Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the representations of late Egyptian President Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) in Egyptian literature and film. It focuses on how the historical character of Nasser has emerged in the Egyptian imaginary—novel, short stories, autobiographies, and films. Rather than engaging in historical arguments about the deeds and legacy of Nasser, my dissertation makes a case for literature and art as alternative archive that questions, erases, distorts, and adds to the official history of Nasser. Employing the famous Aristotelian differentiation between the historian and the poet, and building on Hayden White’s argument about the relationship between history and fiction, I argue that the meaning(s) of Nasser for Egyptians must be sought less in recorded history than in fictional narratives. Unlike history, literature and film give voice to marginalized, voiceless witnesses of society. By creating fictional characters that interact with Nasser, these works constitute a space of knowledge, an invaluable window onto the ways people see, personalize, and negotiate their relationships with the president.

As this dissertation shows, Nasser constitutes a perfect site for literary and cinematic approaches. Largely seen as the Arab world’s most influential political figure of the past century, Nasser was a larger-than-life character, a legend whose image, voice, ideals, accomplishments, deeds and misdeeds, and defeats have been shaping Egyptian and Arabic life to date. Historians, however, often recognize the complexity of Nasser’s character, his contradictory traits, and his sometime inexplicable decisions. Particularly ambiguous is how the relationship between Nasser

and Egyptians was personalized and often romanticized, transforming a political leader into an attentive audience, a heartthrob lover, and an enigmatic father. Herein lies a major contribution of this dissertation. I argue that history falls short on capturing the centrality of Nasser in Egyptian life.

As will be demonstrated, Nasser emerges as a site for plural interpretations, an instance where narratives compete over the meaning of the past. In other words, there is no monolithic discourse on Nasser, but rather various, at times contradictory views that fragment the man into multiple “Nassers.” The historical paths and developments which the literary and cinematic Nasser has traversed bespeaks to the shifts in ideals, hopes, and realities that swept the Egyptian society over the past fifty years.

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**For my parents, Khalid Khalifah and Iman ‘Afani,
my unassailable certainty.**

Introduction

Historical truth...is not what took place; it is what we think took place.

(Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*)¹

He did great things, and failed at many others.

If he has wounded our hearts, all the wounds have healed.

(Ahmad F'uad Nagm, *A Visit to the Grave of Nasser*)²

On September 18, 2011, almost eight months after the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution and the ousting of President Husni Mubarak, thousands of Egyptians gathered for the funeral of Khalid 'Abdel Nasser, the eldest son of late President Gamal 'Abdel Nasser (1918-1970). SCAF, Egypt's Supreme Council of Armed Forces was ruling the country. While carrying pictures of President Nasser and expressing nostalgia for him, the mourners were also chanting, *Yasqut Yasqut Hukm al-'Askar* (Down with the Rule of the Military). The irony of the incident did not elude several Egyptian journalists. Many noted how the funeral became an occasion for protesting the rule of the military while celebrating the man who re-institutionalized it in Egypt in 1952. Indeed, jokes about this irony abounded in newspapers the next day, one of which sarcastically asked whether those protestors had taken Nasser to be an obstetrician!³

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¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote* in *Ficciones* (New York: Grover Press, 1962), p. 53.

² Ahmad F'uad Nagm, *Ziyara li Darh 'Abdel Nasser* [A Visit to the Grave of Nasser], 1970.

³ See, for instance, Egyptian daily newspaper *al-Tahrir* (No. 79, September 19, 2011).

Besides Nasser's continued presence in the Egyptian everyday life and discourse, the story above also reveals how many Egyptians separate Nasser as a person from the regime that he had created. For them, Nasser functions as a site of memory, a space of associations at times disconnected from the real historical figure that he once was. As French historian Pierre Nora argues, sites of memory are "moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded."⁴ As such, they are the embodiment of memory, the residue of that long process of remembering and forgetting that takes place in living societies before it enters the realm of history. History, on the other hand, is "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer."⁵ Constituting a counter-discourse, of which history "is perpetually suspicious,"⁶ these sites of memory take the form of movies, songs, novels, paintings, among others. Once perpetuated, repeated, and systematically propagated, these sites, like Nasser's name and image, emerge as self-explanatory signs, whose mere presence is effortlessly deciphered and interpreted by viewers.

This dissertation studies and analyzes the representations of Nasser in Egyptian literature and film. As such, it does not seek to engage in historical arguments and judgments about the deeds and legacy of Nasser, still less to offer another biography of him. Rather, it focuses on how the historical character of Nasser has emerged in the Egyptian imaginary—novels, short stories, autobiographies, and films. Despite the significant position that he occupies in these works, no previous study has been exclusively devoted to illuminate the location of an

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⁴ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire" in *Representations* (California: University of California Press, No 26, Spring 1989), p. 12.

⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

imagined/narrativized Nasser outside the conventional historical archive; a vacuum that this dissertation aspires to fill. In fact, the scarcity of academic scholarship on the images of historical figures in art and literature has been generally recognized, as “little research has hitherto been done on the literary presentation of historical character.”⁷ Among the questions that this study aims to raise and discuss are: What are the recurrent images of Nasser in literature and film? Did Nasser become a rhetorical device, a figure of speech, a trope that connotes essentially specific images constantly invoked whenever he is mentioned? Was Nasser ever reimagined in fiction? In other words, were there any alternative fictional accounts of Nasser? Did Nasser emerge *as* fiction, or *through* fiction? How did the image of Nasser develop over the course of time? What is the significance of writing personal letters to Nasser? Did Nasser’s gender ever become a significant constituent of his conceived image? Why was the first ‘Nasser film’ made only in 1996? How was the otherwise overlooked aspect of Nasser’s domestic life portrayed in that film?

The argument that runs through the dissertation makes a case for literature and art as alternative archive that questions, erases, distorts, and adds to official history. I argue that the meaning(s) of Nasser for Egyptians must be sought less in recorded history than in fictional narratives. Aristotle has famously shown that “where the historian really differs from the poet is in his describing what has happened while the other describes the thing that might happen.”⁸ This dissertation is devoted to the realms of “as if,” the imaginary productions of which history is often negligent—the dreams and nightmares, successes and failures, hopes and despairs that

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⁷ Rosalind Marsh, *Images of Dictatorships: Portraits of Stalin in Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. ix.

⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated and introduced by John Warrington (London: Alibris, 1963), p. 17.

Nasser invokes in ordinary Egyptians. Unlike history, literature and film give voice to marginalized, voiceless witnesses of society. By creating fictional characters that interact with Nasser, these works constitute a space of knowledge, an invaluable window onto the ways people see, personalize, and negotiate their relationships with the president. Thus, while history “is the story of the happenings that are, or might be, otherwise knowable,” Warner Berthoff reminds us, fiction “gives us stories—a particular author telling us in his own fashion about made-up events—which are otherwise unknowable and which cannot otherwise exist.”⁹

Offering an answer as to why humans need fiction, German literary critic Wolfgang Iser similarly argues that literature “reflects something special that neither philosophies of history nor sociological theories are able to capture.”¹⁰ The particularity that is attributed to literature lies precisely in its ability to create other worlds, to enact “what is not there.”¹¹ As such, it unmask alternative realities, perfects the imperfections of nature, and sheds lights on clandestine aspirations and desires. It is a mode of thinking the world that has accompanied humanity throughout history in order to

Gain access to what we otherwise cannot have. We have no access, for example, to the beginning, the end, or the ‘ground’ out of which we are. The beginning and the end are paradigms of realities that we can neither experience nor know. But there are also experiences, such as identity and love, whose reality is just as incontestable as the fact that we can never know precisely what they are. Evidently, however, we are not prepared to accept the limits of cognition, and so we need images to mirror forth the unknowable.¹²

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⁹ Warner Berthoff, “Fiction, History, Myth: Notes Toward the Discrimination of Narrative Forms,” in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, edited by Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 271.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 263.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

This dissertation is indebted to the seminal contributions of historian Hayden White, particularly on the relationship between history and fiction. White seeks to break the boundaries between history and fiction, realizing that the former is in fact “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”¹³ As such, White argues that “there are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories.”¹⁴ But what is it that both history and fiction share? While White acknowledges that historians and writers are dealing with different kinds of events, he argues that the process of *narrating* these events, translating them discursively, and bestowing meaning on them is one and the same:

Novelists might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process. Here the historians must utilize precisely the same tropological strategies, the same modalities in representing relationships in words, that the poet or novelist uses.¹⁵

History and fiction are interpretive acts, investing as much in relaying events as in *inventing* the causality that holds them together. They are mediating discourses, forms of written language where, as Edward Said reminds us, “there is no such a thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation.”¹⁶

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¹³ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 82, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation” in *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 121.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 125, emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 21, emphasis in the original.

As this dissertation aspires to show, Nasser constitutes a perfect site for literary and cinematic approaches. Popularly seen as Arabs' "most charismatic leader since the Prophet Muhammad,"¹⁷ Nasser was a larger-than-life character, a legend whose image, voice, ideals, accomplishments, deeds and misdeeds, and defeats have been shaping Egyptian and Arabic life to date. Historians, however, often recognize the complexity of Nasser's character, his contradictory traits, and his sometime inexplicable decisions. Recognizing the impenetrable aspects of his life, one of Nasser's biographers declares that "the precise role of Nasser in Egyptian and Arab ideological development is not easy to assess empirically; still more difficult to uncover is his real motivational base, the internalized set of beliefs that determined his attitudes and behavior."¹⁸ Particularly ambiguous is how the relationship between Nasser and Egyptians was personalized and often romanticized, transforming a political leader into an attentive audience, a heartthrob lover, and an enigmatic father. Herein lies a major contribution of this dissertation. I argue that history falls short on capturing the centrality of Nasser in Egyptian life. Commenting on the meaning of Nasser for his fellow citizens, Egyptian intellectual Ghali Shukri believes that the documents of the "assiduous academic historian" are not sufficient to explain the exceptional position of Nasser. It is as though the relationship between Egyptians and Nasser was so charged that it left little room for detached academic investigations:

Nasser descended upon us like a resurrected Osiris who returned after tens of centuries as a "dream" seeking to realize a miracle. Many non-Egyptians will say that this is mere 'poetry' that bears no connection to reason. Unfortunately, there is no response to that. Feeling [Nasser]

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¹⁷ Said K. Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), p. 4.

¹⁸ R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Egypt Under Nasser: A Study in Political Dynamics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), p. 97.

inevitably necessitates being Egyptian. Only then can you sense the reality of this quasi-metaphysical fiction.¹⁹

Interestingly, this personalized relationship with Nasser extended to other Arabs as well. Many Palestinian parents and grandparents, for instance, still circulate popular tales about their love and glorification of Nasser, of which two in particular have stuck in my mind. My grandmother used to relay how she and other old women in Burin, a village near Nablus in the West Bank, had spontaneously congregated in the village's main square following the news of Nasser's death in 1970. There, they performed *Nuwah*, lamentation that included singing sorrowful songs, tearing their clothes, and slapping their faces. One of the songs ran as follows:

ya banat al-quds harrimn el libis

mat 'Abdel Nasser o ma harrar el qudis

(O, daughters of Jerusalem, wear no clothes;
for Nasser died; Jerusalem wasn't liberated).

Still more remarkable is a tale about a distant relative who lived in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria after the *Nakba*. No matter where he lived, he would constantly follow Egypt's announcement of the first day of Ramadan, an announcement that is contingent upon the sighting of the new moon and often varies from one country to the other. The reason for his decision was that he wanted to begin his fast on the same day as Nasser. Constituting a much larger repertoire that begs for an academic study, these tales are transmitted orally across generations, with a chance potential of disappearing over the course of the years.

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¹⁹ Ghali Shukri, *Muthakkarat Thaqafa Tahtadir* [Memories of a Dying Culture] (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1970), p. 409.

This is not to suggest that all of the literary and cinematic representations of Nasser were favorable—nothing is farther from the truth. As the following chapters will demonstrate, Nasser emerges as a site for plural interpretations, an instance where narratives compete over the meaning of the past. In other words, there is no monolithic discourse on Nasser, but rather various, at times contradictory views that fragment the man into multiple “Nassers.” Following American historian John Bodnar, I argue that the shaping of the past “is contested and involves a struggle for supremacy between advocates of various political ideas and sentiments.”²⁰ Of particular significance, Bodnar explains, is the emergence of official and vernacular cultures, each providing its own narrative on and interpretation of historical figures and events. It is from the intersection between these two camps that “public memory emerges.”²¹ This dissertation traces the historical developments of Nasser’s image among the warring narratives, paying a particular attention to the location that Egyptian literature and cinema occupy vis-à-vis the official archive. It will show that these imaginary productions do not constitute one single entity of “vernacular” culture that seeks to oppose the official narrative on Nasser, but rather several cultures that can “even clash with one another.”²²

The historical paths and developments which the literary and cinematic Nasser has traversed bespeak to the shifts in ideals, hopes, and realities that swept the Egyptian society over the past fifty years. Only against a deteriorating social, economic, and political situation in al-Sadat’s and Mubarak’s Egypt can one explain, for instance, the resurgence of an almost

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²⁰ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 13.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, p. 14.

exclusively romantic view of Nasser since the late 1970s, despite the state-sponsored, far-reaching process of de-Nasserization that emerged in these eras. It is as though Nasser became a ruin, a *talal*, over which Egyptian writers and filmmakers, like their pre-Islamic poet predecessors, lament a bygone epoch, a bittersweet past relation that can nevertheless surpass a decaying reality. The following chapters will show how the late image of Nasser became synonym for dignity, freedom, and justice, reflecting Egyptians' aspirations for a better, uncorrupted world. However, I am not saying that writers and filmmakers merely reflect people's views on Nasser in their works. Rather, their productions are as much *shaped by* as they are *shaping* the public discourse on Nasser. Muhammad Siddiq shows how the Egyptian novel, for instance, possesses both a *mimetic* and a *performative* power, where it does not only mirror a preexisting reality, but rather "posits a reciprocal pattern of relations between culture and literature, in which the novel plays a performative and dynamic role."²³

Within this context, Samia Mehrez's argument about the Arab and Egyptian writer as an "underground historian" proves significant. Borrowing from George Steiner, Mehrez argues that the contemporary Egyptian writer (and, by extension, filmmaker) bears "the responsibility of producing a counter record, an alternative discourse"²⁴ that opposes the official, state-produced one. For Mehrez, the importance of the role that the writer can play stems from the "restrictions, limitations, and censorship he or she may encounter."²⁵ Against the silencing, chaining measures of the state, the writer inscribes his own version of views, testimonies, and memories.

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²³ Muhammad Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel: Genre, Identity and Agency in Egyptian Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. xiii.

²⁴ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

Interestingly, Egyptian writers have at times written an understanding of their very role as creators of a counter-archive into their ‘fiction’. Analyzing three Egyptian novellas that feature immediate and delayed ramifications of the 1974 visit that former U.S President Richard Nixon had made to Egypt, Noha Radwan shows how the authors consciously engage in deconstructing the official story of the visit. Rather than claiming real nature of their narratives, these novellas are more invested in displaying that “the events inscribed in them, had they really happened, would still have been bound to remain outside of that [official] archive and denied entry into the hegemonic historical narrative.”²⁶

This dissertation was conceived almost a year prior to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, and all of the works that the following chapters will discuss predate it. Naturally, it is still too early to offer a definitive answer for whatever impact the recent revolution will have on the image of Nasser and his meanings for Egyptians. In fact, the revolution itself, ongoing as it is, is still scarcely portrayed in written or visual narratives. Ahdaf Soueif offers an analysis of this situation in an article that is tellingly titled, “In Times of Crisis, Fiction Has to Take a Back Seat.” Published in August 2012, the article argues that time has not come yet to produce a mature fictional account of the revolution. If Egyptian novelists “produced texts of critique, of dystopia, of nightmare” before the revolution, it seems as though they all “have given up—for the moment—on fiction.” The 2011 revolution is not *fictionalizable* yet because “the immediate truth is too glaring to allow a more subtle truth to take form. For reality has to take time to be processed, to transform into fiction.” Another reason simply lies in the fact that writing a novel necessitates a time of withdrawal from the actual world and turning inward, isolating oneself in a

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²⁶ Noha Radwan, “A Place for Fiction in the Historical Archive” in *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* (17, No. 1, 2008), p. 81.

room or a café in order to produce. And it is here that Soueif, herself both a prominent novelist and a participant in the revolution, favors the involvement in the political reality over its literary manifestations, or the citizen over the novelist “you, the citizen, need[s] to be present, there, on the ground, marching, supporting, talking, instigating, articulating.”²⁷

That Nasser has been present in the 2011 revolution, however, is abundantly documented. I have begun the introduction with an actual incident that bespeaks to the ongoing relevance of Nasser in Egyptians’ lives. The images from Tahrir Square that were circulated around the world included groups of Egyptians carrying pictures of Nasser, while live testimonies relayed the existence of several booths at Tahrir that broadcasted his speeches and well-known songs that were dedicated to him. In addition, during the months that I had spent in Egypt preparing for this dissertation I noticed, both in my conversations with people and in articles, literature, and exhibitions, a vibrant debate regarding the position that Nasser possesses vis-à-vis the 2011 revolution. The main question that dominated these debates centered on whether the recent revolution signified a rupture with the thirty years of Mubarak, al-Sadat’s Egypt, or the whole July 1952 regimes—whether, that is, the contemporary Egyptian revolutionaries were a continuity or a discontinuity with Nasser. Egyptian journalist Nagla Beder, for instance, warns against homogenizing Egyptian military and perceiving it as a single entity since Nasser, arguing that Nasser cannot be included in the protests that were taking place against “the rule of the military,”²⁸ and Egyptian filmmaker Khalid Yusif speculates that the positive image of Nasser

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²⁷ Ahdaf Soueif, “In Times of Crisis, Fiction Has to Take a Back Seat.” In *The Guardian* (Friday, August 17, 2012).

²⁸ Nagla Beder, “Ayyam Su’ al-Tafahum” [Days of Misunderstanding] in *al-Tahrir* (No. 81, September 21, 2011). See also ‘Abdel Halim Qandil’s “al-Hanin ila ‘Abdel Nasser [Longing for Nasser] in *al-Quds al-‘Arabi* (October 7, 2012) and Iman ‘Ali’s “Thil ‘Abdel Nasser: Fikra Tahkum al-Tarikh al-Mu’asir fi Misr” [Nasser’s Shadow: An Idea That Governs Contemporary Egyptian History] in *al-Hayat* (October 10, 2012).

will gain a new momentum in Egyptian cinema after the revolution, while Sonallah Ibrahim, Ibrahim ‘Abdel Meguid, and Gamal al-Ghitani unanimously declared the revolution as a major incident against *Nizam Yuliu* (the July Regime).²⁹ On the other hand, an exhibition that opened a few days before Nasser’s first post- revolution anniversary has attracted wide attention and underscored a divided public toward the memory of the president. Entitled “Nasser, the Dream,” the exhibition, whose opening was attended by none other than Nasser’s family,³⁰ featured old and new paintings, including a few that were created after the 2011 revolution, but all demonstrating “the bright side of the picture,” as the title of one critical review puts it. Published in *al-Ahram Weekly*, the review faulted the organizers for attempting to link Nasser to the recent revolution, wondering,

if Nasser should be the symbol of dreams of justice, freedom, and equality among people both rich and poor, then why on earth are we still suffering from injustice and lack of freedom in Egyptian society? And if the principles of the 1952 Revolution have failed to survive, then why are *we still celebrating the dream*? The dream, in other words, that turned out to be a nightmare.³¹

Similarly, Nasser features in two of the early literary responses to the 2011 revolution. The Marquezian title *Mi’at Khatwa min al-Thawra* (One Hundred Steps of the Revolution) introduces a diary that adopts an ambivalent stance toward the relationship between Nasser and Tahrir’s revolutionaries. The writer, who chronicles his personal observations of the 18 days, oscillates between portraying the masses in Tahrir as “chanting from their wounded dignity

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²⁹ In interviews I had with them in Cairo, between October-November, 2011. Sonallah Ibrahim emphasizes that the 2011 is a “fatherless” revolution, denying the possibility that a certain nostalgia for Nasser may arise afterwards.

³⁰ His two sons, ‘Abdel Hakim and ‘Abdel Hamid, and his two daughters, Huda and Muna. As mentioned above, Nasser’s eldest son, Khalid, had just died a week earlier.

³¹ Rania Khallad, “The Bright Side of the Picture” in *al-Ahram Weekly* (No. 1068, 13-19 October, 2011).

against thirty years of the dictator's rule"³² and unequivocally announcing "The regime of the July revolution is 62 years old... This revolution is a total rupture with it."³³ Far more significant is the comparison between Nasser's resignation speech in the wake of the 1967 defeat and Mubarak's second speech on February 1st, 2011, which occurred between a mother and her son Khalid in Hisham al-Khishn's novel *7 Ayyam fi al-Tahrir* (7 Days at Tahrir). Known for its powerful, emotional impact on a large number of Egyptians during the revolution, creating a division between those who believed Mubarak's concessions and the promises he made and those who did not, the speech convinced Khalid and his friends to disjoin Tahrir and give Mubarak the interim he requested. Khalid's mother, however, reminds her son of what she sees a similar manipulation of Egyptians that Nasser had once showed, thus establishing continuity between the two presidents:

Your enthusiasm, Khalid, reminds me of the days when Nasser resigned. One speech made these kind people fill the streets, begging that who led them to defeat and disgrace to stay. All of the Egyptian leaders understand the emotional nature of the Egyptian public, and they seek to exploit it for their interests.³⁴

Before proceeding with providing brief descriptions of the chapters, a few words about the selection process are in order. As mentioned earlier, this dissertation studies the representations of Nasser in Egyptian novels, short stories, autobiographies, and films. The work that qualifies as an object of study is the one in which Nasser, as a person, is directly or allegorically portrayed, thus excluding broader treatment of the 1952 revolution and its impact

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³² Ahmad Zaghlul al-Shayti, *Mi'at Khatwa min al-Thawra: Yawmiyyat min Maydan al-Tahrir* [One Hundred Steps of the Revolution: Diaries from Tahrir Square] (Cairo: Dar Mirit, 2011), p. 32.

³³ Ibid, p. 117.

³⁴ Hisham al-Khishn, *7 Ayyam fi al-Tahrir* [7 Days at Tahrir] (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 2011), p. 92.

on Egypt. Recognizing that vast amount of works, however, I inevitably had to make choices and engage selectively with them. Although I ascribe no comprehensive character to it, I contend that this dissertation treats a number of works that are sufficiently representatives of the making and remaking of Nasser's image. It is as much concerned with major works whose statuses were recognized by critics earlier as it is with unearthing underrepresented works of novel approaches. In addition, though sometimes unavoidable, the aesthetic evaluation of a single work as a whole is not the primary goal of this project, nor do I analyze the work in its totality. Rather, my main goal is to unmask the position that Nasser occupies in the work. Other aesthetic, political, or social aspects are significant only insofar as they relate to Nasser.

Chapter one, "Writing to the Man," explores the position of Nasser as an audience. It argues that the Egyptian public, rather than being conceived as passive, docile followers of, and listeners to, the Man, has occasionally reversed roles with Nasser, situating him in a place where he has to be the addressee. Nowhere can this be better recognized as in writing letters to Nasser. The chapter will trace the emergence of a "tradition" of epistolary literature between Egyptians and Nasser. Motivated by a certainty that Nasser does not know what befalls them, Egyptians invoke in these letters the very ideals, hopes, and dreams about which Nasser has constantly spoken—they, in other words, write to Nasser precisely because they are empowered by a belief in him. The chapter examines the implications of Nasser's position as an audience: absent or present, distant or near, friend or official. In addition, it seeks to question whether Nasser can fit the role of what Janet Gurkin Altman calls "the active confidant," in which the addressee's "voice is *heard* within the hero's letters through quotation or paraphrase."³⁵ As for the letter and

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³⁵ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 51, my emphasis.

its originator(s), the chapter wonders the kind of “capital” that the senders possesses—linguistic, intellectual, or moral—; the gender of the senders; and whether the letter was a product of individual or collective writing.

The second chapter, “Nasser as Fiction,” analyzes the novels in which Nasser emerges as a protagonist. Explicitly or allegorically, he features as a fictive character that lives and interacts with other invented ones in the work. Despite sharing several aspects with the real figure, Nasser as fiction still significantly differ from his historical reference outside the text, adding to, altering, or contradicting it. In other words, there is not realist fictional account of Nasser in Egyptian literature. Rather, the four works which the chapter analyzes all seek to reimagine alternative episodes in Nasser’s life. By introducing him as an intellectual, an animal, a martyr, and a defendant, each of these works offers its own interpretation of Nasser, fantastically revisiting parts of his life and highlighting certain traits of his character. The chronological order of these works reveals that, contrary to common conceptions, Egyptian writers did not shy from criticizing Nasser during his life. What eventually emerges is a shattered imagined Nasser whose very essence is significantly contested. Furthermore, those conflicting interpretations of Nasser bespeak to his polarizing character, which leaves little room for definitive answers, culminating in the position of the “unfinalized hero” that Mikhail Bakhtain has famously theorized.³⁶

The third chapter, on the other hand, locates Nasser’s life, words and actions as part of the background against which the events of the works unfold. Entitled, “Nasser in Fiction,” it considers a different manifestation of Nasser in Egyptian literature, one in which he is not a character, but rather a topic, an idea that is represented through the actions, dialogues, or

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³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 63.

monologues of the main characters. Whether glorified or undermined, abhorred or admired, Nasser remains a silent figure whom these works never give a voice. What matters more are the other characters' views of the president. It is here that the otherwise unknowable Egyptian subjects are empowered to speak. In a thematic approach that seeks to highlight largely understudied aspects of Nasser's position vis-à-vis Egyptians, this chapter is divided into two main parts: Nasser and Children, and Nasser and Women. The first part is concerned with the narratives in which a child narrator expresses his/her thoughts on Nasser. It begs for a consideration of a tensed relationship between Nasser and the father that inevitably leaves its mark on the child's evaluation of both. In addition, it calls into question the very reliability of the child's story, his torn stance between filiation and affiliation, and his relationship with his older self. The second part engages with three female autobiographical texts, focusing on their respective views of Nasser's gendered identity. It attempts to show whether the often recognized masculinity of Nasser has ever occupied a space in female imaginaries.

The last chapter, "Nasser on the Screen," traces the treatment that Nasser receives in Egyptian cinema. It asks whether the ubiquitous presence of Nasser in Egyptian life during the 1950s and the 1960s was ever translated onto the screen. The chapter contends that, contrary to common conceptions, some of the harshest approaches to Nasser in films were produced during his life. Following his death, Egyptian cinema was swept by a series of films that sought to undermine Nasser's regime, reducing it to scenes of torture, prison, and corruption. Widely known as "Cinema of Centers of Power," the series was motivated by a state-sponsored process of De-Nasserization, and largely thought to be initiated by 'Ali Badrakhan's 1975 famous film *al-Karnak* (Karnak). However, the personal presence of, or reference to, Nasser in these films was carefully negotiated. The chapter seeks to understand this negotiation through delineating

the emergence of Nasser's portrait in Egyptian cinema. The study of the portrait serves also to reveal the romantic comeback of Nasser that dominated Egyptian cinema since the 1980s. Aside from the portrait, the chapter pays close attention to another Nasser-related theme that recurs in films—the “resignation speech.” It asks why Nasser was visually and aurally immortalized by arguably his most tragic appearance following the humiliating defeat of 1967. The chapter explores some rhetorical aspects of the speech, contextualizes its appropriation in Egyptian movies, and draws the attention to instances in which only Nasser's voice appears.

This dissertation is based on reading and analyzing numerous texts and movies, the overwhelming majority of which are in Arabic. Unless otherwise stated, all translations in the following chapters are mine. Finally, I would like to recall a sentence that one of the Tahrir revolutionaries had in 2011 said to me “For me, Nasserism does not mean anything now, but Nasser does.” This dissertation is, in part, a modest attempt to understand why.

Chapter 1

Writing to the Man

Throughout his tenure as a president of Egypt, Nasser has managed to transform the Egyptian public into an audience. Whether in his official processions in the streets of Egypt, on his visits to factories, schools, universities, and companies, or in the mere photos of his that were ubiquitous in Egyptian society—Nasser was a spectacle to see, a human landmark whose presence in a geographical space would turn it into a Mecca for glances, gazes and stares. Abundant in Nasser's biographies and accounts are descriptions of the passion that would sweep people, men or women, children or adults, upon seeing him. That a few of those encounters were nonverbal—where Nasser would only stand and smile and people would merely look and cheer—can only add more aura to this extraordinary phenomenon. Far from being an exclusively Egyptian phenomenon, however, Nasser was able to turn any Arab people he visited into a similar audience. It is indeed his visit to Syria in 1958, upon declaring the formation of the short-lived United Arab Republic, that offers an unprecedented instance of Nasser and the people-as-his audience. Prominent Egyptian journalist, and Nasser's lifelong confidant, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, presents the following account:

The news of Nasser's arrival had spread dramatically. People filled the streets between the airport and the palace. And once he arrived, the palace's squares were teeming with thousands, then hundreds of thousands, of people, who expressed their jubilation at Nasser's arrival in unprecedented ways. They would come, group after another, to greet him, and he would peer from the palace's balcony, then go inside... and so on.³⁷

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³⁷ Fu'ad Matar, *Bi Saraha 'an 'Abdel Nasser: Hiwar ma' Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal* [On Nasser, Frankly: A Dialogue with Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal] (Beirut: Dar al-Qadaya, 1975), p.140.

It is Nasser's speeches, however, that effectively demonstrate this audience-spectacle relationship. Characterized by their passionate and hyperbolic rhetoric, defiance, and even humor, those speeches punctuated the Man's ups-and-downs, decisions and responses to international and local events—from the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 to the infamous “resignation speech” in the wake of the 1967 defeat, to name but the two most memorable ones. They were “dramatic performance[s],”³⁸ whose audience was “looking as if they were seeing something messianic.”³⁹ I do not intend to dwell here on Nasser's speeches or his voice, for it belongs elsewhere in this dissertation.⁴⁰ What merits the attention now, however, is the “democratic” aspect that a few historians have ascribed to those speeches. Although it could be puzzling to see a shade of “democracy” manifested in the speeches of what is often portrayed as an authoritarian ruler, Lebanese historian Georges Corm argues that “by thinking loudly before the crowds, using a very simple language, in search of solutions for the various problems of backwardness, dependency, and poverty, and by announcing, at the right moment, the suitable solution he found among all the proposed alternatives,”⁴¹ Nasser's speeches were democratic discourses that did rectify to a certain extent the crude, despotic practices of his regime. Put differently, the audience, by merely listening approvingly, if passively, to their leader, did bestow a certain kind of legitimacy on the process of decision-making, whereupon Nasser's speeches could be perceived as both monological and dialogical.

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³⁸ Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p.195.

³⁹ Said K. Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab*, p.296.

⁴⁰ See chapter three, “Nasser in Fiction.”

⁴¹ Georges Corm, *Infijar al-Mashriq al-'Arabi: min Ta'mim Qanat al-Sweis ila Ijtiyah Lubnan* [The Explosion of the Arab Orient: From the Nationalization of the Suez Canal to the Invasion of Lebanon] (Beirut: Dar Al-Tali'a, 1987), p. 27.

Furthermore, the story is not one-sided. For the crowds whose love for Nasser was unqualified have occasionally exchanged positions with him, where the Man himself would become an audience. This can be seen through writing letters to Nasser, where he would be put in a place to receive, read, and, occasionally, act. By reversing the equation, the people, empowered as they were by “a belief in Nasser personally,”⁴² have emerged as voiced agents who voluntarily assumed a reciprocal relationship with Nasser, where they could be at once an addresser and an addressee. As it is often noticed in any hierarchical exchange, one can hardly fail to see the inequality between the sender and the recipient.⁴³ Yet it is this very existing hierarchy that compels one to ponder the kind of “capital” that those people possessed in order to imagine Nasser as an audience.

This chapter will reflect on some remarkable incidents of ‘writing to the Man.’ Those correspondences, manifested as both independent letters as well as letters-in-narrative, will be representatives of a much larger corpus that has often been overlooked by Nasser scholars. I am arguing that writing to Nasser poses him as an *active confidant*. In her important book on epistolarity, Janet Gurkin Altman establishes confidentiality as a main feature of epistolary literature. If writing letters is an act of confiding in someone, it is the nature of this confidant that would characterize him as a passive or active one. After clarifying how the former merely fulfills his minimal function by listening to stories and confessions, Altman proceeds to define the active confidant as:

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⁴² Marina Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech: Prose Literature and Prose Writers in Egypt Under Nasser and Sadat* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), p.128.

⁴³ See David A. Gerber, “Epistolary Masquerades: Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters” in *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, edited by Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 151.

Rarely a purely passive listener. Even in letter narrative that includes no letters from the confidant, his voice is *heard* within the hero's letters through quotation or paraphrase. There are varying degrees to his activity, according to whether he merely contributes information relevant to the hero's story or actually influences it.⁴⁴

Letters to Nasser, as will be demonstrated, took Nasser's words, slogans, beliefs, and deeds as their points of departure. By personalizing their relationship with Nasser, and consequently separating him from the regime that he himself had created, the audience of the Man has regularly opted to remind him of the rights about which he himself had frequently spoken. In other words, writing to Nasser has expressed the senders' dismay, not at Nasser's acts, but at their own life conditions or situations that they assumed would never meet Nasser's approval. It is the discrepancy between the ideals, dreams, and hopes of which Nasser spoke, and the facts on the ground, that the letters were requesting to rectify.

Equally revealing in this context is the dual way in which Nasser emerges in the letters—present and absent. Kafka has once declared that letter writing “is truly a communication with specters, not only with the specter of the addressee but also with one's own phantom.”⁴⁵ Several scholars have noted that, particularly in love letters, the addressee is assumed to be absent “if the beloved were present, there would be no need to write.”⁴⁶ This view is over-simplifying, however, for it not only takes for granted the transparency of what a “love” letter is (a letter to Nasser could be based on a specific “love,”) but has also an exclusively functional perspective on letter writing. In love, as in other relationships, one can write to the beloved because writing is at

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⁴⁴ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p 51, my emphasis.

⁴⁵ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, quoted in Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity*, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 17.

times like touching—it is a physical act, exhilarating and fulfilling for many, so much so that one does not need his “addressee” to be absent in order to write to him.

Janet Gurkin Altman offers a more comprehensive paradigm. While acknowledging that letters occur between “two distant points,” she maintains that the sender can “emphasize either the distance or the bridge.”⁴⁷ In the case of Nasser, letters are predicated upon a negotiation between his presence and absence. On the one hand, the absence is acknowledged by the need to establish a rapprochement through letters. Yet, it is the very ubiquity of Nasser, his voice, words, and deeds that are invoked in them. It is as if the absence of Nasser is shown inconceivable in those letters precisely because he *ought to be* present. Hence the senders’ attempts to “reclaim” Nasser, to ever *Nasserize* him by demanding that their situations be leveled to a *Nasserite* level, one that could match Nasser’s own visions and aspirations.

Pertinent also in this regard is the fact that letter writing to Nasser eludes the two principal slots that are often ascribed to the addressee: the lover or the friend.⁴⁸ Nasser could be both; or neither. After all, he was the president of the republic. The case of Nasser as an addressee begs for consideration precisely because it destabilizes the notion of formality between a citizen and a president—in one letter, to mention a brief example, a woman describes Nasser as having an “angelic voice.”⁴⁹ This chapter will be concerned with the way Nasser was addressed, the titles that were used, and the respectful words (or the lack thereof) that featured in the letters. This will be discussed in relation to the sender’s gender, education, age, and political orientations.

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⁴⁷ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity*, p.12

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 69.

⁴⁹ See the letter that poet ‘Afifa al-Hisni wrote to Nasser in the appendix of her elegiac collection of poems, *Shahid al-Tadhiyat* [The martyr of Sacrifices] (Cairo: Matabi’ al-Nashir al-‘Arabi, 1970), pp.68-70.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer an exhaustive analysis of all the letters that were sent to Nasser. Rather, it will engage a select number of two kinds of letters. The first are the ones that were written to Nasser by journalists, intellectuals, or activists, and were published either in newspapers and other periodicals during Nasser's life or in a book form after his death. The second are fictional letters; letters in narratives that employ the epistolary form in order to establish a correspondence with Nasser. I am not suggesting that the first group possesses a more authentic value than the second one, nor am I implying that an actual exchange had in fact occurred—with a few exceptions, we are uncertain if any letter was received or even sent. The categorization I am following can merely shed light on the historical context in which those intellectuals felt compelled to write Nasser. In other words, it is the need to write a letter, its content, and the process of writing, rather than the letter's outcome, that interest me the most. Moreover, by grouping works of fiction together, one could scrutinize its dialogue with history, and the emergence of a mode, its continuities and discontinuities.

A Journalist Intervention

In his now classic thesis on the emergence of the public sphere in Europe, German philosopher Jurgen Habermas describes the eighteenth century in Europe as “the century of the letter.”⁵⁰ According to him, privatized European individuals saw themselves as independent agents who can establish “purely human” relations with one another. Those relations were better negotiated through letter writing; it is there that “the individual unfolded himself in his

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⁵⁰ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 1991), p. 48.

subjectivity.”⁵¹ Interestingly, however, Habermas does not see a contrast between subjectivity, which he calls “the innermost core of the private,” and the public, for the former is “always already oriented to an audience.”⁵² Hence Habermas’ connection between the letter and other eighteenth century media, like the novel and the diary. This view on the relationship between the letter and the public sphere has found a warm reception among scholars. Ann Goldberg notes how “we, today, in Western liberal societies still, to a large extent, retain a conception of letter-writing that derives from the eighteenth century.”⁵³

Obviously, Habermas’ thesis is strictly European and cannot be applied to other human experiences—including the Arab one. Aside from letter writing that was flourishing in classical Arabic literature—about which one can only anachronistically employ Habermas’ terminology—the “modern” Arabic experience has witnessed kinds of letter writing that do not fall into the European paradigm. Prominent Egyptian sociologist Sayyid ‘Uways has a study of Egyptian letters that were sent to the dead. In his attempt to explain the reason why so many crimes in Egyptian society were not reported to the police, ‘Uways finds that several Egyptians had chosen to report those tragic events to dead religious figures like al-Shafi’i, one of the most celebrated jurists of Islamic history. Though dead, those blessed figures were believed to have some supernatural power that could heal, help, and improve people’s conditions. To ‘Uways astonishment, those letters were not only left at al-Shafi’i’s shrine, a practice which he had noticed when he was a child, but were also sent by mail to the shrine’s address, and were then

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⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid, p.49.

⁵³ Ann Goldberg, “Reading and Writing across the Borders of Dictatorship: Self-Censorship and Emigrant Experience in Nazi and Stalinist Europe” in *Letters across Borders*, p. 166.

collected by the shrine's servant.⁵⁴ Upon the request of 'Uways, the letters were handed over to him.⁵⁵ 'Uways was so captivated by his study that he refers to it in most of his later works.

Commenting on his findings, he maintains how this "clearly underscores a rise in the position that the unscientific cultural aspects occupy in some people's lives."⁵⁶ In addition, he sees in this practice a continuity in a tradition of writing to the dead that featured throughout Egyptian history, implying that "contemporary" Egyptians "behave, at certain issues, in light of a specific set of old social values that had been carried over time, and which emanated from the conditions of Egyptian society."⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Habermas' model of interpretation can still offer insights onto the practice of generations of "liberal" Egyptians, those who were highly enchanted by the principles of the European Enlightenment, liberal democracy, and individualism. His reference to an audience-oriented letter, together with his emphasis on the role that newspapers and novels had played in forming the modern subject, are worth considering as we delve into analyzing the first incident of letter writing to Nasser. It is precisely a letter *in public*, a letter for both Nasser and an audience, and, more importantly, a letter by one of the leading journalists in Egypt, that had ushered in the phenomenon of writing to the Man. Surprisingly overlooked by most of Nasser's biographers, the letter was penned by Ruz al-Yusuf on the pages of her famous weekly periodical

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⁵⁴ Religious people's graves are usually found in mosques, and the people who look after mosques are referred to as *Khadim al-Masjid*, or the "servant of the mosque."

⁵⁵ See Sayyid 'Uways, *Min Malamih al-Mujtama' al-Misri al-Mu'asir: Thahirat Irsal al-Rasa'il ila Darih al-Imam al-shafi'i* [From the Features of Contemporary Egyptian Society: The phenomenon of sending letters to al-Shafi'i's Shrine] (Cairo: al-Markiz al-Qawmi lil-Buḥuth al-Ijtima'iyyah wa al-Jina'iyyah, 1965), pp.19-29.

⁵⁶ Sayyid 'Uways, *al-Khulud fi Hayat al-Misriyyin al-Mu'asirin* [Immortality in the Life of Contemporary Egyptians] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma lil-Kitab, 1972), p. 26.

⁵⁷ Sayyid 'Uways, *Hadith 'an al-Thaqafa: Ba'd al-Haqa'iq al-'Ilmiyya al-Mu'asira* [On Culture: Some of the Contemporary Egyptian Cultural Facts] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlu al-Miṣriyah, 1970), p.60

of the same name. Sent as early in Nasser's career as 1953, the letter is invaluable not only for its content, nor its initiation of a tradition, but also because it was a rare instance in which Nasser himself felt compelled to respond.

Ruz al-Yusuf was born Fatima al-Yusuf in 1898 in Tripoli, Lebanon.⁵⁸ After her mother had died upon delivering her, her father, a merchant who used to travel across several Middle Eastern countries, left the child in the custody of two friends of the family. The vague information that was reported by al-Yusuf's biographers stated that the custodians, a Christian couple, began calling the child "Ruz," a name that would accompany her throughout her life. Al-Yusuf's move from Lebanon to Egypt resembles a fairy-tale story. Accounts had it that, with the disappearance of her father, al-Yusuf's life with the new family proceeded miserably. One day, a friend of the family, who was preparing himself to migrate to Brazil, suggested that he would take al-Yusuf with him. To the kid's astonishment, the family warmly welcomed the proposal. Egyptian historian Ibrahim 'Abduh maintains that on that day, al-Yusuf's nanny revealed to her that those were not her original parents, and, more surprisingly, that her name was actually Fatima.⁵⁹ The accounts left unanswered the reason why al-Yusuf decided to stick to her "Ruz" name. Also unmentioned was her age at the time of departing Lebanon. The story resumed with the travelers' stop at Alexandria, where, surprisingly, al-Yusuf decided to stay for good and, more so, her company let her.

Al-Yusuf had had a flourishing acting career in Cairo, before she decided to found her own periodical "Ruz al-Yusuf" in 1925, upon noticing the ill-informed coverage of art and artists

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⁵⁸ See Ibrahim 'Abduh, *Ruz al-Yusuf: Sira wa Sahifah* [Ruz al-Yusuf: a Biography and a Periodical] (Cairo: Mu'assasat Sijil al-'Arab, 1961), and Khalid 'Azab, eds. *Ruz al-Yusuf: 80 Sanah Sihafa* [Ruz al-Yusuf: 80 Years of Journalism] (Alexandria: Maktabat al-Iskandarīyyah, 2006).

⁵⁹ Ibrahim 'Abduh, *Ruz al-Yusuf*, pp. 19-21.

in Egyptian media then. The newborn, a weekly magazine, was not exclusively dedicated to art, however. Politics was naturally unavoidable, and al-Yusuf had to find herself an alliance among the several political parties and rivals of that era. As for her private life, she married three times, had two children (one of whom, Ihsan, would become the celebrity journalist and novelist Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus), and led a successful career that turned Ruz al-Yusuf into one of the biggest media institutions in Egypt to last until today. She died in 1958.

Unlike the case of her son Ihsan, we seldom find any mentioning of a special relationship or even encounters between al-Yusuf and Nasser. True, the lady had dedicated her magazine to support the nascent revolution of 1952, given the antagonistic stance that it was taking toward the monarchy, particularly after Ihsan’s influential features on what became known as the issue of *al-Asliha al-Fasida* (the Defective Weapons). First published in Ruz al-Yusuf in 1949,⁶⁰ the story “electrified the already tense atmosphere of the country”⁶¹, with many considering it a major reason behind the mobilization of the free officers and the move toward overthrowing the monarchy.⁶² That support, however, was not unequivocal, for al-Yusuf was critical of the several laws of censorship that the young officers have imposed over the media. It is in that context of choking journalists’ freedom of expression that the al-Yusuf-Nasser exchange occurred.⁶³

Mustafa ‘Abdel Ghani locates the exchange within the few months in which the revolution did

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⁶⁰ See Amirah Abu al-Futuh, *Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus Yatathakkar* [Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus Remembers] (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma lil-Kitab, 1982), p.82.

⁶¹ Said K. Aburish, *Nasser*, p. 33.

⁶² Yusif al-Qa’id, *Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal Yatathakkar: ‘Abdel Nasser wa al-Muthaqqafun wa al-Thaqafa* [Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal Remembers: Nasser, Intellectuals, and Culture] (Egypt: Dar al-Shuruq, 2003), pp. 69-70.

⁶³ Mustafa ‘Abdel Ghani, *Al-Muthaqqafun wa ‘Abdel Nasser* [Nasser and Intellectuals] (Kuwait: Dar Su’ad al-Sabah, 1993), pp. 411-412.

loosen its grip on writers and journalists.⁶⁴ Indeed, al-Yusuf's letter was as much a writing *for* freedom as it was a writing *as* freedom, an attempt by a woman of letter to persuade a man of power that he was as much in need for disagreement as for agreement. The exchange, which took place in 1953, revealed yet again the keen perception of al-Yusuf, who realized, early in Nasser's career (when Muhammad Naguib was still the president of the newly-born republic), the position that the young officer would later occupy in the political and intellectual history of Egypt.

Entitled, "*Khitab Maftuh ila Gamal 'Abdel Nasser*" (An Open letter to Nasser), the letter is bereft of formal structure, particularly in the opening paragraph. There is no mentioning of names (Nasser) nor titles. The letter rather opens thus:

Freedom is the only lung through which people can breathe.

You are as much in need for disagreement as you are for unanimity.

Greetings for your youth that you put in danger and the efforts that you spent for the sake of this homeland. Greetings from a woman who has experienced numerous events and extracted its essence.⁶⁵

Although it is apparently meant for endearment, the reference to Nasser's youth is immediately contrasted with the seniority and maturity of the older al-Yusuf, thereby creating a rather condescending tone toward the predictable recklessness of a youth. Al-Yusuf, who was twenty years older than Nasser, emphasizes on her life experience before she confesses her happiness with the new, young officer who was trying to lead Egypt. Her invocation of age difference and experience at the beginning of the letter could be meant to establish her "capital" before power. It has been noted in several incidents of letter writing that the sender, particularly women, would

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⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ruz al- Yusuf, "*Khitab Maftuh ila Gamal 'Abdel Nasser*" [An Open Letter to Nasser] in *Majallat Ruz al-Yusuf* (Cairo: No. 1300, May 11, 1953). All translations of the letter are mine.

seek a specific capital that would bestow on them “an appropriate epistolary voice.” Lynne Magnusson shows how some poorly educated women would search for more “linguistic” capital and rhetorical sophistication by searching for a writer by proxy.⁶⁶ No linguistic capital is needed, however, in the case of an educated journalist. Rather, it is deemed sufficient to remind Nasser of the sender’s experience and background.

The letter then unfolds as showing simultaneously a belief in Nasser’s good intentions and in the fact that he himself will not be capable of handling things alone. Hence the need to hear the others’ voices:

I know a lot about the hours that you spend working incessantly, your nights of no sleep, and your thorough investigations into every matter in order to make the right decision. But you—*alone*—will not be able to do everything, not even with the sincere aid of those brothers, friends, and acquaintances of you that you trust. For you must also seek the aid of those you do not know, those who live in an atmosphere quite different from yours, are influenced by factors other than those which affect your friends, and live through various, different experiences that cannot be all experienced by one, nor tens, nor a thousand people!⁶⁷

After clarifying the obvious need for plurality in any nascent regime, al-Yusuf reminds Nasser that those different voices might abstain from emerging when they see that the regime is looking for one, singular formula for the future. Nor will they dare to speak when they sense the various obstacles, barriers, and laws that bar them from expressing their ideas freely.

Al-Yusuf, however, is keen on displaying a sympathetic understanding of why Nasser resorts to censoring and limiting people’s freedom of expression. It is as if she suggests she knows he is forced to do so, given that he is “fearful of snakes’ fangs and ships’ mice, of the

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⁶⁶ See Lynne Magnusson, “Widowhood and Linguistic Capital: The Rhetoric and Reception of Anne Bacon’s Epistolary Advice” in *English Literary Renaissance* (31, No. 1 (2001): 3-33).

⁶⁷ “*Khitab Maftuh*,” my emphasis.

tendentious and the corrupted taking advantage of freedom.”⁶⁸ Yet, she precisely proposes that only in an atmosphere of fear, censorship, and absence of freedom do such people find a great opportunity to seize, for “only free people can benefit from freedom.”⁶⁹ Also revealing is al-Yusuf’s grasp of Nasser’s anti-colonial aspirations at the time, which compel him as well not to allow absolute freedom so that voices “of defeat and disintegration” will not sneak into the scene with their subversive calls. Yet again, she employs a pleading, friendly voice to convince Nasser that freedom of expression will not stand in Egypt’s path toward independence and liberation:

But, believe me, this will not occur, for those defeatists had an influence in the past only because strong parties were protecting them. Had they been left unprotected, they would not have survived long. *True* freedom can always eradicate its enemies, as the light of the sun kills the earth’s worms.”⁷⁰

What constitutes true freedom is left unsaid, however. For al-Yusuf’s arguments are less concerned about offering a comprehensive view of freedom than with assuring Nasser that “freedom” should not be seen antagonistically. As mentioned earlier, her thesis constantly oscillates between a belief in Nasser and the good intentions that stand behind his apprehension of freedom on one hand, and the desire to show him, not that his apprehension is not justified, but that it nevertheless should not lead him toward suppressing the freedom of expression, on the other. Furthermore, she employs several rhetorical modes to corner Nasser, leaving him with very few options to defend the outcome of controlling the media at the time: “You are surely fed

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⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, my emphasis.

up when you skip through the daily newspapers every morning to find that they sound as if they are one copy, differing only in titles.”⁷¹

Astonishingly, the letter ends with a prophetic insight. Having credited Nasser for his announcement that any maltreated journalist could take his grievance directly to him, al-Yusuf insists on the impracticality of this approach. It is the personalization of the relationship between people and Nasser, the reduction of the whole regime’s institutions and apparatuses into the single person of Nasser, and ignoring the role of public society, courts, and the legal system as a whole that al-Yusuf is implicitly warning against. After all, Nasser is one individual who has plenty of concerns to care about, and that approach would be unfair “to you, journals, and the grand causes that you are busy working for? *Did not I tell you that you alone cannot do everything?*”⁷² Prophetic, indeed. For it is precisely this view of an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent Nasser that would continuously inspire people to write to him. Never mind the existence of a whole government, of various apparatuses, of a hierarchical system, Nasser would always be both exempted from and invoked against the misdeeds of the very regime he established. It is as though al-Yusuf’s letter is a letter on the potentiality of forthcoming letters if Nasser’s public image does not change—which it, after all, did not.

Interestingly, there is no gendered importance attached to the sender. That a woman has written this letter can add very little to our understanding of it. It is not a “feminist” letter, but rather a liberal call for abolishing censorship and moving toward a real public space, where private people, like herself, can freely pour their hearts before an audience. If it has been noted

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⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, my emphasis.

that the letter is a “feminine mode par excellence,”⁷³ it is with al-Yusuf less about her or her female readers’ specific needs than about every Egyptian’s. It is probably this aspire to implicate her readership in this debate that propelled al-Yusuf to publish this letter publicly. She could have quite easily reached Nasser otherwise. Yet, I argue that in her mind an implied reader (read: ordinary Egyptians) occupied a space next to Nasser’s. It is unfortunate that we have no account of how such a public letter/advice to Nasser was received by the magazine’s readers.

What we do have is a reply written by none other than Nasser himself. In a rare incident of an open reciprocity between the political power and the media in modern Arabic writing, the very next issue of *Ruz al-Yusuf* carried Nasser’s response, entitled, “*Al-Khayt al-Rafi’ bayna al-Hurriyya wa al-Fawda*” (The Thin Line Between Freedom and Chaos). Much shorter than al-Yusuf’s (563 vs. 942 words), Nasser’s letter follows a similar structure of omitting titles and formality, if more vehemently. Whereas al-Yusuf’s letter mentions Nasser’s name once in the letter’s title, thereby adding some personal tone to it, Nasser’s title delves right into the subject, relegating al-Yusuf’s name to the background of the intellectual battle. More importantly, the title here serves to tersely summarize the gist of the previous letter, containing an indirect charge of promoting chaos, if not against al-Yusuf herself, then against a potential reading of her advice.

Also telling is the way Nasser replies to al-Yusuf’s opening paragraphs. Responding to her three first paragraphs, including the greeting, Nasser impatiently moves from a short sentence to the second, maintaining a style of only touching upon what has been brought in her letter:

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⁷³ Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). p.103.

As for your greeting, I thank you for it. As for your experience, I am sure it rests on the lessons of life. As for your appreciation of the efforts I make, I am grateful you feel that way. As for your opinion that I alone cannot do everything, this is also my opinion and the opinion of all of my colleagues the Free Officers.⁷⁴

Nasser not only does not greet al-Yusuf back, sufficing instead to thank her for her one, but also attempts to deprive her letter of one of its basic merits by explicitly stating that he never acts alone, nor does he seek to do everything by himself. The Arabic sentences are punctuated by the use of the conjunction *amma*, roughly rendered as “as for.” The conjunction is generally used in the context of detailing things, or moving from one point to the other, something that Nasser precisely, and hastily, does here.

The response is predicated upon an attempt to strip al-Yusuf’s letter of any genuine, original view it may possess. It does so in two ways. First, it denies any implicit charge that is leveled by al-Yusuf at the new regime and Nasser personally. Aside from refuting the claim that Nasser seeks to act individually, the response goes further as to dispel the very core allegation of al-Yusuf’s letter, namely, the suffocation of freedom of expression. Having shown the damage that absolute freedom could inflict upon a society, Nasser rhetorically wonders:

However, where is it this freedom that [you claim] we restricted? You yourself know that criticism is allowed, and that we insist on our demands for guidance and tutorship. Nay, we even welcome any attack against us if it was meant for the sake of the homeland and the building of its future—and not meant to destroy, ruin, or merely incite.⁷⁵

Second, Nasser appropriates al-Yusuf’s opinions themselves, claiming them as his own, only to show that they justify whatever approach to freedom he adopts. The need for disagreement, for example, is something, he says, “I believe in, and trust that it is of the core foundations of

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⁷⁴ Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser, “*Al-Khayt al-Rafi’ bayna al-Hurriyya wa al-Fawda*” [The Thin Line between Freedom and Chaos] in *Majalt Ruz al-Yusuf* (Cairo: No. 1301, May 18, 1953). All translations of the letter are mine.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

freedom.”⁷⁶ But if al-Yusuf herself understands the fear of giving infiltrators a chance to exploit freedom, then she unintentionally gives Nasser a pretext on which to capitalize:

You yourself said that you know how much I am afraid of allowing freedom lest it would harm the solid position of the country if its waves were infiltrated by the advocates of defeat and disintegration. As such, you had expressed *parts* of what I feel, but allow me to add something more: I am not afraid of allowing freedom. Rather, I fear it would be a commodity that is bought and sold, as it was before July 23.⁷⁷

The letter ends with Nasser underscoring once again that whatever he does is meant for the sake of the *watan*. Nasser, as an individual, is not averse to being subject to criticism and accountability, for “I believe none of us is beyond criticism or infallible.” What matters, after all, is Egypt. Nasser can “place his head in his palms,” a metaphor for sacrificing the self, but cannot do so with “the interests and the sanctities of the homeland.”⁷⁸

It is worth noting how Nasser meticulously traces each of al-Yusuf’s main phrases and arguments, replying to, agreeing with, or refuting them. He understands the nature of the epistolary exchange, where “the *you* of any *I-you* statement can, and is expected to, become the *I* of a new text.”⁷⁹ Janet Gurkin shows how this *I-you* relationship in epistolary exchange differs from any other first person narrative, like memoir and diary, in which “there is no reified addressee.”⁸⁰ The “you” of Nasser in al-Yusuf’s letter is a physical “you,” a specific address to a real person who, in turns, understands this message and acts accordingly. He reclaims his voice,

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⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid, my emphasis.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity*, p. 121.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.117.

turning his former “you” into a present “I” in less than a week. In so doing, Nasser is not objecting to his role as audience, for he never questions al-Yusuf’s right to address him. What he actually rejects is to remain as such, as a listening “you,” a mute partner who does not engage in personal negotiations over what should and should not be done. By posing as a responder in the realm of reciprocal writing, Nasser at once offers his blessing to an emerging tradition but warns future senders that his status as an audience can be promptly reversed.

As was argued earlier, al-Yusuf’s letter can be seen as prescient in the sense that it foreshadows a history of Egyptians overriding institutions and regime apparatuses in an attempt to reach Nasser directly, to present a grievance or demand a right. This attempt was based on a personal trust in Nasser and a belief that he does not know. What had ensued afterwards was a corpus of letter writing that would combine those two elements.

A Son Following Suit

In 1980, ten years after the death of Nasser, famous Egyptian novelist, short story writer, and journalist, Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus, published *Aasif Lam A’ud Astati* (Sorry, I No Longer Can). The book contains seven short stories, one of which bears the title of the collection. As it is the case with most of ‘Abdel Quddus’ literary input, it had women as protagonists, centered on love and sexuality, and, more importantly, went almost unnoticed in the Egyptian and Arabic critical circles. Critics have generally treated ‘Abdel Quddus’ writings as sensational, superficial, and flat. Famous and prolific as he was, ‘Abdel Quddus and his literary career would be rarely taken seriously, often left out of Egyptian literary canon. ‘Abdel Quddus himself has complained against critics’ disregard and neglect of his works, considering himself “one of the most unfairly

treated writers by critics.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, he has mostly found a warm reception among the public, his novels selling more than most of his contemporaries’, including the critically-admired Naguib Mahfuz, so much so that he was awarded the title of “the First Writer, in a popular poll conducted by the American University of Cairo regarding the most beloved writer of 1952.”⁸²

‘Abdel Quddus’ 1980 collection includes a piece that could have otherwise found an important place in the debate around Nasser, particularly the latter’s relationship with writers. Subtitled, “Seven Short Stories and a Letter,” the book in fact opts to open with the letter, preceded by a short preface in which ‘Abdel Quddus elucidates its *story*. He begins thus:

The Charge was:

- Sex
- Atheism

I discovered a letter I had written to Nasser in 1955. I was astonished, for I do not ever recall writing a letter to any president. This could have been the only one that I wrote, then forgot. I even forgot whether I had actually sent it to Nasser, or only wrote it before throwing it into the drawer of oblivion.⁸³

‘Abdel Quddus subsequently proceeds to tell us the story of this “forgotten” letter. It was in the context of publishing his collection *al-Banat wa al- Sayf* (Girls and the Summer) serialized in Ruz al-Yusuf magazine. “It seems,” ‘Abdel Quddus goes on, “that Nasser was reading [it]... and

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⁸¹ Muhammad Misba’i, *Surat al-Mar’a fi Riwayat Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus* [The Image of Women in Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus’ Novels] (Algeria: Dar al-Qasabah lil-Nashr, 2000), p.18. For a discussion on ‘Abdel Quddus’ fiction, see for example ‘Isa al-Na’uri, *Udaba’ min al-Sharq wa al- Gharb* [Litterateurs, East and West] (Beirut: Manshurat ‘Uwaydat, 1977); Ghali Shukri, *Azmat al-Jins fi al-Qissa al-‘Arabiyya* [The Dilemma of Sex in the Arabic Story] (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1987), and Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim & ‘Abdel ‘Azim Anis, *Fi al- Thaqafa al-Misriyya* [On Egyptian Culture] (Egypt: Dar al-Fikr al-Jadid).

⁸² Yahya Haqqi, *Khatawat fi al- Naqd* [Steps in Criticism] (Egypt: Maktabat Dar al-‘Uruba, 196-), p.171.

⁸³ Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus, “Hal Qara’a ‘Abdel Nasser Hathihi al-Risala?” [Did Nasser Read This Letter?] in *Aasif Lam A’ud Astati’* [Sorry, I No Longer Can] (Cairo: Muntasir, 1980), p.6.

he sent me his disapproval of what was being published, or at least his dissatisfaction.”⁸⁴ The letter itself states that it is Nasser’s confidant, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, who conveys Nasser’s opinion to ‘Abdel Quddus, probably at the former’s behest. As indicated by its title, the collection revolves around stories of Egyptian girls during the summer, including one that apparently stirred the “strictly conservative” Nasser, as ‘Abdel Quddus characterizes him,⁸⁵ which features scenes of what takes place inside the cabins of Alexandria beach.

But it was not only the free depiction of sexual rendezvous that upset Nasser, for the incident has coincided with another provoking publication in the magazine. It was Mustafa Mahmud’s articles on religion that were not welcomed by the president. Although ‘Abdel Quddus did not elaborate on the nature of those articles, one could guess their critical approach to God and Islam, given Mahmud’s interests at the time.

The story confirms my argument about the extent to which Egyptians’ relationship with Nasser was personalized, so much that he himself internalized it. There exist several incidents in which Nasser’s taste and opinion became the gauge of what could or could not be published or screened, coupled with his personal interference for the ban or permission of a specific cultural product. Realizing this, Egyptian intellectuals and artists would turn to Nasser as the last resort, ironically against his own system and (possibly) ruling. The case of Kamal al-Sheikh’s movie *Miramar*, which was based on Mahfuz’s novel, remains probably the most notorious one. Joel Gordon, who describes the film as being the first to openly criticize the system without resort to symbolism or allusion, relays how the solicitation of Nasser’s personal approval was a pre-

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⁸⁴ Ibid, p.7.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.6.

requisite to show the film.⁸⁶ In ‘Abdel Quddus’ case, the situation is more puzzling because Nasser himself initiated the exchange. It is also an incident in which Nasser the president intersects with Nasser the man, for ‘Abdel Quddus did in fact have a personal relationship with him.

As mentioned earlier, ‘Abdel Quddus was known to Nasser prior to the revolution, his features on the “Defective Weapons” having turned him into a renowned journalist. Accounts had it that Nasser used to frequent ‘Abdel Quddus’ office at Ruz al-Yusuf, finding him a source for news.⁸⁷ Their friendship developed very closely that ‘Abdel Quddus used to nickname Nasser “Jimmy.”⁸⁸ It was during the turbulent year of 1954, and what was historically known as “March Crisis,” that the two men’s friendship received a harsh stroke. ‘Abdel Quddus’ son tells us how his father’s article in Ruz al-Yusuf on “The Secret Society that Rules Egypt” has caused him three months in jail.⁸⁹ Whether the punishment was at the behest of Nasser is difficult to ascertain, although he surely knew about it. ‘Abdel Quddus even mentioned to Mahmud Murad that Nasser himself had called him in prison and apologetically said, “What can I do, Ihsan.”⁹⁰ Undoubtedly, the incident has left an inerasable strain between them, with ‘Abdel Quddus changing even the way he addressed Nasser after his release:

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⁸⁶ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser’s Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002), p. 225. See chapter four for more details.

⁸⁷ ‘Abdel Rahman Abu ‘Awf, *Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus bayna al-Sahafa wa al- Riwaya* [Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus between Journalism and the Novel] (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A’la lil-Thaqafa, 2006), p.145.

⁸⁸ Mahmud Murad, *l’tirafat Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus: al-Hurriyya..al-Jins* [The Confessions of Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus: Freedom.. Sex] (Cairo: al-‘Arabi li al-Nashr wa al- Tawzi’, _), p. 52.

⁸⁹ Muhammad ‘Abdel Quddus, *Hikayat Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus* [Ihsan Abdel Quddus’ Tales] (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li al-Kitab, 2011), pp. 95-97.

⁹⁰ Mahmud Murad, *l’tirafat Ihsan*, p. 50.

A few minutes after my release, and upon arriving at home, Nasser called me, apologized again, and spoke about what he was doing during that severe crisis. He then invited me over for dinner... I remember very well that when I arrived, he came to welcome me and see me to the salon, saying “*Itfaddal, Ihsan*” so that, being a guest, I could enter before him. But I stopped motionless and said, “Excuse me, *efendim*,⁹¹ *Itfaddal*, your Excellency.” My reply was surprising, for I used to call him “Jimmy” before. He then said, “What happened, Ihsan? You have completely changed.” But I repeated, “*Itfaddal, efendim*.”⁹²

The letter’s preface confirms the distance that occurred between the two men after 1954, although ‘Abdel Quddus based it on his inability “to fulfill the demands of men in charge.”⁹³ This, together with his desire not to rely on mediators, was the reason behind choosing the letter as a medium for communication. Whether he had actually sent it remains uncertain, for it was equally plausible to ‘Abdel Quddus that he had merely “written it then thrown it into oblivion.”⁹⁴ If that is the case, then why did he publish it when he did? Sensing the readers’ potential misgivings around it, ‘Abdel Quddus rushes to offer his own answer: the letter responds to a controversy that surrounded one of this current collection’s stories (though he did not specify it), bespeaks to a debate that was still taking place in Egypt, and articulates several topics that were yet to be resolved.

Questions remain, nonetheless. If we were to take the claim regarding the actual sending of the letter without a grain of salt, it would still be unconvincing that ‘Abdel Quddus only found the letter ten years after the death of Nasser. Naturally, between the date of writing (1955) and that of publishing (1980), the tradition of writing to the Man has been revealed in so many books,

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⁹¹ A Turkish word that means “sir.”

⁹² Ibid, p.52.

⁹³ Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus, “Hal Qara’a ‘Abdel Nasser Hathihi al-Risala?”, p.6.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

stories, magazines, and memoirs. Was ‘Abdel Quddus finding himself a place in that archive? More puzzling is the fact that he chose to publish the letter in a book of fiction. Indeed, the letter would have probably fitted more in one of ‘Abdel Quddus’ published political writing, such as *Khawatir Siyasiyya*⁹⁵ (Political Reflections), which was published by the same publishing house only a year earlier. By opting to include the letter in a short story collection, ‘Abdel Quddus, I would argue, adds something “fictional” to it. In fact, as if to raise more suspicions about it, he himself acknowledges in the same preface that the letter is not meant to be read as part of his memories, autobiography, or diaries, for he has already published all of his memoirs. “Whatever I find myself unable to publish in an article,” he explains, “I publish it as a story, disguising myself behind a character of my imagination.”⁹⁶

Furthermore, if Nasser had not actually received the letter, a possibility that ‘Abdel Quddus proposes, then the title “Did Nasser Read this Letter,” becomes completely rhetorical. But if Nasser did not read it, then we, readers, would. The title, the paratext in Gerard Genette’s famous terminology, serves to seduce us into devouring that text which Nasser could have equally read or missed. We will find ourselves replacing the “Nasser” of the title, seeking to reply affirmatively to the proposed question. If Nasser read it, then we would be the second reader. If he did not, then we would be the first to read a letter that was not written for us (or was it?) Unlike his mother’s letter, which was a public correspondence with Nasser, ‘Abdel Quddus’ was not initially meant to be. Whether he did not want to be received as merely imitating his mother, or whether he saw disadvantages in publicizing the letter in 1955, remains in the realm of speculation.

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⁹⁵ See Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus, *Khawatir Siyasiyya* [Political Reflections] (Cairo: Muntasir, 1979).

⁹⁶ Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus, “Hal Qara’a ‘Abdel Nasser Hathihi al-Risala?”, p.7.

The letter can be seen as ‘Abdel Quddus’ self-defense against the two unfavorable comments he heard Nasser was making against him. First, there is the free depiction of sexual relationships in his *al-Banat wa al-Sayf*. Interestingly, ‘Abdel Quddus does not seem radically different from Nasser’s social conservatism, for he only defends the writer’s right to honestly reflect the reality that he sees in a society. As for those realities, he acknowledges that what was taking place in Egypt was “decadence.”⁹⁷ He perceives it as his and writers’ duty to explicitly approach this moral decay, refusing to sugarcoat it. After showing that writers all over the world have done exactly this, from France’s Balzac to Italy’s Moravia, he declares that he was following what great Egyptian writers, including Tawfiq al-Hakim in his *al-Ribat al-Muqaddas* (The Sacred Bond) and Ibrahim al-Mazini in *Thalathat Rijal wa Imra’a* (Three Men and a Woman), had done before. But a defense will not be complete without invoking Nasser himself. ‘Abdel Quddus reminds him—and probably us—of a conversation that had occurred between them on the “great role that narrative literature could play,”⁹⁸ and that he has, under Nasser’s patronage, contributed to animating the literary life in Egypt. In other words, ‘Abdel Quddus attempts to take Nasser to his own words, showing that he was precisely doing that which Nasser had already approved.

At stake also is the religious dimension of Nasser’s comments. And it is only here that ‘Abdel Quddus’ confessions become so personal we forget he is addressing a president. Having acknowledged that some of those articles published in *Ruz al-Yusuf* on religion might have exceeded the limit of what is permissible, he then turns the letter into a confessional booth:

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⁹⁷ Ibid, p.9.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.10.

I believe in Allah, Mr. President. I am not an atheist. You may not know that I pray. I do not do so ostentatiously or hypocritically, for none of the aspects of my life may suggest that I pray. But I do pray, because it makes me feel comfortable. Yet, I believe that our religion is dominated by several superstitions and absurd interpretations, which the clergy uses to keep the people in darkness so that they could easily exploit and dominate them. Had our religion been purified from this... it would have made it easier for *you to lead the people in the path you had drawn for them*.⁹⁹

Once again, Nasser's aspirations are employed in 'Abdel Quddus' defense. It is his claim that he acts only in accordance with what is beneficial to the revolution and its leader. It is astounding, nonetheless, to see 'Abdel Quddus' pleading regarding his prayer to a president who has seldom, if ever, attached himself to religious manifestations. In fact, Haykal himself has avoided answering his interlocutor about whether Nasser was praying or fasting.¹⁰⁰ It is significant, however, for it further obfuscates the question of the letter's intended audience and the nature of the epistolary relationship between Nasser and 'Abdel Quddus.

In fact, the way 'Abdel Quddus addresses Nasser supplements such ambivalent position of him. True, there is no longer a nicknaming of Nasser, Jimmy or otherwise. Yet the first three lines of the letter tellingly combine formality and informality:

Mr. President, Gamal 'Abdel Nasser,

Dear Mr. President,

A greeting of love and longing.¹⁰¹

'Abdel Quddus' choice of the word *hubb*, or love, might have been intentional, compelled by an incident he relays in the preface. He used to present a program in a radio channel at the time, concluding it with *Tusbihona 'ala Khayr*, *Tusbihona 'ala Hubb*, or (Good Night, Good Love).

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⁹⁹ Ibid, p.11, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁰ Fu'ad Matar, *Bi Saraha*, pp.179-180.

¹⁰¹ Ihsan 'Abdel Quddus, "Hal Qara'a 'Abdel Nasser Hathihi al-Risala?", p.8.

Nasser objected, and suggested the use of the less sexually-loaded word for love, *mahabba*.

‘Abdel Quddus, however, did not conform, reasoning that he wanted to spread the correct use of the word *hubb*, whatever that means. Although he stopped presenting the program, his resort to the same word in the letter could serve as an implicit reference to that incident.

The body of the letter sees ‘Abdel Quddus addressing Nasser only as “President,” “Mr. President,” or “Your Excellency.” Toward the end of the letter, however, he rearticulates his intentions behind writing to the Man. It goes, “Mr. President, what I intended with this letter is to retain your trust. I need you, *as a supporter and a brother*.”¹⁰² It is signed with *al-Mukhlis*, or the sincere, Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus.

Compared to other incidents of writing to the Man, ‘Abdel Quddus’ letter stands out as the one whose author himself casts doubts on its status. It is situated in a space between fiction and non-fiction. More importantly, it is the quickest answer to al-Yusuf’s prophetic view in her previous letter. To her disappointment, it was none other than her son, Ihsan ‘Abdel Quddus, who would so soon resort to Nasser, asking for more freedom of speech.

Declaring Allegiance: If Only You Knew How Much We Love You

The end of the 1950s would offer us yet a special case of writing to the Man, against one of the most notorious incidents to take place in Egyptian prisons. On June 15, 1960, prominent Egyptian Communist and intellectual, Shuhdi ‘Atiyya al-Shafi’i, was murdered at the hands of his inquisitors and jailers. A year earlier, al-Shafi’i wrote a letter to Nasser, declaring his

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¹⁰² Ibid, p.12, my emphasis.

allegiance, expounding his and his comrades' stance toward the regime, and pleading that Nasser would release them. The particularity of this letter stems from the fact that it was published posthumously in 1975 in an issue that the leftist Egyptian magazine, *al-Tali'a*, dedicated to al-Shafi'i.¹⁰³ In addition, there was no record to testify neither that al-Shafi'i managed to send the letter nor that Nasser knew about it. Nor do we even know how the letter was rescued. The letter is only part of the story of a legend in the making; the epitome of a Communist's suffering during Nasser's regime, rivaled only by his Muslim Brother counterpart, Sayyid Qutb.¹⁰⁴

Al-Shafi'i's case occurred during the most intense and violent campaign against Egyptian Communists in Nasser's Egypt, the period in which "one of the dark pages of modern Egyptian political history would be written,"¹⁰⁵ to quote one of its now famous victims, Sonallah Ibrahim. It began in 1959 and lasted until 1964. Much has been written about the reasons behind the campaign, and the larger story of Communists under Nasser.¹⁰⁶ The crisis occurred in the context

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¹⁰³ See *al-Tali'a*, No. 1, January 1975, pp. 82-113.

¹⁰⁴ Qutb, arguably the most influential and controversial Islamist thinker in the 20th century, was executed in Egypt in 1966. For a brief discussion of his thought, see Hamid Algar's introduction to Qutb's *Social Justice in Islam* (Oneonta, N.Y.: Islamic Publications International, c2000).

¹⁰⁵ Sonallah Ibrahim, *Yawmiyyat al-Wahat* [Diaries of al-Wahat] (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 2004), p. 27. Ibrahim was one of al-Shafi'i's mates in prison. He would later dedicate a celebrated work of his, *Najmat Aghustus* [The Star of August] to the memory of al-Shafi'i.

¹⁰⁶ On that specific campaign against Egyptian Communists, see Ibrahim's book that was mentioned above; Ilham Saif al-Naser, *Fi Mu'taqal Abi Za'bal* [At Abu Za'bal's Prison] (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 1977); al-Sayyid Yusuf, *Muthakkarat Mu'taqal Siyasi: Safha min Tarikh Misr* [Memoirs of a Political Prisoner: A Chapter in Egypt's History] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li al-Kitab, 1999); and Fawzi Habashi, *Mu'taqal Kul al-'Usur: Hayati fi al-Watan* [Prisoner of all Generations: My life in the Homeland] (Cairo: Dar Mirit, 2004). On Nasser and Egyptian Communists see Tareq Y. Ismael & Rif'at al-Sa'id, *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988) and Fakhri Labib, *Al-Shuyu'iyyun wa 'Abdel Nasser: al-Tahaluf wa al-Muwajaha* [Communists and Nasser: Alliance and Confrontation] (Cairo: Sharikat al-Amal li al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1990).

of what Malcolm Kerr calls “shifts in alignments”¹⁰⁷ that characterized Nasser’s policies at the time. Nasser’s receptive treatment (though not necessarily view) of Egyptian Communists in the wake of their positive role during the Suez Canal crisis would come to an end in 1958. Two incidents caused this. First, there was the unity with Syria and the emergence of the United Arab Republic in February, of which the Syrian Communist party was not favorable. Although Egyptian Communists first welcomed the union, they were later influenced by the stance of their Syrian comrades, particularly after Nasser had dissolved the Syrian Communist party.¹⁰⁸

The worst was still looming, however. In July of the same year ‘Abdel Karim Qasim led a coup d’état in Iraq that overthrew the Hashemite Monarchy and established the Republic. The coup was supported by Iraqi Communists who, together with Qasim and their comrades in the UAR, opposed the unity with Egypt and attacked Nasser. The latter, who was seen by Communists as a symbol of Egyptian bourgeoisie attempting to impose its vision on Syria, was disenchanted with the Iraqi revolution, after initially hoping it would bring Iraq to join the UAR. What ensued was a “Cairene crusade against Communism and Communists. The largest-scale arrest in the history of Egyptian Communists occurred in March 28, 1959.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, it was a great opportunity for Nasser to halt the growth of one of his two biggest enemies among the political parties, second only to the Muslim Brotherhood. After all,

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¹⁰⁷ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (London, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.18.

¹⁰⁸ Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society, the Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 270-272.

¹⁰⁹ Khayri ‘Aziz, “Abdel Nasser wa al-Ittihad al-Suwyati” [Nasser and the Soviet Union] in *‘Abdel Nasser wa Ma Ba’d* [Nasser and After], edited by Anis al-Sayigh (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1980), p. 252.

Communism... was not simply an ideology differing on this and that point from Nasser's brand of revolutionary nationalism, but something much worse; an organized movement in competition with his own, and outside his control.¹¹⁰

A Turbulent year it was, its repercussions going far beyond the Middle East to include realignments and shifts in the stance toward the US and the USSR. However, not all Egyptian Communists were unfavorable to the unity, and al-Shafi'i was a notable example. Indeed, all of the writers who documented the case of al-Shafi'i unanimously agreed on his support and belief in Nasser. Sonallah Ibrahim relays this dialogue between al-Shafi'i and one of his jailers:

-Are you a Communist, bastard? Say: I am a woman

- This is shame, and your behavior harms the regime. We are nationalist forces, and we are not against the government. Even if we were, you could not just act so monstrosly. We have opinions, we support the revolution, and President Nasser himself knows that.¹¹¹

Exempting Nasser, that is. This attitude by which Nasser is distanced from the excesses and abuses of his regime is typical of the attitude of Egyptian communists who suffered from their impact. Unlike the Muslim Brothers, who believed Nasser was an evil,¹¹² most of the Egyptian Communists who were imprisoned and tortured between 1959-1964 remained faithful to Nasser and the revolution, so much so that after their release, they chose to dissolve their party and opted to work within the state's organizations. True, tens of books were harshly written against the officers and the intelligence, but Nasser the person remained, for the most part, beyond suspicion. 'Adil Hammuda, commenting on suppressing the students' movement in 1968

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¹¹⁰ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, p. 19.

¹¹¹ Sonallah Ibrahim, *Ayyam al-Wahat*, p. 228.

¹¹² See my discussion of Zaynab al-Ghazali's autobiography in chapter 3.

by the then secretary of state Sha'rawi Jum'a, expresses this somewhat incredible belief in Nasser rather beautifully:

We were not against Nasser. We never attacked him, never chanted "*Irhal*", never demanded his fall... What we only wanted was to send him an urgent "telegraph," from his sons in the University of Cairo to his house in Manshiyyit al-Bakri... Alas, the telegraph did not reach him, or it was maybe distorted, after the apparatuses had added a line or scratched another.¹¹³

Communist's faithfulness to the revolution was unfathomable to some, given the amount of torture and suffering they faced at the hands of its men. They were accused of being masochists who "find pleasure in the torment that was poured on them."¹¹⁴ The justification was that Nasser's revolution cannot just be reduced to torture and prisons, even though they themselves were among its victims. Rather, positive and negative aspects should all be contextualized to infer a better understanding of Nasser's movement, transcend its shortcomings, and continue its progressive projects.¹¹⁵

Still, the case of Shuhdi al-Shafi'i reached a mythical vindication of Nasser. He and forty eight of his jail mates comrades (the most famous of whom is Sonallah Ibrahim) were sent to court in what was referred to as the "Case of the Forty Eight," for they all were members of HADITO, the Democratic Movement for National Liberation.¹¹⁶ The trial took place through the first half of 1960, with the defendants making several appearances at court. It was al-Shafi'i who

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¹¹³ 'Adil Hammuda, *Azmat al-Muthaqqafin wa Thawrat Yulio* [The Crisis of the Intellectuals and the July Revolution] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1985), pp.14-17.

¹¹⁴ Abu Saif Yousif, "Likay La Yandam Ahad 'ala al-Haya" [In Order Not to Regret a Life], appendix to Shuhdi 'Atiyya al-Shafi'i, *Tatawwur al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Misriyya, 1882-1956* [The Development of the Egyptian National Movement, 1882-1956] (Cairo: Dar Shuhdi, 1983), p. 329.

¹¹⁵ See what Mahmud Amin al-'Alim, one of the most prominent Egyptian Communists and intellectuals of the past century, and himself a prisoner during Nasser's era, had to say on this in "Misr 'Abdel Nasser" [Nasser's Egypt] in *23 Yulio: Khamsat Ab'ad* [July 23: Five Dimensions] (Beirut: Dar al-Quds, 1974), pp.29-52.

¹¹⁶ Fakhri Labib, *al-Shuyu'iyyun wa 'Abdel Nasser*, p. 417.

delivered a self-defense speech before the court on March 8. *Al-Tali'a*'s issue on al-Shafi'i left us with a few passages from the transcript of this speech, in which al-Shafi'i declared:

Am I on trial merely for embracing Communist principles, as the prosecution goes? Would I be charged for that, even if it was proved to the court that I support the regime and do not seek to overthrow it? It is impossible. No state would charge people for their principles. President Nasser himself said that there could not be a trial for one's beliefs and principles.¹¹⁷

Al-Shafi'i and the other defendants were moved from al-Wahat into Abu Zi'bal prison, where on June 15, he died due to severe torture at the hands of prison officers.

“He died while screaming, ‘for Nasser’s sake, please.’”¹¹⁸ Thus goes most of the accounts of al-Shafi'i's final words before he was pronounced dead, overheard by those who were close to his cell. Ever since that time, al-Shafi'i was referred to as the martyr “who died while chanting, ‘long live Nasser’!”¹¹⁹ He was killed “while defending the regime and the leader of the regime.”¹²⁰ The news of al-Shafi'i's death was shocking and frightening, no less than the accounts of his belief in Nasser until the last moment. It was perhaps in a subconscious attempt to understand such an opaque relationship with Nasser that Sonallah Ibrahim writes, in one of his random diaries in prison:

A large number of old Bolsheviks who were detained and mistreated remained certain that they were persecuted without [Stalin's] knowledge. They never recognized that it was Stalin

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¹¹⁷ *Al-Tali'a*, p. 85.

¹¹⁸ Sonallah Ibrahim, *Ayyam al-Wahat*, p.228.

¹¹⁹ Salah 'Isa, *Muthaqqafun wa 'Askar* [Intellectuals and Military] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1986), p.35.

¹²⁰ From a letter sent by al-Shafi'i's wife to the head of the court on July 1st, 1960. See *al-Tali'a*, pp. 89-90.

himself who ordered their arrest. After returning from torture sessions, many of them would write with their blood, on the walls of their cells, 'long live Stalin.'¹²¹

It was thanks to al-Shafi'i's wife, Roxani Petredes, that the news of his death was made public. Petredes followed the prison car that moved the inmates to Abu Za'bal prison, and learnt about her husbands' fate from the prison guards.¹²² Five days later, she was able to publish an obituary in none other than the regime's own paper of record, *al-Ahram*.¹²³ At the time, Nasser was in an official visit to Yugoslavia. There are different accounts as to how Nasser knew about the incident. Tahir 'Abdel Hakim, himself a prisoner during the same era, reports that al-Shafi'i's wife sent a telegram to Nasser, protesting her husband's death.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, no record of that telegram was kept. On the other hand, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal says it was him who first relayed the news to Nasser.¹²⁵ Still worse, other accounts have Nasser completely surprised when some Yugoslavian journalists asked him about al-Shafi'i's death. Egyptian journalist Mahmud al-Sa'dani even says that "Nasser, attending a parliament session in Yugoslavia, was astonished when a member asked for a minute of silence, mourning the struggler Shuhdi 'Atiyya

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¹²¹ Sonallah Ibrahim, *Ayyam al-Wahat*, p.83. In the footnotes, which were written at the time of publishing this book in 2004, Ibrahim, commenting on the above entry, says, "Were I mindful, at the time when I wrote this, how much it could be applied to our situation in al-Wahat?" See p. 258.

¹²² Ibid, p.33.

¹²³ See the foreword that Sha'ban Yusif wrote for al-Shafi'i's literary works, which were published posthumously in Shuhdi 'Atiyya al-Shafi'i, *Harat Um al-Husayni wa Qisas Ukhra* [Um Al-Husayni's Neighborhood and Other Stories] (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la lil-Thaqafa, 2009), pp. 5-6. Sonallah Ibrahim alludes to the fact that the censorship over newspapers did not include the obituary section, which therefore enabled Petredes to publish the obituary. See *Ayyam al-Wahat*, p.33.

¹²⁴ Tahir 'Abdel hakim, *Al-Aqdam al-'Ariya: al-Shuyu'iyyun al-Misriyyun, Khams Sanawat fi al- Sujun wa Mu'askarat al-Ta'thib* [The Bare Feet: Egyptian Communists, Five Years in Prison and Torture Camps] (Beirut: Dar Ibn Khaldun, 1974), p. 184. 'Abdel Min'im al-Ghazali, in the preface to *al-Tali'a*'s issue, seconds this. See *al-Tali'a*, p.86.

¹²⁵ Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, *Li Misr, la li 'Abdel Nasser* [For Egypt, not for Nasser] (Cairo: Tawzi' al-Akhbar, 1976), p. 46.

who fell as a martyr in one of the Egyptian prisons.”¹²⁶ At any rate, Nasser’s public reaction was to order an investigation instantly. His more private one, however, was reported by Haykal:

Having heard the story, Nasser’s outrage was overwhelming. He picked up the phone and called the secretary of state, relaying to him what he had learnt from me, before adding verbatim, ‘if this could happen in the time of the revolution, then it would be more honest to end this and go back to our homes. By Allah, King Farouk’s era would be seen as better.’¹²⁷

Whether Nasser had heard of al-Shafi’i prior to the latter’s death is left to speculations. Also uncertain is the conditions of the unrequited epistolary between them. Did al-Shafi’i try to sneak the letter out of prison with some guards? Did it reach Nasser’s hands or, for that matter, any of his men? Haykal does not say a word, nor does he even allude to the letter. Aside from mentioning there was a letter, Sonallah Ibrahim and other eyewitnesses, who were al-Shafi’i’s mates at the time, offer no more. Unlike ‘Abdel Quddus’s letter, for which we have the sender’s full disclosure regarding its circumstances, little, if any, is known about al-Shafi’i’s, apart from the date (September, 1959, a few months before the beginning of his trial), and the text of the letter.

Interestingly, the letter begins by negotiating the meaning of writing to Nasser. After addressing the letter to “Mr. President Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser,” al-Shafi’i, an intellectual advocate of democracy and the rule of law, seems aware of the separation of power that is (should be?) ruling Egyptian political scene. “The decision in my case must be left to the court,”¹²⁸ he writes, adding that it is only because he senses a bigger conspiracy against all progressive forces in

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¹²⁶ Mahmud al-Sa’dani, *Al-Tariq ila Zimsh* [The Way to Zimsh] (Cairo: Dar Akhbar al-Youm, 1993), p. 176.

¹²⁷ Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, *li Misr*, pp. 46-47.

¹²⁸ The letter in *al-Tali’a*, p. 91

Egypt and, consequently, the revolution itself that he seeks to write to Nasser. Al-Shafi'i is keen to show that he does not perceive the whole case personally, for it is "not merely a trial for one individual charged with a punishable act by the Penal Code."¹²⁹ He feels "compelled to write," the letter goes on, "whatever risk this may incur."¹³⁰ What kind of risk comes with writing to Nasser is undeclared, although it could be guessed that he fears the letter might be caught by the guards before reaching Nasser, as will be shown below.

The letter then proceeds with a detailed exposition of the circumstances: the disagreement between Iraq and Egypt, the role of reactionary forces in inciting against Communists, and the latter's stance during the whole case. Throughout this, al-Shafi'i's main objective is to affirm the identification between Nasser's and Egyptian Communists' views, so much so that someone who is accustomed to Nasser's rhetoric and terminology could see him in the letter. It is "the reactionary forces" who sow the seeds of discord," "imperialism," "Zionism," "the followers of colonialism," "the Saudi regime," "the Hashemites of Jordan," who, among others, are spreading lies about "the most sincere supporters of the national regime, and the most enthusiastic who call for the people to unite around Nasser's leadership, not only of the republic, but of the entire Arab East."¹³¹

Interspersed in the letter are references to several of Nasser's decisions and speeches that al-Shafi'i glorifies. Whether it is "your wonderful speech in the collaborative conference in November 1958," or "your remarkable law on limiting companies' profits that was issued early

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¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 92.

1959,” al-Shafi’i seems eager to prove both his acquaintance with and endorsement of Nasser’s stances.

Al-Shafi’i’s strategy of declaring allegiance to Nasser follows other patterns. For instance, he seeks to prove that the only people who benefited from the crackdown on Egyptian Communists were the latter’s and Nasser’s shared enemies, both locally (the feudalists, the Right, reactionary periodicals such as *Akhbar al-Yawm*) and regionally (Jordanian, Saudi, And Tunisian regimes). More significantly, al-Shafi’i enumerates the Communists’ basic views and principles, one by one, only to show that

this is our politics, and that is its application. It perfectly complies with your liberational, national policies, for we are not concerned now with applying socialism, but rather with carrying over what the July Revolution had launched.¹³²

Nowhere in the letter does al-Shafi’i attribute the crackdown, arrest, or torture to Nasser personally. The letter is not meant to tell Nasser that what *he* had done is wrong and not justified. Rather, al-Shafi’i mostly employs the passive voice in order to describe that he “will be presented to the court,” or that Communists “are placed under accusations.” Nasser’s agency is only invoked toward the end of the letter, when al-Shafi’i affirms that it is only the former who can rectify the situation, “put an end to our trial, and stop the campaign against us.”¹³³ Nor does al-Shafi’i even allude to any possible transformation in the Communists’ stance toward Nasser and the regime after their arrest. Doubtless, they had grievances, but this would never change

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¹³² Ibid, p. 93.

¹³³ Ibid.

their convictions about the righteous Nasser. “What was our position,” al-Shafi’i wonders, rather rhetorically,

despite being arrested, despite all the violence and the fatigue that we passed through? Was not this an ordeal, a harsh ordeal? Yet, this did not budge our belief in your patriotism, and our confidence in you as a leader for this Arab East. Our policies and principles are the same, untouched, based on uniting people around you and your national rule.¹³⁴

The closing paragraph very well epitomizes al-Shafi’i’s ultimate belief in Nasser, personalizing the exchange maximally. Having acknowledged his uncertainty regarding the identity of the first person who could read the letter, al-Shafi’i wonders appealingly whether Nasser “could send a trusted delegation so that I could confide in him what is there in my heart, the gratitude that I cannot scribe in such a letter.”¹³⁵ Al-Shafi’i is seeking to bring Nasser closer to him, by meeting one of Nasser’s men whom the Communists could trust. He realizes the limitations of the letter as a medium, worrying that an unwanted party could probably get involved in it. He therefore wishes to move from writing into speaking to the Man—or any of the Man’s men, for the least, trusting that such an opportunity would surely make the end of his suffering much sooner. Alas, al-Shafi’i’s suspicion about the letter’s limitations was proven true. Yet although it did not save him, as he wished, the letter remained an evidence of a desperate attempt to reach Nasser, turn him into an audience, and, more significantly, tell him: if only you knew.

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¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Letters in Fiction

Unlike other traditions, in which “a full-length story consisting of nothing but letters”¹³⁶ exists, modern Arabic fiction hardly witnessed an epistolary novel. There is no Arabic equivalent of Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, or Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*, to name but a few prominent examples. Nor do letters feature frequently in Arabic fiction. In fact, the tradition of employing the letter form as a narrative vehicle has significantly abated across cultures throughout the 20th century. Whereas the letter was seen as a valuable narrative strategy in the 18th and 19th centuries, “a thoroughly and consistently employed epistolary method has little chance of heightening the illusion of reality in a novel of our own time.”¹³⁷ Interestingly, one of the most notable incidents in modern Arabic literature where a fiction writer was involved in letter writing occurred outside the realm of fiction. In 1993, famed Syrian writer Ghada al-Samman revealed what she claimed to be love letters that the late Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani had penned her.¹³⁸ As for her responses to Kanafani, al-Samman said she did not possess copies of them, and that the originals were held by an unknown third party following the assassination of Kanafani in 1972.

There are, however, a few cases of the use of the letter-form in modern Arabic fiction. Among them, writing to Nasser features, where a character in a novel or a short story feels the need to pen a letter to the Man. Those works emerged long after al-Yusuf’s letter, which was

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¹³⁶ Vivienne Mylne, *The Eighteenth-Century French Novel: Techniques of Illusion* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.144.

¹³⁷ Bertil Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (Folcroft, Pa, Folcroft Library Editions, 1974), p.49.

¹³⁸ See *Rasa’il Ghassan Kanafani ila Ghada al-Samman* [Ghassan Kanafani’s Letters to Ghada al-Samman] (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a li al-Tiba’a wa al-Nashr, 1999).

discussed earlier, with the first incident occurring—strangely enough—in 1967. A major question then arises: Were those fiction writers influenced by previous non-fiction letter writing to Nasser? If so, what were the main sites of influence: format, theme, etc...? Although those works are presented as fiction, Nasser does not come out reimagined or fictionalized. Rather, he is the same historical Nasser. In other words, Nasser here is a flat character, born developed and complete. Invoking Nasser is therefore invoking all the associations that his name suggests.

In what follows, I will study three notable examples in Egyptian fiction where Nasser features as an addressee: ‘Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi’s *al-Fallah* (the Peasant), Salwa Bakr’s *Zeinat fi Janazat al-Ra’is* (Zeinat at the President’s Funeral), and Radwa ‘Ashur’s *Faraj* (Faraj). I am less concerned with discussing the work as a whole than with approaching the position that the letter writing occupies. My reading, therefore, is meant to be specific, highlighting the letter, its structure, sender(s), and their views on Nasser.

Let’s All Write to Nasser

The publication of ‘Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi’s novel *al-Fallah* (the Peasant) in 1967 marks the first incident of turning Nasser into an audience in a work of fiction. One can legitimately wonder why it took long before the already-established mode of writing to the Man inspired fiction writers. Yet, we need not forget that Nasser in fact rarely appeared in a work of fiction during his life. Whether it was self-censorship, the ambivalent stance that writers had toward him, or the feeling that the Man’s experience was not *fictionalizable* yet, fiction writers in the 1950s and the 1960s have by and large avoided to refer explicitly to Nasser. After all, it is

this disproportionate emergence of the Man in fiction, compared to his ubiquity in real Egyptian life, that forms a basic argument of this dissertation.

Al-Fallah is al-Sharqawi's fourth and last novel.¹³⁹ Interestingly, but unintentionally, both al-Sharqawi's first and last novels coincided with the two most important years in Nasser's life: 1952 and 1967. However, it is the 1952 one, *al-Ard* (the Land), that he is best remembered for. Adapted into a celebrated Egyptian film by Yusif Chahine in 1969, *al-Ard* was a major intervention in modern Arabic literature, for with it, "and perhaps for the first time in Arabic literature, the *fallah* is written as a revolutionary historical agent and as the fully articulated subject of narrative."¹⁴⁰ The novel was an instant critical success, hailed as a fine example of social realism. It was al-Sharqawi's only novel to be translated into English.¹⁴¹

But if *al-Ard*, which represents the village in pre-1952 setting, reinterprets it as a site of social struggle in a feudal system, *al-Fallah*, revisits the same geographical entity, albeit differently. It features the village as a space for struggle between the real, committed revolutionary peasants on one hand, and those who are remnants of the old system, the counter-revolution figures, and the beneficiaries who pretend to be on the side of the July 23rd movement, while in fact they are among its worst outcomes, on the other. The novel is narrated by an intellectual who goes back to his village after years of living in Paris. Punctuated by the various attempts of the peasants to complain and protest against the behavior of the revolution's men in

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¹³⁹ Mustafa 'Abdel Ghani, 'Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi: *al-Dalala wa al-shahada* ['Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi: the Significance and the Testimony] (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la li al-Thaqafa, 2010), p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (New York; London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), p. 127.

¹⁴¹ The translation appeared as *Egyptian Earth* and was published by the University of Texas, Austin Press in 1990. It was translated by Desmond Stewart.

the village, the novel opens with the unnamed narrator meeting his cousin, ‘Abdel ‘Azim, in Cairo, where the latter seeks to meet the Minister of Agrarian Reform. It is in that first encounter that the narrator realizes the progressive transformation that occurs in the consciousness of the semi-illiterate ‘Abdel ‘Azim after the revolution. Reflecting on ‘Abdel Azim’s repetitive use of words such as “reactionary,” “production,” “socialists,” “the mother land,” among others, the narrator frequently asks himself, “What is all this, ‘Abdel ‘Azim? Where did you learn that?”¹⁴² The major event of the narrative occurs toward the middle of it, when ‘Abdel ‘Azim, along with another peasant, ‘Abdel Maqsud, go to the city to meet its sub-committee of the Socialist Union. They disappear for months, triggering the consequent efforts made by the peasants to release them.

Where does Nasser stand among those two warring groups? Following the same stance that was eminently manifested in al-Shafi’i’s letter, the narrative discourse believes there are two governments competing for the rulership of Egypt. The first is that of Nasser and the faithful men surrounding him, while the second consists of “the remnants of feudalists, some members of the Socialist Union, and the security, who all compose a new class that receives high salaries and expresses interests that are radically antithetical to the new government’s.”¹⁴³ The narrative abounds with this differentiation, as well as the belief in the sincere intentions of Nasser, pronounced not only by the leaders among the peasants, such as ‘Abdel ‘Azim and ‘Abdel Maqsud, but also by ordinary peasants like Um Insaf: “How come all this could happen when

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¹⁴² ‘Abdel Rahman al-Sharqwi, *al-Fallah* [The Peasant] (Tunis: Mu’assasat Ibn ‘Abd Allah, 1975), pp. 5, 8, 19.

¹⁴³ Samah Idris, *Al-Muthaqqaf al-‘Arabi wa al- Sulta: Bahth fi Riwayat al-Tajriba al-Nasiriyya* [Arab Intellectual and the Authority: Thesis on the Novel of the Nasserite Experience] (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1992), p.83.

we live in Nasser's time;”¹⁴⁴ and Salim who, engaging in a heated dispute with the representative of the Socialist Union in the village, asks him, “what are you going to do? Crucify me on a palm tree? This is something from the past. The President says, ‘raise your head, brother.’”¹⁴⁵

Those same ordinary peasants stand behind the idea of writing a letter to Nasser. The incident occurs in the midst of the village's concerns about the fate of the two disappearing men, which was mentioned earlier. The news both enrages and worries the peasants, who begin muttering on the possible reasons behind the disappearance, the kind of people whom the two men may have met in the city, and the potential danger they are probably encountering now. Unable to offer an answer, the peasants *collectively* suggest “a quick telegram to President Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser.”¹⁴⁶ The sentence opens a new passage in the novel, acting like a magic phrase that is surely seen to bring an end to the helplessness of the peasants' situation. What proceeds highlights not the letter per se, but *the process* of writing it. If the dominant concept of the letter perceives it as a private site “where the inner-life achieves self-expression in the search for truth,”¹⁴⁷ then the peasants' is a *collaborative act*, a public aggregation of efforts, money, and, more significantly, words, all combined toward writing a letter to Nasser.

The first issue that the peasants raise is the obstacles that they have to override in order to send the letter, i.e., how to send the letter undistorted. Due to the fact that their village is bereft of a post office, the peasants suggest going to the neighboring one, only to remember that “the

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¹⁴⁴ ‘Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi, *al-Fallah*, p.109.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, pp.128-129.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 150.

¹⁴⁷ Gerald MacLean, “Re-sitting the Subject,” in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, edited by Amanda Gilroy & W. M. Verhoeven. (Charlottesville; London: University of Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 176.

employee could reject [sending] the telegram,” or that “he could play with its words.”¹⁴⁸ The suggestion then is a *collective* surveillance over him, exercised by the peasants themselves. In the midst of this, however, the semi-illiterate peasants encounter a more serious hindrance: who will write the letter for them? They first suggest they should seek the assistance of some secondary school students, thereby unintentionally seeking to transform the letter writing from a “solitary endeavor”¹⁴⁹ into an act of *writing by proxy*. They retract, however, empowered by the few literacy classes they take. The peasants then immerse in discussions about what to write, introducing throughout other issues related to writing to the Man. Interestingly, their complete belief in Nasser notwithstanding, the peasants are also aware that only grave grievances should be sent to him—for minor causes, it suffices to inform the police. At first, the hierarchy impedes them, forcing them to reconsider the whole issue, with voices seconding the plausibility of writing to “the Secretary of State.”¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Nasser, the person, triumphs eventually, for the overwhelming majority of the peasants decisively declares:

We are writing a telegraph to Nasser. Period. We have no one but him. We will complain to him about the guy who came from Cairo and claimed to represent the government, about the supervisor, and about the cooperative’s employee. We will demand an urgent investigation. Needless to say, we will mention the disappearance of ‘Abdel Maqsud and ‘Abdel ‘Azim. Of course. They have been probably kidnapped. Who knows? Maybe they arrested them. We will tell him everything. Other than Allah, we have no one but him.¹⁵¹

There are two capitals at play here. First, the peasant’s determination to send a telegraph to Nasser reveals their moral capital, their profound belief not only in Nasser, but in their

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¹⁴⁸ *Al-Fallah*, p. 150.

¹⁴⁹ Linda Kauffman, *Special Delivery*, p.55.

¹⁵⁰ *Al-Fallah*, p.153.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.154.

legitimate attempt to reach him. In other words, the peasants here do not beg, nor do they ask for gratuitous support from Nasser. Rather, they “negotiate their status and rights as subjects of the state.”¹⁵² As such, the peasants have a “clear sense of entitlement”¹⁵³ to address Nasser. Contrary to this, however, the peasants lack the financial capital that will allow them to write freely to Nasser. If they are encouraged by their belief in Nasser, the way they view their relationship with him, and the legitimacy of their cause, to detail all the grievances in one telegram, it is the financial cost that bars them. They then have to recourse to writing “under erasure,” as Linda Kauffman, commenting on Derrida’s *The Post Card*, names it.¹⁵⁴ It is not censorship, internal or external, nor is it political surveillance, that obliges the peasants to erase some of their choices. Rather, it is their financial inadequacy that forces several among them to say, reacting to the statement quoted above: “this would be too many words. You think these telegraphs are free? Where could we get all the money that is needed for this? We shall say one word only: Oppressed, Help us.”¹⁵⁵

Arriving at the post office, the employee there still finds the need to correct the language mistakes in the letter, before telling the peasant that with the money they have, they can send up to fifteen words. To the readers’ surprise, the novel does not leave us with the text of the actual telegram. Does it matter? It surely does, but the collective negotiation and discussion that fill the process of writing the letter grant us the ability to predict it. Nor are we to find a direct reference

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¹⁵² Vadim Kukushkin, “To His Excellency the Sovereign of all Russian Subjects in Canada: Emigrant Correspondence with Russian Consulates in Montreal, Vancouver, and Halifax, 1899-1922” in *Letters across Borders*, p.295.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Linda Kaufman, *Special Delivery*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁵ *Al-Fallah*, p.154.

to the letter afterwards. We merely read the narrator observing that “the village sent a letter to complain, only for *them* to capture Salem.”¹⁵⁶ We do not know who “them” is, although it can refer to the same people the peasants are complaining against. Does the letter reach Nasser? This is also left untold, but we do know later that the arrested men are released because of the many efforts that the village’s students living in the city exert in search of them.

Apart from the personal belief in Nasser, the peasants’ letter seems antithetical to the previous, intellectual letters that we discussed earlier. If those letters were sent by one individual, the peasants’ was a product of a collective endeavor, so much so that when the post office employee asks them for their identification card, he finds that “no one has an ID.”¹⁵⁷ If the previous letters were pages, this was merely fifteen words. If they were written by intellectuals, this was scribed by semi-illiterates who first thought of asking for students’ assistance. Only one thing was in common: Nasser. The trust in the Man is what all of these letters boil down to—a trust, at once, in him, and in their rights to turn him into their audience.

Zeinat; or: Thanks for Responding, Nasser, but That Was not Enough.

Salwa Bakr’s first short story collection, *Zeinat fi Janazat al-Ra’is* (Zeinat at the President’s Funeral) (1986) announced the birth of both a talented writer and the first Egyptian short story to revolve entirely around writing to the Man. Bearing the title of the collection, *Zeinat fi Janazat al-Ra’is*, the story “describes Zeinat’s attempts to contact the president of the

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¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.160, my emphasis.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.155.

republic in order to obtain a government pension that she is legally owed.”¹⁵⁸ It is noted for what would become Bakr’s major narrative attributes: her “fascination with the practical problems faced by women like her mother: widows, divorcees, women who have never married, or women who are emotionally alienated from their husbands;”¹⁵⁹ her “articulation and dissemination of the suppressed discourse of women;”¹⁶⁰ and her fusion of Colloquial and standard Arabic in a way that renders the former “proper” and the latter “colloquialized,” thereby producing what Ferial Ghazoul calls *Balaghat al-Ghalaba* (the rhetoric of the have-not).¹⁶¹

Set shortly before the death of Nasser, the story is inspired by Bakr’s own observations of her mother’s gathering with other widows in Cairo during the 1960s. Bakr relays how “the old women, mostly illiterate, would ask a youth to write a letter on their behalf and send it to Nasser.”¹⁶² What was fascinating, Bakr recalls, was the kind of requests and demands the women made. “Tell Nasser that the train does not come on time. This does not help,” one woman would say. Still more personal, another would implore, “*winnabi*, my leg hurts me. What shall I do?” Bakr describes to me a mythical Nasser in which those old women believed, someone who was capable of doing miracles, healing sufferers, and bearing responsibilities for every single detail in Egyptians’ lives, however meager.

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¹⁵⁸ Caroline Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women’s Writing* (Syracuse; New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), p.26.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.22.

¹⁶⁰ See Hoda El Sadda’s introduction to her own translation of some of Bakr’s stories in *Such a Beautiful Voice, and other stories* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994). I will be relying on El Sadda’s translation of *Zeinat*.

¹⁶¹ Ferial Ghazoul, “Balaghat al-Ghalaba” [the Rhetoric of the Have-nots] in *al-Fikr al-‘Arabi al-Mu’asir wa al-Mar’a* (Cairo: Dar Tadamun al-Mar’a al-‘Arabiyya, 1988), pp.107-124.

¹⁶² From an interview with Bakr in Cairo, October 2011.

The story features Zeinat, a poor, illiterate, lonely woman whose name, we are told, is always wrongly pronounced Zanat. She “embodies the disappointment and broken dreams of a generation that hung its hopes on the revolution’s promises.”¹⁶³ Zeinat seeks to overcome part of her destitute life by sending letters to Nasser. However, resorting to letters is a substitute for the impossible endeavor of reaching Nasser personally. Zeinat dreams of “the chance to speak to him, and to tell him personally all that she wanted to.”¹⁶⁴ She first attempts to attain a middle ground, whereby she can both write a letter and deliver it personally to Nasser. Knowing the streets that he passes by every Friday, she decides to approach him at first hand, and to give him a very brief letter that one student writes for her, which goes, “Zeinat says hello and wants to find out what you did about the previous matter.”¹⁶⁵ It proves equally impossible, however, and her striving goes unrealized, for at the last minute

when she imagined that the president’s car was close enough for her to step forward and quickly catch his attention, shake his hand and deliver the note, she was taken aback by scores of rude hands of policemen and others in plain clothes who appeared in a flash, as if they had dropped from the sky, and shoved her away from the car and the procession. She fell on the ground and was surrounded by feet which Zeinat noticed were mostly covered with high leather boots, and some of which concealed enough guns to massacre a whole country.¹⁶⁶

Unquestionably painful, the incident still does not affect Zeinat’s love of Nasser and belief in him, as it surely “had happened *behind the president’s back*, and if he ever got wind of the doings of those bastards who prevented her from greeting him and delivering her letter, he

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¹⁶³ Radwa ‘Ashur, Ferial Ghazoul, Hasna Reda-Mekdashy, eds. *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873,1999* (Cairo; New York: The American University Press, 2008), pp.139-140.

¹⁶⁴ *Zeinat*, p.22

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.23.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

would have undoubtedly banished them to a god-forsaken place.”¹⁶⁷ Only after the incident does Zeinat give up on both meeting Nasser and delivering a letter personally to him. Her third option is to request the assistance of her apparently sole friend, ‘Abdou the barber. Similar to the peasants’ case in al-Sharqawi’s novel, Zeinat’s establishes a writing by-proxy, whereby ‘Abdou writes the letters, and Zeinat signs them by ‘Abdou’s “carefully steadying the pen between her fingers. He firmly held her hand with his own and moved both hands at the same time, so that she would actually have signed her own name.”¹⁶⁸

Unique in this narrative is the fact that Zeinat’s requests of the president are met. After a few months of anticipation, Zeinat “had been granted a special pension, the sum of three pounds.”¹⁶⁹ Although we do not read them, the letters prove fruitful, and Zeinat now, “brimming with confidence and proud of herself and of the president,”¹⁷⁰ can go at the beginning of every month to receive her allowance. Not forgetting ‘Abdou’s invaluable assistance, she decides to present him with a “pair of hefty chickens and a bottle of rose sherbet.”¹⁷¹

The correspondence does not end here, however. Empowered now by her successful endeavor, and fully aware of the influence of words, Zeinat determines to continue sending letters to Nasser. Advised by the second author of those letters, ‘Abdou, Zeinat decides to “magnify her grievances, to demand an increase in her pension on the grounds of being a lonely

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¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p.24, my emphasis. “A god-forsaken place” is how El Sadda renders *wara’ al-shams* [beyond the sun], the phrase that was commonly used to refer to the unknown destiny facing those who opposed Nasser.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p.22.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p.25.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

woman without a single soul to support her in the whole wide world, to listen to her grievances—except God and the President of the Republic.”¹⁷² She acts accordingly, with ‘Abdou outdoing his previous letters, this time by sharpening “his wit, squeezing out the sap of his rhetorical talents in an attempt to induce the president to issue the necessary mandate to raise Zeinat’s pension.”¹⁷³ Nonetheless, the letters go unheeded, and after sending nine of them the narrator, who often adopts Zeinat’s perspective, reckons that it must be “the quality of ‘Abdou’s writing”¹⁷⁴ which is not strong enough as to influence the president.

Nowhere in the letters that were studied earlier does the issue of language and formality emerge as urgently. Zeinat is not a passive author of her letters; she is an agent who fully participates in the way her idea will take shape onto the pages. In so doing, she prevents ‘Abdou, the man, from dominating the sphere of writing, her inability to perform the actual writing down notwithstanding. In the process of writing the tenth letter, there emerges a disagreement between Zeinat and ‘Abdou. While he “tried to punctuate the conventional preamble he wrote each time—which consisted mainly of expressions of gratitude and laudatory remarks about the President of the Republic—with some of his own views on current political issues,”¹⁷⁵ Zeinat refuses, offering a more direct way to address Nasser. As Hoda El Satta observes, Zeinat

questions the validity and sincerity of the formal stylized language used by ‘Abdou, the barber, in writing letters on her behalf. In her last letter to the President she insists on telling her story in her own words, honestly and without recourse to formal stereotypes.¹⁷⁶

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¹⁷² Ibid, p.26.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.27.

¹⁷⁶ Hoda El Satta, introduction to *Such A Beautiful Voice*, p. xix.

Zeinat's perspective on the unnecessary embellishment of the letter is informed by her personalized relationship with Nasser, developing through sitting, day after day, in front of the president's pictures that fill her shack, and talking to him. She does not see why she has to modify her way of addressing Nasser when her words become inscribed in a letter, and therefore decides to "come right out and tell him her innermost thoughts."¹⁷⁷

Justified as it may be, this view has still to appeal to 'Abdou, the actual inscriber of the letter. He rejects it at first, considering this "an affront to his own special skills,"¹⁷⁸ before complying eventually, driven by a feeling that Zeinat's own words might actually find an ear. He therefore decides to write down "every word Zeinat wanted to say to the President."¹⁷⁹ The letter does not appear directly in the story, but is rather reported by the narrator. Zeinat indulges in a semi-monologue, telling her story completely, "*min tu'tu' li al-salamu 'aleykum.*" Toward the end, she explains her motive behind writing to Nasser:

She also told him that she was a lonely soul, and she would never extend her hand and beg for help, no matter what. She was asking him—the way a sister would ask her brother, the way children would ask their father, the way a person in need would ask a generous man of means—to raise her pension a little just to enable her to meet the bare necessities of life.¹⁸⁰

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¹⁷⁷ *Zeinat*, p.27

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.28.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Zeinat is not a beggar, then, for you do not beg when you ask money from your father. She seems “to have taken paternalism for granted as a “natural” form of relations between the state and its subjects.”¹⁸¹

Assuming her letter reaches Nasser the way her own words reach his picture, she intends to tell him what happens to her in his procession after that Friday prayer. This, however, begs for the intervention of ‘Abdou who, aware of the potential censorship, refuses to write these words and explains that “if the letter were opened and read by someone else, it might not reach the President.”¹⁸² The dynamics between their positions as the author and the scribe is further complicated toward the end of the letter, when ‘Abdou attempts once again to add some coloring, this time a few verses of poetry that he still remembers from primary school. Zeinat, for her part, does not approve it, reasoning that Nasser “would understand the plain language, just the way it was—there was no need for poetry.”¹⁸³ ‘Abdou has to consent, acknowledging anew that he is not writing alone. In relation to this last letter, they both “partook in writing it.”¹⁸⁴

To Zeinat’s astonishment, this honest pouring of the heart onto words still does not compel a reaction from the president. Upon sending it, she seems assured of her success, “certain that the President would respond and take the necessary measures to grant her request.”¹⁸⁵ After

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¹⁸¹ Vadim Kukushkin, “To His Excellency the Sovereign,” p.295.

¹⁸² *Zeinat*, p.28.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p.29.

¹⁸⁴ Hoda El Sadda strangely leaves out this phrase in her English translation. See the Arabic in Salwa Bakr, *Zeinat fi Janazat al-Ra’is* (Cairo: s.n., 1986), p.83.

¹⁸⁵ *Zeinat*, p.29.

all, what she sends him is “*Kalam ma ba’dahu kalam*,” the ultimate words with nothing further to add. It is as though she believes this is the last time she will need to write to Nasser.

Indeed. A few days after Zeinat sends her last letter, an “ominous day” befalls her and her fellow Egyptians. It is noteworthy that Zeinat is informed about Nasser’s death through none other than ‘Abdou himself. Instead of delivering the news which Zeinat is anticipating, i.e., receiving a reply from Nasser, Zeinat observes ‘Abdou running through the street “with a blood-drained face, striking his face *like a woman* in mourning... ‘Abdou screamed, ‘the Man is dead! Listen everybody, the President is dead.’”¹⁸⁶ If ‘Abdou screams the news like a woman, Zeinat, on the other hand, breaks the conventional gender roles instantly, chooses not to wail, but instead seizes ‘Abdou’s collar, saying, “Shut up! Hold your tongue! Do not say these accursed words.”¹⁸⁷ Remarkably, the story juxtaposes Zeinat’s full agency as a writer of her last letter to Nasser with the death of Nasser, “her father and brother,” as she refers to him earlier. Clearly, Zeinat does not kill the father, nor does she under any circumstances intend to. However, the sheer synchronism of the two incidents, coupled with ‘Abdou’s and her reactions to Nasser’s death, destabilizes the already-defined gendered roles that are assigned to Egyptians in their relationships with the Man.

The death of Nasser is disastrous enough for Zeinat, as it is for most Egyptians at the time. However, it is more heartbreaking that Zeinat never hears the voice of Nasser replying to her sole attempt to write a letter on her conditions. Only through these lenses, I argue, do we gain

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¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 30, my emphasis.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

a better understanding of the somehow troubling scene in Nasser's funeral, in which Zeinat, suddenly recalling her letter and pension,

ran towards the coffin. She knocked against shoulders, arms and heads, but she had decided to take a close look at him, to touch him with her hand. The coffin came in sight and grew bigger and clearer. She threw herself forcefully between people, pushing away one here and another there, quite heedless of what might befall her. When she was just an inch away from the coffin, hands reached out to strike her, to prevent her. Suddenly, she felt the taste of salty blood on her lips and thought that she had lost her nose.¹⁸⁸

Is she only reacting to the fact that she will never get the pension of which she has been dreaming? The narrative itself suggests another possibility, when Zeinat recalls months (or years) later that what she had in mind at that moment is "her long wait for his procession after the Friday prayers and what had happened to her then."¹⁸⁹ Zeinat sees the funeral as her last chance to get an answer from the Man, albeit physically. If she cannot talk to Nasser anymore, she can at least attempt to see him closely, to touch his body, itself a speaking entity that Egyptians have long been able to read and interpret in various ways.

Interestingly, the death of Nasser marks the end of Zeinat's resort to letters. Writing requires an addressee, an audience, a space that only Nasser is trusted enough to fill. With al-Sadat, words cease to help, change, or provoke. Ironically, al-Sadat, who often referred to himself as the Father of Egyptians, never sees his presumed children talking to him. Instead, the end of the story shows Zeinat's political awareness that "leads her to take part in the Bread Riots of 1977, but she continues to pray for Nasser, clinging to the symbol of dreams and hopes and thereby representing the crisis of an entire generation."¹⁹⁰ Whereas Zeinat's impoverished living

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¹⁸⁸ Ibid, pp.30-31.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p.31.

¹⁹⁰ *Arab Women Writers*, p.140.

conditions in the past are conceived of as something personal, compelling her to write to Nasser and ask for individual help, hers now are considered part of a collective crisis where words and letter do not belong; where only physical, somehow violent protests can cause the “father” to hear. But while “talking” to al-Sadat in her own way, Zeinat, now detained at the police station for participating in the protests, ends her last words in the story with a tribute to Nasser: “May God have mercy on your soul, our dear love.”¹⁹¹

I am Illiterate, *ya Abu Khalid*

A more recently published example of fictionally writing to the Man appeared in Radwa ‘Ashur’s 2008 novel, *Faraj* [Faraj]. It features the protagonist/narrator, Nada ‘Abdel Qadir, who, in a non-linear narrative, tells fragments of her story against the historical background of Nasser’s, al-Sadat’s, and Mubarak’s eras. Like most of ‘ashur’s works, where there appears a “blend of history and literature, and private and public events,”¹⁹² *Faraj* is abundant with references to real people who exist and interact side by side with its supposed fictive characters. Whether with ‘Abdel ‘Azim Anis, a famed Communist thinker whom Nada describes as her father’s mate in prison,¹⁹³ or with Arwa Salih, a major figure in the Egyptian students’ movement of the early 1970s who tragically committed suicide in 1997, *Faraj* “links the specifics of characters’ inner worlds with major social and economic phenomena and political

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¹⁹¹ *Zeinat*, p.31. The Arabic text actually goes, “the beloved of all people.” See *Zeinat fi Janazat al-Ra’is* p.85.

¹⁹² *Arab Women Writers*, p.136.

¹⁹³ Radwa ‘ashur, *Faraj* [Faraj] (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2008), pp.17-18.

events.”¹⁹⁴ Only in the last chapter of the novel does its title, Arabic for “relief” or “salvation,” become explicable. In line with the fragmented nature of the narrative, the last chapter moves us suddenly to the notorious Tazmamart prison in Morocco, where prisoners are surprised to find a small pigeon in their cell. Optimistically, they call it “Faraj,” nourish it, and intend to set it free once it musters its strength. And eventually, it does.¹⁹⁵

It belongs elsewhere to discuss the representations of Nasser in this novel.¹⁹⁶ What pertains to this chapter is the letter that is addressed to him. In fact, letters profusely appear in *Faraj*, often as a means to bridge the gaps, “the constant separations endured by her characters.”¹⁹⁷ Nada receives a letter from Gerard, a French guy she once meets and likes in Paris;¹⁹⁸ she begins to pen letters constantly to her French mother, now in Paris following her divorce from Nada’s father;¹⁹⁹ and she writes an unsent letter to Hazem, her university boyfriend, exactly four months and ten days after his death, melancholically wondering why he could not wait to see the day when Israel withdrew from South Lebanon.²⁰⁰ Moreover, a chapter in *Faraj* carries the title, “A Letter Incomplete,” in which we read a long letter that Nada’s mother means to send to her daughter, except that she never finishes it.²⁰¹ An attempt to explain the mother’s

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¹⁹⁴ Caroline Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural Criticism*, p.111.

¹⁹⁵ *Faraj*, pp.215-219.

¹⁹⁶ See chapter 3.

¹⁹⁷ *Cultural Criticism*, p.109.

¹⁹⁸ *Faraj*, p. 61.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.66

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.173.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, pp. 140-145.

decision to withdraw from Nada's life, to turn inward and never contact her daughter again, the letter is found among the papers that Nada collects following her mother's death.

The letter to Nasser, on the other hand, is sent by her illiterate aunt, protesting against the arrest of her brother (Nada's father), Dr. 'Abdel Qadir Salim, in 1959. In that sense, the letter is meant to suggest that Salim was jailed along with Shuhdi al-Shafi'i. Yet, unlike the case of al-Shafi'i, we never hear Dr. Salim speaking to Nasser. Instead, long into the second half of *Faraj*, and years after her brother passes away, Nada's aunt, whose name is not disclosed, reveals to her niece that she once wrote a letter to Nasser. The news comes as a surprise to Nada, who asks her aunt if she still has a copy of it. She does not, but, amazingly, she still knows it by heart. It was argued earlier that, unlike the letters that were sent to Nasser by journalists or activists, the fiction works that we discuss in this chapter feature illiterate people asking others' assistance in writing to Nasser. *Faraj* comes as no exception. Unlike Zeinat, however, Nada's aunt writes a letter only once. If Zeinat personally intervenes and partakes only in writing the tenth letter, demanding a change in its cliché phrases and formality, Nada's aunt seems aware from the onset of the need to address Nasser uncharacteristically. She informs her niece:

I dictated it to four persons. I asked each one of them to read me what he had written, and found *kalam jarayid*, the speech of newspapers and radios. I do not work in a radio station nor in a newspaper. They wrote what I had not said: now the "immortal leader," another "the leader of the millions," still other big words that I do not understand. I said, 'hey kids, these are not my words.' I then called the youngest kid who was in elementary school, and said, 'write my words verbatim. Write them *bil nahwi*, [in grammatically sound Arabic] but do not add or delete a word.²⁰²

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²⁰² Ibid, p.120.

Entering the realm of writing, the old woman reveals an understanding that Egyptian colloquial does not belong. The reason behind preferring the standard over the colloquial is never explained by the aunt; it is in fact surprising, given that Nasser himself has frequently addressed his people in Egyptian dialect. Possibly, the aunt feels a need to add more “linguistic capital”²⁰³ to her letter. This sole impersonal element in the letter is nonetheless disclosed to Nasser toward the end of it, when the aunt admits, in a precedent in all the letters we have seen thus far, that she is actually illiterate. To dispel any doubts Nasser may have about the authenticity of the letter, the aunt quickly adds, “I dictated this letter to my youngest son, who transformed it, with my approval, to the *nahwi*, not adding or deleting anything from it. I then asked him to read it, to make sure he conveyed my words honestly.”²⁰⁴

Aside from the illiteracy of the sender, the aunt’s letter differs from Zeinat’s and the peasants’ in the ambivalence stance it adopts toward Nasser’s responsibilities. If the peasants fully believe that Nasser does not know about the injustice that some of his men are inflicting upon them, and if Zeinat takes Nasser as her sole supporter in this world saved God, the aunt is somewhat less certain. While she strongly demands that Nasser scrutinizes “the justice of the judge who ordered his [her brother] arrest and the validity of the documents that considered what he did a crime punishable by prison,”²⁰⁵ thereby indicating that Nasser has nothing to do with it, she nevertheless holds Nasser accountable:

I am the sister of Dr. Abdel Qadir Salim, who first went to the Kuttab, then learnt in schools, then entered the university, before going abroad to France, pursuant to the Holy

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²⁰³ See page 30.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p.121.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Prophet's saying, 'seek knowledge, even if it was in China.' When he came back, and began teaching in the university and taking part in what is in the country's interests, *you* put him in prison.²⁰⁶

Still in another instance, she accepts that Nasser becomes the arbitrator in the issue, justifying it interestingly by the fact that "I accept you as a president of the country. How would not I accept your judgment in my brother's case?"²⁰⁷

Also unique to this letter is addressing Nasser with his *Kunya*, Abu Khalid. The *Kunya* usually adds intimacy to a conversation, indicating both respect and friendliness. Abu Khalid occurs three times in the letter, the first of which is in the first line:

President Abu Khalid, Gamal 'Abdel Nasser.

Son of Bani Mur, and the President of Egypt and Syria.²⁰⁸

The "Bani Mur," mentioned above, is the name of the village where Nasser was born in Asyut. The letter cunningly juxtaposes the fact that Nasser descends merely from this little village with his reality now, i.e. the President of the UAR. It reminds him of his simple past, obliquely suggesting that he is a normal Egyptian, "one of us," with no essential merits that place him above any of his subjects.

Unlike Zeinat, who seeks a purely personal aid from Nasser, the aunt is keen to expose that she is not only concerned with her brother's arrest. On the contrary, reminiscent of the letter of Ruz al-Yusuf, it is the desire to assist "Abu Khalid" that compels her to write: to assist him

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²⁰⁶ Ibid, .120, my emphasis.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p.121.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p.120.

that he “will not bear the burden of an unjust judge nor a haughty officer,”²⁰⁹ but more importantly, to assist Egypt as a whole, for “my brother, along with the other young prisoners, are good for the country.”²¹⁰ How then, she asks, can Nasser put them in jail, barring them from offering their knowledge to their country?

The letter is short, precise, and to the point. It does not indulge into any personal details, nor does it implore Nasser and employ sentimental words. The president does not appear here as a mythical figure. His pictures are not hung in the aunt’s house. Rather, the aunt treats herself as an equal part of the correspondence, explicitly stating that “we never lower our heads saved for our creator, and only request that which is our right.”²¹¹ Yet, she still cannot conceal her belief that Nasser will surely cause the truth to triumph. When Nada asks her if Nasser responds to her letter, she says that she receives a reply from his office, stating that they will investigate into the issue. “I waited,” she continues, “After a long wait I said, ‘Either he received the letter and got too busy, or *they* withheld it from him.’”²¹² She confesses to Nada that that was her wishful thinking at the time, for she loves Nasser, and “your lover can swallow the gravel for you,” admittedly stating that this is just “an excuse I came up with to forgive him!”²¹³

Conclusion

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²⁰⁹ Ibid, p.121.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid, my emphasis.

²¹³ Ibid.

Rather than being exclusively listeners to Nasser, Egyptians have occasionally assumed the role of the addresser, turning their president into an audience. Empowered by a personal belief in Nasser, they employed the letter as a medium to establish a contact with him. Interspersed in these letters were references to the ideals, hopes, and aspirations about which Nasser himself has frequently spoken. As this chapter has demonstrated, these letters have often separated Nasser from his regime, whereby he was sought to rectify the injustice that the senders have experienced at the hands of the regime. Similarly, Nasser was believed to be unaware of those abuses, and Egyptians represented their letters as sources for an otherwise unknown reality to Nasser. Seldom did any of these senders hold Nasser responsible for their maltreatment, nor did they announce their disenchantment with him. Rather, they often invoked Nasser's sincerity, decency, and integrity as incentives that compelled them to consider him as their audience.

As the previous pages have shown, there were two kinds of letter writing to Nasser. First, independent letters that were written by intellectuals, journalists, and activists, and were published either as a public correspondence in a journal during Nasser's life or in a book following his death, and in addition, Egyptian fictions has similarly witnessed incidents of letter writing as a technique employed by the protagonists to reach Nasser. The six instances of letter writing that were analyzed in this chapter did not fall into one single format. While some letters were sent by one individual, others, such as the peasants' in 'Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi's *al-Fallah* were the product of a collective endeavor. In addition, whereas the intellectuals have obviously themselves written their letters, fiction letters were all examples of *writing by-proxy*, where the illiterate sender seeks someone to write on his/her behalf. Still more divergent is the extent of formality or informality that the letters followed, with some, such as the aunt in Radwa 'Ashur's *Faraj*, going so far as to resort to terms of endearment in addressing the president.

What all these letters shared, however, was Nasser—a man in whom the senders can believe, trust, and confide. On the eve of a new political reality in Egypt, one can impatiently wait to see if the tradition of Nasser as an audience will live on and inspire yet other instances of ‘writing to the Man.’

Chapter 2

Nasser as Fiction

Throughout the corpus of Egyptian literary narratives, one can identify two major approaches in which Nasser is inserted into the narrative. In the first approach Nasser is featured as part of a historical background against which the narrative unfolds. Interspersed in these narratives are references to Nasser, his legacy, physical and moral attributes, as well as his perspectives on matters concerning both Egypt and the rest of the world. These references are put forward in the dialogues that occur among the protagonists of the work, in their stream of consciousness, or by the omniscient narrator that the work may adopt. However, Nasser remains part of the historical setting and does not enter the narrative as one of the characters. In other words, in these works Nasser is described, debated, undermined, or glorified, yet he is not reimagined or fictionalized. Rather, his image is constructed insofar as the main protagonists' lives interact with, relate to, or are concerned with his. Falling into the famous dictum of Georg Lukács, these narratives represent Nasser "as only a minor character compositionally, a figure described from the outside, in action, whose character is not developed throughout the novel, but whose presence, words, and actions have a significant effect on the other fictional characters."²¹⁴

In the second approach, Nasser himself is a main, if not *the* main, protagonist. Living side by side with other invented characters, Nasser emerges as a fictive figure whose external reference outside the text is recognizable yet whose actual representation in the text may

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²¹⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, translated by H. and S. Mitchell (London: London Merlin Press, 1962), pp. 37-38.

drastically add to, differ from, or contradict this reference. By way of introducing him, explicitly or allegorically, these narratives open up a space for Nasser as fiction, as a literary character whose life becomes subject to “conscious distortion of history through omissions, exaggerations, and anachronisms.”²¹⁵ In so doing, each narrative in this category may give us a Nasser of its own, a revised figure who is inevitably colored by the perspectives of its producers. Shattering the essence of the historical figure that we claim to know, these narratives consequently contribute to the abolition of “the mythic conquest of personal identity.”²¹⁶

This chapter will consider the narratives that belong to the second category, where Nasser, symbolically or explicitly, features as a protagonist of the text. I have found that in Egyptian literature there are not documented historical narratives on Nasser. As Joseph W. Turner notices, this kind of historical narrative is a space where actual people from the past occur, emphasizing their direct links with recorded history.²¹⁷ Egyptian fiction does not offer a realist fictional account of Nasser, nor does it attempt to reconstruct his entire life within a historical perspective. Rather, these fictions often “depart from the historical record to reimagine alternative episodes”²¹⁸ in Nasser’s (multiple) lives. In so doing, they adopt a fantastic and surreal approach to Nasser, in which reality itself, and the possibility “of ascertaining the true nature of...history”²¹⁹ are put into question. Put differently, Nasser as fiction offers models of

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²¹⁵ Seymour Menton, *Latin America’s New Historical Novel* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 23.

²¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 153.

²¹⁷ Joseph W. Turner, “The Kinds of Historical Fiction: An Essay in Definition and Methodology” in *Genre* (Fall 1979), p. 337.

²¹⁸ Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 29.

²¹⁹ Seymour Menton, *Latin America’s New Historical Novel*, p. 23.

interpretation of the Man, his actions, and legacy. These interpretations recourse less to documented episodes in Nasser's life than to obviously fictitious accounts. It is as though the fictional interpretation of Nasser can only be realized through subverting, distorting, and reimagining the historical events themselves, whereby Nasser can be reproduced fantastically.

Notably, these models of interpretation are in constant struggle over the legitimate representation(s) of the Man. As it is commonly the case with larger-than-life historical figures, several aspects of Nasser's life remain "unresolved and unassimilated in the national psyche,"²²⁰ hence the difficulty to fix his image in one exegetic paradigm. The multiple, at times contradictory depictions of Nasser in narratives bespeak to his enigmatic aura, his fluid character, and his inexplicable actions. This chapter will demonstrate how Nasser as fiction is fragmented into multiple Nassers, each is a product of a specific interpretive attempt of the Man, but all eventually contributing to the construction of "a site of litigation over the meaning of the past."²²¹ The abundance of surreal representations of Nasser, I argue, stems partially from his polarizing character which, by urging for a passionate engagement, leaves little room for the disengaged style of historical fiction that was described earlier. In addition, similar to what Xenia Gasiorowska has to say about the Russian Peter the Great, one can convincingly argue that "there are no indifferent, middle-of-the-road, or simply objective creators" of Nasser's image; "there

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²²⁰ Lloyd Hughes Davies, *Projections of Peronism in Argentine Autobiography, Biography, and Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 262.

²²¹ Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 165.

are only admirers and detractors.” It is as though Nasser’s own feelings “were so intense that he could not inspire lukewarm feelings in others.”²²²

In tracing the depictions of Nasser as a protagonist in Egyptian narratives, I will present a select of works written both in Nasser’s life as well as after his death. As will be demonstrated, studies on Egyptian literature have paid little attention to some of these narratives, particularly to the way they approach the character of Nasser. By and large, whereas the allegorical presence of Nasser in narrative was a feature of the fifties and the sixties, his explicit emergence as a protagonist occurs only after his death. This is not to suggest, however, that symbolic takes on Nasser ceased to exist after 1970—they surely did not. For Nasser allegorized was not only an attempt to circumvent the restrictions on freedom of expression during Nasser’s life, but also a literary medium that best served a specific model of interpretation that a writer sought to adopt.

In fact, the ubiquitous influence that Nasser’s character and policies had on multiple aspects of Egyptian life, together with the potentially various explanations that his character may inspire, have at times made it common to see him symbolically represented in various Egyptian literary and artistic productions. Whether in literature, cinema, or music, Nasser has been a favorite site of reference not only for the creators but also the recipients of those works. As Margarit Litvin articulates it,

The degree to which Nasser’s “face” dominated Egyptian and Arab stages, screens, podiums, and loudspeakers would have a fateful effect on Arab arts as well as politics. Audiences internalized the syllogism “Nasser is the sole authority; Nasser is represented everywhere.” Its converse was that nearly every ruler or authority figure depicted on stage or film, regardless of context or period, was assumed to represent Nasser. Theatre critics saw

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²²² Xenia Gasiorowska, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian Fiction* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p. 120.

Nasser's features in sultans, drug lords, railroad stationmasters, honey-tongued charlatans, and mythical kings.²²³

Remarkably, even songs of love were at times understood as hinting at him. The classic *al-Atlal* (The Ruins), for instance, which was written by poet Ibrahim Naji long before the 1952 revolution, acquired an altogether different reception when the legendary Umm Kulthum performed it. Released in 1966, parts of this poem/song, which has been heard in Egyptian and Arab cities over the years, were charged with political connotations, stemming perhaps from the flaming social and political context of the 1960s in Egypt. Thus, Virginia Danielson shows how the song's arguably most famous line, *a'tini hurriyyati atliq yadayya* (Give me my liberty, untie my hands), was "linked by listeners variously to the struggles of the Palestinians and Arabs against the West and of Egyptian citizens against 'Abd al-Nasir's oppressions."²²⁴

Interestingly, those assumptions of a Nasser allegorized in narratives were at times advanced by none other than Nasser himself. Tracing the official reception of Naguib Mahfuz's 1966 novel *Tharthara Fawq al-Nil* (Adrift on the Nile), for instance, Samia Mehrez shows how the book "brought Mahfuz into direct confrontation with the President himself."²²⁵ The novel, depicting a society of defeatism and decadence as has been rarely done in Nasser's Egypt, was read as a blow to the ideals of the nation. True, no character in the novel was assumed to refer personally to Nasser. Yet the whole approach was disturbing Nasser and his entourage, so much

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²²³ Margarit Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 44.

²²⁴ Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 168.

²²⁵ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*, p. 26.

so that the president had to seek the opinion of his then Minister of Culture Tharwat 'Ukasha.

Naguib Mahfuz recounts the rest of the episode:

Tharwat 'Ukasha, who was preparing a trip to Europe, was asked by Nasser, "Have you read *Tharthara Fawq al-Nil*?" He answered, "No, not yet." Nasser said, "Read it and let me know what you think." So Tharwat 'Ukasha took it with him on his trip. After he read it he understood the reason for Nasser's question. It had been an angry question. Tharwat feared that I might be in trouble, that I might be dismissed or transferred, so upon his return, he went to see the President. He said to him, "Mr. President, I tell you frankly that if art is not allowed this kind of freedom, it will not be art." So Nasser said calmly, "Very well, consider the matter closed."²²⁶

In line with common horizon of expectations, allegorical approaches to Nasser during his life were predominantly negative. Egyptian writers, living as they were in an era of "severe censorship and the emergence of evasive jargons among the intellectuals,"²²⁷ sought to find their own way to voice their occasionally harsh criticism, not only against the repressive measures of the regime, but also against Nasser himself. Mahfuz's first novel to appear after Nasser's revolution, *Awlad Haratina* [Children of Gebelawi], though notoriously remembered for igniting heated discussions among Egyptian religious circles for its assumed depiction of God and prophets, was also received as a "symbolic history of Egypt after the revolution,"²²⁸ with Gebelawi himself seen as a critique of Nasser.²²⁹ In fact, almost all of Mahfuz's post-1952 literary productions can be seen as "a barrage of bitter criticism aimed at a revolution that has

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²²⁶ Ghali Shukri, *Naguib Mahfuz: min al-Jammaliyya ila Nobel* [Naguib Mahfuz: From Gamaleyya to Nobel] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'Amma li al-Isti'lamat, 1988), p. 56. The English translation above is found in Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers*, pp. 26-27.

²²⁷ Sabry Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties" in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by 'Issa Boullata (Washington: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1980), p. 171.

²²⁸ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*, p. 21.

²²⁹ In an interview I had with Sonallah Ibrahim in Cairo, he told me that, while this interpretation had never occurred to him, he believed it was plausible.

abjectly failed to deliver the goods.”²³⁰ Equally revealing are Yusif Idris’ approaches to the character of Nasser, one of which will be discussed at length below. Suffice it now to say that perhaps more than Mahfuz, Idris has often been invoked whenever a discussion on Nasser allegorized arises. Indeed, as Jabir ‘Asfur notices, Idris’ allegories functioned as trials of the “illusions of the fifties.” Not exempting the people, whom his stories presented as accomplices, they nevertheless cast their major attention on the “leader himself (Nasser) who hides behind the allegory in *A Kana La Budda an Tudi’i al-Nur Ya Lili* (Did you Have to Turn on the Light, Li-Li), *al-‘Amaliyya al-Kubra* (The Biggest Operation) and *al-Khud’a* (Delusion)”²³¹

If that was the case, then one could only label as misrepresenting what Tawfiq al-Hakim depicts in his infamous post-Nasser memoirs *‘Awdat al-Wa’i* (The Return of the Consciousness). Writing in 1974, al-Hakim, who was one of Nasser’s early inspiring men of letters, describes a society of followers who were nothing short of obedient, docile individuals mesmerized by Nasser’s magical power. When Nasser spoke, “no one argued, checked, verified, or commented. We could not help but believe, and burn our hands with applause.”²³² That al-Hakim himself had produced well-known critical allegories of Nasser a decade earlier seemed to pose no puzzle to him. Commenting on such self-contradiction and rather exaggerating, oversimplifying statement, prominent Egyptian intellectual Lewis ‘Awad argues that al-Hakim himself “was in the forefront of honest writers who voiced their opinions in the heyday of Nasser’s era. He expressed them in

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²³⁰ Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfuz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 25.

²³¹ Jabir ‘Asfur, “Hal Yamut Hatha al-Zammar?!” [Would This Piper Die?!] in *Ibda’* (Cairo: Vo. 9, No. 9, 1991), p. 28.

²³² Tawfiq al-Hakim, *‘Awdat al-Wa’i* [The Return of the Consciousness] (Egypt: Dar al-Shuruq, 1974), p. 50. The English translation was quoted from Margarit Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey*, p. 43.

al-Sultan al-Ha'ir (The Sultan's Dilemma), *Bank al-Qalaq* (Bank of Anxiety), as well as in some other works."²³³

Doubtless, this is not to render Egyptian literary and artistic productions in Nasser's era as predominantly dissident. Rather, it is to demonstrate that despite the sweeping popularity that Nasser had among the masses, whose manifestations in literature and film this dissertation engages, Egyptian writers and, for that matter, filmmakers were not unequivocally tools of the regime. On the contrary, one can barely find, across the prominent productions of that era, a novel, a short story, or a film that can be described as propagandist. The puzzling aspect of Egyptians' relationship to Nasser, as this dissertation endeavors to show, lies not as much in their positive depictions of him as in their personalized, intimate view of the Man that has survived *despite* the well-known failures of his regime.

As mentioned earlier, allegories to Nasser were not only emerging during his life. In fact, one of Yusif Idris' late written works was perhaps among the harshest appropriation of the Man. First published in the Egyptian magazine *October* in 1987, *Abu al-Rijal* (The Father of Men) easily yields itself to allegorical interpretation. As Joseph Massad demonstrates,

An allegory about President Nasser, to whom it alludes but never explicitly names, the novella is a cruel denouncement, not of Nasserism as such, but of Nasser himself...it exposed Nasser himself as a "pseudoman" whose status everyone knew but could not say due to their "hypocritical manners."²³⁴

Earlier than Idris' work, Gamal al-Ghitani had engaged prominent allegorical approaches to Nasser, best recognized in his 1974 celebrated work *al-Zayni Barakat* (Zayni Barakat). But if al-

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²³³ Lewis 'Awad, *Aqni'at al-Nasiriyya al-Sab'a* [Seven Masks of Nasserism] (Beirut: Dar al-Qadaya, 1975), p. 33.

²³⁴ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 327.

Ghitani here disguised Nasser behind the medieval character of al-Zayni, he opted for a more contemporary figure in his less-known short story *al-Zuhur Tatafattah* (Flowers are Blossoming). Written in 1976, and published two years later in his short story collection *Thikr ma Jara* (Mentioning What Happened), the story densely follows the early measures of defaming Mao Zedong that took place a few months following his death. A conveniently recognized allegory to the de-Nasserization that was simultaneous to the time of publishing, the story, as al-Ghitani informed me, “is about Nasser in every detail.”²³⁵

The above overview was not meant to offer an exhaustive listing of all the allegorical approaches to Nasser. Rather, it sought to draw the attention to major literary incidents in which Nasser was differently appropriated. In what follows, however, I will offer a critical engagement with what I perceive as textual models of interpretations of the Man. These works, symbolically or otherwise, will feature Nasser as a protagonist. Beginning with Yahya Haqqi’s *Sah al-Nawm* (Good Morning), it will be demonstrated that contrary to al-Hakim’s claims, which were mentioned above, the literary response to the figure of Nasser began early, perhaps too early, with the rising leader of the 1952 revolution facing a writer’s imagination in 1955.

Nasser as an Intellectual

Yahya Haqqi’s²³⁶ creative writing career, which spans more than six decades, had not left us with voluminous collections. With only one novel, a novella, and six short story collections,

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²³⁵ From an interview that I conducted with al-Ghitani in October, 2011.

²³⁶ There are a few sources in English that offer insights into Haqqi’s life and works. See, for example, Miriam Cooke, *Yahya Haqqi: the Anatomy of an Egyptian Intellectual* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984). Expectedly, more works can be found in Arabic, including Bushusha Bin Jum’a, *Al-Qass wa al- Tahawwul* [Narration

Haqqi stands in contrast to his contemporaries, such as Naguib Mahfuz, Tawfiq al-Haqim, and Yusif Idris, whose oeuvres cover thousands of pages. In fact, Haqqi, who died in 1992, ceased to write long before, with his last book released in 1972. However, those few works were sufficient to establish Haqqi's reputation as "one of the greatest short story writers in the Arab World"²³⁷ and "the Grand Old Man of Egyptian literature."²³⁸ No anthology of modern Arabic literature, Egyptian narrative, or public intellectual figures in Egypt can afford to miss him.

Among the several factors that contribute to this salient position, Haqqi's novella *Qindil Umm Hashim*²³⁹ surely comes to the fore. Published in 1944, the narrative demonstrates the relationship between the East and the West through the story of a young physician, Ismail, who studies medicine in Europe, immerses himself in its worldly pleasures, and returns to Egypt to face the traditional values of his society. The novella is a milestone in the literary attempts to narrativize the encounter between the Arab World and the West, which would later evolve to be a salient theme in twentieth century Arabic literary production, perhaps best epitomized by Tayib Salih's magnum opus *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal* (Season of Migration to the North). Similar to Salih's book, the *Qindil* became Haqqi's best remembered work, so much so that "people seem to think that he has not written anything else."²⁴⁰

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and Transformation] (Lattakia: Dar al-Hiwar, 1998); Yusif al-Sharuni, ed, *Sab'un Sham'a fi Hayat Yahya Haqqi* [Seventy Candles in Yahya Haqqi's Life] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li al-Kuttab, 1974); Naji Najeeb, *Yahya Haqqi wa Jil al-Hanin al-Hadari* [Yahya Haqqi and the Generation of Civilizational Yearning] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li al-Kuttab, 1998); Na'im 'Atiyya, *Yahya Haqqi wa 'Alamuhu al-Qasasi* [Yahya Haqqi and His Narrative World] (Cairo, Maktabat al-Anjlu al-Misriyya, 1978).

²³⁷ Nabil Faraj, "Sah al-Nawm" [Good Morning] in Yusuf al-Sharuni, ed, *Sab'un Sham'a*, p. 205

²³⁸ Miriam Cooke, *Yahya Haqqi*, p. 12.

²³⁹ Translated into English as *The Saint's Lamp*.

²⁴⁰ Miriam Cooke, *Yahya Haqqi*, p. 7.

The novella could also be seen as Haqqi's first resort to symbolic writing, where the lamp has been interpreted by many as a symbol for the established norms of society. This use of symbolism, which Taha Husayn finds it "an obvious tendency"²⁴¹ in Haqqi's writing, would eventually find a broader space in his only novel, *Sah al-Nawm* (Good Morning).²⁴² Published in 1955, the book was among the first literary responses to the 1952 revolution to come from an established writer. Sensing the possible repercussions of (mis)understanding his message, Haqqi himself oversaw the process of publication, where he not only bore its expenses, but also managed to guarantee a limited distribution. Miriam Cooke explains the process thus:

Haqqi decided to finance publication of this novel himself so that he could dictate the format in which it was to appear. The presentation was to be sober: the cover title was to be printed and not written in fancy calligraphic; there should be no women on the cover... Five thousand copies were distributed to Cairo's newspaper stands, where they remained on sale for two weeks for a price of ten piasters. Then the volumes were withdrawn and Haqqi made his way to the printer (*al-Akhbar*) to see how the enterprise had fared—his precautions against the casual reader had worked only too well: 125 copies had sold.²⁴³

This novel excepted, Haqqi has had no significant engagement with the Egyptian revolution—nor, for that matter, with Nasser. In fact, the writer's biographies do not provide information as to whether Haqqi had officially met Nasser. Aside from the fact that he had assumed a few official positions—the most prominent of which was the Director of the Department of Fine Arts—Haqqi was not part of the regime's men of letters, nor could he be classified as dissident or controversial.

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²⁴¹ Taha Husayn, *Nqad wa Islah* [Criticism and Reform] (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm lil Malayin, 1977), p. 154.

²⁴² All quotations from this novel will be taken from Miriam Cooke's translation, which appeared in her *Good Morning and other stories* (Washington DC: Three Continent Press, 1987), pp. 43-112.

²⁴³ Cooke, *Yahya Haqqi*, p. 8

The novel is divided into two, unequal parts. The first is “Yesterday,” in which an anonymous narrator describes an unnamed Egyptian village prior to the arrival of *al-Ustadh*.²⁴⁴ Divided into nine sections and punctuated by the introduction of a few of the village’s inhabitants, this part revolves mainly around the village’s tavern, where the characters mingle and interact. Owned by a man who is merely referred to as “the tavern keeper,”²⁴⁵ the tavern represents a space where people can dispense with artificial behavior of the outside, thus allowing the tavern keeper “to see [them] as they really are, naked as the day they were born.”²⁴⁶ Mainly frequented by males, it shows a village whose men escape their familial commitment, finding in the tavern a getaway from their wives. The women, on the other hand, are presented as either complacent with, or dismissive of, their men’s way of life. Among the second group is the crippled woman, who abruptly visits the tavern to look for her husband. Slightly acquainted with foreign culture, the woman shows an understanding of the deficiencies of the post-colonial society, where the natives reproduce the behavior of the colonials. In one of her visits to the tavern, she verbally assaults the tavern keeper, saying:

Thou art the source and cause of the ills of this good village. Because of thy deeds thou hast become the butt of the district’s jokers. Woe to thee! Art thou not ashamed? Before it was the *foreigners* who had opened taverns in our countryside, thus corrupting our tribe, stealing its money through wine and usury. Then we gave thanks to God for freeing us of them and their evil and their influence. So what has come over thee, one of us, that thou shouldst emulate their ways and harm thy people? Does thy religion not prevent thee from acting in this way?²⁴⁷

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²⁴⁴ Arabic for “teacher” or “master,” the word is rendered by Cooke’s translation of the novel as “professor.” I, however, find this translation limiting, for *al-ustadh* refers to any educated or learned man, whether professionally or not.

²⁴⁵ *Good Morning*, p. 46.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 61-62, my emphasis.

Not all of the village's inhabitants immerse themselves in drinking, however. The narrator relays that the young artist, for instance, does not drink nor find any inspiration in drinking. He only joins the group because he feels "warm and alive here just like out in the fields and the flowers."²⁴⁸ In fact, the narrator himself refrains from partaking in the people's ritual pleasures. He even admits that "my friends accuse me of observing and not participating. With head bent as though blind, I listen to conversations, rarely taking part."²⁴⁹ In a section entitled, "A Break," the narrator seems fully aware of the recording aspect of his job. Declaring himself a writer, he does not hide the nature of his mission, whereby "to document a historical event that had serious repercussions on Egyptian political life."²⁵⁰

Equally important is the narrator's acknowledgment that he only finds interest in a few of the tavern clients, ignoring the others. His proposed justification is that the formers' "lives presented a moral. They are the eccentrics doomed to suffer. They are the most representative, because they are the first to be shaken when society is hit."²⁵¹ Subscribing to the narrator's explanation is Miriam Cooke, who argues that those characters—who include the butcher, the dwarf, the station-sweep, the cart driver, among others—are "not representative of the laborers, but are potential victims of modern society."²⁵² However, in his instant reception of the novel at the time of publication, Taha Husayn notices that those characters are in fact far from

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²⁴⁸ Ibid, 73.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 61.

²⁵⁰ Ami Elad, *The Village Novel in Modern Egyptian Literature* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1994), p. 22.

²⁵¹ *Good Morning*, p. 76.

²⁵² Miriam Cooke, *Yahya Haqqi*, p. 50.

representing an Egyptian village, and that the tavern with its rituals resembles more a European setting than an Egyptian one.²⁵³

At any rate, the narrator's explicit motivation behind telling the story is to show how much reform the village requires. Aside from those eccentric characters, the rest merely wonders "when injustice would cease."²⁵⁴ Taha Husayn himself sees in Haqqi's depiction of the village in the first part a space "utterly miserable, in a dire need for amelioration."²⁵⁵ However, an ambivalent stance toward the conditions of the village's inhabitants could be noticed here. While the majority of them are indeed poor, it is left unclear whether a *modern* reform is actually required. In fact, the narrator mentions that the village has a bitter memory of encountering the outside world, when a tragic event befell it upon the arrival of a traveling circus.²⁵⁶ The novel also shows that the characters in the village cannot be categorized according to a given formula, thus rejecting the necessity to conform to modern criteria about people's conditions. True, the village seems detached from the "modern" world, having not even a bank, but part of its population is satisfied and indifferent to the manifestations of modernity. In a telling incident, the narrator describes how one day the village's 'Umda receives a form from the capital, demanding a list of the villagers' jobs, the number of the unemployed, and the reason behind their idleness. The 'Umda writes down the name of the cripple's husband. The narrator then goes on to declare:

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²⁵³ Taha Husayn, *Naqd wa Islah*, pp. 154-155.

²⁵⁴ *Good Morning*, p. 76.

²⁵⁵ Taha Husayn, *Naqd wa Islah*, p. 157.

²⁵⁶ *Good Morning*, 51.

Had the government had a heart, it would have added another column asking the unemployed whether they were happy. Had it done so, with our unanimous approval, the ‘Umda would have written by the name of the cripple’s husband: “Very happy.”²⁵⁷

The transition from the first part “Yesterday” to the second, shorter “Today” is initiated by the arrival of the *Ustadh*. While he is first mentioned in the second page of the novel, where the narrator tells that the village hears about him and his studies in the capital but has not actually seen him, the *Ustadh* is unmentioned again until he suddenly reemerges. On his entrance into the scene, he notices the poverty around him and says “That will go. That will go.”²⁵⁸ Expectedly, the novel proceeds toward showing the effects of change on the village, brought about by the *Ustadh* and his assistants. The first part ends with the narrator departing the village for more than a year, and it is this absence that enables him to notice the clarity of the difference upon his return.

Stereotypically, the second part of *Sah al-Nawm* sheds light on the people’s dissatisfaction with the post-reform era, thus highlighting the shortcomings of the *Ustadh*’s program. However, one could recognize yet another incident of ambivalence, as the narrative ambiguously embraces and subtly criticizes both the *Ustadh* and the people. This ambivalence that pervades the narrative has led to different readings of the novel, based on the view a critic may have toward top-down reform. Miriam Cooke perceives the novel as a document full of sympathy toward the village’s people. Those peasants are “blissfully oblivious to the threat which contemporary society held for the harmony of their lives.”²⁵⁹ Significant in this context is

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²⁵⁷ Ibid, 69.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 79.

²⁵⁹ Miriam Cooke, *Yahya Haqqi*, p. 49.

the peasants' indifference to the train project that was to pass through their village. Abruptly encountered with a forceful change in the second part, the peasants' transformation discloses the tragic effect "that the modern era has on a remote village."²⁶⁰ The post- *Ustadh*'s village is now subject to a secular view of the world, where ethical norms (represented by closing down the tavern) are forcefully imposed; where official religion and disciplinary measures were to take place; in sum, where "culture killed nature."²⁶¹

Other readings, however, tend to empathize with the *Ustadh* and his relentless efforts to bring about change into the village. Following such reception, the novel has been read as a work tinged with optimism, essentially premised on the belief that "reforming a society is accessible with some effort and firmness from the rulers."²⁶² Naturally, individuals significantly vary with regard to their aptitude and readiness to change. Thus, even when the vicissitudes of society shake the old norms, a calm conformity of people is hardly guaranteed. Rather, reluctant individuals furnish the background of a society-at-change, whether by intentionally resisting reforms or their inability to cope with it. For those, change is tantamount to death.²⁶³

Those two readings, however, are predicated upon a timeless, spatially unbound understanding of the unnamed village, thus missing the not-so-subtle reference to the 1952 revolution in the novel and, more significantly, to Nasser himself. I would argue that *Sah al-Nawm* is less about the modernizing forces and its effects on the Egyptian village than about the

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²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 54.

²⁶² Na'im 'Atiyya, *Yahya Haqqi wa 'Alamuhu Al-Qasasi*, pp. 94-95.

²⁶³ Ibid, p. 95.

1952 revolution and Nasser. This reading finds support in the fact that modernization in Egypt had begun long before the writing of the novel. Additionally, the symbolic nature of the work, the time of publication and, more particularly, the unnamed *Ustadh*, are rather lucid signs that invite this alternate reading. As will be demonstrated below, I read the *Ustadh* as the first attempt in Egyptian literature to *narrativize* Nasser, to fictionalize his character, his revolution, and his ideas, albeit allegorically.

Seldom did any of the novel's reviews in the wake of publication touch upon a resemblance between the *Ustadh* and Nasser. Na'im 'Atiyya goes even so far as to suggest that the novel should not be read "politically... Rather, Haqqi celebrates the human condition regardless of the system in which it emerges."²⁶⁴ There were, however, suggestions that "the village stands as a symbol for Egypt, the tavern for corruption, yesterday for pre-revolution, and today for the revolution time."²⁶⁵ In other cases, the *Ustadh* was credited for enjoying "idealist traits that resemble the features of the revolution's leader who heads his country through the path of socialism."²⁶⁶

The temporal circumstances against which the novel emerged, three years after the revolution and the rise of Nasser's position and popularity—which culminated in the nationalization of the Suez Canal—might have rendered it unfeasible for critics to publicly announce a Nasser fictionalized. Interestingly, only one figure in the literary field, with an authority prodigious enough to compete with Nasser's political one, was able to come as close as

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²⁶⁴ Na'im 'Atiyya, *Yahya Haqqi wa 'Alamuhu Al-Qasasi*, p. 95.

²⁶⁵ 'Abdel Hamid Al-Qut, *Bina' al-Riwaya fi al-Adab al-'Arabi* [The Structure of the Novel in Arabic Literature] (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1982), p. 210.

²⁶⁶ Nabil Faraj, "Sah al-Nawm", in *Sab'un Sham'a Fi Hayat Yahya Haqqi*, p. 208.

to demystify the otherwise apparent symbolism of the novel. It was none other than Taha Husayn, arguably the most influential Egyptian intellectual of the past century, who enunciated this relationship between Nasser and the *Ustadh*—still, without spelling Nasser’s name. He tells us:

It is obvious that the writer’s village is Egypt, and no wonder we find there a tavern and its clients. And it is obvious that the miracle-maker is the leader of the revolution, his friends, and his assistants. And it is finally obvious that the writer aspires to make us satisfied with the reform that has been done in Egypt, and to console us regarding its shortcomings...for Paris, according to the French, was not built over a night.²⁶⁷

Husayn, however, criticizes the second part of the novel for being dull and incoherent, preferring the literary beauty of the first one. In other words, he chooses the marvelous depiction of what he sees as a miserable village over the clichéd take on a reformed society—the literary merit of the text over its message. Elucidating the reason behind this noticeable disparity in the aesthetic value of the text, Husayn very intelligently raises the following point:

It is easy to explain this [the disparity]; the Egyptian revolution has not yet constituted a theme for high literary narratives, as it has yet to reach its end. We live it; we do not *dream* about it. And if we talked about it, we would opt for honest exhortation and pure advice, and would impose on ourselves motives that are foreign to fiction.²⁶⁸

Put differently, Husayn maintains that the Egyptian revolution and its leader are not *fictionalizable* yet, for they are part of a reality that has not yielded itself to literary imagination. They are still a history unfolding, continually adding details to their (then) incomplete, potential story. Only when the story ceases to exist in reality can it become literature.

The novel abounds with references that link the *Ustadh* to Nasser. Upon his arrival to the village, for instance, the *Ustadh* is first seen by the carriage driver, whose vehicle is the village’s

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²⁶⁷ Taha Husayn, *Naqd wa Islah*, p. 159.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 160 , my emphasis.

only means of transportation. Moments before he recognizes the *Ustadh*, it is the latter's physical traits that capture the driver's attention:

The man appeared to be a huge, powerful giant to the driver. His outline was clearly defined like a charcoal drawing on a sheet of the horizon and the mist... he looked at him for a while as he stood there. Despite their simplicity his clothes were elegant and well-fitting. He held his head high on a long neck, which would not submit to injustice. This impression was enhanced by a perfect nose, which was not too thin nor too snub nor too weakened by vicissitudes. Under his broad, powerful shoulders was a straight back that would bow only to God.²⁶⁹

Obviously, the voice of the narrator [read: the author] can be easily recognized. Not only do these attributes match Nasser's, but the paragraph works as though to adopt Nasser's call for pride and dignity, evocating his famous slogan: *Irfa' Ra'sak Ya Akhi* (Raise your head, my brother). Later in the novel, during a meeting with the *Ustadh*, the narrator devotes a full paragraph to describe his smile, and how it reflects the *Ustadh*'s mentality: "originally, the smile had indicated a determination to overcome tyranny and obstacles... But today it seemed to indicate a deep understanding of human aspirations."²⁷⁰ As will be shown next chapter, Nasser's physical traits, including his smile, establish a motif in Egyptian literature.

The aspirations and the actions of the *Ustadh* resemble those of post-1952 Nasser's. As mentioned earlier, the determination to eliminate poverty is what the *Ustadh* first expresses upon his arrival. More significantly, the novel presents the first speech that the *Ustadh* delivers in the village, explaining his reforming agenda. Commenting on the unpleasant conditions in which the villagers live, he maintains that the source behind it is the people's "sense of inferiority, their

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²⁶⁹ *Good Morning*, p. 78.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.107.

submission to injustice, and their predilection for peace and quiet at all costs.”²⁷¹ In addition, the speech proposes the *Ustadh*’s vision for improving the peasant’s conditions, including the redistribution of land and wealth.

Equally indicative is the reference to the *Ustadh*’s assistants among the youth of the village. On his first encounter with the carriage driver, the *Ustadh*, notwithstanding his long absence, appears fully cognizant of the minute details of life in the village, so much so that the driver wonders “where on earth does he get his information from? Does he have informants in the village that keep him up-to-date, without our knowing who they are?”²⁷² This allusion to the secrecy that engulfs the *Ustadh*’s work prior to the change (read: revolution) that he introduces echoes the historical account of the discrete meetings between Nasser and the Free Officers in preparation for the 1952 coup. The identity of those informants is first disclosed during the *Ustadh*’s first speech, when the narrator notices that

The professor stood up with a small group of young men from our village, known for their seriousness, determination, uprightness, and *concealment* (*Kitman*). I realized that they were the ones who had told him about the secrets of our village.²⁷³

Well into the second part of the novel, the narrator once again reflects on the traits of those aides, who by now make up the majority in the village council. Having realized their competence, efficiency, and trustworthiness, the narrator regretfully admits how the villagers, himself included, underestimated those youths prior to the arrival of the *Ustadh*. Noticeably younger than the other villagers, the latter “had ignored [them], not realizing that they would be able to

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²⁷¹ Ibid, p.82.

²⁷² Ibid, p.79.

²⁷³ Ibid, p.82, my emphasis.

shoulder a great burden which needs soundness of mind and body. Some of the elders, who prided themselves on their experience, had not paid them attention.”²⁷⁴

However, the narrator does not completely spare those assistants his criticism. Recognizing the negative transformation that befalls them after the revolution, he comments, addressing the *Ustadh*, “When some of your close and highly trusted friends turned from you, you rejected them.”²⁷⁵ As such, the narrative contrasts the *Ustadh* with his aides, whereby the former is not only exonerated from their misdeeds, but also credited for standing against them once he realizes they betray his ideals. In so doing, the narrative sets an early fictional example in Egyptian literature of the way in which Nasser is personally separated, and mostly exempted, from the misdeeds of his regime. Nasser’s exceptionality, a trait on which successive Egyptian literary productions would capitalize, transforms him into a value, an all-embracing, trans-historical, positive notion that evokes senses of honesty, pride, and modesty. It stems, as *Sah al-Nawm* relays, from the fact that he

Had not given anyone the opportunity to say: ‘we were confused by him, because he has two faces.’ They had said this of many exceptional *rulers* who opened the door of hope onto torture and suffering...But you have only one face to your inner and outer selves. You have protected your people against doubts and shocks. With a guide like you, the wayfarer is sure to reach his destination however long it may take.²⁷⁶

Having established the *Ustadh* as a Nasser allegorized, it merits the attention to notice how the latter is reimagined. The narrative is determined to highlight the intellectual dimension

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²⁷⁴ Ibid, p.98.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 151.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, p.111, my emphasis.

of the *Ustadh*. On his arrival, he spends “the night in his study reading.”²⁷⁷ In fact, his whole intent to bring about change is born out of his long devotion to reflections and observations: “For months I locked myself up in my room, continuously studying and pondering, until the path became clear.”²⁷⁸ The *Ustadh* is presented more as a wise man than as an army officer. Only when necessary, however, will he resort to force: “My friends and I will lead gently at first, and if this should not work, then force will.” The novel shows that the villagers offer the *Ustadh* their allegiance, “promising to follow him wherever he went and to do whatever he advised.”²⁷⁹ In so doing, the novel seeks to imagine an alternative history to the 1952 revolution; it attempts to *demilitarize* it, to image it as a social movement led by an intellectual whose education is the primary incentive behind his reforming aspirations. This alternative account offers the narrator the freedom to criticize and advise the *Ustadh* himself, bestowing, I would argue, a didactic, preaching tone upon the novel. In other words, the narrative creates its own Nasser, a Nasser who admits, as early in his career as in 1955, the downsides of the revolution, and who, equally important, is willing to listen receptively to admonition and direction. Thus, in a self-assessing scene that constitutes a precedent in Egyptian literature, the narrative has the *Ustadh* /Nasser acknowledging the mistakes and conceding that his movement might have harmed some people:

We are turning over a new page, and will not go back even for a second, because this is not possible in our world. One cannot, however, avoid some shadow of that previous page falling over the new... you think I am not concerned about what has happened to some people as a result of my programs?²⁸⁰

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²⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 82.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 83.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 109.

The didactic aspect of the novel is best recognized in the last section, entitled, “The Meeting with the Professor.” This section, triggered by an invitation that the narrator receives for a private meeting with the *Ustadh*, sheds light on yet another concern of the novel; namely, the relationship between Nasser and Egyptian intellectuals. It reflects the apprehensions that Egyptian writers, particularly the liberal generation to whom Haqqi belongs, had toward a military coup. Interestingly, the publication of *Sah al-Nawm* coincided with the personal letter that veteran Egyptian artist and journalist Ruz al-Yusuf had sent to Nasser, asking for unrestricted freedom of speech. As shown in the first chapter, the letter would establish a tradition of writing to Nasser. The *Ustadh*’s view on writers, represented by the narrator of *Sah al-Nawm*, is revealed soon after his arrival. Having joined other villagers to welcome him, the narrator seems uneasy upon hearing that the *Ustadh* has actually mentioned him in passing: “Who is he? This silent, absent-minded fellow? I have no time for the likes of him. I want workers, not *dreamers*.”²⁸¹ Favoring actions over intellectual theorization, as though to echo Nietzsche’s aphorism that “knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion,”²⁸² the *Ustadh* turns toward the space where actions vanish the most. Reasoning why he intends to shut down the tavern, he declares in a public speech, attended by the narrator, that “because it is a den of iniquity, luring the men away from their homes. It brings together the misguided and the idle

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²⁸¹ *Good Morning*, p. 81, my emphasis.

²⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 60.

with the disappointed and the dreamers.”²⁸³ The narrator comments that while uttering the word “dreamers,” the *Ustadh* “looks up at me.”²⁸⁴

The private meeting with the *Ustadh* is an opportunity for the narrator to offer suggestions and advices to the new political authority in the village. In addition, it shows the narrator that this authority may at times be intrusive, its surveillance measures penetrating the seemingly discrete aspects of intellectuals’ life. Thus, the *Ustadh* takes the narrator by surprise when he informs him that “I have also heard that you are writing a journal and I have seen some excerpts.”²⁸⁵ The narrator’s reaction shows the anxiety of a writer whose secret work is invaded:

I was surprised at these words, and I did not know what to say. On the one hand, I was impressed that the professor had acquired news of all my movements, and had come into possession of my papers. On the other, I was annoyed to be exposed after having reckoned that my movements were not being observed.²⁸⁶

Corrective and exhortative, the dialogue between the two men examines the positive and negative outcomes of the revolution. In addition, it depicts the *Ustadh* impatiently waiting for intellectuals to intervene, announcing in fact that he knows what concerns them. Interrupting a long speech that the narrator gives before him, the *Ustadh* takes the lead and goes:

Shall I complete what you are saying? I know the rest of your speech because I have read your journal. You will remind me (do you think I do not know?) to be tolerant and to respect the rights of the individual first as a human being and only then as a stone in the building of society,

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²⁸³ *Good Morning*, p. 83.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

and to distinguish between my belief that I am right and that I am absolutely right, and to remember that sincerity and correct opinions are harmonious, if not always found together.²⁸⁷

The last section is a twofold invitation. It calls on the political authority to lend an ear to intellectuals, and asks intellectuals in return to approach the authority and advise it. In a manner of wishful thinking for the situation in Egypt at the time, the novel ends with the two men shaking hands, the *Ustadh* putting it forward before the narrator that “I expect you to do your duty,”²⁸⁸ and the narrator informing the readers: “and I have.” Apparently, the narrator considers telling this narrative, i.e. the novel itself, to be fulfillment of his duty. In so doing, he once again acknowledges the didactic, rectifying nature of his mission. Though harmful to the aesthetics of the narrative, this tone, particularly dominant in the last chapter, succeeds in conveying both the apprehensions and the hopes of the intellectual elite following Nasser’s revolution. Whichever would prevail in successive literary writings on Nasser will be unearthed in the course of this dissertation.

Nasser as a Bestial

Unlike Yahya Haqqi, Yusif Idris has had a more volatile, critical, and confrontational experience with Nasser and his regime. Initially supportive of the revolution, he nevertheless became one of its early victims, and was arrested during the infamous 1954 crisis, a month after the publication of his first short story collection, *Arkhas Layali* (The Cheapest Nights). In the ensuing years, Idris, an idealist, grew disenchanted with the outcomes of the revolution, realizing

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²⁸⁷ Ibid, 111.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 112.

that “few of the aims pronounced so eloquently by the new leader had in fact been accomplished.”²⁸⁹

As mentioned earlier, Idris has repeatedly approached Nasser in his fiction, producing some of the most powerful allegories about the Man. In fact, “Nasser had, by Idris’ own account, always been a source of inspiration to him.”²⁹⁰ Complex and multi-layered, Nasser’s character posed several dilemmas to the leftist Idris. In an interview with Egyptian intellectual Ghali Shukri, he acknowledged how he began to contemplate the attributes of Nasser during his 1954 incarceration. Sensing the seemingly irreconcilable features of the Man, Idris declared that he and his comrades

Were baffled. This is a dictator, but he collaborates with socialist states to protect the homeland and build its major productive institutions. He orders agrarian reforms, free education throughout all stages, and the Egyptanization of foreign banks.²⁹¹

Echoing common feelings that were shared by a sizable group of Egyptian intellectuals, Idris lacked a singular view of Nasser. His was a mix of admiration and disapproval, veneration and dismay. These conflicting sentiments were strongest during Nasser’s final years. The very same Idris whose post-1967 literary productions were condemning and decrying Nasser personally could nevertheless pen one of the most despondent elegies following the president’s untimely death. Writing in his daily column in *al-Ahram* newspaper, Idris lamented:

O, our father in the earth. O, our compassionate, big heart.

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²⁸⁹ Denys Johnsn-Davies, ed. *The Essential Yusuf Idris: Masterpieces of the Egyptian Short Story* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2009), p.1

²⁹⁰ Dalya Cohen-Mor, *Yusuf Idris: Changing Visions* (Potomac: Sheba Press, 1992), p. 116.

²⁹¹ Ghali Shukri, *Yusif Idris: Farfur Kharij al-Sur* [Yusif Idris: A Riffraff Beyond the Wall] (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-‘Amma li al-Isti’lamat, 1992), p. 85.

For the first time ever, the world is without Nasser. We are not used to breathe the air that he does not breathe. We cannot sleep except when we are certain he is there, over the al-Qubba Bridge, nor can we wake up if his smiling face does not greet us.²⁹²

Of all the Nasser allegories that Idris produced, his short story *al-Khud'a* (Delusion) definitely stands out. First published in *al-Ahram* newspaper in 1969, the story was included two years later in one of Idris' best-known collections, *Bayt min Lahm* (House of Flesh). In fact, perhaps owing to its temporal circumstances—emerging as it was a year following Nasser's death—a good number of the book's stories were retrospectively read as allegories of Nasser. For instance, *al-Rihla* (The Journey), narrating the story of a man carrying the dead body of his father in a car, was widely interpreted as a reference to the then current situation in Egypt, where “the dead father is intended to represent ‘Abd al-Nasir (rendered effectively “dead” by the June War of 1967 and its results), and the message of the story is thus that the time had come to abandon even such a beloved figure as one's own (the country's) father figure.”²⁹³ Indeed, with *al-Rihla* first published in *al-Ahram* only three months prior to the actual death of Nasser, it was proclaimed prophetic, attesting to Idris' prescient capacities and his profound envision of the incidents that would soon unfold.²⁹⁴

Peculiar to *al-Khud'a* is Idris' appropriation of an animal, the camel, as a symbol for Nasser. The story revolves around a camel's head intruding into the life of the narrator and his compatriots. Registering a unique literary incident in Egyptian writing where an animal stands

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²⁹² Naji Najib, *Al-Hulm wa al-Haya: Fi Suhbat Yusuf Idris* [Dream and Life: In the Company of Yusuf Idris] (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1985), pp. 87-88.

²⁹³ Roger Allen, “Yusuf Idris' Short Stories: Themes and Techniques” in *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, edited by Roger Allen (Colorado Springs: Three Continent Press, 1994), p. 26.

²⁹⁴ See ‘Abdel Rahman Abu ‘Awf, *Yusuf Idris wa ‘Alamuhu fi al-Qissa al-Qasira wa al-Riwaya* [Yusuf Idris and his World in the Short Story and the Novel] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ausra, 2001), pp. 253-254.

for Nasser, it should be noted, however, that bestial allegories are generously encountered in Idris' oeuvre, be they dogs, as in *Shay' Yujannin* (Something to Drive You Crazy) (1961), fish in *al-Ra's* (The Head) (1962), birds in *al-'Usfur wa al-Silk* (The Bird and the Telephone Wire) (1971), or lions in *Ana Sultan Qanun al-Wujud* (I Am the Lord of the Law of Existence) (1980). Outdoing most of his contemporaries in resorting to this technique, Idris "presents strong moral, social, political, and religious criticism under the cover of ordinary biological phenomena."²⁹⁵

Presenting human beings as animals "is effective not only because of the conventional associations we make with various animals but also because it establishes the individual or individuals targeted as other."²⁹⁶ In other words, it is an othering discourse, where otherness is not based on race nor gender, but on species. By satirically turning humans into animals, the discourse is invested in negative theriomorphism, where, instead of humanizing the animal, it acts as a dehumanization of the human. Tzvetan Todorov recounts how during the conquest of America the natives were looked upon as animals, thus relegating them to a lower status than the conquistadores.²⁹⁷

Still, the selection of the camel in *al-Khud'a* owes more to linguistic reason than to an intrinsic feature of the animal. Both *jamal*, Arabic for camel, and Nasser's first name, Jamal, are derived from the same root. The trilateral root, *J M L*, produces words that are basically related to beauty (*jamal*) and sentence/wholeness (*Jumla*). The pun was hardly missed by any of the critics who commented on the story, with some even going as far as to detect another—this time

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²⁹⁵ Dalya Cohen-Mor, *Yusuf Idris*, p. 23.

²⁹⁶ Karen L. Ryan, *Stalin in Russian Satire: 1971-1991* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), p. 50.

²⁹⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 153-154.

between *ra's* (head) and *ra'is* (president), also sharing the same root.²⁹⁸ The effortless accessibility of the reference is intentional, and Idris makes no attempt to mystify it. The camel, whose ugly presence in the story serves as a “scathing satire on Nasser’s omnipresence in the forms of portraits in public buildings, in the press, and so on, and through the interference of his security services with the private lives of citizens,”²⁹⁹ is appropriated merely because of its Arabic linguistic connection to Nasser’s name, which renders the symbol obviously understood. In other words, the camel in Arabic culture bears no connotations of obtrusiveness, surveillance, or trespassing, nor does it invoke senses of evil and bad omens like the owl or the crow do. In fact, a glimpse at classical Arabic poetry shows the camel, and particularly the she-camel, as the best, most friendly companion to the poet. In addition, the camel was seen as a miraculous creature, whose minute physiological details testify to the omnipotence of God. Thus the Quran combines the camel with heaven, the mountains, and the earth as evidence of the necessary existence of God: “What do they not consider how the camel was created? How heaven was lifted up? How the mountains were hoisted? How the earth was outstretched?”³⁰⁰ The fascination with the camel’s physiology, together with the animal’s frequent nocturnal appearances in the desert, may have awakened an aura in Arabs’ minds, attested in their reference to it as *Banat al-Layl* (daughters of the night).³⁰¹ Unable to fathom its uniqueness among animals, “the old Arabian belief was that the camels were descended from the jinn.”³⁰²

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²⁹⁸ Habib al-Salimi, *Al-Uqsusa al-'Arabiyya wa Matlab al-Khususiyya: Majmu'at Bayt min Lahm li Yusif Idris Namuthajan* [Arabic Short Story and the Quest for Particularity: The Case of Yusif Idris' *House of Flesh*] (Qayrawan: Matba'at al-Nasr, 2006), p. 165.

²⁹⁹ P.M Kurpershoek, “The Later Stories” in *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, p. 43.

³⁰⁰ Quran, 88:17-21.

³⁰¹ Al-Damiri, *Hayat al-Hayawan* [A Zoological Lexicon], translated by A.S.G. Jaykar (London: 1906), Vol. 1, p. 26.

By subverting the common metaphors that the camel often connotes, the story restructures the readers' literary memories, reorienting them toward a world less familiar. In so doing, it poses Nasser and his era as culpable, as deformers of an otherwise amicable being. The story opens with the narrator recounting the first time he notices the camel's head. The scene is worth quoting in full:

There must be a first time to everything and the first time was at night. The moon diffuses a silver peacefulness, the spring is limpid, its water flowing unhurriedly, with a tender murmur and, whenever you see the moon melting in the water, freshly melting in front of you, you cannot help feeling thirsty and you try to drink or at least to get a taste of it. I leaned forward with my whole body and stretched out my hand. The cool, sparkling drops almost reached my mouth, and *I almost enjoyed the first taste of it* when I noticed, next to my quivering image, quivering in shades of white and black, and to the tremor of the moon, *the reflection of another head*, protracted to the fore as if an outstretched hand had wrenched all its features violently out of its face, an elongated head ending with an unlimited transversal slit and, as if this were not enough, there was another slit lengthwise. No doubt, the head of a camel. Voiceless. Noiseless, Motionless. Suddenly, there was the head. I was not scared and I did not scream, I just turned round for no reason other than to make sure. *The moon was gone, the spring had vanished as well as the murmur and the silver.*³⁰³

While the setting is both timeless and not spatially-defined, a political reading of this opening is too tempting to resist. The optimistic, colorful atmosphere that the narrator inhabits—the moon, the spring, the flowing of the water—can be interpreted as the hopes that Egyptians possess in the wake of the revolution. These were real, tangible hopes, partially realized and experienced as the narrator seeks the water and in fact enjoys “the first taste of it.” The joy is interrupted, however, when the camel's head emerges in the background, crowding the narrator in his own space that is mirrored in the spring. The juxtaposition of the three images that are now reflected in the water—the narrator, the moon, and the camel's head—establishes a tensed, dramatic

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³⁰² Robert Irwin, *Camel* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 2010), p. 68.

³⁰³ Yusif Idris, *al-Khud'a* [Delusion] in *Flights of Fantasy: Arabic Short Stories*, edited by Ceza Kassem and Malak Hashem (Cairo: Elias Modern Publishing House, 1985), p. 27, my emphasis. I will rely on Kassem's and Hashem's translation of the story throughout the chapter.

moment that will determine the future of such context. To the narrator's dismay, "the moon was gone, the spring had vanished." No coexistence, that is, as the camel's head leaves no room for poetic imagination.

What is it in the camel's head that causes a sudden disappearance of the moon? The narrator makes it clear that the head is neither harmful nor even noisy. It is as though the mere existence of the head, unmediated, abrupt, and forceful, together with its unpleasant, mutilated features, marks an end for the otherwise elated surroundings. It is important to bear in mind that the story was written in the final years of Nasser's life, when the ship was already sinking, having received a major blow in the 1967 defeat. Compared to the equivocal, ambivalent stance toward the early years of the revolution that Haqqi's *Sah al-Nawm* adopts, Idris' text, written thirteen years later, is categorical and unwavering, unflinchingly condemning the leadership that puts people's dreams to an end. Whether Idris relates the deformed camel's head only to the final years of Nasser, or label the whole 1952 movement as monstrous, is hard to ascertain. However, a few lines later the narrative produces a highly ambiguous scene, in which it makes a reference to the "owner" of the camel, dragging the animal slowly, until,

Without any prelude or any struggle, without there being a doer or a shot or a weapon, without anything at all, the man in the white garment and turban collapses. The owner collapsed. He had been murdered, for around his head thrown on the ground and despite the darkness of the scene, there was a pool of blood. Moreover, the camel did not run away, nor clamor, nor rage, nor did it gurgle.³⁰⁴

The scene was read as a further uncovering of the camel's unspecified identity. "The fact that the camel at one time killed its owner," Cohen-Mor expounds, "[is] a reference to the deposed leader

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³⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 28.

of the revolution, Naguib.”³⁰⁵ More plausible, I argue, is to see in the camel’s owner a silhouette of a people crushed, dreams aborted, and promises unfulfilled. What is left is a camel’s head, unrestrainedly wandering among the masses.

The narrative is driven by three recurring motifs. First, it shows the elements of the grotesque as manifested in the camel’s head: a head without a body, full of slits; a face with “three lips.”³⁰⁶ If “depicting a human as an animal is indeed a disparaging critical gesture,”³⁰⁷ more so is the case when the animal is disfigured. The uncanny nature of this creature extends to the neck, a “thick, long, curved, sharp at the lower end as if it were a lathe, a neck ending with a head at its fore.”³⁰⁸ Throughout the story, the narrative is keen on repeating these monstrous descriptions of the head, almost verbatim: “that high elongated head with features that seem to have been pulled forward considerably, the three huge, swollen lips.”³⁰⁹

Second, whenever the head pops into view, the narrator reflects on its haughtiness and indifference to its surroundings. It does nothing, says nothing, and sees nothing. On first noticing it, the narrator tells how it is “looking on at me from above, and it was not even really looking at me, it was as if it did not see me or as if I had not been there altogether.”³¹⁰ When the head appears while the narrator takes a shower, literally standing with him inside the curtain, it again pays no attention to the surrounding, leaving the reason behind its existence inexplicably cryptic:

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³⁰⁵ Dalya Cohen-Mor, *Yusuf Idris*, p. 26.

³⁰⁶ *Delusion*, p. 130.

³⁰⁷ Karen L. Ryan, *Stalin in Russian Satire*, p. 49.

³⁰⁸ *Delusion*, p. 27.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 32.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 27-28.

I went on having my bath and I started looking carefully at the two eyes through the thin wires of water hoping to catch a glimpse of something, hoping to know why it looked on and what it wanted, hoping to feel for a moment that it did see me, but not at all, it just looked on, from above, and also straight ahead.³¹¹

Even when the narrator begins to discuss the head's appearance with his boss and colleagues at work, the camel partakes in the setting, staring at the nothingness. A complete observer, looking yet not looking, the head's passivity is epitomized in the final words of the story, where it is "looking ahead motionless, neither angry nor pleased, neither reaching out nor holding back, never doing anything except looking on, just looking on..."³¹²

More significantly, the narrative demonstrates the way that the narrator and his fellow citizens react to the existence of the head. Simultaneously, the story shows that the people are helpless in the face of the intrusive presence of the head and have become comfortably accustomed to it. In fact, on his first encounter with the head, the narrator admits that "the strangest thing was that I was not astonished, and did not question how a neck could spring out of no body."³¹³ The narrator becomes surprised when he learns from his colleagues that the head is not news for them, having all constantly seen it before. When he seeks an advice as what to do, they respond,

Do as people do. I ask them what they do and find that they do nothing at all. Sometimes some try to touch it, pat it, fondle it, sometimes some fly into a rage, are infuriated and curse it; others kick it or butt it, but the camel's head always remains as it is, and people remain as they are. It appears to them in a manner that makes them wonder at first, then they get bored with talking, and soon the eerie presence of the camel's head no longer seems a phenomenon that warrants a pause or even a glance.³¹⁴

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³¹¹ Ibid, p. 29.

³¹² Ibid, p. 32.

³¹³ Ibid, p. 27.

³¹⁴ Ibid, p. 31.

Even in the most intimate, private situations such as sexual intercourse, the narrator and his partner, though obviously irritated by the head's presence, can nevertheless consummate their love, realizing that their attempts to expel it out of their room is unattainable: "it slowly, patiently and persistently sneaked back between us so that it became clear that it was no use pushing it aside."³¹⁵

At play here is a twofold condemnation. I argue that the narrative exposes Egyptians' lack of agency, denounces their helplessness, and criticizes their capacity to coexist not only with the regime's intrusion in their life and their lack of privacy, but as importantly with a world of ugliness and malformation that beleaguers them. More precisely, Nasser does not only emerge as deformed; he also deforms the psyche of people, turning them into other "heads" who can normalize their relationship with the otherwise unlivable, uncanny situations. It is no wonder that none of the people in the story ever attempts to kill the camel's head. Even the narrator, taken aback by the inadequacy of people, himself included, cannot resist to release these thoughts, reflecting, "Perhaps if we were to be astonished, merely astonished, if we were all of us to be astonished whenever it appeared, it would cease to appear."³¹⁶

However, I argue that the essence of the story lies in mockery. Idris ridicules not people, but Nasser himself. Despite his ubiquitous encroachment in every aspect of Egyptians' life, Idris predicts that Egyptians will not only endure this, but will eventually ignore it. As seen above, the presence of the camel does not bar Egyptians from indulging in the most mundane and intimate of activities—it even does not bar them from discussing the issue itself. I read *al-Khud'a* as an

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³¹⁵ Ibid, p. 29.

³¹⁶ Ibid, p. 31.

act of confrontation, whereby Idris epitomizes his personal defiance of Nasser. Astonishingly brave, Idris wrote the story as his first contribution to *al-Ahram* upon joining its staff in 1969, at a time when the newspaper was acting as the regime's spokesperson, headed as it was by Nasser's closest intellectual Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal. Rather than declaring allegiance, Idris opted for a showdown with the president. He not only transformed him into a mere deformed camel's head whose only power was to watch people from afar, but also rejected to hide his intention behind the already obvious symbolism of *al-Khud'a*. Ultimately, the narrator declares in the final paragraph his full awareness that the camel/Nasser must be watching while he writes the story itself. Yet, he will continue writing—nay, he only writes because he knows that the camel is looking at him, thereby emasculating its alleged competence. As for the camel, it is devoid of any real threat—it can look, and only look:

Had it not been for my awareness of its presence I would have never ventured upon what I am doing right now, for—now---without a hint of astonishment or surprise, and without my raising my head, I am sure that the camel's head is looking on at me, that high elongated head with features that seem to have been pulled forward considerably, the three huge, swollen lips and the regular teeth, large tooth next to large tooth, tightly clenched and without any clefts between them, looking ahead motionless, neither angry nor pleased, neither reaching out nor holding back, never doing anything except looking on, just looking on...³¹⁷

Indeed, the message did not elude the president. According to an account, “the story displeased Nasser, who saw it insinuating at him.”³¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, Nasser was an active reader of major literary productions in Egypt, particularly those that are first fully published or serialized in *al-Ahram* by influential writers such as Idris and Mahfuz. Relying on the support and the protection of Haykal, those writers have ironically found in *al-Ahram* a safe space for

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³¹⁷ Ibid, p. 32.

³¹⁸ Naji Najib, *Al-Hulm wa al-Haya*, p. 34.

political innuendos. *Al-Khud'a* comes as no exception. A few of Idris' biographers relay how he would have been "barred from writing [for *al-Ahram*] afterwards, had it not been for Haykal's intervention."³¹⁹ The significance of these allegorical readings that Nasser proposes is that he, intentionally or otherwise, accepts to situate himself as a potential subject of literary imagination. Another possible and in fact more literal translation of Idris' story title is "Trick" or "Deception." By reading himself in the story, was Nasser tricked into acknowledging a semblance with an ugly reality? His refrain from punishing Idris can perhaps render the allegorical story more truthful, for, similar to the camel's head, Nasser can watch, and only watch.

Nasser as a Martyr

Nasser died of a heart attack on September 28, 1970, a few hours after the conclusion of the extraordinary Arab League Summit that was held in Cairo to negotiate a cease-fire between Jordanian army and Palestinian guerilla fighters, in what was referred to later as "Black September." Having bidden farewell to the emir of Kuwait at the airport, he felt dizzy and began to sweat heavily. He then was

driven home and the doctors were called. When Haykal reached the residence the end was already near. Nasser lay on his bed in pajamas surrounded by doctors. Haykal was joined by 'Ali Sabri, Husayn al-Shafi'i and Anwar al-Sadat who recited some verses from the Koran. General Mahmud Fawzi entered the room in great dismay just as a doctor said: "Everything is over." General Fawzi said bitterly: "No, impossible. Continue your work..." All the doctors cried. Tears fell, a deluge of tears.³²⁰

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³¹⁹ Faruq 'Abdel Qader, *al-Bahth 'an al-Yaqin al-Murawigh* [Searching for an Elusive Certainty] (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1998), p. 126.

³²⁰ Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 556.

Nasser's death was obviously natural, and health issues that had befallen him earlier were not news to people. However, the amount of grief and pain that swept many Egyptians and Arabs upon hearing the news was indescribably massive, and they soon began to search for some agent to hold accountable for their loss. Popularly, the "fatal heart attack was widely blamed on the stress of recent events, particularly the failure of the Cairo peace talks he [Nasser] convened to try to stop the "Black September" civil war."³²¹ Indeed, a certain feeling of guilt has spread among several Arabs, who have witnessed their beloved leader working day and night, incessantly, against doctors' orders, desperately attempting to bring bloodshed among Arabs to an end. It is as though the man, whose attendance to Arab causes was deemed exceptional, did in fact die for, but equally because of, those very causes. "Intra-Arab fighting, it was said, had broken Nasser's heart."³²²

It is within this context that the notion of Nasser as a *shahid*, or martyr, began to grow, not only among ordinary citizens, but also among writers and intellectuals. Both in Egypt as well as in other Arab countries, Nasser's death was seen by some as an act of sacrifice, an epitome of a selfless life that was entirely devoted to the welfare of the Arab nation. A few months following his death, a Syrian female poet published a collection of poetry whose title captured these feelings. Published in November 1970, *Shahid al-Tadhiyat* (The Martyr of Sacrifices) revealed less a poetic prowess than "the essence of a grieving heart which has been crushed by

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³²¹ Margarit Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, p. 122.

³²² Joel Gordon, *Nasser: Hero of the Arab Nation* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), p. 122. My father, who was studying in Cairo at the time, told me interesting anecdotes that testify to these feelings among Egyptians. For example, he said that in some movie theaters a news reel about Nasser would precede film screenings. Whenever King Husayn showed up in a photo with Nasser, the audience would start yelling at him, simultaneously saying, *kullo minnak ya ibn el kalb* [It is all your fault, son of a dog].

the catastrophe.”³²³ The collection, written in the classical form of the Arabic poem, was prefaced by a dedication to Nasser, who “died as a martyr while performing the greatest human service to Arabs.” The dedication was signed by the poet al-Hisni, who introduced herself as a “Nasserist Arab citizen from Damascus.”³²⁴

However, the two most notable contributions in this regard were those of Fu’ad Haddad, Egypt’s leading vernacular poet, and Nizar Qabbani, the Arab world’s most renowned poet at the time. In November 1970, Fu’ad Haddad embarked on writing an elegy for Nasser that was tellingly entitled, *Istishhad Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser* (The Martyrdom of Nasser). Initially intended as a lengthy piece, Haddad explains that only two parts were completed. Written in Egyptian colloquial, the poem abounds with references to Nasser as a *shahid*, as in “O God, why did not you give the *shahid* a chance to bid us farewell,” or “Farewell, O father, the most soulful *shahid*.”³²⁵ In addition, Haddad, in line with the prevailing discourse on Nasser’s death, alludes to the president’s fatally exhausting days prior to his departure:

Keep on doing the right thing, O the greatest of Arabs;
Who spent ten days and nights with no sleep.³²⁶

The second part of the poem, optimistically entitled, *Lazim T’ish al-Muqawma* (Resistance Must Live on) more emphatically creates a special connection between Nasser’s death and the tragic events that were concurrently befalling Palestinians in Jordan. Thus, “a Palestinian orphan seeks

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³²³ ‘Afifa al-Hisni, *Shahid al-Tadhiyat* [The Martyr of Sacrifices] (Cairo: Matabi’ al-Nashir al-‘Arabi, 1970), p. 70.

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

³²⁵ Fu’ad Haddad, *Istishhad Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser: Misr wa Gamal* [The Martyrdom of Nasser: Egypt and Gamal] in *Fu’ad Haddad: al-A’mal al-Kamila* [Fu’ad Haddad: The Complete Works], collected and edited by Amin & Hasan Haddad (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-‘Ammali li Qusor al-Thaqafa, Vol. 2, 2006), p. 300.

³²⁶ Ibid, p. 301.

to confide his sorrows in you;” “you had to stop the bloodshed in Jordan.”³²⁷ Only Nasser could have healed the wounds:

O the heart of Nasser
Stand up for *jihad* and duty
For the meeting with the kings
For orphans who hastened to search for you.³²⁸

But if Haddad shows both appreciation for Nasser’s sacrifices and apprehensions about the fate of Palestinians in Jordan after his death, renowned Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani goes so far as to hold Arabs responsible for Nasser’s death. For Qabbani, Nasser was metaphorically killed by Arabs, who were unworthy of such a phenomenal man. As such, he was only the last in a chain of prophets and martyrs whose demise was brought about by the very same people whom they served. Characterized by an angry voice and a hyperbolic, condemning diction—common in Qabbani’s political poetry—the poem launches an attack against Arabs, the poet included, where “a relentless rhythm of ‘we’ and ‘you’ casts Nasser as a paternal protector and the Arabs as disloyal children.”³²⁹ It opens thus:

We killed you, O the last of the prophets.
We killed you. It is not new for us
To kill the *Sahaba*³³⁰ and the saints.
For many are the prophets that we have killed...

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³²⁷ Ibid, p. 317 & 319

³²⁸ Ibid, p. 321.

³²⁹ Margarit Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey*, p. 123.

³³⁰ Plural of *sahabi*, or companion. The term is used to designate Prophet Muhammad’s companions.

Many are the imams that we have slaughtered
 While they were praying the evening prayer.
 Our history is a mere calamity,
 Our days are all Karbala'.³³¹

Naturally, Black September's head rears up once again, where the poem reads in Nasser's death his ultimate disillusion with the potential of progress for Arabs, who temporally belong to the time of *Jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic era):

We watered you with the poison of Arabness till you were full
 We threw you in the fire of Amman till you were burnt
 We showed you the betrayal of Arabness till you lost faith.
 Why did you appear in the land of hypocrites?
 Why did you appear? For we are the people of *Jahiliyya*.³³²

Depicting Nasser as a martyr comes in harmony with the Islamic notion of martyrdom, which does not restrict the category to those who die in a battlefield. As Talal Asad notes, "the Islamic tradition has described several ways of dying as *shahada* that are not connected with war."³³³ Of these ways, natural death is featured prominently, befalling those who die "either while engaged in a meritorious act such as a pilgrimage or a prayer, or after leading a virtuous life."³³⁴ This meritorious act has in the modern time been extended to other mundane, non-

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³³¹ Nizar Qabbani, *Buka'iyya li Gamal 'Abdel Nasser* [Eulogy for Nasser] in Muhammad Huwwar, *Buka' Ramz: Gamal 'Abdel Nasser fi Marathi al-Shu'ara'* [Weeping over a Symbol: Nasser in Poets' Elegies] (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1997), p. 367.

³³² Ibid, pp. 368-369.

³³³ Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 49.

³³⁴ Etan Kohlberg, *Medieval Muslim Views on Martyrdom* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1997), p. 26.

religious spheres, such as serving the nation or any other cause in which one believes. As such, the word *shahid* has at times been stripped of its religious connotations, and instead appropriated by groups who are commonly seen as antagonistic to Islam, such as Communists. This in part explains how, in the context of Palestinian resistance movements, *shahid* was used to designate those who died while engaging in the struggle for Palestine, regardless of the way they died. In other words, *shahada*, contrary to common (mis)conceptions, is not only about the faith that leads you to a heavenly hereafter; it is equally, for many, about worldly affairs, social justice, and dignity. It is “an ideology that could easily thrive in a secular context, where the individual has little hope for the afterlife, but wants to leave behind a lasting legacy.”³³⁵

With the publication of Gamal al-Ghitani’s *Kitab al-Tajalliyat* (The Book of Epiphanies) in 1983, the approach to the theme of Nasser’s martyrdom in literature took on an altogether different form. Whereas he was seen earlier as someone who devoted his life to the good of his people, thereby attaining, despite his natural death, the position of martyrs, in *Kitab al-Tajalliyat* Nasser’s death was fantastically revisited, whereby Nasser himself was resurrected, thrown back into life, and physically killed by his enemy. In so doing, al-Ghitani transformed Nasser into a battlefield martyr, one whose earlier sacrifices for the nation were attested by the blood that flowed from him in war.

Kitab al-Tajalliyat conforms to al-Ghitani’s recognized writing techniques, where he “predominantly parodies an archaic Arabic style, which he resurrects from his constant dialoguing with the Arabic literary heritage.”³³⁶ If he imitated the style of medieval historians in

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³³⁵ Daniel Brown, “Martyrdom in Sunni Revivalist Thought” in *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, edited by Margaret Cormack (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 113.

³³⁶ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*, p. 13.

his well-known novel *al-Zayni Barakat*, al-Ghitani turns to Sufi writing in *al-Tajalliyat*. In fact, the title itself relates to Sufism, particularly to the legendary master Ibn ‘Arabi, who had arguably written a book with the same title before.³³⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi’s appropriation of the word *tajalli* added a mystical dimension to its original meaning, which has to do with emergence, clarity, and appearance. For him, *tajalli* means “*ma yankashifu li al-qulub min asrar al-ghuyub*”³³⁸ (what appears before the heart from the secrets of the unseen). It is more specifically related to “seeing Allah everywhere, a gift that is primarily bestowed upon prophets and saints.”³³⁹

Al-Ghitani’s work is a massive, intentionally disintegrated reflection on death, time, martyrdom, and finitude. Its 800 pages, divided into three books, constitute a semi-autobiographical narrative in which the author/narrator Gamal retells the contents of a spiritual journey that he has just experienced. What unfolds is an “associative reminiscing [that] takes the narrator’s discourse from one story line to another, then back to the earlier one in a maze-like sequence that is accentuated by the fragmentary structure of the narrative.”³⁴⁰ The book is triggered by the death of al-Ghitani’s father in 1980. The despondent son, who happens to be

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³³⁷ See Ibn ‘Arabi, *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*, edited with a foreword by Ayman Hamdi (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li al-Kitab, 2002).

³³⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi, *al-Futuh al-Makkiyya* [The Meccan Illuminations] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, Vo. 2), p. 485.

³³⁹ Muhammad Ghazi ‘Urabi, *al-Nusus fi Mustalahat al-Mutasawwifa* [Texts on the Terminology of Sufis] (Damascus: Dar Qutayba, 1985), p. 45. In his forthcoming translation of al-Ghitani’s novel, Farouk ‘Abdel Wahhab chooses to render the title as *The Book of Epiphanies*. Other critical studies of the novel, as will be shown, referred to it as *The Book of Theophanies*. Still, Khaled Osman, who translated the novel into French, opted for *Le Livre des Illuminations* [The Book of Illuminations].

³⁴⁰ Maha El Marraghi, *Gamal al-Ghitani’s Kitab al-Tajalliyat [The Book of Theophanies]: A Deconstructive Discourse* (Unpublished M.A Thesis: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, 1992), p. 50.

away at that tragic moment, feels shattered, with an eruptive sense of mortality overwhelming him. Torn between “a finite existence, and a desire for an infinite one,”³⁴¹ the narrator seeks to defy death by embarking on a journey that annihilates history, resuscitates the dead, and obliterates the otherwise fixed barriers between past and present, here and there, and self and other. Only through a Sufi concept of *tajalli* can time be suspended, spaces traversed, and ephemerality challenged—hence the narrator’s determination to “see what nobody had seen; to live that which had never occurred to anyone; to be illuminated. To be illuminated. To be illuminated.”³⁴² As one critic puts it,

Kitab al-Tajalliyat reflects the writer’s dream of possessing time and the impossible quest to travel through it. Points of time overlap through *tajalliyat*...whereby the narrator witnesses the moment his father was born; sees his father as a child and his mother as a child, a young girl, and a bride; sees the moment he himself was born, as well as the birth of his beloved Lour.³⁴³

It is in these illuminations that Nasser matters. The loss of the narrator’s father is accompanied by a cataclysmic vanishing of the Nasserite dream, manifested in the narrative largely through al-Sadat’s economic policy of *Infitah* and the relinquishment of Egyptians’ and Palestinians’ rights by signing a peace agreement with Israel. The narrator, unable to fathom these drastic changes, seeks to retain that romantic, Nasserite past or, more precisely, to entwine it with the present, so that the dead Nasser can be enlivened again. If al-Sadat’s policies are

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³⁴¹ Gamal al-Ghitani, *Kitab al-Tajalliyat: al-Asfar al-Thalatha* [The Book of Epiphanies: The Three Books] (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li al-Kitab, 1997), p. 37.

³⁴² Ibid, p. 26.

³⁴³ Marwa Mitwalli, *Hadathat al-Nas al-Adabi al-Mustanid ila al-Turath al-‘Arabi: Dirasa li Fanniyyat al-Mawruth al-Nathri wa Jamaliyyat al-Sard al-Mu’asir fi Adab Gamal al-Ghitani (1969-2005)* [The Modernity of the Literary Text: A Study in the Techniques of Classical Prose and the Aesthetics of Modern Narrative in Gamal al-Ghitani’s Writings (1969-2005)] (Damascus: Dar al-Awa’il, 2008), p. 105.

tantamount to stabbing his predecessor's ideals in the back, the narrative materializes this betrayal by pitting the two men against each other on a battlefield.

However, the pair Nasser/the narrator's father acquires a mythological dimension through the appearance of Imam al-Husayn. In fact, the narrative first introduces these three figures together, acting like the focus of a light that dazzles the narrator's eyes. Later on, al-Husayn functions as a guide that leads the narrator through his multiple epiphanies. And it is the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn in the Battle of Karbala' that the narrative employs as a device through which to link the past to the present.

Al-Husayn is perhaps the most significant martyr in Islamic history, and he certainly is for Shiites. His massacre at Karbala' in 680 at the hands of the Umayyads, together with his immediate family and the few supporters that stood with him, was a defining moment in Arabic and Islamic history, and the Battle of Karbala' would become a symbol for "righteous struggle against worldly injustice."³⁴⁴ In most of the historical accounts,

Al-Husayn is presented as the paradigmatic heroic figure, who cares for his fallen children, tries to obtain water for the non-combatant women and young ones, and fights nobly until the end. When he dies, he is said to have received at least thirty-three wounds and killed a number of the enemy. His body is treated ignobly; he was trampled under the hooves of the horsemen, and his head was cut off and presented to 'Ubaydullah b. Ziyad, the Umayyad governor, and eventually to the caliph Yazid in Damascus.³⁴⁵

The centrality of al-Husayn's martyrdom in Muslim and, particularly, Shiite imagination cannot be overstated. Its annual commemoration and mourning on 'Ashura Day, its multiple interpretations, and its relevance to the Islamic Revolution in Iran are but a few manifestations of

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³⁴⁴ Keith Lewinstein, "The Reevaluation of Martyrdom in Early Islam" in *Sacrificing the Self*, p. 80.

³⁴⁵ David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 57.

a tragedy that has been regarded by the Shia community as a “cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves.”³⁴⁶

As Nizar Qabbani’s earlier poem shows, Karbala’ has been invoked in the context of Nasser’s death, albeit in passing. Nowhere in modern Arabic literature, however, have the Battle and al-Husayn’s martyrdom occupied a larger space than in *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*. This space, I argue, follows what Michael Fischer calls “Karbala’ paradigm,” where the Battle and its protagonist function as a “rhetorical device” that al-Ghitani reworks in a different domain. According to Fischer, the story “can be elaborated and abbreviated. It provides models for living and a mnemonic for thinking how to live.”³⁴⁷ Al-Ghitani stages Nasser’s fantastic death as another Karbala’, borrows the details of the Battle’s original setting, and turns the Egyptian president into a Husayn. In so doing, al-Ghitani engages in a *karbalization* of Nasser’s fate, lending his otherwise natural death an entirely new meaning. Moreover, by appropriating Karbala’ in a secular setting, featuring as it does Nasser vis-à-vis Israel, the United States, and al-Sadat, al-Ghitani manages to de-secterianize al-Husayn, detach him from the Shia vs. Sunni debate to which he is often related, and transform him into a humanistic symbol.

The narrative establishes several parallels between al-Husayn and Nasser, a few of which predate the latter’s surreal resurrection. For instance, the narrator tells al-Husayn in one *tajalli* how he and his father used to “pray the Eid prayer at your mosque, where we would see Nasser

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³⁴⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Ashura in Tewlver Shi’ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), p. 141.

³⁴⁷ Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 21.

and his procession.”³⁴⁸ He mentions his father’s frequent visits to al-Husayn’s grave in the mosque, where it is popularly believed that the Imam’s head was buried after Karbala’.³⁴⁹

Interestingly, the homage is reversed shortly, as it is al-Husayn and the narrator now who appear before Nasser’s grave. Upon their arrival, al-Husayn draws the narrator’s attention to roses that blossom on top of the grave:

He pointed to small red roses that are penetrated by blue circles, whose centers are in turn occupied by white dots. He said that these roses emanate from him [Nasser], and that he emanates from them.³⁵⁰

Such saint-like depiction of Nasser, which permeates the narrative, establishes what one critic describes as a hagiographic discourse, in which Nasser appears as a spiritual hero whose life is sanctified.³⁵¹ Hagiography is a genre that “favors the actors of the sacred realm, ‘saints,’ and intends to edify, through exemplarity.”³⁵² Of the hagiographic tales, the martyr’s flourishes “wherever the community is very marginal, confronted with the threat of extinction.”³⁵³ This is precisely the case in *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*, where the martyrdom of Nasser is seen as the epitome of a “phantasmagoric confrontation between the symbols of good and those of evil.”³⁵⁴

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³⁴⁸ Gamal al-Ghitani, *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*, p. 38.

³⁴⁹ David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 57.

³⁵⁰ Gamal al-Ghitani, *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*, p. 88.

³⁵¹ See Bashir al-Qumri, *Shi’riyyat al-Nas al-Riwa’i: Qira’a Tanassiyya fi Kitab al-Tajalliyat* [The Poetics of the Novel Text: an Intertextual Study of *Kitab al-Tajalliyat* (Al-Ribat: al-Bayadir li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’, 1991), p. 200.

³⁵² Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 269.

³⁵³ Ibid, p. 273.

³⁵⁴ Maha El Marraghi, *Gamal al-Ghitani’s Kitab al-Tajalliyat*, p. 152.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative conjures up a resurrection of Nasser. In a section entitled, *Tajalli al-Mustahil* (The Epiphany of the Impossible), the president is seen by the narrator in the early 1980s, and the encounter takes place in Dokki Square in Cairo. This choice of neighborhood is significant, for it houses the first Israeli embassy in Egypt. To the narrator's dismay, no one else notices the appearance of Nasser. Their first conversation goes as follows:

'How are you? What is up with you?'

'You know me?'

'Who does not know him who needs no introduction?'

He nodded his head. I noticed that his hair has turned completely gray.

'So I am in Egypt.'

I was taken aback. He shouted,

'I see what should not be seen.'

He paused for a minute, before muttering words imbued with puzzlement and questions.

'Did the Israelis infiltrate the front?'

'No,' I said.

'Did their army reach Cairo?'

'No,' I said.

'What is it that I see, then? Explain it to me,' he said.³⁵⁵

This emergence establishes the first episode of the Karbala' paradigm in *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*.

Similar to al-Husayn's travel to al-Kufa in order to lead the rebellion against the Umayyads,

Nasser's return is seen as "answering the call of those helpless, weak people."³⁵⁶ If al-Husayn is betrayed by the people of al-Kufa, whom the poet al-Farazdaq had famously characterized as

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³⁵⁵ Gamal al-Ghitani, *Kitab al-Tajalliyat*, pp. 12-13.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 137.

“their hearts are with you, but their swords are with the Umayyads,”³⁵⁷ so too is Nasser, who is now “wanted, chased after. He needs to hide and finds no hideout. His followers deserted him.”³⁵⁸ The conflation of epochs is further intensified when Nasser is captured by an officer whom the narrative describes as working for ‘Ubaydullah b. Ziyad, the *wali* of al-Kufa who orchestrated the crackdown against al-Husayn in Karbala’.³⁵⁹

Underlying the reason behind Nasser’s fantastic return is the ultimate continuity that the narrative establishes between the president and al-Husayn. In a twist that somehow affirms the hagiographic nature of the text, Nasser seeks those who have killed al-Husayn, identifies them, and prepares for a war of retaliation. The enemy turns to be none other than al-Sadat himself, backed by Israel and the United States, who, like the Umayyads before him, amasses thousands of people to face the Karbala’-like meager number of warriors that Nasser leads. As such, the narrative confirms the cyclic nature of history, where every martyr is a Husayn, every enemy is a Yazid, and every battle is a Karbala’. Nasser’s supporters are killed, one by one, each bidding him farewell moments before they vanish, saying, “peace be upon you, O protector of the poor, and champion of the homeland.”³⁶⁰ Eventually, Nasser remains alone, whereupon al-Sadat—who is never explicitly named but rather referred to as *al-jilf al-jafi* (the Blunt Ingrate)—approaches

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³⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 136.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 201.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, pp. 113-114.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 234.

him and, at the behest of Americans and Israelis, cuts his head—thus epitomizing the paradigm.³⁶¹

With no more than seventy warriors, Nasser's battle is obviously deemed lost. In fact, one can see in Nasser's act less an attempt to retaliate, as the narrative hints, than a determination to encounter death. Written in the aftermath of al-Sadat's peace agreement with Israel, the rise of violent Islamic movements in Egypt, and the collapse of the Nasserite project, the narrative is an elegy for a bygone era whose end can only be realized through a bloody rupture. On the other hand, *Kitab al-Tajalliyat* is a fixation on the passive, if heroic, dimension of Karbala'. Its view of the struggle for one's rights is fatalistic, where Karbala' has inexorably to duplicate itself, almost verbatim. Unlike the combative interpretation of Karbala', which aims "to have the martyrdom of the prophet's grandson understood as a call for struggle, and not...as a tragic incident that was to be mourned in passive suffering,"³⁶² al-Ghitani's *Tajalliyat* celebrates a valiant loss. Nasser, literally the victorious, empties his name of its content, for, as a Husayn, he can only be an inevitably crushed martyr.

Nasser as a Defendant

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³⁶¹ Ibid, p. 235.

³⁶² Friederike Pannewick, "Passion and Rebellion: Shi'iti Visions of Redemptive Martyrdom" in *Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity*, edited by Friederike Pannewick (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), p. 58. The most prominent advocate of such an interpretation is perhaps 'Ali Shari'ati. For a discussion of his thoughts and, more importantly, relevance to the Islamic Revolution in Iran see Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 102-146.

In 1983, famed Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfuz published *Amam al-'Arsh* (Before the Throne), a book that “surprised his readers (and presumably himself as well).”³⁶³ Subtitled “A Dialogue with the Rulers of Egypt from Menes to Anwar al-Sadat,” the book’s surprise stemmed from the fact that it was Mahfuz’s first return to the pharaonic past in a work of literature in more than forty years. While it “complicates the standard linear development of Mahfuz’s career,”³⁶⁴ this comeback to a pharaonic setting was read as a discourse on the current time, a Mahfuz’s “rediscovering [of] the usefulness of history as a medium for expressing himself on the present.”³⁶⁵ In addition, it was seen as the writer’s attempt “to remind Egyptian readers of the uniqueness of Egyptian identity—a national identity which precedes Arabism and Islam.”³⁶⁶

Furthermore, the book’s structure calls into question the literary genre to which it belongs. A self-named dialogue consisting of sixty four dramatic scenes with very minimal narration, the book is a unique experiment in Mahfuz’s literary output. Ever since its publication, critics have been divided as to how to label it. “The real question is whether it falls into the genre of fiction or drama,”³⁶⁷ as Raymond Stock, who translated the book into English, puts it. While Samia

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³⁶³ Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfuz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, p. 42.

³⁶⁴ Wail Hassan, “Teaching a Seminar on Mahfuz” in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Naguib Mahfuz*, edited by Wail Hassan and Susan Muaddi Darraj (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2012), p. 34. Hassan refers to critics’ continuous attempts to classify Mahfuz’s oeuvre into rigid stages, such as the romantic, the realistic, and the symbolic periods. For a good study and critique of this approach, see Jabir ‘Asfur, “Naguib Mahfuz’s Critics,” translated by Ayman A. el-Desouky, in *Naguib Mahfuz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition*, edited by Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp. 144-171.

³⁶⁵ Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfuz*, p. 42.

³⁶⁶ Menahem Milson, *Najib Mahfuz: The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), p. 94.

³⁶⁷ Raymond T. Stock, *A Mummy Awakens: The Pharaonic Fiction of Naguib Mahfuz* (Penn Dissertations: Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 2008), p. 247.

Mehrez unequivocally dubs it as “not a novel,”³⁶⁸ and Wail Hassan, perhaps noting a continuity between *Amam al-‘Arsh* and Mahfuz’s early historical novels, considers it the beginning of “late pharaonic novels,”³⁶⁹ Menahem Milson, throughout the chapter he dedicates to it, merely refers to *Amam al-‘Arsh* as “the book,” implicitly attending to the problem of categorizing.³⁷⁰ Rasheed el-Enany sums up the discussion as follows:

It is a difficult book to classify, being unlike anything previously or since written by Mahfuz. It certainly is not a historical novel, nor is it a scholarly book of history in spite of its strict adherence to historical fact. Based mainly on dialogue rather than narration, it used a fictitious dramatic situation (i.e. the underworld trial) to bring into a certain vision of Egyptian history in its entirety. This however does not make the book a play as it consists of independent scenes held together only by the unities of space, action, and theme without either a plot or character development.³⁷¹

Mahfuz’s surprises do not end here, however. For the book, which features a surreal trial of Egypt’s men of power from time immemorial, produced an unprecedented characterization of Nasser in Egyptian literature: the defendant. Borrowing from Egyptian mythology, the book’s tribunal is headed by Osiris and Isis. “Egyptian leaders file in, one by one, and are questioned on their deeds and misdeeds.”³⁷² Trials follow a chronological order, with Nasser occupying the penultimate section. However, Mahfuz introduces major modifications to the original ancient setting, particularly to the way that the final verdict is passed. The pharaonic myth had it that

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³⁶⁸ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers*, p. 36.

³⁶⁹ Wail Hassan, “Teaching a Seminar on Mahfuz,” p. 34.

³⁷⁰ Milson, *Najib Mahfuz: The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo*, pp. 144-155.

³⁷¹ Rasheed el-Enany, “The Novelist as a Political Eye-Witness: A View of Najib Mahfuz’s Evaluation of Nasser and Sadat Eras” in *Journal of Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, Vol. 21, No. 1, March, 1990), p. 82.

³⁷² Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers*, p. 37.

Osiris, the god of the underworld, was responsible for judging the souls of the dead, aided by his sister-wife Isis, his son Horus, and Thoth, the scribe of the gods. In the judgment hall,

Osiris sat enthroned surrounded by forty two judges (This number evokes the forty two district rulers of Egypt). A pair of scales was placed before him to weigh the heart of the deceased against a feather, the symbol of Ma'at. The keeper of the balance was Thoth, the god of magic. Anbuis, the guide of souls, led the deceased before Osiris. Nearby, a monster called the "devourer" stood ready to swallow those who were condemned.³⁷³

The goddess Ma'at symbolized "harmony, justice, order, and truth."³⁷⁴ Those dead Egyptians who passed the balance test "were rewarded with immortality."³⁷⁵

Mahfuz's version of the trial, in turn, eliminates the scale, Ma'at, and the devourer. Perhaps influenced by the Biblical-Quranic narrative of the hereafter, Mahfuz creates three kinds of verdict: Heaven and Immortality, Hell, as well as a third position that he calls *Maqam al-Tafihin* (The Realm of the Unworthy). In his translation of the novel, Raymond Stock renders this term as the Purgatory.³⁷⁶ Also missing from Mahfuz's appropriation is the forty two judges, who are interestingly replaced by whoever gets acquitted and finds a space among the immortals. In other words, the book intends to confront Egypt's past leaders with their successors, thereby creating an inter-ruler debate. However, the two final words are respectively left to Isis, who acts as an intercessor, and Osiris, who declares the final ruling.

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³⁷³ Bojana Mojsov, *Osiris: Death and Afterlife of a God* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 48.

³⁷⁴ David P. Silverman, "Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt" in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, edited by Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 48.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 49.

³⁷⁶ See Naguib Mahfuz, *Before the Throne*, translate by Raymond Stock (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), pp. 50, 64, 68.

Legitimately, and perhaps inevitably, one has to consider the reason that compels Mahfuz to resort to a pharaonic medium by which to assess Egyptian history. Much attention has been given to the fact that Mahfuz sees Egypt as primarily pharaonic, thus challenging, among other things, what Menahem Milson calls “the myth of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir” and, by extension, the latter’s fixation on Egypt’s Arab identity.³⁷⁷ Indeed, *Amam al-‘Arsh* shows an essentialist view of Egypt, bestowing less indigenoussness on those Egyptians who converted to Christianity or Islam and who, unlike the pharaonic kings, will not be categorically subjected to Osiris’ final verdict. Rather, the deity’s judgment will be “a sort of historical appraisal that we hope will be duly considered when the citizen is tried by his proper religious court in the Abode of the Everlasting.”³⁷⁸ Equally significant is that by placing him as a defendant among a series of Egyptian leaders, the book strips Nasser of any exceptional status in Egyptian history, rendering him as a mere dot in the enormous book of Egypt—as a normal president, whose importance is acknowledged yet whose paramount centrality, so commonly believed, is obliterated.

I however would like to venture another approach to *Amam al-‘Arsh*’s representation of Nasser’s character. In his most direct attempt to come to terms with Nasser, following decades of allegorical and less explicit representations of him, Mahfuz opts for the format of trial to evaluate the president. Why? What are the openings and the limitations that such a format offers or imposes? By posing Nasser as a defendant, I argue that the book epitomizes the polyphonic nature of Mahfuz’s works, whereby the author creates “a plurality of independent and unmerged

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³⁷⁷ Menahem Milson, *Najib Mahfuz: The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo*, p. 153.

³⁷⁸ *Before the Throne*, p. 80.

voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.”³⁷⁹ Hence the trial—and, equally significant, the brilliant detail that Mahfuz adds to the ancient setting of allowing the former leaders to engage in arguments with their successors. In the work that culminates “the problem of neutrality and the refusal to take sides,”³⁸⁰ as Samia Mehrez puts it, Mahfuz, the real occupant of the throne, allows Nasser to speak freely, to defend, refute, attack, and even apologize—acts that Nasser himself had so long been accused of denying his opponents.

Not surprisingly, Nasser’s trial occupies the longest section of the book. Summoned to enter the hall by Horus, he is given the chance to speak by Osiris. Nasser’s long defense reads:

I come from the village of Beni Murr, in the districts around Asyut. I was raised in a poor family, from the popular classes, and endured the bitterness and hardship of life. I graduated from the War College in 1938, and took part in Wafdist demonstrations. I was besieged along with others at Falluja in 1949. The loss of Palestine dismayed me, but what disturbed me even more was the depth of the defeat’s roots inside the homeland. Then it dawned on me that I should transfer the fight to within, where the real enemies of the nation were hiding in ambush. Cautiously and in secret, I formed the Free Officers’ organization. I watched as events unfolded, waiting for the right moment to swoop down upon the regime in power. I realized my objective in 1952, then the Revolution’s achievements—such as the abolition of the monarchical system, the completion of the total withdrawal of British troops from the country, the breaking up of the big landed estates through the law of agricultural reform, the Egyptianization of the economy, and the planning for the comprehensive revamping of both farming and industry to benefit the people and to dissolve the divisions between the classes—came one after another.³⁸¹

Given the historical context of that era, such endeavors cannot certainly go by without the interference of the imperialist forces. “They,” Nasser proceeds, in a style that is so much reminiscent of the president’s actual speeches,

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³⁷⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 6.

³⁸⁰ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers*, p. 36.

³⁸¹ *Before the Throne*, p. 132.

Lay waiting to spring upon me—and then the detestable defeat of June 5, 1967 descended upon me. The great work was shaken to its foundations, and I was doomed to what seemed like death three years before I actually expired. I lived a sincere Egyptian Arab, and died an Egyptian Arab martyr.³⁸²

After a few exchanges between Nasser and some pharaonic kings, including Ramesses II, Menes, and Abnum, whose brief evaluations of Nasser largely depend on the latter's resemblance to them,³⁸³ the book turns to more relevant, contemporary reckoning of the president. Introducing Sa'd Zaghlul and Mustafa al-Nahhas, the trial turns into a confrontation between the two most significant political movements in twentieth century Egypt—the Wafd Party and the Free Officers Movement. It is in these heated back-and-forth that Mahfuz's own voice is best recognized. A lifelong Wafdist, Mahfuz is a forthright admirer of both leaders, who are venerated “in his works wherever that period of modern Egyptian history is invoked, and especially in *The Trilogy*.”³⁸⁴ He structures the dialogues between Nasser and the two men in a way that begs for a re-consideration of the “neutrality” that Samia Mehrez ascribes to *Amam al-'Arsh*. In fact, Mahfuz had once explained his position as an author vis-à-vis the characters of his works, stating, “my sympathies for a certain character appear one way or the other within the novel... when I represent the world with neutrality, I do so without being neutral.”³⁸⁵

Indeed. For, while he allows Nasser to defend himself, Mahfuz gives a remarkably bigger space to Zaghloul's and al-Nahhas' arguments. In addition, a glimpse at Mahfuz's own

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³⁸² Ibid, p. 133.

³⁸³ Ramesses II, for instance, tells Nasser, “what is my affection for you but an extension of my love for myself? For look how much we resemble each other,” while Abnum declares, “I want to testify that the wretched did not enjoy such security in any age—after my own—as they did in yours.” See *Before the Throne*, pp. 133 & 134.

³⁸⁴ Rasheed el-Enany, “The Novelist as a Political Eye-Witness,” p. 73.

³⁸⁵ Ghali Shukri, *Naguib Mahfuz: min al-Jammaliyya ila Nobel*, p. 82.

assessment of Nasser, which was published in several interviews, shows that he hides behind the two men, putting his words into their mouths. For instance, Zaghlul's reproach, "you attempted to blot my name from existence, along with the name of Egypt"³⁸⁶ echoes Mahfuz's public statement that "The first defect of the July Revolution lied in repudiating... (*tanakkur*) the Wafd Party, which had been struggling for Egypt's independence from 1919 until 1952."³⁸⁷ Similarly, when al-Nahhas shows how Nasser's "defiance of the world's powers led ... to horrendous losses and shameful defeats,"³⁸⁸ it resonates with what Mahfuz once said, "I would not have blamed Nasser for his policies had he had the sufficient economical and military power to confront and challenge the super imperialist powers."³⁸⁹ Even the rare instances in which Nasser's accomplishments are acknowledged hint at Mahfuz's known reasons to appreciate the Man, particularly with regard to his undisputed attention to the poor of Egypt. While al-Nahhas in *Amam al-'Arsh* remarks in passing "I do not deny that you kept faith with the poor,"³⁹⁰ Mahfuz never ceases to elaborate on Nasser's care for lower classes, often considering it his most perennial virtue:

Nasser was the fairest to the poor. He gave them so much. What he could not concretely realize, he transformed into a hope—hence people will never forget him, because hope never dies.³⁹¹

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³⁸⁶ *Before the Throne*, p. 134.

³⁸⁷ Raja' al-Naqqash, *Naguib Mahfuz: Safahat min Muthakkaratih wa Adwa' Jadida 'ala Adabih wa Hayatih* [Naguib Mahfuz: Chapters of his Memoirs and New Lights on his Literature and Life] (Cairo: Markiz al-Ahram li al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr, 1998), p. 193.

³⁸⁸ *Before the Throne*, p. 136.

³⁸⁹ Raja' al-Naqqash, *Naguib Mahfuz*, p. 198.

³⁹⁰ *Before the Throne*, p. 136.

³⁹¹ Muhammad Salmawi, *Fi Hadrat Naguib Mahfuz* [At the Presence of Naguib Mahfuz] (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 2012), p. 42.

Equally significant, Nasser is not given the chance to seal the reciprocal arguments. Instead of listening to the defendant offering his final plea, Mahfuz enables Nasser's opponent, Mustafa al-Nahhas, to proceed uninterrupted with his last, long, somewhat rhetorical attack, facing no rebuttal:

If only you had been more modest in your ambitions, if only you had stuck to reforming your nation and had opened the windows of progress to her in all areas of civilizations. The development of the Egyptian village was more important than the world's revolutions...unfortunately, you wasted an opportunity that had never appeared to the country before. For the first time, a native son ruled the land, without contention from a king or colonizer. Yet rather than curing the disease-ridden citizen, he drove him into a competition for the world championship when he was hobbled by illness. The outcome was that the citizen lost the race, and himself, as well.³⁹²

Obviously, such a harsh evaluation is bound to produce an equally harsh judgment by Osiris. However, Mahfuz leaves the debate on Nasser unsettled. In a perfect instance of inconclusiveness in modern Arabic literature, typical of Mahfuz, Nasser eventually proves an unfinalized hero, an "unfinished dialogue,"³⁹³ who, as Mikhail Bakhtin explains, "is not a final and defined quantity upon which firm calculations can be made."³⁹⁴ Mahfuz, an inheritor of Dostoevsky's polyphonic style, engages with Nasser in a "fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero."³⁹⁵ Hence Osiris' opening line in his verdict, "If our trial here had

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³⁹² *Before the Throne*, pp. 136-137.

³⁹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.63.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 59.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 63.

the last word in your judgment, we would be compelled to give long difficult consideration to arrive at justice.”³⁹⁶ It is as though the court (and, by extension, Mahfuz himself) is relieved from the necessity to pass a final ruling on such a multifaceted character. As mentioned earlier, Muslim and Christian Egyptians are not to be decidedly judged by Osiris. Nasser is therefore only allowed “to sit with the Immortals until this tribunal ends. Afterward, you shall go to your final trial with an appropriate recommendation.”³⁹⁷ A recommendation for which verdict is left to speculation, and Mahfuz dismounts from his throne ambiguously, leaving much to say to future literary imaginations of the president.

Conclusion

Ever since he assumed power in 1952, Nasser has been a notable subject of literary representations. The enigmatic, charismatic, and complex nature of his character, together with the magnitude of his ambitions, achievements, and tragic shortcomings and failures have ignited authors’ imagination who have approached him in multiple but equally memorable ways. In fact, the enormous presence that Nasser has enjoyed in the Egyptian everyday life, particularly during his tenure, has often invited symbolic interpretation of otherwise nonspecific literary references. Many critics in Egypt and the Arab world have seen allegories of Nasser in works that introduced characters belonging to the ruling elite, the army, or the intelligentsia. As most of these depictions were negative, they stirred controversies in the Egyptian literary scene, with Nasser himself feeling occasionally compelled to intervene. It took long, however, before Nasser

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³⁹⁶ *Before the Throne*, p. 137.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 137.

has explicitly become a protagonist in literary narratives—a fictionalized character whose connection with the real Nasser was mediated, negotiated, and at times obscured.

This chapter studied four Egyptian narratives in which Nasser was allegorically or explicitly introduced as a protagonist. It argued that these representations departed from the historical archive to reimagine alternative episodes in Nasser's life. Far from adopting a singular view of him, these works contributed to the ever-present debate about the legacy of Nasser. By depicting him as an intellectual, an animal, a martyr, and a defendant, these narratives presented models of interpretation of Nasser's character, each producing a Nasser of its own. As the previous pages showed, 'Nasser as Fiction' is a space of literary production that enables Egyptian writers to reflect on the multiple meanings that Nasser still invokes for Egyptians. As such, this space can be regarded as much a commentary on the past as it is a consideration of the future—a present where a man, long dead, is still heard, seen, and felt.

Chapter 3

Nasser in Fiction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the works of Egyptian Fiction where Nasser is one of the protagonists. These works are concerned not so much with representing a full biographical account of Nasser as with offering a particular model of engagement with his character. By introducing Nasser as an intellectual, a bestial, a martyr, and a defendant, these narratives engage in a process of fictionalization of the Man, whereby Nasser's life is reimagined, altered, distorted, or anachronized. In so doing, the readers of these works are left with multiple Nasser(s), whose representations in the texts, while claiming a link to the historical character that he was, do significantly depart from it. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, however, a larger corpus of Egyptian narratives opts for a different negotiation of Nasser's character. Represented through the actions, dialogues, or monologues of the main characters, Nasser in this category of writings does not emerge as a protagonist. Rather, he is described, debated, glorified, or undermined by protagonists whose lives interact with, or are influenced by, Nasser's. Nowhere in these narratives is Nasser given a voice. Nowhere does he directly speak. Nor, for that matter, do any of these narratives seek to portray portions of Nasser's life. In other words, Nasser emerges as a background, as a major or minor constituent of the history during which the events of these narratives develop.

In this chapter, I will examine select literary narratives that feature Nasser as part of its discourse. These works, I argue, offer an invaluable access to Nasser in Egyptian imaginary, where the otherwise unknowable subjects are empowered to speak. As Naomi Sokoloff shows,

“imaginative writing may penetrate the intimate, never communicated thoughts of someone else and so reveal the hidden side of people, or give voice to those not readily heard by society.”³⁹⁸

Of all imaginative writing, narratives possess a salient position as a medium in which “the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed.”³⁹⁹

These narratives contribute considerably to the process of constructing the image of Nasser in Egyptian imaginary, whereby they are both shaped by and shaping the psyche of the nation.

Pertinent to this discussion is Benedict Anderson’s thesis on the role of the novel in constructing what he famously calls the “imagined communities.”⁴⁰⁰ These refractions of the Man who has been one of the major components of Egyptian and, more broadly, Arab nationalism are informative not only about the character of Nasser but, even more significantly, about his impact on ordinary citizens.

As this chapter will show, these narratives do not share a monolithic discourse on Nasser, nor do they adopt a singular a view of him. Rather, he looms as a perfect site of contestation, a contentious character whose multilayered, complicated life can naturally invoke contradictory responses. A Muslim Brother and a Communist, for instance, while both sharing prison experience during Nasser’s life, at times even languishing in the same cell, may still produce two largely disparate reactions to the Man. In addition, these narratives do not merely disseminate knowledge about Nasser that exists *a priori*—they do not, in other words, mirror an already established conception of him. There is no fixed “Egyptian Imaginary” of Nasser that those

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³⁹⁸ Naomi Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1992), p. 4.

³⁹⁹ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 7.

⁴⁰⁰ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York; London: Verso, 1991), pp. 24-31.

works reflect. Instead, he is reproduced whenever a new work that includes him as part of its discourse emerges. If, according to Edward Said, “nations themselves *are* narration,”⁴⁰¹ so too is Nasser—a character that is constantly yet differently born out of the narratives that engage him.

This chapter will consider a thematic approach to the representations of Nasser in Egyptian narratives. Recognizing the vast amount of literature, it claims no final word on the topic, still less an inclusive or comprehensive analysis of all the works that are worthy of examination. However, I argue that the sections below may offer insights into largely unexplored and strikingly overlooked treatments of Nasser in Egyptian narratives. These narratives will therefore be divided into two themes: Nasser and Children, and Nasser and Women.

Nasser and Children

Children pose a challenge to narrative writers. On the one hand, it is often acknowledged that writers “utilize childhood as a lucid space through which to criticize the adult world.”⁴⁰² Childhood connotes spontaneity, innocence, and beauty. It also signifies a stage where boundaries are often crossed and norms broken. In addition, novelists and autobiographers employ childhood “as a means of inspecting how the world seemed when it was more settled and their individual lives were ‘easy under the bow.’”⁴⁰³ Yet, on the other hand, the voice of the child in narrative may cast doubt on the authenticity of representation, for it is a voice that is mediated

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⁴⁰¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. xiii.

⁴⁰² Susan Honeyman, *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 5.

⁴⁰³ John Hodgson, *The Search for the Self: Childhood in Autobiography and Fiction since 1940* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 11.

by an adult author. “How can any adult writer convincingly represent such an inconsistent and imaginary position with any sense of authority?”⁴⁰⁴ asks Susan Honeyman. A solution may lie in the writer’s attempt to withdraw from the narration process and let the child narrate only what the latter can see, feel, or perceive. With the author/adult narrator minimizing his/her interference, the text will be “oriented to the child’s view, [offering] a simple, unembellished presentation of information available to the boy himself, in a form that often approaches deadpan.”⁴⁰⁵

The problem becomes all the more pressing when one recalls that the essentialist view of childhood had in the last few decades been debated. Following French historian Philippe Aries, who, in his influential study *Centuries of Childhood*, shows that there was no concept of childhood in medieval cultures,⁴⁰⁶ many scholars and intellectuals now maintain that “in contrast to children, childhood as we know it, or have constructed it, has not existed since the beginning of time.”⁴⁰⁷ The notion of the child has been seen as a modern phenomenon, a constructed category that emerged as “everything the sophisticated adult was not, everything the rational man of the Enlightenment was not.”⁴⁰⁸ Perceiving children as muted groups, as subjects who are

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⁴⁰⁴ Susan Honeyman, *Elusive Childhood*, p. 4.

⁴⁰⁵ Naomi Sokoloff, “Childhood Lost: Children in Holocaust Literature” in *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle, and Naomi Sokoloff (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 261.

⁴⁰⁶ See Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962). For a discussion of Aries’ thesis and a broader overview on the topic, see Gillian Avery, “The Voice of the Child, Both Godly and Unregenerate, in Early Modern England” in *Infant Tongues*, pp. 16-27, and Richard L. Browning, *Childhood and the Nation in Latin American Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 1-11.

⁴⁰⁷ Ellen Pifer, *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 17.

⁴⁰⁸ James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 10.

incapable of representing themselves, modern adults conjured up a sphere of otherness, both elusive and captive, demonic and angelic, that they called childhood.

Having said that, a considerable interest in children and childhood as a distinct phase in human life still haunts narrative writers, and Arabic literature is no exception. In fact, Tetz Rooke notices how in recent Arabic autobiographies, for instance, adulthood is completely ignored. Noticing an abundance of texts whose titles bear the word ‘childhood,’ he suggests the existence of ‘the autobiography of childhood’ as a sub-category of Arabic autobiography.⁴⁰⁹ To a much lesser extent, children also feature as protagonists in Arabic novels, most notably in the *Bildungsroman* genre, with the character of Kamal in Naguib Mahfuz’s *The Cairo Trilogy* being the most salient example.

Interestingly, a number of Egyptian novels and autobiographies have represented Nasser through the eyes of children, who were in one way or another directly affected by his personality, decisions, speeches, or ideas. The perspective of children offers these works a rare opportunity to approach Nasser in ways that the world of adults may not. It can indicate the incomprehensibility of the situation in which children find themselves vis-à-vis Nasser. Children’s incomplete knowledge of the political context of their lives, these works show, may drive them to adopt different responses towards Nasser from those advanced by their families. As one critic puts it, this assumed unreliability of children’s perspective can be seen as “totally true to their own view

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⁴⁰⁹ See Tetz Rooke, “The Arabic Autobiography of Childhood” in *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild (London: Saqi Books, 1998), pp. 100-101.

of things but unrelated to a ‘reality’ perceived by others. Such viewpoints serve as transparent lenses only for the children’s realities.”⁴¹⁰

More importantly, I argue that these works capture the children’s developing awareness of the significance of Nasser at moments of severe familial crises, during which their fathers emerge as the most negatively affected ones. In so doing, these works place children in an uncomfortable, unsettling position where “the father’s place... loses its unassailable eminence.”⁴¹¹ The tension is all the more aggravated when the attack on the father at the hand of Nasser’s regime is accompanied by the child’s growing respect to and love for Nasser. As I shall demonstrate below, these works pit biological fathers against Nasser—the figurative father of the nation, children included—and, at times, demand a certain belonging from children. They, in other words, corner children between filiation and affiliation, in Edward Said’s articulation of the terms, where the forced absence of the father is juxtaposed with a sudden presence of Nasser in the child’s world. Said argues that “the transition from failed idea or possibility of filiation to a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship, which I have been calling affiliation.”⁴¹² Similarly, Nasser, though not fully grasped by children, becomes their compensatory order whose very role behind the suffering that befalls their fathers destabilizes their understanding of both.

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⁴¹⁰ Linda Britt, “A Transparent Lens? Narrative Technique in Carmen Naranjo’s *Nunca Hubo Alguna Vez*” in *Monographic Review/Revista Monographia* (Texas: The University of Texas, No. 4, 1988), p. 129.

⁴¹¹ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 118.

⁴¹² *Ibid*, p. 19.

In his 1992 debut novel *Inkisar al-Ruh* (Breaking of the Spirit), Egyptian writer Muhammad al-Mansi Qandil portrays a coming-of-age story of the protagonist/narrator ‘Ali against the backdrop of Nasser’s and al-Sadat’s Egypt. As the title suggests, the novel is an elegy for the generation of Egyptians who were born and raised during Nasser’s regime, inculcated with its ideas, and thoroughly infused with its hopes and ideals, before their dreams were crushed by the 1967 defeat, Nasser’s departure, and al-Sadat’s radical change of the country’s course. Through a phantomlike, ever elusive girl named Fatima that appears and disappears abruptly before ‘Ali’s eyes, the novel presents, rather fatalistically, an unquenched pursuit of impossible love.⁴¹³

As the narrative unfolds, ‘Ali gets caught up in the unfathomable world of adults. He is the only child of a poor factory worker (Najib) who has leftist leanings. Notwithstanding ‘Ali’s repeated announcements that he is “big enough,”⁴¹⁴ the child acknowledges his inability to understand his father’s political activities in the factory. The father holds a negative view of the military regime, considering it a continuation of, rather than a rupture from, the previous rulers “The workers of this factory are always treated unjustly. The British used to be unfair to them, then the Pashas, and now the Officers are equally unjust to them.”⁴¹⁵ When ‘Ali’s mother informs him that his father and the co-workers are calling for a strike, he comments, “I did not

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⁴¹³ Muhammad Bariri offers an interesting reading of this novel in light of what he argues its dialogue with Tawfiq al-Hakim’s 1933 renowned novel *‘Awdat al-Ruh* (The Return of the Spirit). See Muhammad Bariri, “Tawfiq al-Hakim wa al-Mansi Qandil: Bayna ‘Awdat al-Ruh wa Inkisariha [Tawfiq al-Hakim and al-Mansi Qandil: Between the Return and the Breaking of the Spirit] in *Fusul* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li al-Kitab, No. 12, Spring 1993), pp. 333-338.

⁴¹⁴ Muhammad al-Mansi Qandil, *Inkisar al-Ruh* [Breaking of the Spirit] (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1992), p. 9. This is a recurring theme in the first part of the novel, enunciated whenever the family faces a dilemma. See, for instances, pp. 21-26.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 16.

know at the moment what that meant...I wondered what was taking place behind the factory's walls. What was my father doing? And why did all workers choose this moment to carry out this thing that they call strike?"⁴¹⁶

The narrative epitomizes 'Ali's inability to comprehend the events that are taking place at his house with the arrest of his father. In a familiar pattern, perhaps reminiscent of Emir Kusturica's classic film *When Father Was Away on Business*,⁴¹⁷ 'Ali cannot make sense of what befalls his father. He notices that many soldiers violently break into the house and take the old man with them, descriptively recounting how "I saw one of the soldiers' big cars waiting for him. I saw them pushing him outside the house door, force him inside the car, and eventually ride all in it."⁴¹⁸ He quietly well observes that his father does not return home, yet he never utters the word "prison," nor, for that matter, does he ask his mother where his father is. In fact, when a few days later the mother informs 'Ali that they will both visit his father, the child comments, "I stared at her, surprised.. My father has a place..and we can visit him! Throughout this period, we have avoided speaking about him directly."⁴¹⁹

It is against this background that the name of Nasser first arises. Now deprived of his father's wages, 'Ali cannot afford to pay the nominal fees for school. After proposing a financial support, the history teacher, obviously a Nasserist, tells 'Ali,

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⁴¹⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴¹⁷ Awarded the Palme d'Or at the 1985 Cannes Film Festival, this Yugoslav film features a kid, Malik, who thinks that his father leaves them to go on a business trip, while in fact the man is arrested by the authorities for a critical comment against Tito's regime. For a discussion of the film, see Goran Gocic, *Notes from the Underground: The Cinema of Emir Kusturica* (London; New York: Wallflower Press, 2001), pp. 23-28.

⁴¹⁸ Muhammad al-Mansi Qandil, *Inkisar al-Ruh*, p. 21.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, p. 23.

- Your father has been too long in prison. These kinds of mistakes occasionally occur. Listen..President Nasser will visit the city on the occasion of Labor Day. Why don't you and your mother go and file a complaint?
- Why Nasser? Is it he who imprisoned my father?

He rushed to say, seemingly angry,

- Never. Your father did not understand that Nasser was to his side. Many people did not understand that. He is not that harmful. These are the mistakes of those who are around him.⁴²⁰

Disturbed by the teacher's somehow vague insinuation that his father is blamed, 'Ali's confused conception of his father vis-à-vis Nasser begins to crystallize. He wonders "was my father really at fault?"⁴²¹ The school's principal prepares the kids to greet the president, requiring them to recite numerous national songs upon seeing Nasser's car. 'Ali, however, refuses to partake in the collective parroting of songs, for he is preoccupied with a more personal issue. Worried if he can actually approach Nasser, 'Ali is nonetheless assured that if the president hears him, "he will right away respond."⁴²² The narrative leaves unexplained the reason behind 'Ali's certain belief in Nasser, given his father's repeated attacks on the regime. It seems as though the voice of the adult 'Ali (or the author) occasionally replaces his younger self's, as can be recognized when the child sees Nasser and becomes invested in celebratory description of the president's physicality, concluding that "everything in him was made with a strange touch of sublimity."⁴²³

So anticipant of this moment is 'Ali that he disrupts the conformity of the greeting crowd "this is [Nasser] my savior. I said none of the hymns. I recalled no slogan. I screamed, 'give me

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⁴²⁰ Ibid, p. 36.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid, p. 37.

⁴²³ Ibid, p. 38.

back my father, O Nasser.”⁴²⁴ At odds with the principal’s attempt to homogenize the linguistic capital of the students in front of Nasser, ‘Ali possesses a discursive agency of his own, functioning as a “site of resistance to the inflexible, systematizing logic of adult discourse.”⁴²⁵ The boy believes (or so the narrative suggests) that his scream reaches Nasser, who in turn exchanges a personal smile with ‘Ali. Unable to enter the stadium where Nasser is supposed to give a speech, ‘Ali hurries home to catch the speech on radio, confident that Nasser “will talk about my father.”⁴²⁶ To his surprise, he finds that his father is released from prison, but the child, unaware of the political measures of the regime, believes that Nasser has so swiftly responded to his request.

The release of the father places ‘Ali at two concurrent positions. On the one hand, he notices the extent to which his father has physically and spiritually waned: “he was different. Something in him was missing. What I see before me is the façade of my father, the body of an old man that looks exactly like him, but is not him.”⁴²⁷ On the other hand, Nasser continues to haunt the child’s imagination with speeches that “give rise to a world of dreams.”⁴²⁸ The tension grows further as ‘Ali begins to compare between the two men, perhaps influenced by the remarks of his history teacher:

There is something I could not understand. How could my father—the simple worker, whose hands are immersed in grease all year long; whose friends are the poor workers of the factory; who lives in a cramped apartment at a muddy ally—be right, while Nasser, as I saw him

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⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Susan Honeyman, *Elusive Childhood*, p. 116.

⁴²⁶ *Inkisar al-Ruh*, p. 38.

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p. 39.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, p. 41.

in the elegant procession, with people madly and enthusiastically cheering for him, be wrong? Could ‘Abdel Halim, Jahin, and al-Tawil be wrong?’⁴²⁹

The narrative, however, leaves the tension temporarily unresolved, though it repeatedly locates ‘Ali within the world of dreams that is inspired by Nasser. In fact, the novel portrays ‘Ali as rebellious against social norms precisely because he is empowered by Nasser. In a telling scene, ‘Ali accompanies his sweetheart Fatima to her house, where he seeks to meet the father in order to propose. Both just entering the secondary school, Fatima’s father reprimands them, labeling them as kids, and asks that they both should finish school first, before helplessly commenting, “I know that my words will go unheeded. This is the time of Nasser: huge misery and big dreams.”⁴³⁰ ‘Ali shows surprise at the fathers’ comment, wondering to himself “even in love, Nasser exists in a way or another?”⁴³¹ Fatima’s father turns out to have a nodding acquaintance with ‘Ali’s, and so asks about his health situation after the prison experience, before adding, “poor man. Does he hate Nasser now?”⁴³² Disturbed again by this juxtaposition, ‘Ali does not know how to answer, uneasily wondering, “why do they always pit my father against Nasser?”⁴³³ Fatima’s father, however, offers a broader contrast, lamenting Nasser’s spell over the children of Egypt “Nasser is not ours, not for people in my or your father’s age. Nasser is yours. He is the one who implants you with all these dreams.”⁴³⁴

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⁴²⁹ Ibid, p. 41. The last sentence refers to the singer ‘Abdel Halim Hafez, the vernacular poet Salah Jahin, and the composer Kamal al-Tawil, who collaboratively produced some of the most renowned national songs for Nasser. For more on Hafez, see the last chapter, *Nasser on the Screen*.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, p. 62.

⁴³¹ Ibid, p. 63.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

It is only when 'Ali becomes a freshman at the medical school that the father/Nasser binary dissolves, with the former having a full disclosure with his son regarding Nasser:

- Look at yourself. Who would have thought that the son of a simple worker like me could enter the faculty of medicine? It is a dream, 'Ali. Nasser empowered us to dream.

I looked at him, amazed, unbelieving. He is talking about Nasser in this way! Seeing my looks, he exclaimed,

- What do you think of me? That I cannot re-asses myself? I had not understood Nasser. I was wrong. He did more than what I was expecting.⁴³⁵

The reconciliation did not last long, however, for, as the title had already foreshadowed, it is these dreams that will be aborted. Following the 1967 defeat, 'Ali grows disenchanted with Nasser, with the fathers who hypnotize the younger generation with "sweet, but extremely false, words."⁴³⁶ He criticizes people's docility before Nasser and, more importantly, poses as a *revisionist* of his younger self's narratives on the president, questioning, for instance, whether Nasser had actually seen him and listened to his scream on that day. Yet, for all the disillusionments that he experiences, 'Ali, echoing a familiar pattern among many Egyptians, still has an unchangeable, seemingly illogical love for Nasser:

This man is really strange. Although he arrested my father, I could not hate him. Nay, even my father loved him when he, thanks to Nasser, was able to send me to medical school... Nasser would beat us, and we would resort to him, *would run to Nasser from Nasser*. Even inside the prison, prisoners under torture used to chant his name. They thought that what happened was a kind of bitter misunderstanding.⁴³⁷

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⁴³⁵ Ibid, pp. 95-96. The reference here is to free education that was implemented under Nasser's regime.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, p. 127.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, p. 130, my emphasis. One can hear more the author's voice than 'Ali's in this part, given that the latter was narrating in 1968, at a time when little was known about prison narratives in Nasser's era. The paragraph above resonates with similar prison tales that were revealed much later, concerning figures such as Shuhdi al-Shafi'i. For more on this, see the first chapter, *Writing to the Man*.

Against a comparable background of prison experience is Nada's growing relationship with Nasser in Radwa 'Ashur's 2008 novel *Faraj* (Faraj).⁴³⁸ Similar to 'Ali in *Inkisar al-Ruh*, the five-year old Nada cannot understand the reason behind her father's absence. A university professor, he was arrested in 1959 due, as we learn later, to his political activities. Noticing numerous relatives coming to stay with them following the incident, Nada, the narrator of the novel, is not satisfied with their explanations. She even accuses her French mother of lying to her by hiding the fact that her father has actually died, at which moment the mother feels obliged to simplify the truth as much as she can. The narrative portrays Nada as a "deceptively innocent inquisitor whose capacity to ask questions exceeds the ability of his elders to provide answers."⁴³⁹ Thus, when the mother tells Nada that there are officers who, disagreeing with her father, have put him in prison, Nada protests,

- What does a 'prison' mean?
- A closed place that one cannot exit.
- Like the lion in the zoo?
- Like the lion in the zoo!
- And then?
- I am not telling you a story. I am explaining why *papa* is not living with us now. He did not die. He will remain there for a while, before they let him return home.⁴⁴⁰

Nada's father spends five years in prison. On her first visit to the prison, she does not recognize him. Years later, the adult Nada will acknowledge that she actually never knows her

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⁴³⁸ In the first chapter I discussed this novel in the context of writing letters to Nasser. Here I am concerned with Nada's view of Nasser vis-à-vis her father.

⁴³⁹ Mary Jane Hurst, *The Voice of the Child in American Literature Linguistic Approaches to Fictional Child Language* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴⁰ Radwa 'Ashur, *Faraj*, p. 17.

father fully, partially because of those years of absence.⁴⁴¹ This period, however, is the temporal space in which Nasser emerges. In a chapter entitled, “Which of the Two Men Is Better?” Nada narrates how the comparison between Nasser and the father haunts not only her, but also other children in her school whose fathers are also sent to prison. In a blending between fiction and reality, so common in ‘Ashur’s writing, Nada speaks about her friend Muna Anis, daughter of renowned Egyptian intellectual ‘Abdel ‘Azim Anis, himself a prisoner at that time.⁴⁴² Muna tells Nada that one of Nasser’s sons is her classmate, to which Nada responds, “I asked her to introduce me to him so that I could ask him why his father put our fathers in prison. If his father does not know about it, we will ask his son to relay the news to him.”⁴⁴³ Nada’s request to meet Nasser’s son never materializes, but Muna, equally furious that her father is in prison, tells Nada about a confrontation in class:

I asked the teacher in front of all students, ‘who is better: my father or his father?’ when the teacher did not answer, I said, ‘my father is a PhD holder who teaches at a university. He was teaching at the University of London when Britain attacked Egypt. He led protests there before deciding to return home to help his country. As for his father [Nasser], he is an army officer. True, he participated in the Palestine war and led the revolution, but he does not hold a PhD, nor had he taught at the University of London. My father is more educated and he knows more!’⁴⁴⁴

Unlike Muna’s certain favoring of her father, Nada falls prey to conflicting arguments, torn as she is between filial bonds and national belonging. At first, she attempts to create a balance between her father and Nasser, at times leaning toward the former “my father has a PhD

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⁴⁴¹ Ibid, p. 122.

⁴⁴² Anis (1923-2009) was one of the most well-known Egyptian Marxists in the past century, noted primarily for his 1955 influential book *Fi al-Thaqafa al-Misriyya* [On Egyptian Culture], co-written with his lifelong friend, Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim.

⁴⁴³ *Faraj*, p. 18.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

from the Sorbonne... he surely knows more than the officers;” at others sensing that her father may not be “smarter nor better than Nasser.”⁴⁴⁵ In reality, however, the assumed battle between Nasser and the father over the control of Nada is decisively won by the president, confirming what Richard Browning calls, in the context of Latin American Literature, “the idea that biological parents, or even the traditional family structure, are replaceable.”⁴⁴⁶ “At the absence of the incarcerated father”, Nada hums, “Nasser’s name, voice, and image were reverberating throughout the day.”⁴⁴⁷ On top of that, Nada’s growing knowledge of Nasser’s political stances, including his support to the Algerian revolution and challenge to French imperialism,⁴⁴⁸ significantly increases his prestige, conducing Nada to factor them in the ongoing debate on “who is right: the president who put my father in prison, or my father whose opinions led him to prison and exile from family all these years?”⁴⁴⁹

Notably, Nada’s rumination over the significance of Nasser brings into attention the juxtaposition between what Alicia Otano calls “the child focalizer against an adult self.”⁴⁵⁰ Commenting on how to transmit an experience that is deemed too sophisticated for a child, Otano recognizes in a body of Asian American novels the position of the focalizer, who is “a

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⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 19.

⁴⁴⁶ Richard L. Browning, *Childhood and the Nation in Latin American Literature*, p. 55.

⁴⁴⁷ *Faraj*, p. 19.

⁴⁴⁸ The knowledge is triggered by another incident that pits Nasser against familial bonds, this time the French mother. Nada, now aged nine, is confronted with a classmate who informs her that her mother’s country, France, had in fact attacked Egypt in 1956. Disturbed, Nada demands an answer from her mother, who in turn explains the political context of the war and, to the child’s relief, declares her opposition to her native country’s imperial endeavors.

⁴⁴⁹ *Faraj*, p. 23.

⁴⁵⁰ Alicia Otano, *Speaking the Past: Child Perspective in the Asian American Bildungsroman* (Munster: Lit, c2004), p. 15.

character within a represented world which is narrated by an older “self” thus giving way to an interplay of a dual perspectives.”⁴⁵¹ Central to her remarks is Gerard Genette’s famous differentiation between “*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?*” and “*who is the narrator?*”⁴⁵² With regard to Nada and Nasser, *Faraj* alternates between the two positions. While the child’s remarks and thoughts are occasionally neither denied nor confirmed, thus leaving the reliability of her judgments to the readers’ conviction—as when she notices that Nasser may in fact look like her father,⁴⁵³ the adult Nada at times senses an obligation to intervene, clearly highlighting the difference between what she sees as a child, and what she makes of it now (which could be the late nineties, although it is never precisely determined):

[Nasser] was not a mere leader or president about whom people talked frequently at home, school, or streets. Rather, he was simply flowing in the space in which we grew, as though he was water, air, soil, or rays of light that we embodied to become what we became. Nasser was raising me, though I was proud to belong to my father... *I do not think any of those thoughts had ever occurred to me at that age.*⁴⁵⁴

Contrary to ‘Ali’s later revisionist approach to Nasser in *Inkisar al-Ruh*, the adult Nada never reconsiders her younger self’s perception of the president, his seemingly negative impact on her familial bonds notwithstanding. In fact, not only does the absence of the father leave an ineradicable scar on his relationship with Nada, but the somewhat irrational love for Nasser exacerbates the feelings of foreignness, detachment, and dissociation that engulf the experience

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⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 186, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁵³ *Faraj*, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 19, my emphasis.

of Nada's mother in Egypt, eventually ending in a divorce. Throughout the narrative, Nada recounts her French mother's frequent struggles to engage in conversations with members of the extended family, with the child occasionally posing as a translator. The parents' disputes, however, indicate a deeper level of miscommunication, one that exceeds the language barrier to more psychological, emotional, and national levels. The pinnacle, very tellingly, involves Nasser. It is 1967, three years after the father was released from prison. The parents are watching Nasser's resignation speech in the wake of the 1967 defeat. Nada, aged thirteen at the time, describes the reaction of her parents as follows:

The speech ends. My father wails. Sobs like children. My mother passes into a sudden hysterical state, screaming, 'I do not understand. I absolutely do not understand. Why are you crying over him? Is he not the fascist officer, the dictator tyrant who unjustly placed you in prison for five years? Isn't it.. Wasn't it he..Didn't you say..?' A sequence of words frantically follows, my mother's voice gradually rising. Abruptly, my father said, 'you are blind,' then left home. My mother uttered no word, neither did I.⁴⁵⁵

Years later, the adult Nada comments that this incident, which was shortly followed by the divorce and the mother's return to France, was "the most tragic example of the problems of translation."⁴⁵⁶ It is as though the relationship with Nasser is not only personalized, but also egyptianized, leaving its subtleties inaccessible to foreign audience. Indeed, the mother's reaction is only a fictional example of a wider puzzlement which, as Nasser historian Robert Stephens puts it, "reflected partly the continuing failure of Westerners to understand the nature of Nasser's relationship with the Egyptian people, the decisive element of consent mixed with

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⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 52.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

the authoritarianism of his regime and the significance of what he had achieved inside Egypt itself.”⁴⁵⁷

However, Nada’s French mother was not the only case in which the encounter with Nasser would magnify one’s estrangement from Egypt. By enunciating Egypt’s Arab identity, Nasser’s ideology had alienated some sectors of Egyptian society whose identification with pan-Arabism was less than cordial. This constitutes one of the major themes that dominate Leila Ahmed’s account of Nasser in her autobiographical work *A Border Passage*.⁴⁵⁸ Known for her significant studies on Islam and women,⁴⁵⁹ Ahmed was born in Cairo in 1940 to an upper-class family. Her autobiography offers yet another example of a child’s uneasy awareness of Nasser, as it sheds light on Ahmed’s experience of growing up in a house that is radically hostile to the new 1952 regime and Nasser personally. Among the many factors that contributed to this unease was the father’s own opposition to Nasser. “A prominent engineer, the father chaired the Nile Water Control Board and the Hydro-Electric Power Commission when he opposed, for ecological reasons, Nasser’s project to build the High Dam.”⁴⁶⁰ This led to a series of harassments by the government, and the father himself was at times put under house arrest.

Ahmed’s book was mainly received as a discourse on identity(ies) that complicates “the metaphors of boundaries constituting not simply the imperialist discourses Ahmed examines but perhaps more so the anticolonial nationalism epitomized by Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser as the

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⁴⁵⁷ Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography*, p. 507.

⁴⁵⁸ Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman’s Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999).

⁴⁵⁹ Her oft-cited book, *Women and Gender in Islam*, was published in 1992.

⁴⁶⁰ Wail S. Hassan, “Arab-American Autobiography and the Reinvention of Identity: Two Egyptian Negotiations” in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, No. 22, 2002), p. 17.

champion of the third world.”⁴⁶¹ Pertinent to our discussion here is the way her childhood’s encounter with Nasser destabilized her notions of Egypt and the Arab world. Ahmed was twelve-year old when Nasser assumed power. She had been raised up earlier in an era “when the words ‘imperialism’ and ‘the West’ had not yet acquired the connotations they have today.”⁴⁶² As was the case with many upper-class Egyptians, Ahmed’s parents, who adored Western culture, sent their child to an English school, where not only she grew infatuated with the English language and spoke it much better than Arabic—which at the time was not even taught in such schools—but her very own name became anglicized, and everyone in school called her “Lily.”

All of this was bound to change after the revolution. First came the Arabic language, which became a mandatory subject in all foreign schools in Egypt. While she spoke Egyptian colloquial fluently, Ahmed was distant from Standard Arabic, and her indifference to the language often provoked her Arabic teacher, a woman of Palestinian origin. “Those moments,” Ahmed recalls later, “were in large responsible for the feelings of confusion, anger, and guilt that I’ve felt all my life in connection with the issues of Arabness, identity, the Arabic language, and the like.”⁴⁶³ However, it is her personal encounter with Nasser that will deliver the strongest confusion about identity she ever experiences at that stage. Attending a movie theatre with a cousin named Mona, Ahmed and the audience are surprised when they find Nasser among them, sitting with some men in the balcony. The two cousins join the scores of people who line up to shake hands with the president:

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⁴⁶¹ Bernadette Andrea, “Passage Through the Harem: Historicizing a Western Obsession in Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*” in *Arab Women’s Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*, edited by Nawar al-Hassan Golley (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007), p. 3.

⁴⁶² Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage*, p. 5.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 148.

As we shook hands, he asked us our names and my cousin readily replied ‘Mona,’ a perfectly good Egyptian Arab name. I, however, was rooted to the spot, unable to speak. I could not say ‘Lily,’ my name at school—not to this man who, I knew, hated the British. How could I, an Egyptian girl, have such a name? How could I confess to such a name? I could not say ‘Nana,’ either. Nana, I suppose, was too personal, a name for family and intimates only.⁴⁶⁴

Ahmed leaves the tension unresolved, offering no more information on how the encounter ends.

What matters, however, is that for her, Nasser becomes an identity marker, a realm with specific associations the lack of which deprives one from inhabiting it. Whereas Ahmed can in the past be both Lily and Egyptian, she now has to forsake any British manifestations in her, including the nickname. Egypt, henceforward, is exclusively Arab.

Not that the child is fully aware of all the nuances of these identity politics, still less is she initially hampered by them or by Nasser’s broader ideology. On the contrary, Ahmed frequently supports Nasser and his project against her family’s interests. It is as though the revolutionary and the child are both rebelling against the entrenched rules of society, with Ahmed being “not yet assimilated into normative societal rules.”⁴⁶⁵ Thus, she finds Nasser’s ideals about equality and social justice very appealing “whatever the family adults were saying.”⁴⁶⁶ She even believes that the members of her mother’s family, who “were constantly muttering against ‘Abdel Nasser and his ‘socialism’”⁴⁶⁷ due to their loss of considerable property to the government, are just selfish. With less easily accessible situations, the child declares her inability to grasp her family’s stance. For instance, she finds it confusing that her family receives the news of the military coup so dispassionately. “I’d often heard my parents lament the

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⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 150.

⁴⁶⁵ Naomi Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction*, p. 25.

⁴⁶⁶ *A Border Passage*, p. 160.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 160-161.

corruption of the king,” she recalls, adding, “so logically they should be pleased now, I thought.”⁴⁶⁸ Perhaps noticing the overwhelming support for Nasser and the new regime among the people that she knows, the child grows distressed as she realizes her family’s significantly different take on the Man. For her, embracing Nasser becomes synonymous with belonging, with finding a space in the society, something that her parents’ attitude makes it difficult to realize. She even thinks that her family may be the only household that was not euphoric about the nationalization of the Suez Canal: “How I wished that we could just for once be like everybody else, that we could be nationalistic and anti-imperialist and just support ‘Abdel Nasser.’”⁴⁶⁹

Ahmed is recognized in her family as the only one “young enough to be significantly shaped by the notion of Egypt that the revolutionary government was in the process of defining.”⁴⁷⁰ In fact, the relationship between her generation and the nascent regime is reciprocal, with the latter’s leader seeking out children and claiming them. As is the case with other post-colonial leaders, Nasser shows “great preoccupation with gaining the allegiance of children.”⁴⁷¹ In an interesting anecdote, Ahmed offers an account of such personalized relationship between the president and Egypt’s children. Aged thirteen, she is sitting by the radio listening to Nasser:

He was speaking on an Arabic program called *Children’s Hour*. Lunch was being served, and I was called to the table, where my parents and sister and brother ...had already sat down. “I’ll come in a minute,” I called back from the radio room, which opened onto the dining room. “I have to listen to this. The president is speaking to us.”

- “Us?” inquired my mother. “Who’s us?”
- “The children of Egypt,” I replied.

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⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 164.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 165.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 149.

⁴⁷¹ Richard Browning, *Childhood and the Nation*, p. 12.

Everyone found this amusing—that I had so wholly and so unselfconsciously placed myself in the group that the president was addressing.⁴⁷²

Ahmed's seemingly unflinching belief in Nasser is put to a test soon after Britain, along with France and Israel, attacked Egypt in 1956. For the sixteen-year old English schooler, the British act is tantamount to betrayal, as she deeply feels hurt the way "when one had believed in the goodness and uprightness of someone and then discovered that they have after all been deceiving one." Yet Nasser's fierce rhetoric against the "enemy" perturbs Ahmed, who, after all, knows this very enemy "all too intimately," unable to "hate and reject everything English." Thus, while Nasser and the war contribute to Ahmed's growing nationalistic sentiments, they too teach her how "complicated things were—politics, justice, truth."⁴⁷³ One such thing occurs only a few weeks later, when Ahmed's Jewish classmate tells her that her family decides to leave Egypt. Arguing with her anti-Nasser mother over the soundness of this decision, Ahmed invokes her belief in Nasser: "But the President said the Jews were welcome to stay." The mother, however, lacking such faith in Nasser, says that the Jews of Egypt should not trust him, and that he will perhaps change his mind. Not realizing that Nasser's words do not make any difference to her mother, Ahmed insists on resorting to the president again "But why should he change his mind?...He said that they are welcome in Egypt. He *said* that."⁴⁷⁴

Unlike the ambiguous location of the narrator vis-à-vis his/her younger self in the previous works, Ahmed's narrative is obviously retrospective. The adult narrator leaves no doubt

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⁴⁷² *A Border Passage*, p. 149.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 170, 171, & 172, respectively.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 173 & 174. Emphasis in the original.

that her “now” perspective comments on whatever thoughts she had in the past, including her perception of Nasser. For instance, she often inserts disclaimers such as “at that time” in the context of speaking about Nasser in order to indicate that she no longer shares her younger self’s point of view. In addition, she moves from past to present, locating her disagreement with her parents over Nasser in the 1950s before hastily reminding the reader that “And of course they were right.”⁴⁷⁵ It is as though Ahmed believed in Nasser and his ideology only *because* she was a naïve child. Her intellectual journey, as recalled in this book, is in a way a rebuttal of those Nasserite fake ideals with which she was indoctrinated before, where the rejection that she shows of an imposed Arab identity on her becomes a result of “her abhorrence of Nasser and his aggressive brand of Arab nationalism.”⁴⁷⁶ Ahmed’s current dismissive views of Nasser and what she sees as his coercive construction of an identity become so intense that any celebratory view of the Man throws her off. Part of her criticism of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, for instance, is the book’s “resonance to my ears with the perspective and rhetoric of Arab nationalism.” So appalled by Nasser’s is Ahmed that she cannot emotionally accept Said’s different take on the president: “Nasser, for instance, figures in its pages only fleetingly, but he is there as hero and only as hero.”⁴⁷⁷ One can argue that her relationship with Nasser, both as a child and as an adult, is irrational, reflecting less a thoughtful examination of the Man than an inescapable struggle to come to terms with one’s past:

Whether I liked it or not, words like *ishtirakiyya*, *al-wataniyya al-Arabiyya*—socialism Arab nationalism—and the Glorious Revolution, became for me redolent of fraud. This was not

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⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 164.

⁴⁷⁶ Wail S. Hassan, “Arab-American Autobiography,” p. 23.

⁴⁷⁷ *A Border Passage*, p. 240.

an analytical reaction and I do not believe I even consciously registered it intellectually. It was merely an emotional, lived perception.⁴⁷⁸

Nasser and Women

In her critically acclaimed 1997 documentary *Four Women of Egypt*, Canadian-based Egyptian filmmaker, Tahani Rached, offers an intimate look into the lives of four female activists and intellectuals who are nevertheless divided by their political ideologies and affiliation and united through their friendship, experience, imprisonment and, more importantly, love for Egypt. Growing up and maturing during Nasser's regime, the four women share their views, admirations, disillusion, and disappointments in the 1952 revolution.⁴⁷⁹ Of all their anecdotes, one particularly invites much consideration. The camera alternates between a recorded interview of Nasser speaking calmly to a British journalist, and the face of Shahinda Maklid,⁴⁸⁰ her eyes emanating a certain mix of longing, grief, and admonish. A heated discussion ensues, in which Maklid and the Nasser-detractor Safinaz Kazim, a liberal-turned-Islamist writer and intellectual and the ex-wife of Egyptian vernacular poet Ahmad Fu'ad Nagm, battle over the legacy of Nasser. As though to reduce the intensity of the exchange, Kazim humorously interrupts Maklid's argumentation with a couplet from a famous song by Muhammad 'Abdel Wahhab that goes, "I love him despite what I suffered because of him; I love him despite

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⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 205.

⁴⁷⁹ The four women are Safinaz Kazim, Widad Mitry, Amina Rachid, and Shahinda Maklid. For more on the film, see Margot Badron's review "Speaking Straight: 'Four Women of Egypt'" in *Al Jadid Magazine* (Vol. 4, No. 24, Summer 1998).

⁴⁸⁰ One of the best-known Egyptian female activists of the last fifty years, best remembered for her involvement in what is known as the "Kamshish Affair." Makled lost her husband, Salah Husayn, who was shot at the hands of feudalists in the village of Kamshish in 1966. For more on her, see Shirin Abu al-Naga, *Min Awraq Shahinda Maklid* [From the Papers of Shahenda Makled] (Cairo: Mirit, 2006).

everything people said about him.” Maklid tries futilely to deny that her defense of the Man is based on a personal love for him, as Kazim reveals to the audience that Maklid had just told her off the record, “I love Nasser, *ya Safi*.” Kazim teasingly comments, “It is true. She loves him. What can she do?”

Kazim locates what she sees as Maklid’s irrational support for Nasser within a lover’s discourse, to borrow Roland Barthes’ famous book title. According to Kazim, Maqlid is a helpless lover, one who is unable to rethink her stance toward the beloved despite the ugly truth that she knows about him. The anecdote is significant, not the least because it raises the issue of Nasser as a romantic hero, as a gendered president whose appeal “would turn politics into a form of romantic popular narrative.”⁴⁸¹ Often missing in his biographies, Nasser’s masculine presence can offer an invaluable window onto the imagination of Egyptian and Arab audience and, more particularly, women. In fact, politics and the political sphere have been a favorite site of masculinity studies, “whether in identifying the ideological basis of exclusionary practices, or exploring the relationship between civilian and military masculinities, or ‘gendering’ the body politic itself.”⁴⁸² In addition, nationalism has often invoked the image of the masculine leader who protects the honor of the nation against its enemies, especially at times of colonial encounters. As feminist intellectual Cynthia Enloe puts it,

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⁴⁸¹ John Hellman, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 114.

⁴⁸² John Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender” in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, edited by Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 41.

Nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope. Anger at being ‘emasculate’—or turned into a ‘nation of busboys’—has been presumed to be the natural fuel for igniting a nationalist movement.⁴⁸³

It is no surprise then that Nasser has been seen by many as an embodiment of anti-colonial Egyptian and Arab masculinity. Amy Zalman shows how “the era of Arab nationalism is often referred to as masculine, dominated by the image of the charismatic Nasser and his muscular rebuttals of Western intervention.”⁴⁸⁴ Aside from the position of presidency that is often related to a certain degree of masculinity,⁴⁸⁵ Nasser’s military career magnified his masculine identity, as militaries are perfect sites for constructing –and constructed– masculinity.⁴⁸⁶ Interestingly, some of Nasser’s major interventions in Egypt underlie not-so-subtle sexual innuendos, whether in his “taking” lands from the rich and distribute it to the poor, or in “erecting” the phallic Cairo Tower (1956-1961), not to mention his lifelong project, the Aswan High Dam, whose first stage ceremony in 1964 dramatized an orgasmic-like moment that was immortalized in documentary films and photos.⁴⁸⁷

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⁴⁸³ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 44. Similarly, George Mosse notices how “modern masculinity from the very first was co-opted by the new nationalist movements of the nineteenth century.” See *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 7.

⁴⁸⁴ Cited in Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), p. 6. See also Hoda Elsadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), pp. xxx-xxxi, where she contrasts the Arab *nahda* hero with its nationalist, Nasser-like counterpart.

⁴⁸⁵ See Frank Rudy Cooper, “Our First Unisex President? Black Masculinity and Obama’s Feminine Side” (Suffolk University: Legal Studies Research Paper Series, 2009), pp. 633-634.

⁴⁸⁶ It should be noted, however, that unlike other revolutionary figures of the era, such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Nasser showed little interest in donning the military uniform.

⁴⁸⁷ The highlight of the ceremony featured Nasser, along with Soviet leader Khrushchev, Iraqi president ‘Arif, and Yemeni president al-Sallal, all pressing a button to blow up a huge sand barrage and divert the ancient River Nile into a canal.

Nasser's physicality had certainly added to his sexual appeal. According to Said Aburish, Nasser had inherited the physical attributes of his father: "tall, dark, sturdily built, and handsome," and "improved on them by having piercing black eyes which twinkled."⁴⁸⁸ Although Nasser biographers have thoroughly described the excitement that overtook the Egyptian masses upon seeing him, unfortunately absent is any particular interest in female reactions. Well-known Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr, who was a member of the Youth Organization in the 1960s, relayed to me how she and her fellow female members used to prepare themselves whenever Nasser visited them. "Girls would wear their best dresses and put make-up," she said. "For us, Nasser was not a president. He was like Rushdi Abaza, a heartthrob who would travel with us on a white horse."⁴⁸⁹ But where history falls short, literature compensates. In a poem that resonates with Bakr's account, lesser-known Egyptian poet Lusi Ya'qub describes her occasional meetings with Nasser. Entitled, "Do You Remember, Nasser?" the poem deserves the attention more for its rare approach to the president than for its literary merit. It begins,

Do you remember, Nasser
 When I first saw you
 When I met you
 When I touched your hands

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⁴⁸⁸ Said K. Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), p. 8.

⁴⁸⁹ From an interview I had with Bakr in Cairo in October, 2011. Famed Egyptian novelist Sonalla Ibrahim concurs, similarly invoking a comparison with Rushdi Abaza. The reference to Abaza is significant, for he, more than any other Egyptian actor, epitomized the "virile male" on the screen. For more on cinematic masculinities in Egypt during Nasser's era, see Walter Armbrust, "Farid Shauqi: Tough Guy, Family, Cinema Star" in *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, edited by Mai Ghousseub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (London: Saqi Books, 2006), especially pp. 199-200.

And looked at your eyes.⁴⁹⁰

The poet goes on to describe a visit by Nasser to a factory in Sinai in which she works:

Eyes embrace you...hearts beat loudly

For Nasser, its dear beloved

Sinai girls and I

Look at you, like a dashing hope.⁴⁹¹

Similarly, Egyptian novelist Ibrahim 'Abdel Meguid offers a vivid account of Nasser's female audience in his acclaimed novel *Tuyur al- 'Anbar* (Birds of Amber). Set against the notorious "Manshiyya Incident" where Nasser faced an assassination attempt,⁴⁹² the scene describes a group of Alexandrian women who attended Nasser's speech in Manshiyya. The scene, so uncommon in Egyptian novels, is worth quoting in full,

The girls had not gone out together for quite some time, not since the day they went to watch Gamal 'Abdel Nasser give a speech in Manshiya on the occasion of the English withdrawal from Egypt, which turned out to be a black day. Someone shot at Gamal and there was such a great commotion they were almost trampled underfoot and indeed might have been had not 'Abdel Nasser himself exhorted the people to stand steadfast, "If Gamal died, each of you would be Gamal." But at the end, after they got away from Manshiya on their way back home, they were happy that the handsome hero with the resonant voice had not been hurt even though they were still frightened.⁴⁹³

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⁴⁹⁰ Lusi Ya'qub, *Nasser Baladi* [Nasser, My Homeland] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlu al-Misriyya, 1971), p. 35. While the collection is published a year after Nasser's death, it is left unmentioned the exact date of the poem above.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, p. 38.

⁴⁹² The attempt is widely debated in Egyptian historiography, with an overwhelming view that the perpetrator was a Muslim Brother. See Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement*, pp. 175-190. Interestingly, Gordon states that the incident marks "the beginning of Nasser's romance with his people."

⁴⁹³ Ibrahim 'Abdel Meguid, *Days of Amber*, translated by Farouk Abdel Wahhab (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), p. 120.

In what follows I will discuss the representations of Nasser in three Egyptian women's autobiographies, paying particular attention to gender and masculinity. I seek to unmask whether a notion of Nasser's sexuality and masculinity—an image of a “gendered” Nasser—has ever found a space in these female imaginary productions and, if so, in what way.

A few months after the eruption of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Cairo-based publishing house Dar al-Shuruq released *Thikrayat Ma'ahu* (Memories with Him). Written by Nasser's wife Tahiyya, the book had been first serialized in two newspapers in Egypt and Lebanon, with the first episode appearing a week prior to the revolution. Tahiyya, who died in 1990, wrote these memoirs in 1973, as a commemoration of Nasser's third anniversary, but never published any of them. Nor do we know why Nasser's family has suddenly decided to disclose their mother's narrative long after she had died. That it was made available to a wider audience in the form of a book at such a crucial time in Egypt is a double-edged sword. While it may enliven Nasser's memory and reinstate him to the limelight as a predecessor of the revolutionaries at Tahrir Square, the political situation in Egypt is so intense and urgent that it can easily overshadow any intellectual production, on Nasser or otherwise. The fact remains, however, that the serialization of the memoirs in newspapers preceded the revolution, and so the timing question is still valid.⁴⁹⁴

It has been widely acknowledged among Nasser historians that his wife, Tahiyya, had led a modest, demure, and low-profile life, posing as a stark contrast to the model of Egypt's first lady that her later counterparts Jehan al-Sadat and Suzanne Mubarak would adopt afterwards. Born to a well-off family of Persian origin, she was introduced to Nasser sometime in the early

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⁴⁹⁴ As'ad AbuKhalil is overstating when he argues in an article he wrote for the English edition of the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* (10/2/2011) that “the life of the Nasser couple, as revealed in her memoirs, was one of many sparks that triggered the Egyptian uprising.” With the first serialized episode appearing a week earlier, the memoirs can hardly be relevant to the uprising.

1940s, and the couple got married in 1944.⁴⁹⁵ Theirs was a stable, happy marital experience, quite separate from, and almost not affected by, the turbulent events that Nasser was regularly facing outside. Loyalty was a pillar in their life, something that “may have been a reflection of love and affection, or simply of mutual respect.”⁴⁹⁶

Tahiyya’s book poses a challenge for what is stereotypically seen as main features of Arab women’s autobiographies, where writing becomes a means to break the silence and violate the space that men impose on them. What is often sought for in these intellectual productions, so goes the common argument, is how women can “transcend or trespass beyond the boundaries and traditions of the cultures they are writing or telling within.”⁴⁹⁷ As such, autobiography for Arab women is a way to reclaim a self that is long suppressed, and to re-inscribe one’s story against the “metanarratives that write them out of active political presence.”⁴⁹⁸ Tahiyya’s narrative does obviously subvert this paradigm. As the title emphatically suggests, Tahiyya exists in the book only insofar as her life intersects with Nasser’s. In fact, the chronological order which the book follows begins with the meeting between Nasser and Tahiyya in the 1940s and concludes with Nasser’s death in 1970—the narrator is silent about her life before or after.

Equally significant is that Tahiyya subjects her will to write to Nasser’s judgment. Rather than writing against boundaries, Tahiyya perpetuates them by soliciting Nasser’s approval of the

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⁴⁹⁵ Tahiyya states in her memoirs that her family and Nasser’s were old friends, and that Nasser first saw her when he used to visit them with his uncle. However, French journalist Jean Lacouture says that it was ‘Abdel Hakim ‘Amir who first introduced Nasser to Tahiyya. See his *Nasser* (London, 1973), p. 49.

⁴⁹⁶ P.J Vatikotis, *Nasser and His Generation* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 314.

⁴⁹⁷ Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women’s Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 80.

⁴⁹⁸ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York; London: Routledge, 2001), p. xxv.

act of writing. In the foreword, she explains that her first attempt to write these memoirs goes back to 1959. Despite Nasser's welcoming, however, she decided to forsake it. It is therefore legitimate for Tahiyya to pursue the project again in 1973, for

I know very well that the president was sorry that I did not continue to write and got rid of what I had written. I now live as if he is next to me, and will do nothing that he does not like. *Had I known that he does not want me to write, I would have never done it.*⁴⁹⁹

Nowhere in the memoirs does Tahiyya shy from identifying completely with her husband, declaring her pride at ignoring any quest for "the completed self" beyond the traditional role of the wife/mother. She even joyfully relates her satisfaction with the distance that Nasser had created between her and the public sphere in which he so immerses himself.

Irresistible with such political memoirs is readers' desire to be illuminated with hidden secrets, surprising confessions, and intimate details about the figures that have often created an unshakable barrier between their private and public lives. The usual outcome, however, as one article in *The Telegraph* had it, is "so disappointing."⁵⁰⁰ Instead of revealing what is hidden, political memoirs often indulge with didactic, tedious, and terse self-celebratory anecdotes about the self-made individual who "made it." This is why, for many, a political memoir *cannot* be a good memoir. As Rick Shenkman puts it,

A memoir to be successful must be honest. No president can afford to be truly honest. He can't explain the deals he made, the compromises he accepted, the sacrifices of his principles on the altar of personal ambition. So instead of the truth we get the president *as he would like to be remembered*. This is death to a good memoir. For a person who has spent their life concealing

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⁴⁹⁹ Tahiyya Gamal 'Abdel Nasser, *Thikrayat Ma'ahu* [Memories with Him] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2011), p. 8, my emphasis.

⁵⁰⁰ Dominic Sandbrook, "Why are Political Memoirs so Disappointing?" in *The Telegraph* (May 15, 2010).

who they are—and all politicians do this to an extent—the memoir is especially unsuited as a literary form to presidents. For the memoir depends on revelation.⁵⁰¹

Judged by these standards, it is partially true that Tahiyya's memoirs do not offer readers anything profoundly novel about Nasser. Rather, they confirm and elaborate on what has been circulated by word of mouth about Nasser's modesty, austerity, devotion to work, intimate relationships with his children, passion for cinema and photography, and the likes. However, a second reading of *Thikrayat Ma'ahu* shows a text that reworks the details of Nasser's private life in a way that says much by almost saying nothing. Of particular interest to our discussion about the romantic image of Nasser is tracing how Tahiyya deals with the presumed masculine aspect of her husband. In contrast to the handsome, physically-built, sexually appealing, piercing-black-eyed man, I argue that Tahiyya *desexualizes* Nasser, presenting a relationship with him that borders on heterosociality. As such, Nasser emerges less as a passionate lover than as a compassionate friend.

Notably, the book is entirely bereft of any reference to Nasser's physical attributes, with a sole exception in the foreword, where Tahiyya mentions "his voice" among what she misses the most about him. She does not describe Nasser's appearance, nor does she hint at any specific features that may have attracted her in the young officer who proposed to her in 1944. As mentioned earlier, Tahiyya knew Nasser through familial friendships. While theirs was not a love story, they both saw and knew each other before marriage. Yet in her chapter "Nasser proposes to Tahiyya," the would-be Ms. Nasser recounts very neutrally, if not dispassionately, how Nasser asked for her hand and how her brother—who was her custodian following her

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⁵⁰¹ Cited in Nawar al-Hassan Golley and Ahmad al-Issa, "A Journey of Belonging: A Global(ized) Self Finds Peace" in *Arab Women's Lives Retold*, p. 217.

father's death—eventually accepted.⁵⁰² Although the narrative testifies to Tahiyya's ability to capture minute details of the houses and the apartments in which she lived,⁵⁰³ she nevertheless does not dwell on her wedding party, drawing no pictures of how she and Nasser looked, what they wore, or how the setting was, along with hiding any indications of how it went. In a rather sparse style, she only says,

My brother organized the wedding party. After writing down the marriage contract, I went with Gamal to the photographer Arman..It was the first time I go out with him alone. We filled the car with garlands of roses...We returned home for the party. At 1am, the guests left, and the wedding was over.⁵⁰⁴

Also absent from the book are details about Nasser's mundane habits, particularly those that are exclusively related to male spheres, such as shaving the beard and trimming the moustache, as well as the sexually-charged acts of wearing a cologne. While she abundantly relates her assiduous care for Nasser's appointments, work, and guests, only once does Tahiyya disclose something about Nasser and clothes. She mentions how Nasser's secretary used to bring samples of suits to their house, whereupon "I will leave them until he [Nasser] finds time to see them and select what he likes."⁵⁰⁵ It seems as though Tahiyya has no saying in Nasser's dressing preferences "I know he likes the cloth that is striped with quiet colors such as light blue, so I used to pick it up on his behalf."⁵⁰⁶ Yet readers encounter no incident of Tahiyya buttoning

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⁵⁰² Tahiyya Gamal 'Abdel Nasser, *Thikrayat Ma'ahu*, pp. 10-12. Tahiyya mentions that her brother was at first reluctant due to the fact that she had an elder sister who had not married yet.

⁵⁰³ See, for instance, pp. 13, 73, & 74.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 92.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 93.

Nasser's shirts, combing his hair, or putting a suit jacket on him. Nor do they hear her complimenting her man on his famously elegant style. In fact, it is Tahiyya who proudly refers to her well-dressed appearance, asserting that "I never forgot to be elegant at home."⁵⁰⁷

Strikingly, the only incident in the narrative in which Tahiyya mentions kissing is moments following Nasser's death, where "I entered the room, stood next to the president, kissing him and weeping."⁵⁰⁸ Physical touches between Nasser and Tahiyya are overwhelmingly overlooked, with a rare exception relating to the wedding night, where, heading to their apartment in the third floor, Tahiyya relays how "we climbed the stairs until the second floor, then he carried me to the third." There, "Nasser held my hand, leading me to see all the rooms. I liked everything, and was extremely happy."⁵⁰⁹ Throughout the book, all of the encounters between Tahiyya and Nasser, including those that are in their house, are devoid of carnality. Even when the context is inviting for an embrace, a hand touch, or a kiss, the narrative, intentionally or otherwise, imposes an end on a seemingly incomplete scene, thus breaking the readers' horizons of expectations for some simple physical manifestations of marital life. For instance, when Nasser returns home in 1949 in the wake of the al-Falluja Siege in Palestine, Tahiyya, who had been scared to death during Nasser's absence, merely mentions how "on March, 6, 1949, Gamal came from al-Falluja. I was filled with an indescribable joy."⁵¹⁰ Similarly,

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⁵⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 50.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, 135.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p. 32.

when she delivered her first son Khalid, Nasser “entered the room and congratulated me, saying, ‘are you happy? It’s a boy.’”⁵¹¹

Nor do verbal displays of affection occupy a salient position in the narrative. The text is abounding with exchanges between the couple, both in person and through letters that Nasser used to send before the revolution while deployed outside Cairo. So sober are these exchanges, however, that they come across as semi-formal. In all the letters that Tahiyya includes in the narrative, Nasser, writing from Palestine during the 1948 war, is merely quoted to say “I hope you are well with the dear kids,” “I am very well, concerned only about you all,” and “I miss our house very much. I will come soon *inshalla*.”⁵¹² Only during the al-Falluja Siege does Nasser’s exchange with Tahiyya deliver more emotionality, as his letter goes:

I never thought I would leave you that long. Thanks God, anyways... Your deep belief in God should soothe you not to worry or be saddened. We will meet very soon and thank God. ..I am well, we will forget everything, and remain together forever, my dear love.”⁵¹³

More striking is the absence of the word “love” or any explicit emotional expression at moments that are conducive to it. For instance, when Tahiyya relays their trip to Alexandria on their eighth anniversary, we only hear this: “We congratulated each other on the anniversary.”⁵¹⁴ Similarly, on the eve of the revolution, Nasser, uncertain whether he would come back alive or not, leaves the house uttering a mere greeting to Tahiyya.⁵¹⁵

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⁵¹¹ Ibid, p. 33.

⁵¹² Ibid, pp. 26-27.

⁵¹³ Ibid, p. 30.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid, p. 60.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, p. 65.

Subtly, the narrative shows a woman grappling with the too well-known fact that her husband was not fully hers. On the one hand, she frequently declares her extreme happiness and satisfaction with her life, assertively repeating that Nasser's extremely busy life outside, even before the revolution, does not bother her. So long as she is assured of "Nasser's loyalty, nobility, fidelity, and love" for her and her children, she is "elated, joyful, and unbothered by anything."⁵¹⁶ On the other hand, there is a creeping sense of unease and loathing towards whatever stole Nasser's days, years and, eventually, life from her. This, I argue, can in part explain Tahiyya's detached and indifferent descriptions of the major events in Nasser's tenure, such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the union and secession between Egypt and Syria. For Tahiyya, whatever increases Nasser's responsibilities and concerns is to be dismissed as undesired, so much so that upon hearing Nasser's resignation following the 1967 defeat, hers and her children's consolation was that "Dad will have time to rest now."⁵¹⁷ This inner disquiet of a Nasser ever-abducted from her finds a final manifestation when he dies, where, after she is taken out of the room for some sedatives, she finds upon her return that people had already taken the body. In an honest moment, she says, "even now, they took him."⁵¹⁸

If Nasser's physicality is rather understated in the memoirs of his wife, it receives a radically different treatment in famed Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi's autobiography

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⁵¹⁶ Ibid, p. 47.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, p. 113. See also Tahiyya's reaction to the collapse of the United Arab Republic, p. 105.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, p. 136. Tahiyya's character in Anwar al-Qwadri's film *Gamal 'Abdel Nasser* expresses something similar, when she asks the people who surround the body to leave her with the dead Nasser, saying, "when he was alive, there was no time for me to sit with him. Now, excuse me, I want to sit with him for a bit."

Walking Through Fire.⁵¹⁹ With El Saadawi, Nasser's body becomes a signifier, a field of meanings, an independent entity that foretells the nature of the person who inhabits it. It is as though the body, more than anything else, is what makes Nasser who he is—the leader of the revolution.

While it is not her first autobiographical work, *Walking Through Fire* marks El Saadawi's most elaborate approach to Nasser. Its antecedent and much-discussed *Muthakkarati fi Sijn al-Nisa'* (Memoirs from the Women's Prison) had expectedly little space for Nasser, as it draws heavily, though not exclusively, on the controversial writer's prison experience during al-Sadat era.⁵²⁰ In fact, al-Sadat's ferociously negative portrayal in *Muthakkarati*, which can only belittle the downsides of any leader who had preceded him, hints at an implicit nostalgia for Nasser. With al-Sadat, El Saadawi states, "for the first time, the meaning of 'autocracy' is embodied before me. For the first time, dictatorship takes tangible form before my eyes."⁵²¹ This is not to render pre-al-Sadat Egypt flawless—nothing is farther from El Saadawi's judgment. But even when she critically recalls the 1960s, Nasser himself does not feature as culpable, for it is "the top aides of Nasser," headed by none other than then vice-president al-Sadat himself, who receive the writer's anger.⁵²²

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⁵¹⁹ Published by London-based Zed Books in 2002, it emerged as a selective translation by Egyptian intellectual and El Saadawi's then husband Sharif Hatata of the second and third volumes of *Awraqi... Hayati* (My Papers...My Life), published originally in Arabic in 2000. All references to the autobiography will rely on the English translation.

⁵²⁰ The book was translated into English by Marilyn Booth. For more on it, see Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*, pp. 148-164, and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 159-176.

⁵²¹ Nawal El Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 134-135.

⁵²² *Ibid*, pp. 76-78.

The first reference to Nasser in *Walking Through Fire* occurs as the narrator romantically engages in remembering the initial days of the 1952 revolution. Born in 1931, she was studying medicine at Cairo University when the Free Officers overthrew the monarchy. As her narrative on the departure of King Farouk aboard his yacht *al-Mahrusa* unfolds, she begins to identify a few of those new agents in Egypt's political scene: Muhammad Naguib, Zakariyya Mohieddin, and Anwar al-Sadat. As though to address readers' implied question about Nasser, the narrator rushes to say, "But the lion in this story had not yet appeared openly in the scene."⁵²³ Following such a powerful nicknaming, the narrator explains:

My father spotted the lion standing in the photograph next to [Muhammad Naguib]. He pointed at him and said, 'This man is the real leader of the revolution, Nawal.' At the beginning people used to hail Muhammad Naguib and proclaim his name. No one knew Gamal 'Abdel Nasser. I asked my father, 'How did you discover that?' He answered, '*From his eyes.*' So I looked at his eyes in the photograph. Big, dark, wide open eyes looking straight out of the picture from under a broad obstinate forehead. His sharp nose stood out in his face, slightly hooked. His thin lips were pressed together with determination or in anger, an anger that had kept growing since he was a child. *Muhammad Naguib's features next to him looked innocent and naively childish.*⁵²⁴

While El Saadawi's attention to Nasser's body is awakened by her father, her detailed description of the other parts goes well beyond her father's initial remarks about the eyes. By recognizing the masculine in him, El Saadawi deterministically declares Nasser as the would-be leader of the revolution.

As years go by, those preliminary reflections on Nasser's powerful and manly features yield to a more eroticized perception of him. However, it will require an in-person meeting before El Saadawi fully realizes the man in Nasser—pictures cannot capture the whole truth. Ten

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⁵²³ Nawal El Saadawi, *Walking Through Fire*, p. 54.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 54-55, my emphasis.

years after the revolution, she meets Nasser for the first time during the National Congress of Popular Forces “When I looked into Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser’s face I found him more attractive than in his pictures. The cameras could not catch the strong glimmer in his big, black eyes.”⁵²⁵ These were the heyday of Nasser’s regime, where “the revolution was moving forwards, mobilizing to strike down the remaining bastions of feudalism and comprador capitalism and had announced what were called the Socialist Decrees.”⁵²⁶ But the associations of Nasser’s body do not end here. Powerful, angry and erotic, Nasser’s body is also *Egyptian* “His skin was brown, the color of fresh silt brought down by the Nile. He was tall, very tall, with a slight stoop to his shoulders like my grandmother and my father.”⁵²⁷ As is commonly noted, the body is a site for constructing a native self, an autochthonous essence that “poses as the carnal representation of identity and existence.”⁵²⁸ As the “first native ruler of an independent Egypt since the Persian invaders destroyed the twenty-sixth and last pharaonic dynasty in 525 B.C,”⁵²⁹ Nasser is seen by El Saadawi as another pillar of Egyptian identity. Perri Giovannucci notices how El Saadawi’s “description of Nasser develops these two motifs of native identity: the basically familial concept of the Egyptian peasantry and the conception of the Nile, that most ancient signifier of Egypt.”⁵³⁰

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⁵²⁵ Ibid, p. 55.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Perri Giovannucci, *Literature and Development in North Africa: The Modernizing Mission* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 194.

⁵²⁹ Robert Stephens, *Nasser*, p. 11.

⁵³⁰ Perri Giovannucci, *Literature and Development in North Africa*, p. 189. For more on the relationship between Nasser and the figure of the *fallah* (the peasant), see Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, especially pp. 145-150.

Wittingly or unwittingly, El Saadawi's fascination with the image of Nasser is present in some of her encounters with men, largely exacerbating her disenchantment with and repugnance towards them. Lacking what she physically admires in Nasser, together with meagerly sharing his ideals, these men feature as anti-Nasser, unseemly partners for a woman whose feelings toward people are always "born in a first encounter."⁵³¹ Nasser's features, I argue, become the standards against which these men are gauged. El Saadawi tells the story of Dr. Rashad, an assistant professor who taught her in the surgery department. From the onset, she notices his arrogant, harsh, and inattentive treatment to poor children in the hospital, the ones who come from peasant families that share Nasser's and her family's native physical looks "there was a small child in the ward called Mostafa whom I always remember. His features resembled those of my cousin in the village...his skin was brown like mine, his eyes like mine, large and black, shining brightly."⁵³² After a few unreciprocated gestures, Rashad formally proposes to El Saadawi. For her family, this man is *la'ta*, a great catch, with his own apartment, car, clinic, and Chevrolet car. As for El Saadawi, "never in my life have I rejected a man as I rejected Dr Rashad."⁵³³ For all the things that he possesses, Rashad's eyes are not appealing. Unlike Nasser, whose eyes El Saadawi never tires of romanticizing, repeatedly fixating on their radiant qualities, Rashad's are not shining. When her father disapprovingly asks her why she refuses him, she just cannot find words, "How could I say to my father that what attracted me to living creatures was the shine in their eyes?"⁵³⁴ To make things worse, Rashad shows a critical assessment of Nasser

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⁵³¹ Nawal El Saadawi, *Walking Through Fire*, p. 59.

⁵³² *Ibid*, p. 57.

⁵³³ *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 64.

during the visit. It was 1957, when Egypt had begun to improve its relationship with the Soviet Union following the 1956 Tripartite Aggression. While El Saadawi's father praises Nasser's role as a national leader, Rashad anxiously questions the president's openness toward what he sees as the Communist threat. What is missing in the discussion is El Saadawi who, while supposedly the visit's *raison d'être*, is nevertheless not asked to offer an opinion. Enraged, she blames her father for "not asking me what I thought of Gamal 'Abdel Nasser or Dr. Rashad himself."⁵³⁵

Unlike her resistance to Rashad, El Saadawi succumbs to society's conditions when she marries a man she does not love. Reasoning that it was only to erase the memory of a first failed marriage, she admits that nothing binds them together except a piece of paper. In an almost exact inversion of her earlier description of Nasser, El Saadawi dispassionately details the physical attributes of her husband:

When he charged into my room I lifted my head and looked at him. I felt as though I had never seen him before. He had a round face with pink cheeks, the kind of face that I dislike in men. His body was squat and fleshy, the kind of body which I found repugnant even in women. When I looked into his eyes I could not find what I was searching for. His nose was soft and flabby with nothing challenging or proud in it, and when he spoke there was no warmth, no ring in his voice. *He had none of the things I found attractive in a man*, and yet this man was my husband.⁵³⁶

If Nasser's eyes, skin, and nose stand in contrast to her husband's, so too does his voice, which is recurrently characterized throughout the book as *yudawwi*, or shrill "Abdel Nasser's voice echoed loudly from thousands of radios in the houses and on the streets."⁵³⁷

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⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Ibid, p. 165, my emphasis.

⁵³⁷ Ibid, p. 89. See also pp. 70 & 98.

Occasionally, the narrative offers unfavorable accounts of Nasser, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and the persecution of dissent. El Saadawi, for instance, combines Nasser with God and sex as the “sensitive topics” that writers in Egypt were instructed to avoid.⁵³⁸ Pertinent to the discussion above is to notice how, in the midst of criticizing Nasser, El Saadawi and her female friends conceive him as the man of the nation, comparing their physical relationships with their husbands to Egypt’s with Nasser. In a scene that renders the difference between the nation and the woman rather unnoticed, Samia, one of El Saadawi’s closest friends whose husband Rifa’a is imprisoned due to his Communist views, wonders if Nasser is truly loyal and faithful to Egypt. Against the backdrop of increasing disillusion with the regime among a group of intellectuals, who cite the crackdown on Communists and the collapse of the UAR, Samia concludes that “Nasser cannot possibly be loyal to the country after all that had happened.”⁵³⁹ Abruptly jumping from the political to the personal, she asks if her husband Rifa’a is faithful to her, before adding, “Do you think Nasser is faithful, Nawal? Do you think Rifa’a is faithful? Can we separate marital from national faithfulness?”⁵⁴⁰

To the dismay of El Saadawi, the disillusion with the regime came to a full materialization with the 1967 humiliating defeat. Given the nature of the warring parties and the shock of the swift collapse of Egyptian and Arab armies, the defeat would soon acquire symbolic meanings in Egyptian and Arab minds, including a gendered perception of the battle. As is often

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⁵³⁸ Ibid, p. 120. Arab writers often use the term *al-Thaluth al-Muharram* (The Forbidden Trinity) in reference to politics, sex, and God. The term was arguably popularized by Syrian intellectual Bu ‘Ali Yasin, whose 1973 book carried the term as its title.

⁵³⁹ Ibid, p. 170.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

noted, loss at war leaves a “profound sense of masculine vulnerability,”⁵⁴¹ ushering in a feminization of the crushed side. Hence the damage that the 1967 *Naksa* has done to the once powerful, masculine image of Nasser. Syrian intellectual George Tarabishi argues that the *Naksa* was tantamount to an emasculation of Nasser at the hands of Israel, whose colonization of Palestine was also described as *ightisab*, or rape. For Arabs, Tarabishi explains, Israel was seen as a woman, a stepdaughter of colonial powers who nevertheless possesses a phallic image of aggression, usually identified as a “dagger” in the heart of the Arab World. Passing away before standing up to this “manly woman,” Nasser failed to fix “the crushed dignity and its symbolic equivalent: amputated manhood.”⁵⁴²

Suffocated in a devastated Cairo, El Saadawi volunteered with other Egyptian male physicians to join the Palestinian camps in Jordan. The camps were booming with *Fedayeen*, militants of various origins who were launching attacks against Israeli targets and who, backed by the Jordanian army, had just fought and arguably triumphed in the Battle of Karamah in 1968. The Palestinian narrative views the Battle as a minor but significant victory over the too-conceited Israeli army, a key incident that helped uplifting the morale of the entire Arab World after it had indescribably declined in 1967.⁵⁴³ It is worth pondering that El Saadawi chooses to move temporarily from the realm of defeated Nasser to the side of rising competent freedom fighters in Jordan. Interestingly, and in perhaps the most powerful scene in the book, she engages

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⁵⁴¹ Brenton J. Malin, *American Masculinity Under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties “Crisis of Masculinity”* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 145.

⁵⁴² George Tarabishi, *al-Muthaqqafun al-‘Arab wa al- Thurath: al-Tahlil al-Nafsi li ‘Usab Jama’i* [Arab Intellectuals and the Heritage: Psychoanalyzing a Collective Neurosis] (London: Riyad al-Rayyes Books, 1991), p. 28.

⁵⁴³ The Battle took place in the Jordanian town of Karamah whose name, coincidentally, means “dignity.” For more on the political significance of the Battle, see W. Andrew Terrill, “The Political Mythology of the Battle of Karamah” in *Middle East Journal* (Vol. 55, No. 1, Winter, 2001).

in an intimate conversation with Ghassan, a *fedayee* who had lost his limbs during the war.

Ghassan deliriously contemplates the meaning of an incomplete body for both a man and a freedom fighter like himself, before surprisingly turning to El Saadawi, asking,

But you, Dr. Nawal, what brought you here to our camp? Are you looking for a hero, for a man on whose shoulder you can rest your head? Our leaders, despite everything, have a certain attraction for women, and the higher up they move in the ranks the greater the attraction they are able to exercise on women looking for some excitement in their lives.⁵⁴⁴

Obviously taken aback by his observation, El Saadawi denies she is looking for a man. She states that she can no longer bear living in a mourning Cairo. However, she still perceives Nasser physically—only that his masculine features prior to the defeat were no longer there “everybody seemed to be carrying a heavy load, even ‘Abdel Nasser. His face went old, the look in his eyes was no longer defiant, it was defeated, like a badly wounded lion that feels its death is approaching.”⁵⁴⁵ Whether or not Ghassan’s observation was accurate, it still forces El Saadawi to release a sigh at the carnal image that Nasser once had. A leader at loss is inevitably less lionized, and as the defeat defaces the shining eyes of Nasser, death will be a few steps away.

Unlike the previous two books, Zaynab al-Ghazali’s *Ayyam min Hayati* (Days from my Life) reorients the associations of Nasser’s masculinity into a totally different direction. A leading female member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the founder of the Muslim Women’s Association in 1937, al-Ghazali was imprisoned in 1965, along with fellow members of the Brotherhood, on charges of plotting to assassinate Nasser. Marking the second major

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⁵⁴⁴ *Walking Through Fire*, pp. 229-230.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 230.

confrontation between the regime and the Brotherhood since the revolution,⁵⁴⁶ the campaign culminated “on 21 August 1966 in the sentencing by the Supreme State Security Court of seven Brothers to death by hanging and a hundred or so more to prison terms of varying lengths.”⁵⁴⁷ Of the seven executed Brothers, Sayyid Qutb was the most prominent one. Al-Ghazali was sentenced to 25 years in prison, before she was released in 1971 following the death of Nasser. *Ayyam min Hayati* chronicles al-Ghazali’s prison experience during these six years, with a few references to earlier incidents.

Published in 1977, al-Ghazali’s book belongs to what Fedwa Malti-Douglas calls “Islamic autobiographical writing,” a sub-genre of Arabic autobiography that is “written from a consciously Islamic perspective.”⁵⁴⁸ More specifically, it is a founding text in describing the prison experience in Nasser’s Egypt through the vantage point of a Muslim Brother. Depicting shocking scenes of torture, beating, and humiliation, the book paved the way for a series of less critically-acclaimed chronicles by former prisoners of the Brotherhood, the most famous and widely-circulated of which is Ahmad Ra’if’s *al-Bawwaba al-Sawda’* (The Black Gate). Unlike the prison memoirs of other political groups in Egypt, such as the Communists’,⁵⁴⁹ the Muslim Brothers’ do not differentiate between Nasser and the regime. Rather, both are condemned, with

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⁵⁴⁶ The first one took place in 1954, and was also related to an assassination attempt on Nasser. See earlier on p. 27.

⁵⁴⁷ Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. vii.

⁵⁴⁸ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Postmodernizing the Traditional in the Autobiography of Shaykh Kishk” in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature*, edited by Kamal Abdel-Malek & Wael Hallaq (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 389, 393.

⁵⁴⁹ For a discussion of Egyptian Communists’ prison experience during Nasser’s regime, see my reading of Shuhdi ‘Atiyya al-Shafi’i’s letter to Nasser in chapter 1.

Nasser seen as the ultimate pharaoh, the source of ills whose personal role in persecuting the Brothers lies as a major concern of these memoirs.

It is this kind of bitter relationship with Nasser that permeates almost every page of *Ayyam min Hayati*. More importantly, al-Ghazali conceives of her feud with Nasser in gendered terms, as an ongoing war between a *male* oppressor and an oppressed female, where her prison experience becomes the ultimate testimony on Nasser's hegemonic masculinity. However, instead of surrendering to this unequal relationship between a man and a woman and helplessly succumbing to its conditions, I argue that al-Ghazali's narrative often operates to invalidate Nasser's masculinity. By depicting him as personally ordering the torture of al-Ghazali and the violation of her body, the text deprives Nasser of the role of the 'protector of the nation,' the hero who defends "feminine and national virtue."⁵⁵⁰ Equally significant, al-Ghazali emphatically seeks to prove that she not only defies Nasser, but also triumphs over him. Unable to submit a woman to his will, Nasser emerges as an impotent masculine, a tyrant whose manhood is severely damaged at the hands of an enduring woman.

From its inception, the narrative personalizes the otherwise ideological enmity between al-Ghazali and Nasser. Entitled, "Abdel Nasser Hates me Personally," the first chapter relays the story of a car accident that al-Ghazali had. She soon establishes from the reports surrounding her that the accident is in fact not so accidental, and that it was orchestrated by Nasser's secret agents to kill her at the behest of the president himself. The latter, so al-Ghazali's secretary informs her, "hates you personally, *Hagga Zaynab*. He cannot stand to hear your name pronounced by any

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⁵⁵⁰ Walter Armbrust, "Farid Shauqi: Tough Guy, Family, Cinema Star", p. 203.

one. Whenever someone mentions you, he gets agitated and furious and ends the meeting.”⁵⁵¹

Interestingly, al-Ghazali receives this news with joy, as though Nasser’s hatred for her testifies to the righteous path that she follows.

As soon as al-Ghazali is arrested by “the men of the *Taghut*”⁵⁵² the narrative indulges in unceasing, rather repetitive sequences of horrific torture. During these sequences, her “body becomes the battlefield on which the contest between good and evil is played out.”⁵⁵³ While al-Ghazali is surrounded by other male inmates who share her ordeal, she tirelessly seeks to affirm her gender as a female prisoner. Flogged and beaten by male jailors for refusing to admit or give names of those who conspired against Nasser, al-Ghazali celebrates her courage, patience, and endurance. If women “frame their physical violation as evidence of their equality with men,”⁵⁵⁴ al-Ghazali goes so far as to place herself above many of her male counterparts who allegedly collapse under torture and offer information to the inquisitors. In a telling scene, al-Ghazali contrasts ‘Ali ‘Ashmawi, a Brother who could not endure torture and collaborated with Nasser’s men, with the unwavering and unbroken ‘Abdel Fattah Ismail. Ashamed of ‘Ashmawi’s behavior, al-Ghazali distastefully describes his appearance following the favorable treatment he now receives from prison authority, almost de-masculinizing him “Ali ‘Ashmawi came. He was wearing clean, elegant, silk pajamas, his hair combed, and no traces of torture left on him.”⁵⁵⁵

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⁵⁵¹ Zaynab al-Ghazali, *Ayyam min Hayati* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1978), pp. 12-13.

⁵⁵² Ibid, p. 45. “Taghut,” a word with multiple meanings that is often used now to mean “tyrant,” is the most common reference to Nasser in the text.

⁵⁵³ Miriam Cooke, “Ayyam min Hayati: The Prisoner Memoir of a Muslim Sister” in *The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam’s Impact on Contemporary Literature*, edited by John C. Hawley (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 127.

⁵⁵⁴ Julie Peteet, “Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada: A Cultural Politics of Violence” in *Imagined Masculinities*, p. 119.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ayyam min Hayati*, p. 119.

Precisely the opposite is Ismail, a leading Brother member whose “blue prison uniform was torn. The signs of torture on his body bespeak to the amount of suffering he passed through.”⁵⁵⁶ Commenting on the two, al-Ghazali states, “I was comforted. Yes. I was comforted by the glory of manhood that ‘Abdel Fattah Ismail displayed.”⁵⁵⁷ It is as though the endurance of physical violence, or the absence thereof, that becomes central to the construction of true masculinity.⁵⁵⁸

Aware of her extraordinary capabilities, Nasser increasingly becomes more determined to break al-Ghazali. The narrative tells of a letter that the prison authority receives from Nasser. It reads, “By orders of the President of the Republic Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser, Zaynab al-Ghazali is to be tortured rougher than men.”⁵⁵⁹ Nevertheless, al-Ghazali never surrenders, memorializing with each page her fortitude to the otherwise unbearable agony. Hence the book’s excessive iteration of almost identical torturing scenes. Nadja Odeh rightly wonders whether *Ayyam min Hayati* is in reality an ‘auto-hagiography.’⁵⁶⁰ Indeed, al-Ghazali repeatedly refers to the dreams that she sees, in which the Prophet appears, asking her to withstand and promising of a victory over her enemies.⁵⁶¹

In contrast to El Saadawi who romanticizes her personal meeting with Nasser, focusing on his physical appeal, al-Ghazali refuses a deal through which she can meet the president.

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⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 120.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 121.

⁵⁵⁸ See Julie Peteet, “Male Gender,” pp. 118-119.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ayyam min Hayati*, p. 87.

⁵⁶⁰ Nadja Odeh, “Coded Emotions: The Description of Nature in Arab Women’s Autobiographies” in *Writing the Self*, p. 327n.

⁵⁶¹ See *Ayyam min Hayati*, pp. 172, 173, 185, 188.

Whereas the prison authority offers the meeting as an alluring prize for a few concessions on her part, al-Ghazali dismisses it, conceiving of Nasser's body as implicated in the crimes that are committed against her and her fellow Brothers "I want nothing from you. I will never accept to meet with Nasser, nor will I shake the hand that is stained with the blood of Ismail al-Fayyumi, Rif'at Bakr, Muhammad 'Awwad, and others."⁵⁶² Ultimately, al-Ghazali gets to see Nasser, albeit involuntarily. In a rather surreal scene following a torture session, she wakes up to see Nasser in the room, leaning back on 'Abdel Hakim 'Amir, and holding black sunglasses in his hand. Upon seeing him, "I forgot my pain, with a strange sense of awakening creeping into my body."⁵⁶³ Contrary to expectations, Nasser remains motionless and silent throughout the meeting, offering the floor to his Minister of War, Shams Badran to interrogate al-Ghazali. Nor does al-Ghazali dwell on describing the appearance of Nasser. In fact, the narrative leaves it enigmatic the reason behind Nasser's alleged attendance, and the details it offers about this particular interrogating session raises legitimate doubts concerning its actuality. As Pauline Lewis observes, "it is difficult to assess the validity of al-Ghazali's claims that Nasser considered her a top threat to his security."⁵⁶⁴ What remains, however, shows al-Ghazali subverting the probable purpose of the meeting. While the presence of Nasser is meant to startle her, al-Ghazali plucks up enough courage to retort to Shams Badran's argumentative questions about the aims of the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the meeting serves to underscore Nasser's baseness and villainy by showing him indifferent to a *woman's* physical suffering at the hands of his men. Despite the

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⁵⁶² Ibid, p. 140.

⁵⁶³ Ibid, p. 143.

⁵⁶⁴ Pauline Lewis, "Zainab al-Ghazali: Pioneer of Islamist Feminism" in *Michigan Journal of History* (Winter, 2007), p. 24.

flogging and the beating, Nasser is shown to never move a hair. Victorious, al-Ghazali comments, “I said everything I wanted him [Nasser] to know. And now he did know.”⁵⁶⁵

As mentioned earlier, al-Ghazali is fully investing in gendering her struggle against Nasser. Aside from his given name, he is referred to as a pharaoh, a *taghut*, or a *taghiya*,⁵⁶⁶ all of which indicate an oppressive patriarch. In addition, she often calls her jailors and inquisitors as *rijal* ‘*Abdel Nasser*, or *rijal al-taghut*, while mockingly refers to their incompetence and shallowness. During the trial, for instance, she recounts the story of a male judge who, after hearing al-Ghazali’s self-defense, including her reference to the Prophet as ‘*uswa*, or example, shouts hysterically, making a scene of himself “Shut up! Shut up! What is she saying? What does ‘*uswa* mean?”⁵⁶⁷ Appalled by his ignorance, al-Ghazali comments, “At this moment the hall burst out into laughter at that who is assigned as a judge but nevertheless does not understand the word ‘*uswa*. *This is how Nasser chose his men.*”⁵⁶⁸ Spearheaded by Nasser, these men fail, despite resorting to violence and oppression, to extinguish the Muslim Brotherhood, thanks, first and foremost, to a *woman*: Zaynab al-Ghazali. Nasser, al-Ghazali believes, has gone mad because a woman has robbed him of the generation that, while born during his regime, was nonetheless “absorbed in our mission and involved in our ranks.”⁵⁶⁹ Thus, Nasser is defeated by a woman.

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⁵⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 145.

⁵⁶⁶ See, for instance, pp. 18, 19, 45, & 66.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 180.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, my emphasis.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 190.

Nowhere in Egyptian literature does Nasser emerge so demonized, trashed, and desecrated. The largely complicated, multilayered, and turbulent tenure of Nasser is diminished into images of a ruthless, bloodthirsty, oppressive, and secular masculine who does not rule by Islam. Notably absent from al-Ghazali's narrative is any references to major political events in Egypt. Nor does she offer her own reading of Nasser's main acts, such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the unity with Syria, or the construction of the High Dam. Rather, she reduces the narrative of post-1952 Egypt into a struggle against the "devil, embodied in the Egyptian President Nasser."⁵⁷⁰ The one-sidedness of al-Ghazali's narrative goes so far as to consider Nasser an exceptional, unprecedented case of evil, so much so that "the Nasser regime has made us forget the immorality of criminals throughout the entire history of mankind."⁵⁷¹ Such a statement is a striking exaggeration, but for al-Ghazali, the intentionally detailed scenes of torture and humiliation can perhaps pass as a convincing justification.

Conclusion

The presence of Nasser in Egyptian literary narratives takes multiple forms. While he is introduced in certain works as a protagonist, in others he constitutes a part of the historical background in which the narrative takes place. In the latter form, Nasser becomes a reference, a site of contestation where conflicting views over the president and his legacy may battle. Representing Nasser through the vantage points of fictional characters, these works enact a unique source of knowledge about Nasser by creating a world for ordinary citizens whose

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⁵⁷⁰ Miriam Cooke, "*Ayyam min Hayati*," p. 127.

⁵⁷¹ *Ayyam min Hayati*, p. 69.

personal takes on him may have otherwise been unheard. This knowledge is an essential constituent of the making of Nasser's image in the Egyptian imaginary, both inspired by and inspiring the ongoing debate concerning the meanings of Nasser for Egyptian citizenry.

Nasser in fiction paid a particular attention to two largely unexplored treatments of Nasser in Egyptian literary narratives. It began with an analysis of the location of Nasser vis-à-vis the child protagonist. Drawing on Edward Said's concepts of filiation and affiliation, it argued that these narratives place the child in a disturbing situation where a growing comparison between Nasser and the father begins to materialize. Concomitant with the child's increasing knowledge about and, more significantly, love for Nasser is his perception of the damage that befalls his father at the hands of the very regime of Nasser. These narratives introduce a child grappling with mixed feelings of belonging and loyalty, torn between glorifying Nasser on the one hand and defending his father on the other.

The second part of the chapter looked into the image of Nasser as a gendered president, highlighting his masculine identity as it was conceived by his female audience. Analyzing three autobiographies that were produced by women of drastically different relationships with Nasser, the chapter confirmed the absence of a monolithic approach to Nasser's masculinity. While his wife Tahiyya invests so little in depicting a masculine Nasser, producing what I argued to be a desexualized image of him, Nawal El Saadawi transforms Nasser's body into a field of meanings that connote courage, rage, and eroticism, largely epitomized by his shining eyes and resounding voice. Still, the masculinity of Nasser acquires an evil dimension in Zaynab al-Ghazali's *Ayyam min Hayati*, which approaches the persecution of al-Ghazali in prison as an essentially gendered war between a male oppressor and a female victim.

Chapter 4

Nasser on the Screen

Among the surge of serialized television drama that was sweeping the Arab world during the 2012 month of Ramadan, an Egyptian one was highly anticipated. Featuring the first appearance of veteran comedian ‘Adil Imam on the small screen in thirty years, *Firqat Naji ‘Atallah* (Naji ‘Atallah’s Team) chronicles the life of an Egyptian diplomat (Imam) who works in the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv. Unable to contain his critical and, at times, offensive, anti-Semitic comments against Israelis, Imam finds himself dismissed from work. As he prepares to return to Egypt, he stops by the bank to collect his money, only to discover that the bank has placed a hold on his account. The manager attributes the procedure to instructions he received from high officials, who suspect Imam is involved with a terrorist organization. Dismayed and infuriated, Imam leaves the bank, returns to Egypt, and embarks on an *Ocean’s 11*-like mission to recruit a team of Egyptian youths in order to rob the bank.

Naji Atallah’s Team was largely panned by critics, who faulted it for being a mere attempt to gather all of Imam’s now stereotypical cinema characteristics—heroism, nobility, extreme intelligence—in a rather silly plot. Also attacked was the serial’s superficial recourse to the Palestinian cause as a way to sell its message to viewers. Imam’s first work since the 2011 Egyptian revolution, it was argued, was an endeavor to divert the attention from his reactionary position against the revolution and to reproduce him as a dauntless figure.⁵⁷²

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⁵⁷² See the various features that were published in *al-Hayat* and *al-Quds al-‘Arabi* newspapers on August 2, 2012.

However, it is the way the first episode of the series opens that is of interest here. A new press attaché arrives in the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv. Following a brief meeting with the ambassador, the latter summons Imam to introduce him to his new colleague. The encounter takes place at the ambassador's office, and runs as follows:

Ambassador (addressing Imam, pointing to the attaché): I would like to introduce you to the new press attaché in the embassy: Gamal Bey; Gamal 'Abdel Nasser.

Imam: Who, Your Excellency?!

Ambassador: Gamal 'Abdel Nasser!

Imam: Gamal 'Abdel Nasser is here in Tel Aviv! What a day! How did he manage to enter? We understood that al-Sadat could, but now Gamal 'Abdel Nasser?!

The irony that the name invokes for Imam (and, presumably, viewers at home) needs no further explanation. The mere mention of Nasser's name, borne by a regular Egyptian who happens to work in Israel, suffices to connote. It is as though not only Nasser, but also his name, cannot be imagined to inhabit Tel Aviv. The first few episodes of the serial further introduces this Gamal to the audience: he was born on July 23, 1959—tellingly the seventh anniversary of Nasser's revolution—; his father was killed in the October war in 1973; he shortly proves incapable of handling the fact that he is working in Israel, and consequently resigns and returns to Egypt. The message is then delivered: a *Nasser*, whoever he is, cannot reconcile himself with Israelis. He cannot partake in normalizing relationships with Israel.

Nor can Israelis. Following their introduction at the embassy, Imam escorts Nasser in his search to find an apartment in Tel Aviv. Upon their success, they sit down with the landlord to sign the lease. The latter asks for the attaché's full name. Once he hears it, the landlord suddenly wears a frown, while Imam whispers in Nasser's ear that "They [Israelis] lose control when they

hear his name.” The attaché is played by a relatively unknown actor (Yasir Ali Mahir) who, while not looking exactly like the man after whom he was named, does carry a few of Nasser’s physical characteristics, most notably the graying sideburns.

This recent appropriation of Nasser’s name reflects a tendency among Egyptian filmmakers and producers to capitalize on the popularity that the late president still possesses in people’s imagination. Borrowing from Pierre Nora’s 1989 article, I would argue that Nasser functions as a site of memory, a space of associations often disconnected from the real historical figure that he once was. *Les Lieux de Memoire*, Nora tells us, are “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.”⁵⁷³ As such, they are the embodiment of memory, the residue of that long process of remembering and forgetting that takes place in living societies before it enters the realm of history. History, on the other hand, is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”⁵⁷⁴ Constituting a counter-discourse, of which history “is perpetually suspicious,”⁵⁷⁵ these sites of memory take the form of movies, songs, novels, paintings, among others. Once perpetuated, repeated, and systematically propagated, these sites, like Nasser’s name and image, emerge as self-explanatory signs, whose mere presence is effortlessly deciphered and interpreted by viewers.

However, this latest employment of Nasser’s power hides behind it a much more complicated story of Nasser on the screen. In fact, and probably contrary to expectations,

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⁵⁷³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire” in *Representations* (California: University of California Press, No 26, Spring 1989), p. 12.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9.

Nasser's immense presence in Egyptian everyday life has hardly been equally reflected in films. One needs only to remember that the first biographical film on the most important Egyptian politician to emerge from the capital of cinema in the Arab world was made as late as forty four years after Nasser's revolution and twenty six years after his death. *Nasser 56* (Nasser 56), directed by Muhammad Fadil, partly filled a vacuum that had been often negotiated and pondered by scholars and historians. This chapter traces the historical path that Nasser's presence on the screen has taken prior to and after *Nasser 56*. It will discuss how his picture, voice, speeches, and persona have been approached by Egyptian filmmakers in feature films. I will argue that Egyptian cinema has often separated Nasser from the regime that he created. Additionally, Egyptian filmmakers have for the most part ignored the complexity of Nasser's character, thus reducing him to a flat sign with a set of attributes that either elevate him to the position of heroes or banish him to the sphere of ruthless dictators. In other words, rarely has Nasser been introduced as a historical figure on the screen, his deeds and decisions contextualized and thoroughly contemplated. Rather, filmmakers have often oversimplified Nasser to evoke in the audience love or hate for him. As this chapter will demonstrate, it is the love that eventually triumphs. Following a brief reflection on Nasser's disproportionate appearance on the screen compared to his influence in reality, the chapter will move to tackle four major themes: symbolic interpretations of Nasser; the portrait of Nasser; the "resignation speech;" and, finally, Nasser and bio-pictures.

As mentioned earlier, there is little disagreement among scholars that Nasser has not enjoyed a huge cinematic presence, particularly during his life. Movies "did not encompass

Nasser's life details.”⁵⁷⁶ In fact, it is acknowledged that Egyptian cinema has often refrained from approaching historical figures, especially contemporary ones. Yet, as Egyptian critic Kamal Ramzi shows, it was puzzling to notice that Nasser's regime did not break away with that tendency.⁵⁷⁷ This is even more perplexing because Nasser's pictures and portraits were ubiquitous in Egyptian life. Maria Golia demonstrates how

The reproduction of his [Nasser's] face became a cottage industry; his photograph was sold in mass-produced, ornately framed portraits, and reproduced on matchboxes, bric-a-brac and even prayer carpets. Throughout Egypt, civil servants' offices and merchants' shops had a photograph of the president hanging on the wall.⁵⁷⁸

If one concurs with this account, then it is legitimate to wonder why such a powerful image has not made it into the screen more frequently. It comes as no surprise to find only a few, if any, negative cinematic representations of Nasser during his life. But Nasser rarely appeared, even positively. His portraits “remain strikingly absent from post-1952 films.”⁵⁷⁹ With the exception of a few films such as *Port Said* (Port Said) and *‘Amaliqat al-Bihar* (Giants of the Sea)—both will be discussed below—, Joel Gordon reminds us that Nasser's image “would vanish thereafter from the screen, even as it proliferated throughout city and country, adorning public and private walls, and resonated in the lyrics of revolutionary anthems and school

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⁵⁷⁶ Bashar Ibrahim and Jum'a Qajah, *‘Abdel Nasser wa al- Cinema: Bahth fi Ishkaliyyat al-Ru'ya bayna Cinema al-Sira wa Cinema al-Mu'taqal* [Nasser and Cinema: A Study on the Problem of Vision between Bio-Pictures and Movies of Imprisonment] (Beirut: Dar al-Tariq, 2004), p. 9

⁵⁷⁷ Kamal Ramzy, “Irtibat Nushu' al-Cinema al-‘Arabiyya bi Harakat al-Tahrir al-‘Arabi” [The Linkage between the Emergence of Arab Cinema and the Arab Liberation Movement] in *al-Huwiyya al-Qawmiyya fi al- Cinema al-‘Arabiyya* [Nationalist Identity in Arab Cinema], edited by ‘Abdel Mun'im Talima (Beirut: Markiz Dirasat al-Wihda al-‘Arabiyya, 1986), p. 43.

⁵⁷⁸ Maria Golia, *Egypt and Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 121.

⁵⁷⁹ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002), p. 89.

ditties.”⁵⁸⁰ And if that was the case with Nasser’s portrait, then one can only expect a similar scenario with his voice, not to mention his physical appearance in films through real footage.

There are various attempts to explain this phenomenon. Raymond William Baker, discussing the relationship between cinema and politics in post-1952 Egypt, traces a broader context that begs for consideration. He argues that “Egypt has not produced a significant body of official mobilization films such as one might expect from an ostensibly revolutionary regime.”⁵⁸¹ Among the reasons behind that was the lack of a “coherent and elaborate ideology”⁵⁸² in the newly founded regime, aside from an “inchoate notions of a somehow modernized Egypt.”⁵⁸³ This view is problematic, however. While it is true that the 1952 revolution and Nasser have not frequently expressed themselves cinematically, the reasoning that Baker offers is less than convincing. Whether or not Nasser and his regime had a finely-defined ideology did not bar them from using the press and the radio as major vehicles for disseminating their message and communicating with the public. The same regime that surely facilitated the ubiquity of Nasser’s portrait in Egyptian life could have also transformed it into a cinematic icon.

More tenable is Viola Shafiq’s assertion that “the promotion of Nasser’s ideas and his image during his lifetime was rather word-oriented.”⁵⁸⁴ Words, not images, were Nasser’s biggest assets. Indeed, Nasser’s relationship with the masses was primarily conceived of as “a

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⁵⁸⁰ Ibid, p.90.

⁵⁸¹ Raymond William Baker, “Egypt in Shadows: Films and the Political Order” in *American Behavioral Scientist* (New York: SAGE Publications, No. 17, 1974), p. 395.

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: the American University in Cairo Press, 2006), p. 104.

voice with an ear.”⁵⁸⁵ Also significant is Shafiq’s argument that Nasser was rather an iconoclast who “rejected symbolic deification along with visual representation.”⁵⁸⁶ Buttrressing this view is the surprising absence of statues of Nasser in a country where far less influential figures were thus materially commemorated. Unlike other authoritarian leaders around the world, Nasser did not hijack the cityscape of Cairo; did not impose his truly larger-than-life figure on the Cairenes of his time. Aside from his portraits, “there is no designated monument to Egypt’s most significant ruler of this century, no stadium, airport, public building, or major thoroughfare that bears his name.”⁵⁸⁷ Needless to say, Nasser’s physical disappearance from Egypt’s public space exponentially intensified following his death, with his pictures replaced by those of al-Sadat, so much so that even “at the rarely visited monument to Soviet Egyptian friendship at the Aswan High Dam, Nasser’s profile was all but hidden by a superimposed image of the inheritor.”⁵⁸⁸ Commonly known as de-Nasserization, this state-sponsored yet multilayered and consistent process of erasing, obliterating, and demonizing Nasser, whose manifestations in cinema will be discussed below, did nevertheless fail in consigning him to oblivion. The story of Nasser’s survival constitutes a main premise behind this dissertation.

That Nasser’s era was captivated by his voice does in fact add more bafflement to his underrepresentation on the screen. For one could legitimately expect to “hear” more of his speeches in films. As Egyptian historian Sherif Yunis notices, the Free Officers’ regime was the

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⁵⁸⁵ George Tarabishi, *al-Muthaqqafun al-‘Arab wa al- Thurath*, p. 25.

⁵⁸⁶ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 105.

⁵⁸⁷ Joel Gordon, “Nasser 56/Cairo 96: Remembering Egypt’s Lost Community” in *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, edited by Walter Armbrust (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p.168.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

most self-expressive one in the history of Egypt, with Nasser's speeches alone amounting to 1359.⁵⁸⁹ True, speeches find a warmer vehicle through radio, and Nasser's were no exception. His focus on radio was probably driven by "the high rate of illiteracy in Egypt and the Arab World,"⁵⁹⁰ but this could clarify more a distance from the written word than an avoidance of cinema. Moreover, critics have been noting the predominance of the aural over the visual aspect in Egyptian—and Arabic—movies. This can be recognized through "flowing and elongated dialogues to the point of loquacity, as well as the overuse of soundtrack."⁵⁹¹ This state facilitated a doable representation of feature films aurally on radio, of which there existed many instances.⁵⁹² Still, a few exceptions notwithstanding, Nasser's speeches were rarely used in cinema. From his routine speeches on everyday Egyptian matters to the more significant ones, and at times on occasions that made Egyptian history—such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Tripartite Aggression in 1956, the declaration of the United Arab Republic in 1958, and the inauguration of the High Dam project in 1960—Nasser's speeches oddly fell short of inspiring Egyptian filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s.

A more direct and conventional view on the cinematic underrepresentation of Nasser is proposed by Durriya Sharaf al-Din in her important study on cinema and politics in Egypt. Examining the effect of Nasser's charismatic presence on Egyptian cinema production, she

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⁵⁸⁹ Sherif Yunis, *Nida' al-Sha'b: Tarikh Naqdi li al-Aydyuluja al-Nasiriyya* [People's Call: a Critical History of the Nasserite Ideology] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2012), p. 11.

⁵⁹⁰ Durriyya Sharaf al-Din, *al-Siyasa wa al- Cinema fi Misr* [Politics and Cinema in Egypt] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1992), p.45.

⁵⁹¹ 'Adnan Mdanat, "al-Cinema'i al-'Arabi wa Qadaya al-Tiknuluja wa al- Aydyuluja" [Arab Cinematician and the Issues of Technology and Ideology] in *al-Huwiyya al-Qawmiyya fi al- Cinema al-'Arabiyya*, p. 146.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

argues that the 1960s witnessed a major cinematic trend that she calls *Cinema al-Khawf* (Cinema of Fear). Driven by the undemocratic nature of the regime, the uncontested leadership of Nasser, and, more importantly, the identification between Nasser and the regime, this cinema “opted to distance itself from the present time...and instead found refuge in the past, as a way to protect and secure itself from the consequences of clashing with the present.”⁵⁹³ Egyptian film critic ‘Isam Zakariyya concurs with Sharaf al-Din, adding that “Nasser’s aura made it implausible to approach him cinematically, even positively.”⁵⁹⁴ Therefore, the majority of Salah Abu Seif’s and Yusif Chahine’s best works, to mention but notable examples, were either timeless or clearly set in pre-1952 Egypt.

Whatever the reason, the repertoire of the 1950s and 1960s Egyptian cinema was overwhelmingly Nasser-less, whether visually, aurally, or symbolically. Time has come, however, to examine those few exceptions that were alluded to earlier. In what follows I will consider symbolic cinematic interpretations of Nasser in those decades, films that provoked the Egyptian artistic scene by courageously attempting a negotiation with *al-Rayyis*, albeit indirectly. Needless to say, there is no singular reception of those films, still less a unanimous agreement among critics that their protagonists were accurate representations of Nasser.

Less Fear; a Bit of Fear

Those who are well acquainted with the trajectories of Egyptian cinema may reach two unexpected conclusions. An undemocratic regime as it was, Nasser’s Egypt did not nevertheless

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⁵⁹³ Durriyya Sharaf al-Din, *al-Siyasa wa al-Cinema*, p. 46.

⁵⁹⁴ In an interview I had with him in Cairo, October 2011.

ban any film from public screening. Surely, there were several fierce clashes between filmmakers and the censorship, but that did not lead to the disappearance of any film. As Samir Farid recounts:

Since President Nasser permitted the screening of *Allahu Ma'ana*⁵⁹⁵ (God Is with US), attending personally its premiere in 1955—the same year in which the first post-revolution censorship laws on cinema and theatre were issued—and throughout the 1970s, no Egyptian movie was banned.⁵⁹⁶

More striking is the fact that Egyptian cinema produced the best cinematic allusions to Nasser, both positively and, more importantly, negatively, during his life. Nasser's aura that was described above still left a room for symbolic takes on him. The 1970s, on the other hand, and despite an open and encouraged criticism of Nasserism, did not create its own Nasser on the screen.

As mentioned earlier, there were very few allegorical representations of Nasser in Egyptian cinema. According to Viola Shafiq, "Nasser's image had only few mythical or, to be more precise, visual symbolic aspects, ...[and] an intersection between him and a legendary figure is only marginally documented."⁵⁹⁷ He arguably had a small impact on the image of male heroes in post-1952 films, perhaps better recognized in the so-called "*Futuwwa*" or "tough guys" movies. A mix of adventure, love, crime, and physical fights, those were Egypt's *film noir*, taking place in the dark corners of Cairo. Critics have noticed that this quasi-genre experienced a resurrection after 1952, but it lacked a sophisticated treatment to transform it into a child trend of

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⁵⁹⁵ Directed by Ahmad Badrakhan, *Allahu Ma'ana* was one of the most popular Egyptian films to come after Nasser's revolution. Teaming Egypt's leading actress Fatin Hamama with her often screen-partner 'Imad Hamdi, it addressed the turbulent years of the monarchy that precipitated the revolution.

⁵⁹⁶ Samir Farid, "Al-Cinema wa al-Dawla fi al-Watan al-'Arabi" [Cinema and the State in the Arab World] in *al-Huwiyya al-Qawmiyya fi al-Cinema al-'Arabiyya*, pp. 107-108.

⁵⁹⁷ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 104.

the revolution. It merely expressed a “desire in Egyptian cinema and its audience to have a strong “hero” who is able to realize his rights by force.”⁵⁹⁸

Another realm where a potential influence of Nasser was anticipated was the image of army officers. Yet this again proved an aborted venture, with superficial takes on the revolution abounding, most of which were far from reality. Instead of digging deeper into the social, political and economical grievances that may have pushed unknown officers to risk a coup, Egyptian cinema largely sufficed to present the July revolution as a natural product of a society where love between poor guys-turned-army officers and wealthy women was forbidden. Better exemplified in ‘Izz al-Din Thulfiqar’s 1957 classic *Rudda Qalbi* (Requited is my Heart), these films depict the July Revolution as an operation

Orchestrated by some army officers, daughters of feudal families, and members of the political police apparatus prior to 1952. Lacking a conspicuous goal, the revolution, those films maintained, only aimed at realizing happy marriages between girls of aristocratic, feudalist background and low-rank army officers.⁵⁹⁹

In fact, the filmic son of the 1952 revolution was neither an army officer nor a tough *futuwwa*, but rather a singer. Unanimously seen as the one “who rose to prominence in the Nasserite period and is associated with its spirit,”⁶⁰⁰ the legendary ‘Abdel Halim Hafez brought to cinema a new political dimension. With his short figure, melancholic eyes, and rather

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⁵⁹⁸ Ahmad Yusif, “Al-Waqi’iyya wa Suwar al-Waqi’ fi al- Cinema al-Misriyya fi al- Marhala al-Klasikiyya, 1952-1970” [Realism and Images of Reality in the Classical Age of Egyptian Cinema, 1952-1970] in *al-Cinema al-Misriyya: al-Thawra wa al Qita’ al-‘Aam: 1952-1971* [Egyptian Cinema: Revolution and the Public Sector: 1952-1971], edited by Hashim al-Nahhas (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A’la lil Thaqafa, 2010), p. 50.

⁵⁹⁹ Muhammad Kamil al-Qalyubi, “al-Cinema al-Misriyya wa Thawrat Yuliu: Sira’ al-Ihtiwa’ bayna al-Cinema wa al-Thawra” [Egyptian Cinema and the July Revolution: A Struggle on Co-option between the Cinema and the Revolution] in *al-Cinema al-Misriyya: al-Thawra wa al- Qita’ al-‘Aam*, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁰⁰ Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 73.

effeminate looks, Hafez could certainly be no Nasser. However, in his movies he played constantly the role of the “orphan in search of love—not only the girl’s love, but also her family’s and, more importantly, her father’s.”⁶⁰¹ Many critics have noted the political implication of this pattern, emerging as it were in the wake of Nasser’s revolution. Hafez’s quest for a father echoed Egyptians’ dream for a new leader (read: Nasser) that could hold them together. Thus ‘Isam Zakariyya unequivocally asserts that “the phenomenon of ‘Abdel Halim Hafez, which began after the July revolution, could be politically read as a journey to find the father Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser.”⁶⁰² Interestingly, Hafez’s last film *Abi Fawqa al-Shajara* (My Father is up the Tree), which was produced two years after the defeat of 1967, introduced a modification into the pattern, perhaps necessitated by the blow that was directed to the image of Nasser and, consequently, the father. Instead of searching for the father, Hafez in this film first separates from him. They reunite at the end, but after both indulging in an affair with the same woman. “In a powerfully emotive ending, father and son tearfully confront each other in a cabaret, then walk out arm in arm as the dancer looks on, heartbroken.”⁶⁰³

On the other hand, aside from Yusif Chahine’s *al-Nasir Salah al-Din* (Saladin), no ancient Arab or Egyptian hero was cinematically appropriated as a metaphor for Nasser. Arabic poetry and prose abounds with heroic figures that were constantly invoked by Arabs, especially in times of crisis. Nabila Ibrahim notices how those heroes were “recalled and reproduced, both

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⁶⁰¹ ‘Isam Zakariyya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha: Suwar Misr al-Ijtima’iyya fi al-Cinema* [Spectra of Modernity: Social Images of Egypt in Cinema] (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A’la li al-Thaqafa, 2009), p. 43.

⁶⁰² Ibid, p. 69.

⁶⁰³ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, p. 124.

individually and collectively.”⁶⁰⁴ For instance, the popular epic tale of pre-Islamic great poet ‘Antara ibn Shaddad came out in Egypt during the Fatimid era. According to a common view, the hero and the timing combined a metaphor for Egyptians of that era “to rise against the Fatimid rulers who occupied their land, seized upon their resources, and considered them mere slaves.”⁶⁰⁵ Egypt in particular was a fertile soil for producing and reproducing popular tales and epics on heroes, from Prophet Muhammad’s grandson al-Husayn to Taghribat Bani Hilal. Naturally, selecting a historical or mythical figure and represent it as a metaphor for Nasser is not an easy task. A filmmaker has to be well versed in Arabic history and popular epics; there has to be an apt figure that could be a metaphor for Nasser; and more importantly, such a film requires a huge budget, something that was not always within the reach of Egyptian filmmakers.

These three factors were present in the case of Chahine’s *Saladin*. Produced in 1963, the historical context of this film is in and of itself a clear indication of its contemporary message. The year 1963 is, as Hala Halim notices,

a year during Nasser’s regime; a year that comes after 1948 and 1956 with their harassing and dangerous events; a year, moreover, that follows the unity between Egypt and Syria (1958) and its dissolution (1961). 1963 is, therefore, a year when it is timely—if not imperative—to launch a propagandist film making the statements Saladin makes about a powerful Arab political leader who, by uniting the forces of the Arabs (and Saladin unites Egypt and Syria specifically), manages to achieve a difficult victory over the dangerous colonizing forces of the West in Palestine.⁶⁰⁶

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⁶⁰⁴ Nabila Ibrahim, *al-Butulat al-‘Arabiyya wa al- Thakira al-Tarikhiyya* [Arabic Heroisms and Historical Memory] (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Akadimiyya, 1995), p. 19.

⁶⁰⁵ Muhammad Jibril, *al-Batal fi al- Wijdan al-Sha’bi* [The Hero in Popular Conscience] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Dirasat al-Sha’biyya, 2000), p. 55.

⁶⁰⁶ Hala Halim, “The Signs of *Saladin*: A Modern Cinematic Rendition of Medieval Heroism” in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, No. 12, 1992), p. 78.

But Saladin himself is the film's most important projection onto contemporary time. No critic who wrote about the film failed to notice Nasser's metaphor in Saladin. The title of the film, itself including Nasser's name in Saladin's nickname (which means "the victorious"), the fact that Saladin ruled over Egypt, the presence of Palestine, the call for Arab unity, and the Western threat all combine to present an accessible sign to decipher. The ironical fact that Saladin himself was not originally an Arab is never mentioned in the film.

A few, however, have noticed the very physical reference to Nasser that the film credits offer. Five minutes into the movie, we see the Arabs of Palestine looking at the horizon, anticipating the arrival of Saladin "the savior of *al-'Uruba*," as one of them says. The camera then focuses on an old man who, hearing sounds of horses and drums from afar, begins shouting, pointing his finger to the screen, "Listen, these are his drums; listen, these are his signs. It is him! It is him!" Credits unfold, with the title of the film first, as if to show whom the old man is referring to. However, moments before the credits end, Chahine begins to zoom his camera into a face, stopping at the eyes. The eyes very much "resemble those of Nasser's."⁶⁰⁷ When the camera zooms out, the audience realizes that the eyes are Ahmad Mazhar's, the actor who plays Saladin. Mazhar had by 1963 "turned to a movie career but not yet escaped villainous secondary roles."⁶⁰⁸ Picking him to play such a significant figure in what at the time was "the most expensive film ever made by the Egyptian film industry"⁶⁰⁹ was probably compelled by the fact

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⁶⁰⁷ Majdi 'Abdel Rahman, "al-Tahawwulat fi 'Imarat al-Manthar wa Tasmim al-Malbas al-Sinema'i wa Morfolojiyyat al-Mujtama' al-Misri ba'da 1952 [Changes in the Décor, Cinematic Costumes Design and the Morphology of Egyptian Society after 1952] in *al-Cinema al-Misriyya: al-Thawra wa al-Qita' al-'Aam*, p. 387.

⁶⁰⁸ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, p. 79.

⁶⁰⁹ George Sadoul, *The Cinema in the Arab Countries* (Beirut: Interarab Centre of Cinema & Television, 1966), p. 309.

that he was not only an army officer and a graduate of the military academy, but also a classmate of none other than Nasser himself.

The film's audience at the time did act according to these inviting signs. Reportedly, "Arab audiences would chant "Nasser!" acknowledging the correlation between the twelfth-century battles and Nasser's fight to unite Arab people and liberate Palestine."⁶¹⁰ Khouri also notices that the film's popularity among Arabs today, almost fifty years after its production, derives not as much from Saladin's status as from "an enduring nostalgia for Nasser's leadership and a longing for strong, unswerving guidance in the struggle for Arab economic and political independence."⁶¹¹

Chahine was aware he was making a pro-Nasser film (in fact, *the* Nasser film), but he was not only doing that. Defending his project against charges of political propaganda, he clarified his stance toward *Saladin*:

Let me be clear: perhaps the government back then, among other things, did have this goal in mind [showing support for Nasser's effort to unite the Arab world]. Of course, my feelings about the issue of Arab unity back then were very strong...and today they have even become stronger, albeit more studious and substantive. But when I made the film I was simply trying to prove that I could make historical epics and battle scenes without even needing the huge budget that Hollywood uses for the production of such films.⁶¹²

And he did, thanks to the prodigious Shadi 'Abdel Salam who designed the decorations and the costumes. 'Abdel Salam, whose sole feature film *Al-Mumiya* ' (The Mummy, or The Night of Counting the Years) (1969) tops the list of the best one hundred films in the history of Egyptian

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⁶¹⁰ Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Yusif Chahine's Cinema* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), p. 48.

⁶¹¹ Ibid, p. 49.

⁶¹² Samir Farid, *Adwa' 'ala Cinema Yusif Chahine* [Highlights on Yusif Chahine's Cinema] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li al-Kitab, 1997), p. 126.

cinema, was considered the most important costume and set designer in Egypt, particularly in historical films such as *Saladin*, where he managed to convey the historical setting of the event very intelligently.⁶¹³

Equating Nasser with Saladin, predicated as it was, in the film and beyond, upon dreams of victory and Arab unity that were filling the Egyptian street, received a severe blow with the 1967 defeat. Rendering the once invincible Nasser a powerless president whose first public response was to step down and leave office, the *Naksa* was shattering, a deep wound that Arabs have yet to recover from. Naturally, such an event would leave its scars on Egyptian filmmaking. It belongs elsewhere to discuss the impact of 1967 on Egyptian cinema in detail. What matters here is to trace any changes or developments that the *Naksa* had brought to the image of Nasser in Egyptian Cinema.

With the regime of Nasser weakened and vulnerable, the years 1967-1970 “provided directors with a margin of action for criticizing the policies and the abuses of the regime.”⁶¹⁴ Contrary to “Cinema of Fear” that dominated the Egyptian production prior to 1967, the *Naksa* forced a new trend, what Durriyya Sharaf al-Din calls “the Green Light.” Initiated by the “desire of the regime to loosen its iron grip on the freedom of expression in cinema,”⁶¹⁵ the trend manifested itself in a group of films that adopted a critical stance toward the regime. However, those films significantly varied in the way they situated Nasser within their political agenda. Take *Miramar* (Miramar), for instance. Kamal al-Sheikh’s 1969 controversial adaptation of

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⁶¹³ Majdi ‘Abdel Rahman, “al-Tahawwulat fi ‘Imarat al-Manthar wa Tasmim al-Malbas al-Sinema’l”, p. 386.

⁶¹⁴ ‘Ali Abu Shadi, “Genres in Egyptian Cinema” in *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*, edited by Alia Arasoughly (Quebec: World Heritage Press, Vol. 1, 1996), p. 111.

⁶¹⁵ Durriyya Sharaf al-Din, *al-Siyasa wa al-Cinema*, p. 126.

Naguib Mahfuz's 1967 novel is credited for being the first film that "criticizes explicitly, without any resort to symbolism or insinuation."⁶¹⁶ Yet for all its directness, *Miramar* leaves Nasser untouched. The closest reference to him comes probably in a passing remark about Sa'd Zaghlul, made by the former feudal lord Tulba Marzuq (played by the legendary Yusif Wahbi). Marzuq holds Zaghlul responsible for the current situation, despite the fact that the latter died in 1927, long before Nasser's revolution. In a comic scene, Marzuq asserts that Zaghlul is faulted for igniting the spirit of revolution among the masses. Whether Nasser stands as one belonging to the masses, or else a Zaghlul-like leader similarly accountable for agitating the public, is left to audience's reception.

However, three films produced during that period stand out. What makes them unique is that all of them resort to abstraction and symbolism, possibly to mask their critical stances, although their symbolism is quite transparent and their reference rather obvious. A year earlier than *Miramar*, Salah Abu Seif made his now classic *al-Qadiyya 68* (Case 68). Based on a play by leftist writer Lutfi al-Khuli, the film allegorizes the shaky and uncertain situation of Egypt through an old building. As 'Isam Zakariyya notices, the theme of collapsing or ruined buildings noticeably reverberated in Egyptian cinema in the wake of 1967, embodying "the sense of 'earthquake' that was caused by the defeat."⁶¹⁷ Zakariyya also ponders the contrast between this image and the way the July regime attempted to present a strong and firm Egypt, best symbolized by two giant buildings that emerged during Nasser's reign: the Cairo Tower and the High Dam.⁶¹⁸ Along with *al-Qadiyya 68*, Kamal al-Sheikh's 1967 *al-Mukharribun* (the Vandals)

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⁶¹⁶ 'Ali Abu Shadi, *al-Cinema wa al-Siyasa* [Cinema and Politics] (Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat, 1998), p. 18.

⁶¹⁷ 'Isam Zakariyya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha*, p. 81.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

and Sa'id Marzuq's 1972 *Khawf* (Fear) are the most important representatives of this theme. Depending on their take on Nasser, each of these films has a character who owns the building, guards it, or studies the circumstances of its collapse.

The drama of *al-Qadiyya 68* revolves around "a local political committee's debate over whether to renovate or raze and rebuild an apartment building that doesn't meet code."⁶¹⁹ The building's owner, himself the head of the committee, is Munjid, (played by Salah Mansur), a good-hearted but weak and indecisive man. The film demonstrates people's love and belief in Munjid, whose name tellingly means "the savior" He is surrounded by two groups: the old guards, traditional law-abiding opportunists who seek to maintain the status quo by fixing the building from within on one hand, and the idealist, rebellious youths who demand a radical solution to the problem on the other. Amid their heated arguments and counter-arguments the building literally begins to collapse. Consoling Munjid, the youths shout, "Tear it down, uncle Munjid, and rebuild it anew."

The film was conceived of as a severe attack on the Arab Socialist Union, the only legalized political party in Egypt at the time, whose members in return protested the screening of *al-Qadiyya 68*, condemned its director, and physically assaulted him outside Cinema Miami in Cairo.⁶²⁰ Although the official reception of the film stopped at what they considered a ridicule of Nasser's own entourage, thus ignoring the signification of the Munjid character, several critics

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⁶¹⁹ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, p. 220.

⁶²⁰ 'Ali Abu Shadi, *al- Cinema wa al- Siyasa*, p. 14.

explicitly affirmed that “the landlord is Nasser,”⁶²¹ “Munjid, according to some, is Nasser,”⁶²² and “Munjid’s name obviously refers to Nasser.”⁶²³

Also in 1968 was Tawfiq Salih’s controversial film *al-Mutamarridun* (the Rebels). Unlike *al-Qadiyya 68*, where reference to Nasser was officially unrecognized (or ignored), the implied message in Salih’s film was too obvious to be overlooked. Filmed in 1966, *al-Mutamarridun* was temporarily banned, with the then Minister of Culture Tharwat ‘Ukasha declared that he could not “pass a film which attacked Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser.”⁶²⁴ Following negotiations, Salih was asked to remove twenty five minutes from the original print. Moreover, while the film was clearly set in pre-1952 undefined Egyptian place, Salih was forced to “shoot a new ending, affirming that the July revolution is the solution.”⁶²⁵

But ‘Ukasha was not alone in assuming that the doctor in *al-Mutamarridun* signified Nasser. Decades after its screening, Tawfiq Salih himself acknowledged the relationship, admitting at the same time that unexpected historical events—such as the 1967 defeat—made the film more relevant, if not prescient. He said,

The 1967 war exploded, and threw us into a debacle. My film took then a dazzling prophetic dimension. I was no longer able to deny that the doctor in *al-Mutamarridun* is specifically Nasser, especially that he also offers to step down after the defeat.⁶²⁶

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⁶²¹ Durriyya Sharaf al-Din, *al-Siyasa wa al-Cinema*, p. 126.

⁶²² ‘Ali Abu Shadi, *al-Cinema wa al-Siyasa*, p. 14.

⁶²³ ‘Isam Zakariyya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha*, p. 82.

⁶²⁴ Raymond William Baker, “Egypt in Shadows,” p. 415.

⁶²⁵ ‘Isam Zakariyya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha*, p. 84.

⁶²⁶ Ali Abu Shadi, *al-Cinema wa al-Siyasa*, p. 13.

The film revolves around an uprising that takes place in a tuberculosis sanitarium. Enraged by the lack of water and ultimately unable to contain their wrath after a boy is struck and killed by the water truck, the inmates decide to rebel against the administration. They, however, need a leadership, presented in the film through Doctor ‘Aziz (played by Shukri Sarhan). Interestingly, ‘Aziz belongs to the two warring groups: he is both a patient and part of medical staff. The uprising succeeds, whereby the inmates seize upon the sanitarium, expel its director, and replace him with Doctor ‘Aziz. However, with ‘Aziz lacking the scientific knowledge needed for good administration, and solely relying on words and slogans, the faults of the past are reproduced, eventually restoring the old order, albeit more cruelly. ‘Aziz admits his failure, and offers to step down.

Clearly, Minister ‘Ukasha was not mistaken in reading a Nasser-like character in Doctor ‘Aziz. A side from the stepping down similarity, “a scene in which Doctor ‘Aziz and his ruling council...sit around the director’s table immediately after seizing power recalls familiar images of the Free Officers in the early morning hours of July 23.”⁶²⁷ Moreover, ‘Aziz’s language plays a significant role in stimulating the audience to follow a symbolic reading. As Raymond Baker puts it,

Large segments of the doctor’s dialogue contain slogans and key phrases lifted directly from speeches by Nasser. At one critical moment during the revolt, he addresses the patients and speaks simply and movingly of the necessity of fighting and even dying for one’s dignity: in content, manner of delivery, and effect on those listening, these are unmistakably the words of Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser.⁶²⁸

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⁶²⁷ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, p. 218.

⁶²⁸ Raymond William Baker, “Egypt in Shadows,” p. 415.

The appropriation of Nasser's character in movies escalates significantly after *al-Mutamarridun*, so much so that the president himself had at times to intervene. The most prominent instance was Husayn Kamal's *Shay' min al-Khawf* (A Bit of Fear). Produced in 1969, and based on Tharwat Abaza's novel of the same title, the film features versatile actor Mahmud Mursi playing dual 'Atris roles, the grandfather and the grandson. And if Munjid in *al-Qadiyya* 68 is an indecisive head of a committee, and 'Aziz in *al-Mutamarridon* is a revolutionary turned into an autocrat, then 'Atris is, to put it mildly, a thug. The grandfather leads a gang of aides who assist him in controlling the Dahashna village by force, instilling fear in the hearts of people. As he grows dismissive of his grandson gentleness, supposedly because he sees him as a potential heir, he exposes him to multiple violent situations, indoctrinating that only by force does 'Atris survive. Prior to the grandfather's death, the young 'Atris never commits a crime, having avowed to his childhood sweetheart Fu'ada that his hands will never be stained by blood. However, when a villager shoots the grandfather, the latter bequests his grandson to avenge. And he does, instantly.

The concept of fear is reiterated throughout the film. The grandfather declares at the beginning of the film that "a bit of fear does not harm." When the grandson, now the leader of the gang, loots and robs the villagers of their harvests, they refrain from resisting due to their fear. When 'Atris publicly flirts with one of his aides' fiancée, the aide cannot respond because of fear. The only villager to get over fear is Fu'ada. Although they clearly love each other, 'Atris, now unwilling to let anything drive him other than force, decides to coerce Fu'ada into marrying him, imposing a fake marriage contract on her father. Legally his wife, Fu'ada goes home with 'Atris, avowing nonetheless that she will not yield herself to him.

The last part of the movie witnesses the major transformation that befalls the village. Astonished to know that Fu'ada does not actually give her consent, the villagers, influenced by Sheikh Ibrahim, consider the marriage invalid. In what is perhaps one of the most famous processions in Egyptian cinema, Sheikh Ibrahim leads the villagers to 'Atris' house, shouting, *gawaz 'Atris min Fu'ada Batil* (the marriage of 'Atris and Fu'ada is invalid). Eventually, the rebellion succeeds, Fu'ada escapes the house, 'Atris' aides leave him, and he himself perishes under fire.

The villagers were not alone in their efforts to conquer their fears. The film also scared the censors, who quite easily and rapidly caught the message: Nasser is 'Atris who has usurped Egypt! Added to the dilemma was the fact that the film was produced by the Public Film Organization, funded as it was by the regime itself. 'Ali Abu Shadi recounts that the story reached Nasser, who then asked to watch the film. To people's shock, Nasser passed the film. He asked the censor if he considered his government a gang. The censor said no. Nasser then asked him if he considered him a leader of a gang. The censor repeated his no. Nasser then commented, "if we were like that we really would deserve to be burnt."⁶²⁹

Nasser's passing of the screening was read as an attempt to show his magnanimity and liberalism compared to his subordinates,⁶³⁰ or to offer artists and intellectuals an opportunity to release their anger.⁶³¹ However, I would suggest a different reasoning. The anecdote with the censor shows Nasser protesting not against the film, but rather against the censor's assumption that the film was a reference to Nasser. By passing the screening, Nasser denied any resemblance

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⁶²⁹ 'Ali Abu Shadi, *al- Cinema wa al- Siyasa*, p. 170.

⁶³⁰ Viola Shafiq, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 109.

⁶³¹ 'Isam Zakariyya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha*, p. 91.

to 'Atris, and imposed another reading of the film that would not relate to him. In so doing, he was fighting back against the filmmaker, albeit indirectly. By simply ignoring the otherwise obvious message of the film, Nasser's act was meant to deprive Husayn Kamal of the very courage the latter would claim. Had Nasser banned the film, he would have accepted the fact that, not only he was 'Atris, but also that some of his people were brave enough to think so.

The Politics of the Portrait

In his well-known reflections on photography, Roland Barthes demonstrates that by its mere process, the portrait fragments the "I" which it seeks to capture. Standing in front of the camera, the "I" of the photographee simultaneously becomes the one he thinks he is, the one he wants others to think he is, the one the photographer thinks he is, and the one the photographer makes use of to exhibit his art.⁶³² Barthes then proceeds to enunciate the temporal difference between cinema and the photograph:

In the photograph, something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever (that is my feeling); but in cinema, something *has passed* in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images: it is a different phenomenology, and therefore a different art which begins here, though derived from the first one.⁶³³

As such, photographs and portraits are not a narrative; they do not unfold with the passing of time. They are born complete and, therefore, dead. Hence their intrinsic melancholic feature of which Barthes conceives.

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⁶³² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill And Wang, 1981), p.13.

⁶³³ Ibid, p. 78, emphasis is in the original.

With the portrait shown in the movie, however, a new life is restored. The portrait is now narrativized through its temporal and spatial presence in the movie. Emerging at a specific moment (or moments) in the movie, the portrait acquires new connotations that may confirm or contradict the ones that are associated with it outside it. Cinema has the ability of “shifting the emphasis of the look,”⁶³⁴ says Laura Mulvey. But whose look are we talking about here? At play in the case of the portrait-in-film are two looks: the protagonists’ and the audience’s. When Egyptian actress Su’ad Husni, for instance, gazes at Nasser’s portrait in *al-Karnak*, the audience in the movie theatre gazes at both: Husni and the portrait. It is this complicated status as a doubly-seen photograph that adds new meanings to the portrait.

In the pages below I will trace the emergence of Nasser’s portrait in Egyptian cinema (or the absence thereof). Guiding my analysis is the assumption that this portrait has, by and large, never appeared in films *superfluously*. That is, it is a signifier; it does not merely occupy the background of the setting where the scene takes place. The politics of showing or hiding Nasser’s portrait sheds lights on the message the filmmaker is seeking to deliver. In other words, Egyptian cinema did not mirror the reality when it showed offices and government buildings during Nasser’s life. Although his portrait did surely occupy those spaces, it was not normally seen in films—except when a message was needed. More informative a case is the cinema of de-Nasserization, which swept Egypt after the death of Nasser. While the absence of Nasser’s portrait from the offices of police or intelligence officers during the 1960s was unthought-of, the films that sought to condemn the oppression of Nasser’s regime did often eliminate it, thus sending a specific message to the audience.

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⁶³⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 25.

As mentioned earlier, Egyptian cinema rarely showed Nasser's portrait during his life. When it did, the portrait served a specific purpose within the broader context of the film. A major example of this is patriotic films, particularly those that treated the 1956 Suez War or the emergence of the UAR in 1958. Also significant is that this context witnessed probably an unintentional contest between showing Nasser in a military uniform or a civilian dress, the latter normally a suit. The contest began with the 1957 *Port Said*, arguably the first movie to show Nasser's portrait. Directed by 'Izz al-Din Thulfiqar, and produced under the auspices of the regime, the film shows the city during the Suez War, with special homage paid to its residents for their courageous resistance and fighting against the invaders. Featuring an ensemble cast, including Farid Shawqi, Shukri Sarhan, Amina Rizq, and Rushdi Abaza, the film also introduces the actress/singer Huda Sultan performing a song in tribute to Nasser. Entitled, *Ammim Gamal al-Qana* (O Gamal, Nationalize the Canal), the song is a rare incident in Egyptian cinema in which a singer directs a song to the president.

If *Port Said* expectedly shows Nasser only in his military uniform, *'Amaliqat al-Bihar* (Giants of the Sea) combines the military and the civilian. Produced in 1960, this rather flat representation of the same war focuses on the contributions of the Egyptian navy, headed in the film by real-life army officer Ahmad Mazhar. Nasser's portrait appears three times in the film, but only once in the uniform. However, another movie of the same year, *Watani wa Hubbi* (My Homeland, my Love), opts to exclude the military uniform of Nasser once and for all. Featuring actor-director Husayn Sudqi in the role of Waheed, an army officer sent to Syria in the wake of the Egyptian-Syrian unity, the film is historically significant for its representations, albeit sentimentally, of Syrians and Palestinians, a rare incident in mainstream Egyptian cinema.

In those three instances of patriotic cinema, Nasser's portrait serves to show both the officers' loyalty to their president and the latter's enormous role in the events around which the films revolve. Interestingly, however, the portrait exclusively appears in official spaces; i.e. offices and buildings belonging to the Egyptian army. Nowhere in these films do we see the portrait hung in houses or apartments, nor in public spaces such as clubs, schools, or libraries. The civilian Nasser would triumph over the militant in *Watani wa Hubbi*, and his portrait in cinema would henceforward show the signature shot of Nasser, where "he was almost always pictured grinning winningly."⁶³⁵

Unlike the former blatantly positive appropriation of the portrait, the 1960s witnessed a few incidents of a more critical approach. Galal al-Sharqawi's 1967 adaptation of Yusif Idris' *al-'Ayb* (The Shame) foreshadowed a would-be trend. The film is a frank condemnation of the corruption and expedience that were sweeping the bureaucratic apparatuses of the regime—Nasser's, that is. Contrary to the movies of the "Green Light," where the setting is either timeless or clearly pre-revolution, Joel Gordon notices how in this film "Nasser's portrait, not Farouk's, hangs in the government office where a group of opportunistic bureaucrats sell government permits for LE 75, then attend liquor-splashed parties hosted by the bribe-profferers."⁶³⁶ The trend, however, would not find instant followers, for even in the more explicit attack on Nasser's regime that proliferated Kamal al-Sheikh's 1969 *Miramar*, Nasser's portrait remained unseen. Only after Nasser's death was the door opened for a radically different treatment of the portrait.

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⁶³⁵ Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt*, p. 118.

⁶³⁶ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, p. 212.

It is often acknowledged that the so-called al-Sadat's Corrective Revolution of May 1971 facilitated the emergence of what Durriyya Sharaf al-Din calls "the most important movement witnessed by Egyptian cinema in the 1970s; namely, the Cinema of Centers of Power."⁶³⁷ Named after Nasser's influential state security apparatus, particularly the state intelligence service, which was dismantled by al-Sadat, this loosely-defined movement took aim not only at the failures of Nasser's regime, but more broadly at the whole post-1952 experience, reducing it to an era of fear, oppression, and torture. Promoted in this cinematic wave was a pattern that hardly changed, which, as 'Ali Abu Shadi puts it, replaced the traditional evil man of melodramatic Egyptian movies with a representative of a centre of power from Nasser's epoch. "He is either a minister, a director of prison, the intelligence chief, or an army officer," Abu Shadi recounts, "who is merciless, has an appalling appearance, finds pleasure in torture, and causes the good girls of Egypt to being raped, transformed into prostitutes, or stolen from their helpless husbands."⁶³⁸

It merits the attention, however, that even after al-Sadat's reorienting policies toward his predecessor, Nasser's portrait still found a warm welcome. A notable example was Sa'id Marzuq's technically innovative film, *Khawf* (Fear). Produced only a year after the Corrective Revolution, *Khawf* revolves around an affair between the photographer Ahmad (played by Nur al-Sharif) and Suad, a poor girl from Suez (played by Su'ad Husni) who loses all of her family members during the 1967 war. Although the political inclinations of Ahmad are never explicitly spilled, the pictures that are hung on his room's wall speak to some. While the director's slow camera pans the room, it abruptly lingers over a specific corner, gradually zooming into two

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⁶³⁷ Durriyya Sharaf al-Din, *al-Siyasa wa al- Cinema*, p. 132.

⁶³⁸ 'Ali Abu Shadi, *al-Cinema wa al- Siyasa*, pp. 20-21.

large portraits. Not only do we see Nasser's smiling face, but we also find it next to none other than the iconic Alberto Korda's photo of Che Guevara. The juxtaposition, a unique incident in Egyptian cinema, is laden with associations, implicitly referring to a real-life encounter between the two men that occurred during Guevara's visit to Cairo in 1959, a picture of which is also widely circulated.

'Ali Badrakhan's 1976 notorious adaptation of Naguib Mahfuz's lukewarmly received novella, *al-Karnak* (Karnak) is recognized as the most important representative of 'Cinema of Centers of Power', so much so that critics have also labeled the latter as *al-Karnaka* (Karnakization), in a reference to other movies that followed Badrakhan's suit.⁶³⁹ Although the film bears the name of the café where students and regular Cairenes used to meet, it is the intelligence offices, interrogation rooms, and prisons that constitute the major setting of *al-Karnak*. Filled with images of blood and torture, coupled with a long rape scene that befalls the prisoner Zaynab (Su'ad Husni) at the behest of the intelligence chief (ably played by Kamal al-Shinnawi), the film relays the story of innocent students who, despite being advocates of Nasser and his revolution, find themselves captured by intelligence forces.

A ground breaking film by all accounts, *al-Karnak* engages in a careful dialogue with Nasser's portrait. Eight minutes into the film, the camera lingers over posters which combine Nasser with the then Soviet statesman Alexei Kosygin in an unspecified street in Cairo. Surrounded by the red Russian flag, the juxtaposition is telling of both the Soviet presence in Egypt and the timing of the film—the 1960s. Contrasting the "foreign" redness of the poster is the redness of the Egyptian sport club al-Ahli, whose fans we see cheering in buses right after the poster's scene. In so doing, the film attempts to create a distance between what merits Nasser's

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⁶³⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

attention and what concerns his people's. As though to justify al-Sadat's later break with the Soviet Union, Nasser's portrait with Kosygin is left unnoticed by passers-by and unmentioned by normal Egyptians who have another "red" passion about which to care.

Also of interest is the politics that orients the appearance of Nasser's portrait in government offices. When the two main protagonists of *al-Karnak* (Su'ad Husni and Nur al-Sharif) are taken at night by the police, their families go ask about their whereabouts at the police station. Expectedly, Nasser is seen smiling behind the police officer. However, when the prisoners are transferred to the intelligence office, the portrait disappears. The ruthless chief, Khaled Safwan, occupies a huge space in which no portrait of Nasser is hung. Nor do we see the portrait in the dark rooms in which interrogation and torture take place. It only reappears again at the office of a kind-hearted member of the parliament, whom Husni and al-Sharif visit to complain about their first arrest.

The manipulation of the portrait in *al-Karnak* would set the pattern for others to follow. With Nasser unseen in the office of the intelligence chief, the film is partially exonerating him. The ruthless chief shows no association with the president, not even through a picture. Moreover, while the member of the parliament expresses his utter disapproval of what is happening "behind the sun"—as goes the title of another film of the movement—, asserting that the chief intelligence's acts constitute a serious precedent in the country, the camera lingers on Nasser's picture. However, the final part of the film grants Khalid Safwan a room to speak. Having been dismissed and jailed following al-Sadat's Corrective Revolution, Safwan attempts to fight back, refusing to be the scapegoat of the transition. When the furious prisoners surround him and beat him, he shouts, "we all are criminals; we all are victims."

The epitome of *al-Karnak*'s negotiation with the portrait occurs neither in government offices nor in the streets of Cairo. Rather, it is Husni's apartment that witnesses "the most poignant scene in the film."⁶⁴⁰ Horrified by the chief intelligence and his henchmen after she is raped, Husni accepts to spy on her circle of friends, including her lover (al-Sharif), in return for a release from prison. Arriving home after a passionate night with al-Sharif, she goes right into her room, sits down at her desk, and begins to write the report. Suddenly, the audience is surprised to see a portrait of Nasser hanging over her desk—a scene that does not appear in Mahfuz's text.⁶⁴¹ Husni briefly stares at the portrait. It is noteworthy that the film never reveals the presence of the portrait in Husni's room before this moment. Undoubtedly, Nasser is always there, from the beginning of the film, but only the politics of the portrait can determine its right moment to appear. The brief stare at Nasser, as Joel Gordon notices, "reflect[s] a combination of lingering adoration, disbelief at the ruler's potential complicity, and the intense pain of betrayal."⁶⁴²

Less powerfully, several movies would mimic a similar approach to the portrait, particularly its selective presence and absence from police and intelligence offices. Husayn Kamal's 1979 *Ihna Btu' al-Utubis* (We Are the Bus People), teaming 'Adil Imam with another famous Egyptian comedian, 'Abdel Min'im Madbuli, follows the tragic fate of two neighbors who are taken to the police station due to a fight with the conductor on a public bus. Seemingly

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⁶⁴⁰ Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, p. 240.

⁶⁴¹ The politics of adding or deleting references to Nasser in cinematic adaptations of Egyptian literature reveals as much the political inclinations of the filmmaker/producer as the temporal circumstances of the production. The case of *al-Karnak* reflects an atmosphere where criticism of Nasser was welcomed and encouraged. An opposite context, however, may lead to a different treatment. For instance, the scene in 'Alaa al- Aswani's bestselling novel *'Imarat Ya'qubyan* [The Yacoubian Building], in which Zaki al-Dasuqi embarks on a rant against Nasser and the Free Officers, is completely absent from Marwan Hamed's adaptation. See 'Alaa al- Aswani, *'Imarat Ya'qubyan* (Cairo: Miret, 2002), pp. 228-229.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

trivial and apolitical, the case coincides with rumors running the country about a plot to overthrow the regime. No matter what their charges are, all detainees on that day are indiscriminately related to the supposed plotters. A strong man—a center of power—whose office is decorated with a large picture of Nasser calls the director of the prison, demanding signed confessions from all detainees about their political associations. And torture unfolds.

Similar to *al-Karnak*, the heartless director of the prison possesses no visual relations with Nasser, his office bereft of the president's portrait. The dissociation between Nasser and those who work in his name is further magnified when the prisoners blame their situation explicitly on the president's entourage, who convinces the otherwise benign leader that conspiracies against his rule are proliferating, hence the need for an iron fist against suspicious citizens. In fact, the film is keen on demonstrating the prisoners' loyalty to the regime. Upon hearing the news about the outbreak of the 1967 war, for instance, they identify with the very same system that is unjustifiably punishing them, declaring, as one prisoner says, that "we are not important. The country is." Also significant in this context is the two neighbors' disbelief that the high authorities might know about what is befalling them. They both reiterate their ultimate trust that once the authorities realize there is a mistake, they will release them. Hence the recurring, unheeded shout in the film, released regularly after each torture session, "we are the bus people, o' brothers."

With the advent of the 1980s, preceded as it was by al-Sadat's visit to Israel and the *Infatih* (open door) liberal economic policy, a generation of so-called "neo-realist" filmmakers was born. Disenchanted with al-Sadat's promises of prosperous economy, and experiencing an inner grief over the collapse of the Nasserite dream, those filmmakers represented an Egypt

where “the economy let down the simple Egyptian man, whose livelihood was devoured by the *Infatih*’s monsters; where a parasite class emerged, whose fortune multiplied enormously.”⁶⁴³

Khayri Bishara, Muhammad Khan, ‘Atif al-Tayyib, and Dawud ‘Abdel Sayyid, to mention but the most significant ones, dominated the scene, producing films that were “sparked off by the *Infatih* or Open Door policy launched by the al-Sadat government in the 1970s.”⁶⁴⁴ Contrary to the 1970s, the ‘Cinema of Centers of Power’ found no space within these productions. In the films of the new generation of filmmakers, Nasser’s portrait began to return positively, albeit irregularly, in a process that would ultimately turn it into an icon with associations fixed and trans-historical.

The most eloquent instances of the portrait revisited were made by ‘Atif al-Tayyib. A true son of Nasser’s regime (born in 1947), al-Tayyib made his directorial debut in 1982 with a rather commercial film, *al-Ghira al-Qatila* (Fatal Jealousy). However, it was his second, 1983 film that issued him a birth certificate as an important filmmaker. *Sawwaq al-Utubis* (The Bus Driver) stars al-Tayyib’s favorite actor Nur al-Sharif as Hasan, a 1973 war veteran who works as a bus driver in the day and a taxi driver at night. Hasan’s father owns a carpentry workshop whose situation deteriorates due to the negligence of his son-in-law ‘Awni who oversees it. Unable to sustain itself, the workshop is shut down, indebted with thousands of dollars to merchants and customers. To Hasan’s dismay, all of his family members suggest selling the workshop. Hasan, the last moral person in a decadent surrounding, refuses, and embarks on a journey to borrow the needed money.

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⁶⁴³ Ali Abu Shadi, *al-Cinema wa al-Siyasa*, p. 109.

⁶⁴⁴ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 214.

Where does Nasser fit within this gloomy picture? Nasser's portrait is seen hung in the workshop, tellingly blurred by the camera. On the other hand, the father's apartment has no portrait of Nasser. The director very well exploits this presence/absence of the portrait when he makes Hasan agree to sell the apartment, not the workshop. The workshop/Nasser/father associations function as symbols of a bygone era, one that Hasan is fighting not to lose. Eventually, however, Hasan manages to collect the money, and hurries home to tell his father the good news, only to find the old man dead. Enraged, Hasan engages in a physical fight with the first person who misbehaves on the bus, shouting, as the credits unfold, "*ya wlad el-Kalb*." (sons of the dog).

But if *Sawwaq al-Utubis* offers an elegy for an irretrievable past, al-Tayyib's 1986 adaptation of Mahfuz's novella, *al-Hubb Fawqa Hadabit al-Haram* (Love on the Top of the Pyramid) condemns a hypocritical present. The film presents a rare, if bleak, treatment of sexual deprivation in Egypt through the protagonist 'Ali (played masterfully by Ahmad Zaki), who seeks answers from intellectuals, journalists, religious figures, and family members on how he can satisfy his sexual needs. Also rare in this film is the form that Nasser's portrait assumes. Rather than the more common photograph in a frame, it is in *al-Hubb* a drawing that lies in the centre of a large rectangular tile on a café's wall. The tile is colored with the red and the black of the Egyptian flag, with Nasser's face replacing the eagle in its middle.

The café is a setting for two brief encounters between 'Ali and an old journalist called 'Atif Hilal. 'Ali looks for the journalist in order to confide in him his sexual dilemma, hoping he will offer an answer. Interestingly, they both sit on a table right underneath Nasser's portrait, with the latter positioned in the space between them. In the first meeting, the journalist sits closer

to the portrait, sharing the same direction that Nasser looks at—presumably ‘Ali. After hearing ‘Ali’s story, he tells him that it is a common problem, that the whole society must change, and that ‘Ali should work towards realizing that goal. When ‘Ali protests that he cannot wait until the whole society is changed, the journalist excuses himself to leave.

In the second meeting, it is ‘Ali who shares Nasser’s perspective. After mockingly pretending to have solved his problem due to a fortuitous acquisition of millions of dollars, ‘Ali’s encounter with the journalist ends abruptly and unexpectedly. As the journalist instructs him not to gain the world and loses himself, ‘Ali, his looks and Nasser’s fixed on the journalist, begins shouting, “liar, liar.” He goes hysterical as he accuses the journalist of hypocrisy, of selling words while in fact being a mere opportunist. Sharing ‘Ali’s point of view, Nasser’s portrait is obviously there to agree. By situating ‘Ali and the portrait against the journalist, the film condemns the old generation—the 1952 generation—by showing that they betray Nasser’s principles. Compared to the first encounter, Nasser, generationally associated with the journalist, is now reclaimed by ‘Ali, who has nothing to resort to but a portrait.

The continuous decline in Egypt—politically, socially, and economically—has added more to the romantic, nostalgic reception of Nasser’s portrait. From the 1990s on, it will be almost exclusively approached through those lenses, thanks to Yusif Chahine’s disciples—a group of leftist filmmakers who began their careers as assistants to the legendary director. In Radwan al-Kashif’s 1993 highly acclaimed *Lih ya Banafsig?* (Why, Violets?), the protagonist Ahmad (played by Faruq al-Fishawi), suffering from an impossible, unrequited love, is seen sitting in his room between Nasser’s and ‘Abdel Halim Hafez’s portraits, two major icons of the aspirations of the sixties generation, to whom the film is dedicated. Produced in the same year is

Yusri Nasrallah's *Mercedes* (Mercedes), which features al-Nubi, a Communist who, after Nasser's death, believes he is personally responsible for realizing justice, equality, and freedom for people. Those words are uttered while the screen plays footage of Nasser's funeral, his large portraits carried by the bereaved mourners.

Khalid Yusif, a self-declared Nasserist and Chahine's assistant director of ten years, relies frequently on Nasser-related motifs. And, certainly, the portrait. In his 2001 debut *al- 'Asifa* (The Storm), a film that "laments the loss of pan-Arab nationalism,"⁶⁴⁵ a woman named Huda (played by Yusra) recounts how her husband disappears. A war veteran, he returns home injured after the 1973 war, only to see a gradual vanishing of the principles he fights for. Sitting in front of Nasser's portrait that hangs over a T.V, "the flashback shows him witnessing al-Sadat's visit to Israel on television, then images of the Camp David Accords, and later the opening of the Israeli embassy in Cairo with the raising of the Israeli flag."⁶⁴⁶ Unable to contain his rage and shock, he stands, stares at Nasser's portrait, and leaves home forever. Yusif revisits the portrait again in his 2009 *Dukkan Shihata* (Shihata's Shop). The film chronicles the life of the kind-hearted Shihata, whose birth coincides with al-Sadat's assassination, his relationship with his father, an old man obviously representing Nasser's generation, and his troubled brotherhood with his two elderly siblings, apparently standing in for al-Sadat's era. Nasser's portrait decorates the wall of the father's room. In one scene, the father asks Shihata to move the portrait a little bit so that it "covers the crack in the wall." The brothers conspire against Shihata to send him to prison. He is released, years later, only to learn of his father's death. In a scene that is too explicit, Yusif shows Shihata crying, holding Nasser's portrait, and murmuring, "rest in peace, father."

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⁶⁴⁵ Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London; New York: I.B Tauris, 2006), p. 147.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

As has been demonstrated, Nasser's portrait has cinematically travelled through contested narratives and conflicting intentions, but eventually emerged as an icon whose mere presence connotes singular nostalgia for an era that ceases to exist. In other words, the portrait is no longer historicized, nor is it subjected to neutral reflections on the good and the bad of Nasser's regime. Rather, it is only there to express the dissatisfaction with the present, along with the hope for, not necessarily a return of the son, to borrow the title of Chahine's famous film, but a better tomorrow of social justice and liberation. It is no wonder, then, that Nasser was the only Arab leader whose pictures were carried by protestors in Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian revolution. As the scenarist Mahfuz 'Abdel Rahman recounts, rather flowerily,

And on January 25, I saw the sun of Nasser... True, it is a generation that did not know him, did not probably follow him. But the sun does not need us to know it. We therefore saw Nasser's pictures in the Square. We were watching the T.V, and chants after chants began to rise. I heard an old lady's voice feebly rising, 'long live, Gamal 'Abdel Nasser!'"⁶⁴⁷

The Resignation (*Tanahhi*) Speech

More than any other verbal utterances of Nasser, the 1967 *tanahhi* (resignation) speech possesses, from the 1970s onward, a special space in Egyptian cinema. In fact, the speech is the most featured archival footage in the history of Egyptian cinema, surpassing other seminal moments in modern Egyptian history, such as the funeral of Nasser himself in 1970, the Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal in the 1973 October War, or al-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977.⁶⁴⁸ Triggered by the humiliating defeat of 1967, the speech showed a wounded Nasser

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⁶⁴⁷ Mahfuz 'Abdel Rahman, "'Abdel Nasser wa Ana" [Nasser and I] in *Al-Yawm al-Sabi'* (Cairo: January 20, 2012), p. 17.

⁶⁴⁸ 'Isam Zakariyya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha*, p. 88.

assuming responsibility of the *Naksa* and consequently announcing he would step down. With the exception of Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, who reportedly co-wrote the speech,⁶⁴⁹ the announcement was surprising news to all Egyptians, including Nasser's own wife Tahiyya, who in her memoirs acknowledged that she did not know about it prior to the delivery of the speech.⁶⁵⁰

Aside from its performative and informative aspects, the speech, delivered on June 9th, is remarkably remembered for the reaction it inspired in hundreds of thousands of Egyptians, who, hearing their leader's intention to depart office, poured into the streets of Cairo for two consecutive nights, their sole goal surprisingly was "the return of an Egyptian president who has led the country to its biggest defeat since the 'Battle of Tal al-Kabir' in 1882."⁶⁵¹

Notwithstanding the length of the speech, its deliverance lasting 23:25 minutes, the single most important part that reverberated through Egyptian movies is the one in which Nasser, toward the end, announces his retirement. It runs as follows:⁶⁵²

I have taken a decision with which I need your help. I have decided to withdraw totally and for good from any official post or political role, and to return to the ranks of the masses, performing my duty in their midst, like any other citizen.

The speech was so much identified with this part that it was labeled *Khitab al-Tanahhi*, or the Resignation Speech, arguably in reference to its massive impact on Egyptians. This, however,

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⁶⁴⁹ Sherif Yunis, *al-Zahf al-Muqaddas: Muthaharat al-Tanahhi wa Tashakkul 'Ibadat Nasser* [Sacred Marching: The Stepping Down Demonstrations and the Formation of Nasser's Worship] (Cairo: Miret, 2005), p. 181.

⁶⁵⁰ See Tahiyya Gamal 'Abdel Nasser, *Thikrayat Ma'ahu*, p. 113.

⁶⁵¹ Sherif Yunis, *al-Zahf al-Muqaddas*, p. 7.

⁶⁵² For a full Arabic script of the speech, see the Bibliotheca Alexandrina website at <http://nasser.bibalex.org/Speeches/browser.aspx?SID=1221&lang=en>

has led to “a relative marginalization of the topic that was supposed to be the cornerstone of the speech, namely, the defeat.”⁶⁵³ As we shall see, Egyptians’ relationship with Nasser was once again personalized through this speech, leaving aside the more factual and informative aspects of it for the purpose of foregrounding the touching, direct appeal to the masses, which the speech brilliantly articulated.

As of late years, there have emerged a significant number of studies that approached the speech, both linguistically and historically. In particular, historian Sherif Yunis and linguist ‘Imad ‘Abdel Latif both brilliantly analyze the speech, the latter arguing that “the rhetorical formulation of the speech did influence the responses that followed it.”⁶⁵⁴ Concurring, Yunis shows that the speech addressed the situation in a way that, if it would not have necessarily led to the historic responses that followed, “it nevertheless was formulated in a way as to strongly encourage it.”⁶⁵⁵ Whether or not that formulation was intentionally meant by Nasser is hard to determine, but the effects are easily attested. One of the most powerful aspects of the speech was the fact that it was, up to its deliverance, the “only political act in the country”⁶⁵⁶ since the beginning of the war four days earlier. Highly anticipated amidst conflicting news of victory and defeat, the speech came as the first and last straw thrown to Egyptians, who were brimming with hunger for a hopeful sign from their leader. As such, the speech, ending as it did with the

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⁶⁵³ ‘Imad ‘Abdel Latif, “Bayan al-Tanahhi wa Thakirat al-Hazima: Madkhal Balaghi li Tahlil al-Khitab al-Siyasi [The Stepping Down Speech and the Memory of the Defeat: A Rhetorical Introduction into the Analysis of Political Discourse] in *Alif* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, No. 30, 2010), p. 146.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 146.

⁶⁵⁵ Sherif Yunis, *al-Zahf al-Muqaddas*, p. 182.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 181.

resignation, was tantamount to leaving the already shattered Egyptians in a state of “catastrophic orphanhood.”⁶⁵⁷

In Addition, the speech appropriated several rhetorical devices to magnify its impact on listeners. For instance, it euphemistically referred to the disastrous defeat as merely a *naksa*, or setback, thus alleviating its then unknown consequences. Moreover, unlike “defeat,” the word “setback” is “ambiguous and unspecified, and therefore open to interpretations.”⁶⁵⁸ On the other hand, ‘Imad ‘Abdel Latif argues that parallel to euphemism, the speech also employed dysphemism in its choice of words to label the war. Instead of referring to the Israeli act as war, invasion, or occupation, it described it as *‘udwan*, or aggression. In so doing, the speech avoided representing the situation as a war between two political entities, and opted rather for a term that is laden with connotations of “taking others by surprise, and assaulting against a peaceful party.”⁶⁵⁹

Ironically, the speech with which Nasser intended to leave office would be his most memorialized and immortalized act, both visually and aurally, in Egyptian cinema as well as in other media outlets. The revolutionary figure—hero of nationalization, triumphant of the 1956 Tripartite War, builder of the High Dam, and advocate of the peasants and the poor—is predominantly reduced into images of a crushed man, his face sweating, his voice, once powerful, low and quavering. Nowhere in Nasser’s life is the tragic quality of his character better manifested than in the 1967 defeat. Even his funeral three years later, unprecedentedly attended

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⁶⁵⁷ Yasin al-Hafiz, *al-Hazima wa al- Aydyuluja al-Mahzuma* [The Defeat and the Defeated Ideology] (Damascus: Dar al-Hasad, 1997), p. 43.

⁶⁵⁸ ‘Imad ‘Abdel Latif, “Bayan al-Tanahhi wa Thakirat al-Hazima,” p. 153.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 154.

by millions of mourners, would fall short of competing visually with his image delivering the resignation speech. The tragic hero and the dreams he lived by—in fact, the whole era that was associated with him, “all ceased to exist on June 9, 1967, and the resignation speech was an honest, internal sense of the end.”⁶⁶⁰ As his once vice-president and later detractor Anwar al-Sadat puts it,

The events of June 5 dealt him [Nasser] a fatal blow. They finished him off. Those who knew Nasser realized that he did not die on September 28, 1970, but on June 5, 1967, exactly one hour after the war broke out.⁶⁶¹

Doubtless, the speech, coupled with the circumstances that led to it, is laden with implications that would be employed by several filmmakers. However, the persistence of the speech, in cinema and elsewhere, equally bespeaks to the unceasing impact of the 1967 defeat on Egyptian and Arab collective memory. The speech is ubiquitous primarily because it is a historical marker of a wound that is yet to heal. As George Tarabishi argues, the trauma of 1967 is still manifested in Arabs’ lives—intellectuals or otherwise—through their constant search for a “father” that could replace the refuge that Nasser has once offered to Arab masses up to the defeat—hence the revival, after 1967, of Islamic movements and the return to the golden *Turath*, or heritage.⁶⁶² “The society has not got over the defeat,” says Egyptian Journalist Wa’il ‘Abdel

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⁶⁶⁰ Ghali Shukri, *Muthakkarat Thaqafa Tahtader*, p. 399.

⁶⁶¹ Anwar al-Sadat, *In Search of an Identity: an Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977), pp. 179-180.

⁶⁶² George Tarabishi, *al-Muthaqqafun al-‘Arab wa al- Turath*, pp. 26-30.

Fattah. Even though the Egyptian army did restore parts of its status with the achievements of the 1973 war, the 1967 scar still nowadays “seems present and fresh.”⁶⁶³

While most of the cinematic appropriations of the speech focus primarily on the stepping down part, they interestingly differ on an essential aspect of it—the image of Nasser. For unlike most of Nasser’s previous speeches, this one was televised, with Nasser’s appearance magnifying its impact on viewers. However, in later years filmmakers have alternated between an “emotional, televisual viewing experience”⁶⁶⁴ of the speech on one hand, and an aural representation of it, devoid of images, and where only Nasser’s voice is heard, on the other. The contexts of these choices will be illuminated below, along with a discussion of the most prominent instances of the speech in Egyptian cinema.

The first cinematic appropriation of the speech dates back to 1974, with the screening of Yusif Chahine’s *al-‘Usfur* (the Sparrow). Centering on a seemingly criminal case, the film moves from the public interest in an unseen bandit, referred to as “Abu Khadir,” into unearthing the structural corruption of the regime. In so doing, it “takes a lucid look at the reasons for the 1967 defeat at the hands of Israel, finding them not simply in specific errors by Nasser or weakness in army tactics but in the very structure of Egyptian society.”⁶⁶⁵

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⁶⁶³ Wa’il ‘Abdel Fattah, “Fi Intithar Munqith” [Waiting for a Savior] in *al-Akhbar* (Beirut: No. 1782, August 13, 2012). Interestingly, Egyptian cinema critic ‘Isam Zakariyya argues in the aforementioned interview that the first real recovery from the 1967 war came with the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. One can only wait to see if the joyous scenes of Egyptians in Tahrir square would visually replace the resignation speech.

⁶⁶⁴ Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 152.

⁶⁶⁵ Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1987), p. 249.

Al-‘Usfur is set in the few days before, during, and after the 1967 war. In this period, the film maintains, there are “two Egypts, each moving in an opposite direction to the other.”⁶⁶⁶ Rather than attributing the defeat to external forces, *al-‘Usfur* shows that the first Egypt, the corruption and demoralization of state apparatuses, are the actual factors behind the catastrophe. The second Egypt, on the other hand, is portrayed by a group of men and women—a journalist, a police officer, a progressive sheikh, and an activist—who are connected through their relationships with Bahiyya, an elderly woman whose house becomes their meeting place and therefore a prominent space in the film. It is in this house that Bahiyya, her friends, and the audience first watch Nasser’s speech.

The speech comes toward the end of the film, breaking the uncertainty regarding the outcomes of the war that engulfs the protagonists. Sensing a forthcoming disaster, Bahiyya, learning of an imminent speech by Nasser, orders the others to stop speculating, commenting, “Now he will talk, and we will know.” Moments before the speech begins, Chahine pans his camera across the streets of Cairo, showing its stillness, inactivity, and emptiness of people. Cutting to Bahiyya’s house, we hear Nasser’s words before seeing him, with the camera alternating between the president relaying the news on television, and the reaction of stunned protagonists who are unable to believe what they hear. The most powerful part of the film emerges right after Nasser utters his intention to step down, when Bahiyya screams, “No, never, we will fight.” She spontaneously runs into the street, followed by tens of neighbors, all shouting, “We will fight. Long Live Egypt.” The spontaneity of the crowds is further underscored by a scene in which an apparently state functionary calls his colleagues, wondering, “Who are those people in the street? If they are not ours, who are they?”

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⁶⁶⁶ Kamal Ramzi, “Irtibat Nushu’ al-Cinema al-‘Arabiyya bi Harakat al-Tahrir al-‘Arabi”, p. 71

Much has been written about the signification of Bahiyya, whose name features also in the legendary duo Ahmad Fu'ad Nagm's and Sheikh Imam's song with which the film begins and ends. Viola Shafik argues that Bahiyya stands for 'Mother Egypt,' the female nation "that is not just in danger of losing its leader but which finds itself betrayed by the new class of functionaries."⁶⁶⁷ In fact, the metaphor is explicitly established in Nagm's and Imam's song, whose most famous part goes, "Masr yamma, ya Bahiyya." (O Egypt, mother beautiful).⁶⁶⁸

In addition, the film is amply engaged with speech and utterances. Throughout the film, Bahiyya states that she suppresses her words and chooses not to share her pain with others. Only when the pain becomes collective is her voice heard, attempting to alleviate people's fear prior to Nasser's speech. When her daughter asks her to stop analyzing the situation, she responds, "You always try to mute me. Now I will not be silent." In light of this, Nasser is not the only one who speaks at the end. His low voice, however, is brilliantly juxtaposed with Bahiyya's and people's loud voices in defiance to the enemy, with the defeat representing an "indicative of the long repression of the peoples' voice."⁶⁶⁹ Bahiyya subverts the traditional distribution of roles in Egyptian nationalism, where "the man was the actor, the speaker, the lover; the woman was the acted upon, the listener, the beloved."⁶⁷⁰ Instead, Nasser's helplessness is contrasted with the agency of Bahiyya, who does not only "speak," but also mobilizes people into flooding the streets—the act that eventually empowers Nasser and reinstates him as a president. In this regard, the relationship between Nasser and Bahiyya in the film can be seen as a reference to the

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⁶⁶⁷ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 98.

⁶⁶⁸ The word "Bahiyya" is a pun, for it is a female name that also means "beautiful."

⁶⁶⁹ Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Yusif Chahine's Cinema*, p. 102.

⁶⁷⁰ Beth Baron, "Nationalist Iconography: Egypt as a Woman" in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, edited by James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 121.

traditional Egyptian epic *Yasin wa Bahiyya* (Yasin and Bahiyya), which itself reproduces the story of Isis and Osiris. In the tale, Yasin is murdered and Bahiyya retrieves his body and gives him proper burial.

Yet while Chahine's film captures people's allegiance to Nasser following the speech, 'Ali Badrakhan's *al-Karnak* mocks that very same reaction. As mentioned earlier, the film is credited for ushering in the 'Cinema of Centers of Power.' Instead of presenting the speech, the film opts for another approach. It juxtaposes footages of the early Israeli raids against Egyptian air force in the morning of June 5th with scenes where the imprisoned protagonists in the film are tortured at the hands of the prison security. This simultaneous crushing of Egyptians, by both Israel and the oppressive Egyptian regime, serves to show the irrelevance of the protests that follow Nasser's speech. Passing by Karnak café, one customer wonders what those people are saying. "Nasser. Nasser. We will fight," another replies. The camera then zooms into the customer's face, who sarcastically comments, "By the prophet, we are kind people."

A more critical take on the speech is found in Husayn Kamal's 1979 *Ihna Btu' al-Utubis*. Whereas *al-Karnak* ridicules people's standing by Nasser despite the defeat, *Ihna Btu' al-Utubis* attacks the speech itself, considering it the epitome of the failures of the regime. Amidst joyful scenes of prisoners celebrating the early news of an Egyptian victory over Israel, Nasser's speech, aurally broadcasted through the radio, cuts into the scene. Beginning with the resignation part, the speech is responded to by the jailer 'Abdel Mu'ti, who thus far believes that the prisoners are true enemies of Egypt. Standing by the speakers, he confoundedly wonders, "What happened? Why didn't we win the war? Why? The prison is full of the bad people we are afraid of. What more do we need?" Nasser's mention in the speech of great sacrifices by Egyptians during the

war is further contradicted when the camera cuts to the cells, showing several close-ups of those tortured “Egyptians” against Nasser’s celebratory words. Expectedly, the prisoners show no reaction to the resignation, but the defeat, coupled with the death of a poet prisoner following the news, triggers an internal uprising against the director of the prison.

If the earlier appearances of the speech testified to a conscious, highly politicized appropriation, later films treated the speech as a somewhat temporal marker. Whether to set up the historical context of the events or to inform about the way the protagonists knew about the defeat, the speech does not occupy an integral part of the films’ narrative, emerging only *en passant*. This is true of ‘Atef al-Tayyib’s 1987 *Abna’ wa Qatala* (Sons and Killers) and 1992 *Naji al-‘Ali* (Naji al-‘Ali), although the latter transfers the reception of the speech to Kuwait, where the would-be well-known Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-‘Ali (played by Nur al-Sharif) was living in 1967. In both cases, we only listen to Nasser’s voice, with the protagonists expressing signs of grief and shock following the retirement news. This is not to suggest, however, that selecting the speech as the marker for the defeat (or even the late 1960s)⁶⁷¹ is not in and of itself political. On the contrary, the recurring appearance of the speech, even in movies in which the narrative does not necessarily require it, adds more to its specificity.

With the screening of Khalid al-Hagar’s 1993 highly autobiographical debut, *Ahlam Saghira* (Little Dreams), the cinematic approach to the speech took on a different shape. Rather than reflecting the collective, overtly political reaction to it, the speech is now seen through the eyes of a 13-year old child. Dedicated to the people of Suez, *Ahlam Saghira* narrates the story of

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⁶⁷¹ In Sa’d Hindawi’s 2009 thriller *al-Saffah* (the Assassin), we hear the speech as the credits unfold, indicating the era in which the protagonist grew up.

Gharib ⁶⁷² in the few days before and after the war. Also the narrator of the film, Gharib tells us that his father died during the 1956 Suez War, when he was only two. Ever since, Gharib has grown up haunted by the feeling of fatherlessness. His situation is further complicated when he is surrounded by two men: Salah, the cruel landlord for whom Gharib works—and who constantly flirts with Gharib's mother; and Mahmud, a leader in the popular resistance groups in the city, who had fought side by side with Gharib's father in 1956.

In contrast to the harsh treatment that Gharib receives from Salah, Mahmud warmly embraces him, tells him about his father “the martyr,” and cultivates in him love for Egypt and readiness to fight for it. In one of his frequent visits to Mahmud's house, Gharib finds a huge portrait of Nasser in which he hugs a child in Gharib's age. While gazing at the portrait, he coincidentally listens to the speech in which Nasser announces he is sealing off the Gulf of Aqaba against all Israeli shipping. Mahmud explains that there will be war, and that all must be ready to fight for Egypt.

Gradually, Gharib begins to develop a unique, spiritual relationship with Nasser. Whenever he sees his picture, he pauses, staring at it, his eyes filled with love and admiration. Seeing the father in him, Gharib continuously recalls the image of Nasser hugging the child. In one of the most beautiful scenes of the film, Gharib runs from Salah toward the beach. He lies down, holding Nasser's picture in his arms, imagining. Suddenly, the camera moves to a forest, where Gharib stands facing the specter of a tall man looking afar. The man, who could be Nasser, Gharib's father, or a combination of the two, begins to walk toward Gharib, his face blurred. He taps on his shoulder, holds his hands, and walks.

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⁶⁷² The name means “stranger.”

Gharib's yearning for a father is partially satisfied through an imagined relationship with Nasser, but is also challenged when he realizes his mother finally surrenders to Salah's tireless requests to marry her. Interestingly, they both marry on June 5th, and Salah, the anti-father for Gharib, orders the family to escape the war and go to Cairo. Gharib refuses, and instead joins Mahmud, who reassures him about the victory of which Nasser promises. When the ominous news of the defeat spreads, Mahmud convinces Gharib that it is all rumors and that Nasser will speak now and tell the truth. They both sit in a café watching, and the speech, televised, confirms the initial, disastrous reports. While the crowds instantly leave the café upon the announcement of the retirement, screaming, "No. Do not leave us now," Gharib and Mahmoud remain. The child looks at Mahmud and says, "You are liars. You fooled me. You all are liars." Whether or not he includes Nasser among those "liars" is not spelled. However, he runs to the street to join the protestors, only to be deadly struck by a truck that carries the portrait of none other than Nasser himself.

Nasser's speech is a confirmation of the defeat. For Gharib, however, it is the ultimate absence of the father. Gharib has to die precisely because he realizes, following the speech, that Nasser (read: father) is truly dead, hence the extinction of the refuge that empowers him. The voice of Gharib, who is buried next to his father, emerges once again in the final scene of the film, wondering if his half-brother that his mother gives birth to after the war will ever find a father who will protect him.

The relationship between the speech and the absence of the father is also articulated in Osama Fawzi's 2004 film *Bahibb Issima* (I Love Cinema). The film stirred a huge controversy in Egypt, largely because it "focuses, in an unprecedented way, on the daily life of a Coptic

middle- class family in Shubra.”⁶⁷³ The plot is centered on Na'im, a Coptic child growing up in Shubra on the eve of the 1967 defeat. But whereas Gharib in *Ahlam Saghira* is shown missing his dead father, Na'im is oppressed by the conservative, patriarchal nature of his father 'Adli, who forbids him from watching films because he considers them *haram*. The film, however, is “eager to connect its narrative and the problematic of the family to its temporal framework, namely the Nasserist period.”⁶⁷⁴ The narrative unfolds with several situations that indicate an atmosphere of fear and oppression spreading in all aspects of Egyptian society, culminating in a powerful scene where 'Adli, drunk for the first time, establishes a monologue with God, admitting that he fears, not loves, him.

'Adli's confession, coupled with his discovery of his heart condition, “finally brings about a total transformation in his relationship with his family.”⁶⁷⁵ The film turns inward toward elucidating the change in the father-son relationship, leaving the developments of Egypt's political situation untouched. However, it is in the final part of the film that the two worlds are reconnected again. Skipping any reference to the war, the film introduces the speech in a very crucial scene. As Samia Mehrez describes it, 'Adli

is hit by a stroke as he is peddling his son Na'im on a bicycle at the seashore with the sun setting on the horizon on the very day that President Nasser delivered his abdication speech (simultaneously played on the soundtrack) after the Egyptian defeat against Israel in June 1967.⁶⁷⁶

In the following scene we see 'Adli dead while performing his morning prayers in his apartment.

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⁶⁷³ Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 194.

⁶⁷⁴ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 63.

⁶⁷⁵ Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars*, pp. 195-199.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 199.

Similar to *Ahlam Saghira*, Osama Fawzi's film identifies between the speech and the death of the father. Yet while in the former Gharib searches personally for a father before the speech crushes this dream and, literally, the child himself, the latter presents the speech, and 'Adli's changing attitude, as a welcomed withdrawal of the patriarch from the Egyptian society.

While in the previous films parts of Nasser's actual speech were introduced, in his 1999 biographical film *Gamal 'Abdel Nasser*, Syrian-born director Anwar al-Qawadri opts for a different path. Rather than using the footage, the speech is enacted by Khalid al-Sawi, the actor who plays Nasser in the film, who, in a setting reminiscent of the actual one, shows up on television in the wake of the defeat, delivering what will be the longest part of the speech to ever appear in cinema. Following that scene, and instead of cutting directly to the crowds protesting against the retirement, the film presents a heated discussion between Nasser and Zakariyya Mohieddin, whom Nasser in the speech announces as his heir. Amidst the discussion, in which Mohieddin vehemently refuses the appointment, the two men hear the voices of the crowds demanding the return of Nasser. In an exchange that is never documented in official history, Mohieddin says,

- You listen? People know that you are the only one who knows the path.
- Why? Why? Why are they doing this? They should hang us.
- The people are refusing the defeat. Gamal, your resignation means only one thing: the realization of the political goal of the war.

Nasser, totally surprised and overwhelmed by people's love and loyalty, sits down, murmuring, "These people are strange. I thought they would hang gallows for me in Tahrir Square. Strange."

Nasser and Bio-Pictures

The emergence of Muhammad Fadil's 1996 film *Nasser 56* ushered in a new era in Egyptian cinema. Not only was it the first biographical film of Nasser; it also "broke a long-accepted taboo against cinematic depiction of modern political leaders."⁶⁷⁷ Passionately received by Egyptians and Arabs throughout the world, the success of *Nasser 56* empowered other filmmakers to follow Fadel's suit. Interestingly, the three biographical films that followed had, completely or partially, a Nasser dimension. Aside from the aforementioned *Gamal 'Abdel Nasser* (1999), Muhammad Khan's 2001 *Ayyam al-Sadat* (Days of al-Sadat) and Sherif 'Arafa's 2006 *Halim* (Halim) portray, as the titles clearly suggest, two significant figures whose lives thoroughly intersected with Nasser's—Anwar al-Sadat and 'Abdel Halim Hafez. Expectedly, therefore, Nasser himself is abundantly referenced in those films, albeit differently.

Aside from Nasser, the other common denominator of all these films, with the exception of al-Qawadri's *Gamal 'Abdel Nasser*, is the casting of Ahmad Zaki in the lead role. Arguably Egypt's greatest actor ever, Zaki astonished millions of filmgoers when he effortlessly impersonated the three extraordinary figures. Surely, Zaki's "own persona and offspring bears some resemblance to those he embodied in cinema."⁶⁷⁸ His dark skin aside, Zaki originated from 'Abdel Halim's village in al-Sharqiya Province, was an orphan like him and, like Nasser, belonged to a middle-class rural Muslim family. Given his personal role in encouraging (and producing, as is the case with *Ayyam al-Sadat*) the making of these films, the nascent biographical era in Egyptian cinema can be equally attributed to him.

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⁶⁷⁷ Joel Gordon, "Film, Fame, and Public Memory: Egyptian Biopics from Mustafa Kamil to Nasser 56" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol. 31, No. 1, Feb. 1999), p. 61.

⁶⁷⁸ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 101.

Yet, the timing of *Nasser 56* requires more explanation than Zaki's contributions. As mentioned earlier, the image of Nasser, both physically and metaphorically, has gradually begun to regain its positive associations since the 1980s, following a decade of harsh demonization. Mubarak's regime, though politically and economically a continuation of al-Sadat's, has taken a middle ground position toward Nasser. It "criticizes the wholesale denigration of the revolution, yet also opposes its idealization."⁶⁷⁹ In addition, while maintaining the historical importance of Nasser, Mubarak's Egypt attempted to deprive him of any exceptionality, instead contextualizing him within a series of "several leaders who had raised the banner of national struggle, including Omar Makram, Mustafa Kamel, Muhammad Farid, Sa'd Zaghlul, Mustafa al-Nahhas, and Muhammad Naguib."⁶⁸⁰ Unlike al-Sadat, Mubarak has not adopted a rival attitude toward Nasser. His temporal remoteness from Nasser, coupled with the fact that millions of his subjects were born after Nasser's death, have probably led to a less complicated relationship with his legacy.

More importantly, the 1990s witnessed a growing nostalgia toward Nasser. With the intensification of privatization and economical liberalism, leading to stark inequality and destitution, and coinciding with tides of religious violence and fundamentalism, Nasserism "has increasingly come to represent an era of hope, unity, national purpose, social stability, and achievement."⁶⁸¹ In the few years that preceded the production of *Nasser 56*, the memory of Nasser did experience a wave of revival. Egyptian critic 'Isam Zakariyya describes those years as the ones "where Nasserist newspapers, such as *al-'Arabi* (the Arab), reached greater numbers

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⁶⁷⁹ Meir Hatina, "History, Politics, and Collective Memory: The Nasserist Legacy in Mubarak's Egypt" in *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, edited by Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler (Orlando: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 117.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 116.

⁶⁸¹ Joel Gordon, "Nasser 56/Cairo 96: Remembering Egypt's Lost Community," p. 171.

of distribution, and where ‘Abdel Halim’s patriotic songs for Nasser were widely reprinted and sold.’⁶⁸²

It is in this context that *Nasser 56* was born, testifying to Mubarak’s two-edged strategy concerning his predecessor. Following George Custen’s definition of the biopic as a film that is “composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used,”⁶⁸³ *Nasser 56* is surely a biographical film. Yet the very portion of Nasser’s life that the film selects highlights the regime’s orientation. Produced by state-owned Egyptian Radio and Television Union, the film revolves around probably the least problematic and most heroic phase in Nasser’s life—the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 and the commencement of the Tripartite Aggression. As noted in other biographical films in world cinema, such as Roger Donaldson’s 2000 *Thirteen Days*—which centers on John F. Kennedy exclusively during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962,—the “narrow focus...facilitates a favorable and ultimately unbalanced treatment”⁶⁸⁴ of the biographee. Indeed, *Nasser 56* was initially “intended as one of a series of hour-long dramatic biographies of Egyptian luminaries for television.”⁶⁸⁵ Neither the leading star nor the director (or the scenarist Mahfuz ‘Abdel Rahman) claimed they were offering a critical, neutral approach to Nasser. The result was a celebratory portrayal, an ode to an era of a great man and national pride.

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⁶⁸² Interview, October, 2011.

⁶⁸³ George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 6.

⁶⁸⁴ Mark White, “*Thirteen Days* and the Burnishing of an Image” in *Presidents in the Movies: American History and Politics on Screen*, edited by Iwan W. Morgan (New York: palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 140.

⁶⁸⁵ Joel Gordon, “Nasser 56/Cairo 96: Remembering Egypt’s Lost Community,” p. 162.

This is not to suggest that *Nasser 56* is entirely restricted to the treatment of that specific incident—nothing is farther from the truth. For if the film is temporally confined, Nasser’s personality is not. With the aim of making Nasser “a relevant hero for current times,”⁶⁸⁶ the film lumps all of his positive features—humble, patriotic, uncorrupted, sympathetic with the poor, lover of the family, among others—and presents them as the background against which the critical events of 1956 unfold. In so doing, the film takes dramatic license to offer anecdotes and situations that are not part of the official history of the Suez Canal. As Joel Gordon notices,

The most popular—and memorable—scenes are not those in which Nasser plots with his advisers and walks the public stage, but rather those in which he tries to balance private-domestic with national concerns or in which he interacts with common citizen scenes.⁶⁸⁷

One such powerful instance occurs in the first half of the film, when Nasser, staying up all night reading about Ferdinand de Lesseps’ authorization to build the Canal, receives a phone call.

Misdialed, the other party is an old woman, Um Yasin, who is looking for someone named Haj Madbuli. Having been told by Nasser that she has the wrong number, she hangs up, but then rings again. Again Nasser tells her that she has the wrong number. When the phone rings for the third time, the conversation runs as follows:

- Hello, Um Yasin, this is not Haj Madbuli’s house. Tell me where your son is and I will send you someone to take you there.
- But who are you, my son?
- I am Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser.
- May God give you victory, my son.

The huge commercial success of the film was an indication that Nasser’s status among Egyptians has survived years of marginalization. Yet he alone does not warrant a similar success

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⁶⁸⁶ Mark Wheeler, “Darryl F. Zanuck’s *Wilson*” in *Presidents in the Movies*, p. 88.

⁶⁸⁷ Joel Gordon, “Film, Fame, and Public Memory: Egyptian Biopics from Mustafa Kamil to Nasser 56”, p. 74.

in future projects. Anwar al-Qawadri's *Gamal 'Abdel Nasser*, produced only three years after *Nasser 56*, has surprisingly failed to generate comparable reactions. Unlike his predecessor, al-Qawadri determined to make a biopic that covered, albeit selectively, the whole of his protagonist's career. And it is precisely this survey-like presentation of Nasser that was strongly faulted. Director Khalid Yusif, for instance, maintains that the film "fell into the trap of oversimplification and hastiness, offering pale snapshots of the Man's life that lacked a strong dramatic thread to hold them together."⁶⁸⁸

In fact, the dramatic tension in the film lies in the bittersweet, complicated friendship between Nasser and his lifelong comrade and commander-in-chief of the Egyptian army, 'Abdel Hakim 'Amir. Obviously, however, the audience did not find the story appealing. The film shows 'Amir as an anti-Nasser: hedonist, individualistic, and conspiratorial. Let alone the historical authenticity of those details, 'Amir's character appears flat, one-dimensional, and almost caricatural. Contrary to *Nasser 56*, where the president seems natural, his deeds developing against the circumstances that are unfolding before him, the Nasser-'Amir tension in al-Qwadri's project subjects the former to a pre-defined role, extremely positive yet totally predictable and unoriginal. On top of that, Khalid al-Sawi's interpretation of Nasser pales in comparison with Ahmad Zaki's. The newcomer actor at the time does occasionally capture Nasser's interiorities, but the comparison, necessitated by the temporal proximity of the two films, has not been to his side.

Ahmad Zaki's magnificent performance of Nasser acquired a lofty status against which any future cinematic appearance of the president would be gauged. The measuring becomes all the more challenging when Nasser is played in a film in which he is not the main protagonist.

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⁶⁸⁸ Interview, October, 2011.

This is the dilemma that Muhammad Khan attempted to circumvent in *Ayyam al-Sadat*. The solution was, as Joel Gordon describes it, truly bizarre: Nasser is rendered faceless, framed either from behind or in profile.⁶⁸⁹ By obscuring the very facial expressions of the actor who plays Nasser, Khan sought to avoid the aura that the mere presence of Nasser can inspire, thus underscoring the centrality of al-Sadat.

Inevitably, however, *Ayyam al-Sadat* has Nasser as a major point of reference throughout the film. The very opening scene establishes “a positive link between the two presidents...with a devastated al-Sadat after Nasser’s untimely death.”⁶⁹⁰ Al-Sadat is shown as declaring allegiance to Nasser, yet also rectifying the misdeeds of his predecessor. But if the history of post-1970 al-Sadat is well-known to people, it is his more obscure role under Nasser that the film unconvincingly articulates. In the scenes that combine the two before the revolution, al-Sadat is often portrayed as possessing a more leading and powerful presence than Nasser, the latter oddly appearing cold and quiet. Even after the revolution, when Nasser’s status cannot be competed, the film is keen on bestowing a certain particularity on al-Sadat. He receives a threatening phone call after the assassination attempt on Nasser; he often calls Nasser by his first name, Gamal; and Nasser calls him in the wake of the 1967 defeat to inform that ‘Abdel Hakim ‘Amir committed suicide.

Following *Ayyam al-Sadat*’s controversial way to impersonate Nasser, Sherif ‘Arafa’s *Halim* would opt for a completely different approach. Rather than enacting the president’s character, the film employs real footages of Nasser whenever the narrative necessitates his

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⁶⁸⁹ Joel Gordon, “Days of Anxiety/Days of Sadat: Impersonating Egypt’s Flawed Hero on the Egyptian Screen” in *Journal of Film and Video* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, Vol. 54, No. 2/3, Summer/Fall 2002), p. 36.

⁶⁹⁰ Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East*, p. 138.

presence. Relaying the story of ‘Abdel Halim Hafez, the film pursues the singer’s life from orphanhood to stardom to death, interspersed with multiple and intricate encounters and relationships with women, friends, and significant figures of the era, including Nasser. Instead of following linear storytelling, the narrative, triggered by an interview that Hafez gives to the Egyptian radio in 1976, alternates between flashbacks and forwards, selectively covering the pivotal moments in the life of “the son of the Revolution.”⁶⁹¹

The film features footages of Nasser nationalizing the Suez Canal, inaugurating the High Dam Project, and, more relevant to *Halim*’s topic, attending several of the singer’s concerts, particularly those in which he performs his most famous patriotic songs, such as *Bil Ahdan* (By Open Arms) and *Sura* (Picture). The privilege that those attendances of Nasser bestow on the singer is exposed through a bitter rivalry between Hafez and Umm Kulthum. Scheduled to sing second to Umm Kulthum in a huge event commemorating the 9th anniversary of the revolution in which Nasser is present, Hafez appears uneasy as *il-Sitt* far exceeds her assigned time. Fearing Nasser will depart soon, Hafez (played in his early years by Ahmad Zaki’s son Haytham) archly wonders when he stands up on stage whether singing after Umm Kulthum is an honor or a trap.

Lest the singer be characterized as a mere opportunist who sings to whoever assumes power, the film very meticulously differentiates between Nasser as a person and what he symbolizes. Halim vehemently rejects in the interview the allegation that he sings for Nasser personally, but rather for “the dreams that Nasser embodies.” Further elaboration on this matter is shown by comparing Hafez’s and famed vernacular poet Salah Jahin’s positions in the wake of the 1967 defeat. While Jahin, who wrote Hafez’s most memorable patriotic songs, holds a unique

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⁶⁹¹ See pages 202-203.

view of Nasser, and therefore considers the defeat a decisive end to his own dreams, Hafez insists on singing, even for al-Sadat, so long as the latter realizes the aspirations of the nation.

The film, however, leaves unmentioned other aspects of Hafez's truly special relationship with Nasser. Confirming this relationship, journalist Yusri al-Fakhrani has recently revealed how Hafez used to refer to Nasser as *baba*, and how Nasser would call the singer and listen to him singing over the phone. Al-Fakhrani goes so far as to compare Hafez's presence to Haykal's, emphatically stating that in Nasser's era, "Haykal writes and 'Abdel Halim Hafez sings."⁶⁹² Produced by Good News, a company whose owners (the Adib family) are close to Mubarak, *Halim* attempts to depersonalize the singer's relationship with Nasser, with an implicit emphasis that Hafiz's songs were for the country rather than the Man, insinuating, perhaps by extension, that Hafez, who sang for al-Sadat, could have also sung for Mubarak.

Those four films have shown that unless he is the main protagonist, the enactment of Nasser poses a dilemma to filmmakers. His grand stature requires a cinematic treatment—and appearance—that may steal the light from the supposedly main character of the film. Yet a settlement such as the one that *Ayyam al-Sadat* proposed is utterly unconvincing. Real footage may be an answer, but its abundance can weaken the fictionality of the film. Anticipating future cinematic projects on other significant Egyptian figures (and where Nasser has to be undoubtedly present), one can only ponder any potential alternatives that filmmakers may bring forth.

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⁶⁹² See Yusri al-Fakhrani, 'Abdel Halim... 'Abdel Nasser: Sirri Jiddan ['Abdel Halem... 'Abdel Nasser: Very Secretive] (Cairo: al-Fursan li al-Nashr, 2002), pp. 39 & 109, respectively. See also Joel Gordon's "The Nightingale and the Ra'is: 'Abdel Halim Hafez and Nasserist Longings" and Gabriel m. Rosenbaum's "Nasser and Nasserism as Perceived in Modern Egyptian Literature through Allusions to Songs," both in *Rethinking Nasserism*, pp. 307-323 & 324-342, respectively.

Conclusion

The space that Nasser has occupied in Egyptian cinema in the 1950s and the 1960s is disproportionate to his significance and ubiquity in Egypt. Rarely did any of his speeches, slogans, or pictures make it into the screen. While it is explicable to find rare negative cinematic approaches to him during his life, Egyptian cinema has almost escaped Nasser, even celebratorily. In a stark contrast with other mass media outlets such as radio and newspapers, films did not constitute a favorite site for glorifying Nasser and disseminating knowledge about him. Following his death, Nasser was subjected to contested cinematic narratives concerning his legacy. While the 1970s has largely experienced a gloomy cinematic picture of him, driven perhaps by the state-sponsored process of de-Nasserization, later decades have witnessed a revival of a romantic view of Nasser. Both treatments, however, lacked a sophisticated analysis of the Man. Instead, they viewed Nasser as a site of memory that connoted certain fixed associations which, depending on the filmmaker, can be good or evil, noble or ignoble, and corrupted or clean.

This chapter has studied the story of Nasser on the Egyptian screen through multiple entries. First, I found out that, contrary to expectations, the most significant critical cinematic interpretations of Nasser were produced during his life. Triggered by the catastrophic defeat of 1967, films such as *al-Qadiyya 68* and *Shay' min al-Khawf* had a main character who was widely seen as a reference to Nasser. Second, I traced the appropriation of Nasser's portrait in Egyptian cinema, arguing that nowhere did it appear in films *superfluously*. Rather, the portrait's presence or absence has constantly served to convey a certain message that filmmakers intended to deliver. A relevant case study were the films of de-Nasserization, with their way of showing or hiding

Nasser's portrait at the offices of police officers and intelligence chiefs, thereby establishing a link or a separation between the president and the abuses of his entourage. In addition, the chapter showed that, of all Nasser's speeches, his 1967 "resignation speech" was by far the most inspiring to filmmakers. It was as though Nasser was visually and aurally immortalized through the most tragic event in his life, thus leaving aside more triumphant moments such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Finally, Nasser proved to be the linchpin of the biographical films that have increasingly emerged in the last two decades. From *Nasser 56* to *Ayyam al-Sadat* to *Halim*, these films negotiated various approaches to impersonate Nasser on the screen. The chapter concluded that unless he is the main character, the reenactment of Nasser in films will constantly pose a dilemma to filmmakers.

Conclusion

More than forty years after his death, Nasser is still present in the Egyptian imaginary. His character is widely invoked, his legacy debated, his pictures raised, and his speeches circulated. Of all the Arab leaders of the past century, few had a lasting impact that extended to other Arab countries as had Nasser. The unparalleled position that he has possessed, still felt to this day, transforms him from history to memory, from the realms of political scientists to the works of writers and artists—in short, from a real figure to a metaphor. Whether glorified or demonized, elevated or debased, hailed as a symbol of freedom, anti-colonialism, and social justice, or tarnished as a ruthless dictator who cultivated a cult of personality and popularized the authoritarian model of regimes among Arabs—Nasser is an emotional and divisive subject, an agglomeration of meanings that transcend direct outcomes of his rule to dwell deeply in the psyche of generations of Egyptians and Arabs, becoming a site onto which they project their dreams and aspirations, defeats and disappointments.

In his recent attempt to analyze the Nasserite ideology, Egyptian historian Sherif Yunis concludes by arguing that both the detractors of Nasser and his panegyrists testify to the perennial omnipresence of the president in Egyptian life. For Yunis, Nasser is the ultimate materialization of the notion of the “savior,” the dream that is so ingrained in the Egyptian imaginary. Why cannot even those who realize the falsity of this concept “leave Nasser in his tomb and transcend him?”⁶⁹³ asks Yunis. His argument is that Egyptians have yet to produce an alternative political model that can replace Nasser’s. Those who no longer believe in the

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⁶⁹³ Sherif Yunis, *Nida’ al-Sha’b* [People’s Call], p. 738.

“individual hero” are liberated from a grand delusion, but they still cannot fill the vacuum that is left by Nasser.⁶⁹⁴

This dissertation sought to identify this exact space that Nasser has occupied in the Egyptian imaginary, its histories, forms, particularities, and vicissitudes. It showed that the image of Nasser has not enjoyed a smooth, uninterrupted, singular path of glory or discredit. Rather, it passed through multiple junctures and turning points, and was produced by several contesting narratives, divergent opinions, and conflicting sensibilities. The largely positive, romantic view of Nasser that has proliferated in Egyptian literature and film in the last two decades hides behind it a much more complicated and multilayered tale of rising and declining. In fact, the survival of Nasser as a site of nostalgia for many Egyptians is in itself indicative of the peculiar position in which he was placed, given the disgracing blow that he received in 1967 and the intense campaign of de-Nasserization that was launched by his successor.

Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary captured writers and filmmakers as they were grappling to come to terms with the meanings of Nasser. Enigmatic and ever elusive, however, Nasser has no fixed and determined explanation, nor were those writers left with abundant details that could explain the various ambiguities and contradictions in his life. Consequently, by seeking to interpret Nasser, each writer has in fact produced his own Nasser, reimagining, adding, or altering episodes in his life. Thus, as the second chapter of this dissertation revealed, Nasser has been seen as an intellectual, a bestial, a martyr, and a defendant.

Aside from presenting Nasser as a character, Egyptian literary narratives are invaluable sources of how ordinary Egyptian citizens see their relationships with the president. Nasser was

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⁶⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 739.

largely credited, even among his enemies, for his endeavors to appeal to, empower, and assist the masses. While his efforts are minutely recorded by the historians of the era, it is the manifestations of his personal impact on these masses that is often missing. Egyptian literature shows characters responding heterogeneously to this personalized relationship with Nasser. Whether by writing letters to Nasser and turning him into an audience, by conceiving him as a potential replacement of the father and a de-stabilizer of familial bonds, or by negotiating his masculine identity, those characters have each appropriated Nasser into their own realms, locating him within broader contexts that are largely unrelated to his official position.

The visual representations of Nasser open up other possibilities to negotiate his status in the Egyptian imaginary. This dissertation found certain politics that oriented the appearance or disappearance of Nasser's portrait in Egyptian cinema. The portrait was transformed from a mere picture of the president into a medium through which filmmakers sought to deliver specific political messages to their audience. In addition, one of striking aspects about Nasser in Egyptian cinema is the appropriation of his 1967 "resignation speech." By far his most immortalized speech in Egyptian cinema—in fact, its most recurring archival footage ever, the presence of the speech serves to define the year 1967 as a timeless moment, a lasting wound that Egyptians cannot still mentally overcome.

A major contribution of this dissertation lies in unearthing the way in which many Egyptians separate Nasser from his regime. While the latter can be seen as oppressive, unjust, and even brutal, Nasser is often detached from its excessive violations and therefore exonerated as either unknowing or necessarily disapproving of these measures. Egyptian literature and film abound with characters that claim Nasser to their sides and invoke him against his very regime,

empowered by a certain belief in his exceptionality. One of the remarkable outcomes of this tendency is that even among the movies that belonged to the de-Nasserization phase Nasser himself was hardly criticized, and his portrait, for instance, rarely appeared in the rooms where interrogation and torture took place.

This dissertation explored less the actual history of Nasser than the images of that history as reproduced by writers and filmmakers. Maintaining that the imaginary has a history of its own, it sought to identify the major shifts, transformations, and contradictions that surrounded the literary and cinematic representations of Nasser. By attempting to delineate “plots” that informed these representations, one could speak of a periodization of Nasser’s images from 1952 onward, resulting in certain stages each of which was marked by a dominant approach toward Nasser. Whereas the four years that preceded the 1956 Suez War saw writers producing mild criticism of Nasser and showing anxiety about the repressive measures that were initiated by him, while at the same time acknowledging his good intentions and sincere efforts to improve the country,⁶⁹⁵ the period between 1956-1967 largely witnessed a Nasser glorified, a symbol declared hero of independence, anti-colonialism, and social justice who, if presiding over a regime in which torture, corruption, and persecution may take place, can nonetheless be separated from those misdeeds and claimed by the people. This long period of genuine belief in Nasser was interrupted by the 1967 *Naksa*, which caused a rift among writers and filmmakers regarding Nasser’s own culpability for the disastrous defeat. Thus came three years of disenchantment with Nasser that were interspersed with harsh allegorical cinematic and literary treatments of him, some of which questioned the previous separation between Nasser and the regime, and all culminating with Husayn Kamal’s movie *Shay’ min al-Khawf* in 1969.

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⁶⁹⁵ This approach can be best recognized in Ruz al-Yusuf’s letter and Yahya Haqqi’s novel *Sah al-Nawm*.

The negative representations of Nasser reached its apex during al-Sadat's regime (1970-1981), with a systematic attack on his legacy that sought to reduce it into scenes of torture, fear, and oppression. This attack was meant to establish a contrast between Nasser and al-Sadat and to therefore bestow legitimacy over the radical changes that the latter introduced in the economic, political, and social directions of Egypt. However, a close examination of this period shows that these representations were mainly found in movies, and that most literary narratives (with a notable exception of Mahfuz's *al-Karnak*) remained silent toward a reappraisal of the image of Nasser in the 1970s. Whereas the majority of writers shared Nasser's class orientations and his ideals of social justice and equality, movies were largely produced by the private sector and ruled by the latter's values and stance toward Nasser. Unlike writers who witnessed a collapse of the Nasserite project at the hands of al-Sadat, a sizable number of film producers found in this decade a golden opportunity to release the enmity that they have been harboring toward Nasser and his socialist policies over the years.

Yet the deterioration of the economic and social situations that were strongly felt in the last years of al-Sadat and persisted throughout Mubarak's Egypt initiated a positive comeback of Nasser's image that began in the early 1980s and dominated the ensuing years. Interestingly, this favorable return of Nasser nearly eliminated the divergence that was recognized in the previous decade between writers and filmmakers and united them both in invoking Nasser against a sinking reality. Thus Nasser became a martyr in Gamal al-Ghitani's *al-Tajalliyat* (1983) and a resort to the poor Zeinat in Salwa Bakr's *Zeinat fi Janazat al-Ra'is*, while a group of young,

politically progressive filmmakers began to revisit the image of Nasser cinematically and to dismiss the sensational treatment of their 1970s predecessors.⁶⁹⁶

The resurgence of a predominantly nostalgic view of Nasser in the last two decades is more informative about the current situations in Egypt than about the president. That many Egyptians still yearn for the same ideals, dreams, and aspirations that Nasser had striven to realize indicates that Egypt has experienced a post-Nasser era only temporally. Poverty, social injustice, and foreign hegemony have so much permeated the country that they became stable components of Egyptian life. Still worse, the waves of Islamic extremism, sectarian clashes, and migration of major intellectuals, from which Nasser's Egypt was largely free, were but a few symptoms of a decaying reality. In addition, the untimely death of Nasser in 1970 befell a nation still traumatized by an unprecedentedly demeaning defeat whose images and memories never cease to haunt the Egyptian imaginary. Only when Egyptians are truly awakened from that nightmare can the 1967 lose part of its damaging associations and become a distant moment in a bygone era. The achievements of the Egyptian army during the 1973 October War presented a potential remedy that was soon aborted by al-Sadat's political and economic policies. Strikingly, the October War has yet to be warmly embraced and represented by Egyptian writers and filmmakers.

As mentioned earlier, a sizable number of Egyptians believe that the 2011 revolution presents the long-awaited event that will not only put an end to the military regime of Nasser, but will eventually upend the nostalgia many Egyptians have for him and, with that, altogether expunge people's quest for a "savior." A spontaneous and leaderless uprising, the revolution will surely test the persistence of Nasser in the Egyptian imaginary. Will his aspirations, ideals, and

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⁶⁹⁶ For more on this new generation of filmmakers see pp. 219-224.

even character inspire the revolutionaries who are still struggling to realize the goals of what Hani Shukrallah recently describes as a “revolution, interrupted?”⁶⁹⁷ A definitive answer amidst the tumultuous situation that currently engulfs Egypt is certainly implausible. The astounding rising of Hamdin Sabahi, however, has reinvigorated questions concerning the place of the charismatic leader in post-2011 Egypt. A lifelong Nasserist, Sabahi was the dark horse candidate of the 2012 Egyptian presidential elections, surprisingly finishing third by a narrow margin behind the Muslim Brother and eventual winner Muhammad Mursi and the Mubarak-era prime minister Ahmad Shafiq. Described by many observers as a politician in the style of Nasser, Sabahi does not hide his political inclinations, building on his hero’s appeal toward the masses. However, he seeks to maintain his own vision of presidency, attempting to avoid what he sees as the pitfalls of Nasser “I would uphold Nasser's principles on social justice while pushing for a completely democratic system that clearly defines and limits the role of the president, which Nasser did not do.”⁶⁹⁸

The phenomenon of Hamdin Sabahi cannot solely be attributed to Egyptians’ yearning for a Nasser-like leader—the fear of the Muslim Brotherhood and the ancien régime have surely driven many voters to search for a third way. Yet his presence serves as a reminder of the image of Nasser and its ability to haunt the Egyptian imaginary at such a critical moment in Egypt’s history. Whether this image will run its course and lose its spark in a more stable Egypt, or whether Nasser will remain relevant to the imaginary of the post-Tahrir Square generations, is left to speculation.

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⁶⁹⁷ Hani Shukrallah, “Revolution, Interrupted,” in *Foreign Policy* (February 8, 2013).

⁶⁹⁸ Muhammad ‘Abdel-Baqi, “In the footsteps of Nasser,” in *al-Ahram Weekly* (No. 1096, 3-9 May, 2012).

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