evocation of a childhood memory was enough to make her feel “happy with this complicity”⁶³ that bounds her to her father.

This analeptic reference is certainly illuminating, as it brings additional information to the main narrative, and any omission would undoubtedly affect the central plot. It also serves to stimulate the narrator’s memory and encourages the reader to sympathize with Habiba, seeking excuses for her in her past.

The events follow one another in a logical temporal and spatial sequence, punctuated by certain ellipses that sometimes condense the story, recounting only the episodes that prove essential to the narrative.

An ellipsis occurs when “a zero segment of narrative corresponds to any given duration of story”.⁶⁴ These fragmented narratives are interwoven, “like Russian dolls”: the narrator shifts from the space of the hammam, where she describes “the raw nudity”,⁶⁵ to “evenings at home”⁶⁶ with her parents. She then lingers over the admiration she felt for her father, only to suddenly jump to an adolescent Habiba, who leaves to continue her studies at a boarding school. Habiba ends up in the arms of a husband insensitive to a woman whose reading has made her highly sensitive. One can com-

⁶² Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁴ Genette. *Figure III*, p. 72.

⁶⁵ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

pare these fragmented sequences to cinematic scenes, which are small pieces linked together.

The birth of Basma raises the tension of the narrative and delays the protagonist's decision to leave the marital home. The rest of the story is nothing but a succession of trials testing the love of this woman/mother:

- "Tu as failli à ton devoir de mère".
- "Tu erreras d'une histoire à l'autre éternellement" ne cessa de lui répéter cette voix, qui est "la seule compagnie qu'elle ne veut pas".
- ("You have failed in your duty as a mother").⁶⁷
- ("You will wander from one story to another, eternally").⁶⁸ this voice kept repeating, ("the only company she does not want").⁶⁹

In the final pages of the novel, the narrator makes promises, in a proleptic discourse, about all the projects she still wants to undertake to take good care of her daughter:

"Habiba va changer de vie, s'occuper de sa fille (...) elle changera les rideaux, peindra son bureau en parme et le convertira en chambre pour sa fille. (...) Habiba rêve en couleurs à son proche bonheur".⁷⁰

("Habiba will change her life, take care of her daughter (...) she will change the curtains, paint her office lavender, and convert it into a room for her daughter. (...) Habiba dreams in color of her near happiness".)

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.158.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.156.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.158-159.

In the epilogue of the novel, we witness the birth rather, the resurrection of another Habiba:

“Elle allait mourir mais n’opposa aucune résistance. Elle ferma les yeux (...) ouvrit les yeux (...) la culpabilité avait disparu (...) elle posa sur Basma et sur le monde un regard neuf”⁷¹

(“She was about to die but offered no resistance. She closed her eyes (...) opened them again (...) guilt had disappeared (...) she cast a new gaze upon Basma and upon the world”.)

Habiba’s reconciliation with herself marks the re-birth of her new personality. She has freed herself from the remorse that has devoured her since leaving her daughter. However, Basma’s reaction remains incomprehensible. Will she forgive her mother, or will her deep wound continue to bleed forever?

3. The Text as a Call to Freedom

Freedom is defined as “the condition of a person who is not under the absolute dependence of someone else”.⁷² The protagonist of the novel aspires to freedom, to emancipation which are two synonyms of modernity, a notion described by Weber as an “ideal type”.⁷³ It is also synonymous with a return to the self, aimed at realizing another self, an imagined self.

In a country where everything is allowed, where there are no constraints, she longs to be a free woman,

⁷¹ Hamdane, *Epilogue*.

⁷² *Le Petit Robert*.

⁷³ M. Weber, *Économie et société, tome 1: Les catégories de la sociologie*, (nouvelle édition), Paris 2003, p. 315.

in both body and mind: "She had left quickly, to put distance between herself and them".⁷⁴ They are, in fact, her family, her culture, her religion, her life as a young girl, a woman, and a mother. "All of (Habiba's) intense desires are desires defined by the Other".⁷⁵

A woman's identity is constructed through the gaze. Starting with seeing herself in the mirror and questioning her own identity, and then through the societal gaze, the gaze of the Other, from which she builds her own image. Her steps depend on this gaze, whether adoring or disapproving. The protagonist wavers between conservative ideas and emancipatory ones. She wants both to maintain her social status as a wife and to preserve a flexible margin of freedom.

The notion of freedom appears paradoxical when compared to the law of gravity that governs the physical world, where every object is tied to the earth's core, and where the absence of this law would certainly lead to disorder, to chaos. Habiba created such chaos by breaking away from the anchors that maintained "the cosmos"⁷⁶ in its core values of faith and morality.

Habiba's ambition "is a triangular sentiment that feeds on hatred for those in positions of power".⁷⁷ Her encounter with a certain Mike, after settling in France, marked only the beginning of a long list of lovers. This man handed her "a handkerchief and a glass of wa-

⁷⁴ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 120.

⁷⁵ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 34.

⁷⁶ From the Greek *kosmos*: "good order; order of the universe".

⁷⁷ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 34–35.

ter"⁷⁸ while she was crying a theatrical gesture of galantry, but above all, one that opened the door to desire, for it was with him that she would come to know desire in a different form. With her husband, by contrast, "she wanted to die".⁷⁹ She exchanged "her female body desired, scorned, fantasized (...) brutalized, oppressed"⁸⁰ for a new body that "was completely unleashed",⁸¹ a body she "discovered under his skillful hands".⁸² For a long time, she had mistakenly believed that "to give herself fully, she needed to be in love".⁸³

The protagonist moved from one embrace to another to forget the unhappy nights where "foreplay was almost nonexistent",⁸⁴ and the nights when Bachir would "fall asleep as soon as his desire was satisfied".⁸⁵ Her immorality stems from her lack of cultural belonging neither Moroccan nor French. She dreams of being a modern woman, as free as a Parisian, since "desire projects a dreamlike universe around the hero".⁸⁶

In a society founded on communal spirit and collective identity, where the individual counts for nothing, Habiba struggles to live in solitude because she has failed to embrace her individuality. When every rela-

⁷⁸ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 138.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 32.

tionship turns out to be a mirage, the problem lies elsewhere. Habiba seems to live a belated adolescence, continually entering into non-relationships, because for her, pleasure “if it appears, while declaring itself an impossible reward, destabilizes the personality, which becomes exhausted solely in the pursuit of satisfaction”.⁸⁷

Due to this existential shift, Habiba remains an “eternal unfulfillment”,⁸⁸ her new life generating a persistent sense of unfulfillment:

“À travers le changement fréquent de partenaires, il y a une quête d’amour et d’absolu jamais satisfaite. La force du désir en ces instants peut aussi bien réactualiser la recherche d’un amour parental ou la difficulté d’orienter son affectivité”.⁸⁹

(“Through the frequent change of partners, there is an unquenched quest for love and absoluteness. The force of desire, in such moments, may also reactivate the search for parental love or reveal the difficulty of channeling one’s affectivity”.)

It is this inner emptiness that explains her perpetual need for a male presence in her life, an eagerness for passionate fusion. It is the idea of being in love with physical love itself, with an image of the other, but not with the other as a real person. The reality of love, and therefore of the partner, is rooted in otherness. The other is an individuality with a history, a past, a culture, a family, a particular approach to religion, to raising children, and to money. Ignoring all this context amounts

⁸⁷ T. Anatrella, *Le Sexe oublié*, Paris 1990, p. 26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸⁹ Anatrella, *Le Sexe oublié*, p. 26.

to creating a purely idealized “object” man, an idealized projection that fosters, beyond its illusory optics, a dangerous emotional dependence.

Habiba remains perpetually unhappy, as the possession of the desired object renders it banal.

“The only person who matters now is Basma”,⁹⁰ she eventually declares at the end of the novel. To make a single person the sole value of one’s life is a sign that one is undergoing an existential crisis. Habiba’s tragedy lies in her inability to find meaning in life or any reason to live other than the presence of her little daughter, Basma.

Alongside the themes that reflect the character’s psychological journey, there is also the linguistic blend of literary and oral writing. The alternation between registers of language dialect and refined French gives rhythm to the text and conveys a sense of freedom.

The narrator peppers the text with many lively words and expressions that could certainly hinder the understanding of some Francophone readers, had they not been followed by translations: “oulidi habib, my beloved son”,⁹¹ “allah ya slah al walad, may God guide your son’s path with His benevolence”,⁹² “serwal”,⁹³ “ragued, asleep in his mother’s lap”,⁹⁴ “astaghfir li llah, ask God for forgiveness”.⁹⁵ This sense of freedom is

⁹⁰ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 192.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹³ Trousers worn by the young bride on her wedding night, usually white in color, to prove her virginity.

⁹⁴ Hamdane, *Le Chaos de la liberté*, p. 31.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

especially palpable in the arrangement of the various paragraphs. Sometimes, as one reads, one stumbles upon fragmented, scattered, asymmetrical chapters containing three paragraphs, or even just one line. Some sections are titled, others are narrated directly. This apparent anarchy not only gives the impression of freedom but also reflects the scattered nature of the protagonist's emotions.

Conclusion

It becomes clear that Halima Hamdane's writing does not merely depict the condition of Maghrebi women; it replays their most intimate tensions at the very core of its form. The chaos that pervades the text syntactic, narrative, and identity-related is not only thematic: it is the language of a desire at work, a desire irreducible to any norm or closure. This desire, both a quest for freedom, for expression, and for recognition, structures the novel's aesthetic and allows us to interrogate the transformative function of writing.

Thus, style becomes a critical space where the subversion of the feminine manifests itself through a fragmented, hybrid language, infused with orality and driven by the impulse to voice the unspeakable. *Le Chaos de la liberté* offers a striking example of how Maghrebi women's literature inscribes the desire for emancipation not only in its themes but also in the very forms of its text. In this sense, *Le Chaos de la liberté* emerges not as a disorder to be contained, but as a field of pos-

sibilities, where the female subject unfolds in and through language between pain, resistance, and creation.

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Samir Mundy

Arabic Autobiography and Family

Abstract: This study explores the influential role of the family, particularly the father and husband, in the lives of Arab writers, as depicted in their autobiographies. For this purpose, three seminal texts from contemporary Arabic literature have been selected: Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Search: Personal Papers*, Taha Hussein's *The Days*, and Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*. Al-Zayyat, a prominent Egyptian writer known for her political and social activism as well as her role as a university professor, presents a complex exploration of the father-daughter relationship and its lasting impact on her life. Considered a cornerstone of Arab and global autobiographical literature, Hussein's *Al-Ayyām (The Days)* recounts his early life as a blind child, the bullying he endured from his parents and siblings due to his blindness, and the profound effects this had on his personality and intellectual path. Hussein was a pioneer of the Arab *Nahda* (renaissance). Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri's autobiography *Al-Ḥubz al-ḥāfī (For Bread Alone)* is also a renowned work in both Arab and world literature. Choukri's narrative depicts a unique and intense relationship between a father who despises his son and a son who reciprocates that hatred, even to the point of imagining his father's death. Through these three diverse narratives, the study illuminates how familial dynamics, especially paternal

influence and authority, shape the identity and experiences of Arab authors.

Keywords: Arab Autobiography, Family Disdain, Latifa al-Zayyat, Taha Hussein, Mohamed Choukri

Introduction

Biographers find themselves compelled to say something about their upbringing and childhood. Childhood, as we know, explains much about an individual's life, whether it was normal and ordinary or turbulent. It is childhood that later shapes an individual's destiny. Consequently, the discussion turns to the family: the father, mother, brothers, sisters, husband, and the circumstances of one's upbringing.

There is no need to point out the significance of upbringing and formative years in autobiography. Just as they reflect a unique situation for the biographer, they also reflect a social context regarding customs, traditions, and forms of education and upbringing. In Arab autobiographies, the family is considered one of the most important topics, serving as an entry point for understanding Arab societies and the very composition of the biographer.

Arab society, as I see it, is made up of large families. The degree of respect for family and kinship values and ties varies from one society to another. The Arabian Gulf societies, for instance, are family-centric societies of the highest order. Society is divided into major families, the largest of all being the ruling families. There is

no doubt that respect for family values is greater in these societies than in others. Foremost among these values is the father, who represents the pinnacle of authority in the nuclear family. He is followed by the head of the extended family, often a patron who holds significant symbolic power within the family. He is a respected master with influential opinions and authority that cannot be defied. Thus, society is divided and defined by clear, straight boundaries and ties. This has an impact on society's view of women as an inferior gender that should not overstep the boundaries drawn for them¹.

In most Arab countries, the father is the “guardian” (*walī al-amr* – ولي الأمر). This means he is the primary and ultimate decision-maker in his children's affairs, especially those of his daughters. A father remains in control and manages his daughter's affairs until he hands her over to another man – her husband and her next guardian.

In her autobiography, *Shaking Off the Dust* (*Unfuḍ ‘annī al-ḡubār* – 2017، أنفض عنّي الغبار), writer Laila al-Othman recounts how her father ordered her to stop her education and stay home to await marriage. Also the Saudi writer and journalist Aḥmad as-Sibāī who wrote the first Saudi autobiography published in Saudi Arabia titled *My Days* (*Ayyāmī* – أيامي) in 1954, complained about his father's cruelty. His father asked his son's teachers to break his bones if he did not show progress in learning. Meanwhile, Saudi writer and poet

¹ For more details, see S. Mundi, *Al-Sira ad-dātiyya fī ʿl-Ḥaliḡ wa ʿl-hiḡra ilā isti ʿrāt badīla*, Amman, 2022.

Hudá ad-Daġfaġ, in her autobiography *Tearing the Veil, I See* (*Ašūq al-burqu‘, arā* – 2011, أشق البرقع، أرى) speaks of what she calls a “shameful event” (*ħadaṭ muħzī* – حدث مخزي), when her husband locked her inside their home with their child and left on a trip, leaving her alone.

While the Palestinian poet Fadwá Ṭūqān, in her autobiography *A Mountainous Journey... A Difficult Journey* (*Riħla ġabaliyya... Riħla ša‘ba* – رحلة جبلية... رحلة صعبة, 1985) speaks of her love and gratitude for her elder brother Ibrāhīm, whom she considered both a guardian and a father figure. At the same time, her strained relationship with her own father is almost the central theme of her autobiography. In fact, her father could be seen as the master key that explains the entire trajectory of Fadwá Ṭūqān’s life, from beginning to end. Her discussion of how her father did not desire her arrival into the world, viewing her as an unwanted female, had the most profound impact on her life’s journey.

In the first chapter of his autobiography *Papers of a Lifetime* (*Awraq al-‘Umr* – 1982, أوراق العمر) Egyptian writer Luwīs ‘Awād dedicates significant attention to discussing his family. He meticulously provides miniature biographies of his father, mother, and six siblings under the heading “8 Profiles”. He lists their names, birth dates, professions, families, and dates of death, if applicable. In addition, he paints a portrait of each personality’s inclinations and traits, as well as his relationship with them.

In this study, I have selected three autobiographies to examine portrayals of the family in Arab autobiography. The first is by the Egyptian writer Latifa al-Zayyat (Laṭīfa az-Zayyāt, 1923–1996), titled *The Search: Personal Papers* (1992). The second is *The Days* by the Egyptian writer and pioneer of the Arab Renaissance, Taha Hussein (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, 1889–1973). The third is *For Bread Alone* by the Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri (Muḥammad Šukrī, 1935–2003).

What prompted me to choose these particular texts was not so much their similarities as their differences – differences that make each of them a unique narrative of life and of complex family relationships.

1. Tomboy

In the Egyptian writer Latifa al-Zayyat's autobiography *The Search: Personal Papers* (1992), a unique relationship unfolds between a father and his daughter. The father fears and rejects his daughter's femininity, attempting in various ways to conceal or erase it. He tries to change his daughter's identity as a female and replace it with masculinity. Through a masculine imagination, the father encourages his daughter to believe that she is not a female, but rather a strong male. She narrates her father's rejection of her existence, stating:

“My sensitivity about wanted, as if I was not, was almost pathological. Perhaps it sank in deeper in my childhood and because of my relationship with my father, which as I see it, was always a tug-of-war between acceptance

and rejection. My excessive vitality was, I believe, a source of anxiety for my father as I went through this critical phase of my growing up. The fact remains that the insistent desire to be wanted, together with the enervating fear that I was not, was one of the things that controlled me for some time and held me prisoner to the need which the people I love have for me".²

Al-Zayyat, in her memoir, describes her childhood, including how her father refused to acknowledge her femininity. When she was six years old, he continued to refer to her as the girl who looked like a boy – a “tomboy.” The term that corresponds to *tomboy* in classical Arab heritage is *ḡulāmiyya* (غُلَامِيَّة), which refers to a girl who dresses and behaves like males or imitates men. She recounted:

‘I was in the third year of nursery school, or kindergarten as it called now, when my father was transferred from Damietta to Mansoura. I was astonished when, almost, fifteen years later, I met the headmaster of nursery school in Damietta and she reflected back to me the image that she had of me at that point. It was completely inconsistent with my own image of myself as a child with *the tomboy* as my father used to call me... My former headmaster said that I was known as the *tearful girl*’.³

A feeling settles within al-Zayyat is equal in strength and courage to that of a man, while the delicate, tender emotion associated with femininity becomes something strange and unacceptable. Al-Zayyat recalls the

² L. Zayyat, *The Search: Personal Papers*, trans. S. Bennett, London 1996, p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

headmistress of her kindergarten, whom she encountered again later as a mature young woman. The headmistress tried to remind her of her tenderness and how easily she used to cry, but Al-Zayyat could not accept the idea that she had once been so sensitive. She attempted to find another explanation—one that would not involve her being a tender-hearted female—to justify that sensitivity, which she considered a flaw.

Her father's encouragement of the masculine side of her personality led to an internal split between two identities: a strong, stubborn self that resisted and stood up to injustice, and a delicate, feminine side longing for love and intimacy. As soon as a man entered Al-Zayyat's life and praised her femininity, she abandoned everything and dissolved into his personality. Her life and autobiography became a desperate attempt to break free from her husband's authority and to revive the spirit of resistance and defiance within herself – a constant struggle between independence and submission, between life and death⁴.

The *girl of futuwwa* (*al-bint al-futuwwa* – البنت الفتوة) – that was the description her father gave her. *Futuwwa* (a term meaning chivalry or toughness) is traditionally used in Arab culture only to describe a man. When applied to a woman, it implies nothing but a condemnation of her femininity and an accusation of roughness and harshness.

⁴ I. Kacandes, *Trauma Theory* [in:] *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, D. Herman, M. Jahn, and M.L. Ryan (eds.), London–New York 2005, p. 616.

As a result of this label – *the girl of futuwwa* – a kind of imagination or self-image formed within Al-Zayyat that was closer to that of a male. This imagination, in any case, eventually evolved into a powerful force of resistance against all forms of oppression and tyranny, whether political or social. On the other hand, it was also an imagination that resisted and suppressed her true femininity, working hard to conceal the tenderness and delicacy that were part of it. As a result, Al-Zayyat's *self* became, as I previously mentioned, split into two conflicting and competing parts: the self of the sensitive, love-thirsty woman, and another self – one closer to a masculine identity – that worked to repress and displace the desires of that feminine side⁵.

At the first true test of Al-Zayyat's personality, she no longer knew who she truly was. This test was none other than her first real experience of love. As a result of this experience, the suppressed feminine side within Al-Zayyat's *self* awakened. It rose from a deep slumber, during which it had suffered loneliness and neglect at the hands of the dominant, masculine self that had taken control of her. Once awakened, it desired nothing but the love it had long been denied. She said:

"How could I come to explain to people that my husband given what was new and what was not new, what he did and did not do, was no longer – and had not been

⁵ S. Mundy, *Autobiography and Trauma: Narrating and Writing the Broken 'I' in Latifa Al-Zayyat's The Search: Personal Papers* [in:] *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the History of Arabic Literature*, O. Khomitska and B. Horvat (eds.), Kyiv 2018.

for a long time-involved in the battle. How did I explain that the battle was, above all, my battle to be restored to life after a long barren spell, so that I could exist again, act, take the bull by the horns, be involved in life as I used to be, that the battle was to get out of the orbit I was in and which I knew in my bones was wrong to put an end to the rift between what I say and what I do, between what I believe in and the reality I live?"⁶

Spatially, Al-Zayyat remained attached to the old family home – the house within whose walls her femininity had been suppressed. In her memory, it appeared no longer as anything but a stage for a trauma that had forever changed her personality and split her against herself. She recounted:

"The image of our old house is still etched on my memory and the smell of its decadence fills my being, although the house is long gone. There is nothing peculiar about that, for I was born there on 8 August 1923 and it was there that I spent the first six years of my life. I went back every summer, from whichever city my father had moved to because of the position he held in municipal councils from Damietta to Mansoura to Asyut, until he died when I was twelve years old. After my father died, when we were living in Cairo, I spent every summer holiday in the old house until I graduated from the faculty of letters in 1946. I went back time and time again after I graduated, and the house was certainly still there at the end of the forties, in 1949, for I came out of the City Prison in Alexandria and went there, with a suspended sentence".⁷

⁶ Zayyat, *The Search*, p. 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The reader will notice how Al-Zayyat maps the course of her life onto the space of the old family home. That old house seems to be a fixed center around which her life revolves. More critically, Al-Zayyat reveals that the old house, as a physical space, became in her imagination inseparably tied to oppression and tyranny – to a past she neither shaped nor chose. When she speaks of being subjected to coercion or injustice, she refers to it as a kind of submission to the old house. Conversely, when she experiences freedom or a sense of independence, she speaks of the Sidi Bishr house – the home that witnessed her marriage to her comrade in struggle, with whom she resisted British colonialism at that time. From this perspective, the Sidi Bishr house became a symbol of independence and freedom, while the old family home came to represent oppression, repression, and servitude. She said:

“The fact remains that I have no home and that I have only ever had two homes in my life, the old house and the house which the police sealed up with wax in the Sidi Bishr desert in March 1949. The old house was my fate and my heritage. The house at Sidi Bishr was my creation and my choice. Perhaps because the two have made up an indivisible part of my being, perhaps I belonged to them both to the same degree and never managed to prefer one or other, the course of my life was distorted in the end.”⁸

The extent of Al-Zayyat’s attachment to either the old family home or the Sidi Bishr house defines her very

⁸ Ibid., pp. 19–20

identity. When she gravitates toward the old house, she becomes the submissive, repressed Al-Zayyat. When she turns toward the Sidi Bishr house, she becomes the free, independent Al-Zayyat. However, when she belongs equally to both houses, she becomes neither – caught in between, belonging to neither one nor the other.

This spatial conflict between two houses gives rise to a psychological conflict between two selves: a repressed, submissive self and a free, independent one – as previously mentioned. This internal struggle becomes most evident during Al-Zayyat's second marriage. In that relationship, the husband manages to reach the repressed woman buried deep within her. He succeeds in awakening the woman who longs for love, intimacy, and tenderness. As a result, Al-Zayyat – even if only temporarily – forgets the identity of the strong, resistant *girl of futuwwa* and becomes stripped of her will. At that point, she feels completely powerless.

And so, Al-Zayyat continues to spin in a cycle of repetition, where her sense of femininity is, in her imagination, inseparable from feelings of weakness and humiliation, while her sense of strength necessarily requires the suppression of the woman within. She finds herself trapped in a vicious circle, inscribed in her imagination since childhood – shaped by a father who called his daughter the *girl of futuwwa*, denying her femininity and praising her masculinity.

As soon as Al-Zayyat enters her second marriage and her husband succeeds in awakening her suppressed femininity – as soon as he satisfies the desires of the

repressed woman within her – he begins to strip her of her will and takes hold of her identity. She becomes captive to his love and subordinate to his personality, while the strong, resistant *girl of futuwwa* fades into the background. In other words, unleashing Al-Zayyat's femininity means, precisely, the suppression of her will and the loss of her freedom – the defeat of the *girl of futuwwa*. Conversely, unleashing the *girl of futuwwa* means the suppression and subjugation of Al-Zayyat's femininity. Thus, she remains trapped in a vicious cycle – one etched into her imagination by a father who, from childhood, denied his daughter's femininity – a father who called her the *girl of futuwwa*.

In contrast, the eldest brother often appears as a substitute for the father – or, perhaps more accurately, as the father in the truest sense of the word. It is no surprise that Al-Zayyat opens her autobiography with a discussion of a momentous event on the verge of occurring: the dying moments of her brother, Abdel Fattah. Indeed, her entire autobiography came into being as a result of this event. Al-Zayyat wrote it in the room adjacent to her brother's room in a hospital, while he was suffering the pains of dying. She wrote:

"My brother Abdel Fattah is dying in the next room. He does not know that he is dying and no one in the house knows but me. The doctor has given him between three to six months to live. Between taking care of my brother, making up smiles and jokes, and falsifying prescriptions so that he does not learn the true nature of his illness and the fact that he is dying, I sit down to write, I push away death as I sat writing what seems to be an

autobiography not destined to be completed. My brother dies in May 1973 and my autobiography ends with his death. What follows is what I wrote during this period”⁹.

Al-Zayyat begins her autobiography with her brother’s dying moments and concludes with his death, without ever reaching a definitive end. It is an autobiography that opens with death and, through a turbulent, fragmented, and repetitive narrative, recounts the story of her personal wilting and demise¹⁰.

Al-Zayyat speaks of her ascent and her fall, her successes and failures, her struggles, and of a self torn between will and involuntariness, between resistance and surrender – all without ever being able to heal from the division her father had instilled in her subconscious within the walls of the old house.

2. A Special Place

In the autobiography *The Days* by Egyptian writer Taha Hussein, we notice that the father – the hero of the story and its author – begins writing his autobiography on the occasion of his daughter reaching the age of eight, the same age at which he became blind. It is also the age at which he experienced misery, poverty, deprivation, and rejection from his family because of his blindness. The father compares his daughter’s childhood, which he succeeded in making a happy one,

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A guide for Interpretation Life Narrative*, Minneapolis 2010, p. 30.

with his own childhood, in which he suffered rejection and hardship. From that point, the chapters of his autobiography begin, and from that point, the narrative takes off. He said:

“Would you not like to live as your father lived when he was eight years old? In spite of that, your father has spent every effort he possesses and has gone to almost unendurable pains to spare you the life he had when he was a child”.¹¹

Although his daughter’s childhood was happy thanks to him, it reminded him of his own miserable childhood and led him to compare the love and care she received from her parents with the contempt he had endured from his own parents and numerous siblings due to his blindness:

“He was the seventh of the thirteen children of his father, and the fifth out of the eleven children of his father’s second wife. He used to feel that among this enormous number of youths and infants he had a *special place distinct from his brothers* and sisters. Did this position please him or did it annoy him? The truth is that he cannot definitely say, nor is he now able to form a correct judgement about it”.¹²

Even though Hussein states that he cannot now judge whether this place among his brothers pleased or angered him, his indication leaves little doubt that it did not please him – rather, it angered him. Taha Hus-

¹¹ T. Hussein, *The Days: His Autobiography in Three Parts*, trans. E.H. Paxton, H. Wayment, and K. Cragg. Cairo 1997, p. 84.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

sein chose not to immediately and directly judge what he would later call “disdain” due to his blindness. Instead, he offers a cautious and precise description of his suffering as a result of that disdain.

Note with me, dear reader, the expression Hussein uses: “*a place distinct from his brothers and sisters*”. This expression, in reality, does not refer to distinction in the positive sense that might first come to mind. Rather, it evokes another term that arises immediately in our consciousness: *revulsion*. Hussein hints at distinction only to direct us to the revulsion based here on the idea that a blind person is helpless and a burden on others. Within his family, he is not regarded as a normal person.

This *discrimination* is alluded to in more than one context and in more than one way. First, his parents show pity and sadness for his condition in multiple situations. His brothers, on the other hand, remain reserved in their interactions with him. This *reservation*, as we know, is a kind of unannounced complicity in a special treatment due to his blindness. He says:

“He experienced much tenderness and consideration from his mother, and from his father lenience and kindness, and his brothers he felt were somewhat reserved in their conversation and dealings with him. But he found side by side with this tenderness and consideration on the part of his mother a certain amount of negligence sometimes, and at others even harshness. And side by side with the lenience of his father he found a certain amount of negligence also, and even severity from time to time. Moreover, the reserve of

his brothers and sisters pained him *because he found therein a sympathy tainted with revulsion*".¹³

Ultimately, sympathy, pity, reservation, or neglect were nothing but diverse manifestations of a single feeling of revulsion – revulsion mixed with sympathy, or sympathy mixed with revulsion.

In a different context, Hussein speaks clearly about his brothers' mockery of him and his parents' silence regarding this mockery, their only response being pity and sadness for the blind boy who did not know how to eat properly and would drop food on his clothes:

"But one incident in particular curbed his curiosity, and filled his heart with a *shyness*, which lingers even yet. He was sitting own to supper with his father and others, and his mother, as was her custom, was superintending the meal and directing the servant and her daughters, who were assisting the servant, in bringing the dishes required for the meal. And he was eating just as the others were eating, when a strange thought occurred to him! What would happen if he took hold of a morsel of food with both hands instead of one as was customary? And what was there to prevent him from making this experiment? Nothing. Lo!... he took a morsel in both hands. Then he raised it to his mouth. At once his brothers burst out laughing. His mother was on the point of tears. His father said in a soft and sorrowful tone, 'That is not the way to eat your food, my son!' And he himself passed a troubled night."¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., pp. 15–16.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

The laughter that suddenly erupted when the blind boy dropped food on his clothes left an impact that can only be described as *trauma*. Neither the blind boy nor the mature man he later became was ever able to eat in front of people again. Indeed, his brothers' mockery imposed an isolation on him that never left him throughout his life. And just as the blind Arab poet Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (أبو العلاء المعري) confined himself to his home for fifty years, never leaving it, so too did Taha Hussein confine himself within himself until his death¹⁵.

Taha Hussein speaks of a *shyness* that has never left him to this day. Shame is a feeling that separates a person from themselves. Meaning, it makes us strangers to ourselves, always seeing something within us that must be hidden. Something like a defect or a deformity that others must not see. It must be covered.

The blind boy adopted a plan to which he adhered throughout his life – a plan for eating and another for thinking. He forbade himself from drinking liquids and holding spoons for his entire life, and he committed to the path of Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī in avoiding people when eating. He had changed permanently and irreversibly¹⁶. He said:

“From that time his movements were fettered with infinite caution, fear and shyness. And thenceforth he re-

¹⁵ S. Mundi, *Ḥudūd al-naqd ‘inda Ṭahā Ḥusayn bayna kitābay al-Ayyām wa Fī al-shi‘r al-jāhili*” (حدود النقد عند طه حسين بين كتابي ("الأيام" و"في الشعر الجاهلي"), Al-Kalimah 2015, No. 195, <http://www.alkalimah.net/Articles/Read/22516> [Access date: 15.06.2025].

¹⁶ F. Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography: Al-Ayyam of Taha Husayn*, Princeton 1988, p. 24.

alised that he had a strong will and also abstained from many kinds of food which he only allowed himself when he was over twenty-five years old. He gave up soup and rice, and all dishes which had to be eaten with spoons because he knew that he could not wield a spoon nicely, and so he didn't want his brothers to laugh at him, his mother to weep or his father to reproach him, albeit softly and sadly. This incident helped him to understand correctly a traditional story about Abu-l-Ala".¹⁷

3. Autobiography Escaping from the Father

For Bread Alone (Arabic: الخبز الحافي, *Al-Ḥubz al-ḥāfī*), written by the Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri, is considered one of the most important and famous autobiographical works, not only in the Arab world but globally. Mohamed Choukri's novel, written in the 1980s, gained considerable attention from readers, scholars, and researchers upon its publication, as it portrayed the cruel life of a Moroccan child and the harsh reality of a country surrounded by poverty, ignorance, and sickness.

Al-Ḥubz al-ḥāfī, the title of the novel, signifies nothing but hunger. The word *ḥāf* (حاف) in Arabic referring to a person who has nothing to eat but bread. The dominant feeling throughout the novel is one of hunger and deprivation. On the cover of the English translation by Paul Bowles, there is an image of a child biting

¹⁷ Hussein, *The Days*, p. 17.

into a piece of bread. At the beginning of the novel, we find these telling words:

“One afternoon I could not stop crying. I was hungry. I had sucked my fingers so much that the idea of doing it again made me sick to my stomach”.¹⁸

However, hunger, or the lack of essential sustenance for human life, becomes a broader metaphor for Choukri’s entire life. This is especially true when this hunger is coupled with emotional hunger, as Choukri lacked his father’s tenderness and affection. The harshness of physical hunger in Choukri’s life became intertwined with his father’s cruelty and emotional detachment toward his children. On the one hand, a father is typically the provider for his children, working to earn their livelihood. Yet here, he is incapable of earning enough to satisfy their hunger. Simultaneously, he is excessively cruel to them – to the point of killing his youngest son, Abdelkader.

Choukri recounts a tragic scene in which his father killed his young brother for crying for bread. He said:

“My little brother cries as he squirms on the bed. He sobs and calls for bread. I see my father walking towards the bed, a wild light in his eyes. No one can run away from the craziness in his eyes or get out of the way of his octopus hands. He twists the small head furiously. Blood pours out of the mouth. I run outdoors and hear him stopping my mother’s screams with kicks in the face. I hid and waited for the end of the battle”¹⁹.

¹⁸ M. Choukri, *For Bread Alone*, trans. P. Bowles, London 2006, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The father's cruelty transforms into a violent sexual desire in Choukri. This sexual desire becomes entangled with an urge to inflict physical harm on his sexual partner, even if only at the level of fantasy:

"My father's rough treatment of me always served only to increase the rage of my desire. The girl turned towards me with a smile. I looked at her, and in my mind's eye I see a gust of wind arrive, and lift her filmy garments. Asiya is prettier than she is. But Fatima is in front of me. She stood up straight and stretched. Then she put her arm behind her back, wincing a bit. I was staring wistfully at her full bare thighs. Quickly she let her skirts fall to cover her knees. I imagined myself going over to her and slapping her in the face. Then I would pull the skirt up again, and she would yank it down angrily. I would hit her again and lift it up. She would scream with rage, and I would set her clothes on fire. The flames as they burned her underwear delighted me".²⁰

Choukri's sexual desires became linked to a kind of sadism, where he found pleasure in harming his sexual partner. This was especially true after he witnessed his father hurting and humiliating his mother during the day, only to passionately make love to her at night.

"Were it not for imagination, I would have exploded". This is how Choukri speaks about his way of settling scores with his father. Due to his helplessness and feeling of oppression, he could only kill his father in his imagination: "In my imagination, I don't remember how many times I killed him".

²⁰ Ibid, p. 25.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the presence of the family, particularly the father, in an autobiography is active and influential. To the extent that Arab society is a conservative one, women are affected by the father's authority, and the father plays a central role in their lives. This is despite the father being considered the ultimate authority that must be respected, even by his male children. Generally, it can be said that Arab autobiography is a product of the family.

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