

Shifting Ground: Spatial Representations in the Literature  
of the Sixties Generation in Egypt

Yasmine Ramadan

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## ABSTRACT

### Shifting Ground: Spatial Representations in the Literature of the Sixties Generation in Egypt

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This dissertation examines the representation of space in the fiction of seven members of the sixties generation in Egypt. Focusing upon the novels of Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Bahā° Ṭāhir, Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, and Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm, I contend that the representation of urban, rural, and exilic space is a means to trace the social, political, and economic changes of the post-colonial period in Egypt. This exploration is framed by the theoretical work of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre and seeks to show that the “spatial shift” that has occurred in the humanities and social sciences can enrich the understanding of the contribution of this literary generation. Emerging at a time of instability and uncertainty, the writers of *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the sixties generation) moved away from the realist techniques of their predecessors, displaying new innovations in their work, in an ongoing struggle to convey their changing experience of reality. This shift away from realism can be registered in the representation of urban, rural, and exilic space and speaks to the writers’ growing disillusionment with the post-colonial project in Egypt, in the years following the 1952 Revolution. Chapter One traces the emergence of the writers of the sixties generation onto the literary scene in Egypt, presenting both the aesthetic innovations with which they were associated, and the socio-economic and political context of which they were seen to be both a part and an expression. This

chapter also pays attention to the “anxiety over categorization” that the appearance of this generation seems to have caused, an issue that has been overlooked by critics in the field, and which reveals a great deal about how power and authority is negotiated within the literary field in Egypt. Chapter Two moves to the focus upon literary texts, exploring the representation of the urban space of Cairo in the novels of Ibrāhīm, al-Ghīṭānī, and Aṣṣlān. The three novels reveal a move away from the realist depictions of the popular quarters of Cairo, or of the alley as a cross-section of society; the novelists represent “new” spaces within the capital, or “old” spaces in new ways, showing the way in which the relationship between the individual and the state is based upon surveillance and control, providing virulent critiques of the regimes of Jamāl °Abd al-Nāṣir and Anwar al-Sādāt. Chapter Three turns to an examination of the Egyptian countryside as it appears in the novels of Qāsim and °Abdallah, arguing that the move away from socialist realism resulted in the re-imagination of the village as mystical or mythic space. This chapter places these novels within the context of the agricultural reforms intended to improve the lives of the rural population, and that dominated political discussions in the decade of the fifties and sixties. Both novelists present villages that are separate from the rest of the country, calling into question the possibility of revolutionary change. The fourth and final chapter ends with the move beyond the borders of the Egyptian nation; the novels of Ṭāhir and al-Bisāṭī signal a shift to Europe and the Arab Gulf which appear as the spaces of political and economic dislocation. These novels are read in light of the transformations that resulted in migration, and that call into question both national and regional forms of belonging.

This dissertation expands the understanding of the literary contribution of the sixties generation by bringing together the discussion of stylistic innovation and thematic preoccupation, while also insisting upon an approach that reads the production of the generation against the socio-economic and political changes that took place in the decades after their emergence on the literary scene.

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*For my parents, Ali Ramadan and Mona Aboulnasr*

## Introduction

I repeat: the new generation is truly new.  
(Najīb Maḥfūz, *Al-Hilāl*, August 1970)<sup>1</sup>

I blame the old generation and invite the new generation to refuse to reconcile and to  
begin the dialogue with the word “No!”  
(Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf, *Al-Hilāl*, August 1970)<sup>2</sup>

The 1960s in Egypt witnessed the emergence of a new literary generation that caused quite a commotion on the cultural scene. This group of young writers, that would come to be known as *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the sixties generation), exhibited new literary aesthetics in their work, breaking with the realist tradition of their predecessors. This label, in its broadest sense, refers to writers who began publishing their work in the decade of the sixties and whose work came to be associated with the literary innovations of the time. Among its most prominent members are Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Muḥammad Ḥāfīz Rajab, Bahā° Ṭāhir, Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna, Raḍwā °Āshūr and Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm.<sup>3</sup> The innovations these writers displayed in their work captured the attention of critics and writers within the cultural field, sparking intense debates about the formation of a new literary generation, and its implications for cultural and intellectual life in Egypt. Fierce battles raged over whether or not these new writers

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<sup>1</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz’s testimony in Muḥammad Barakāt, “Al-Qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah bayn jilayn,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970), 192.

<sup>2</sup> Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf’s testimony in Muḥammad Barakāt, “Al-Qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah bayn jilayn,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970), 197.

<sup>3</sup> The discussions surrounding the use and meaning of this label are explored in Chapter One.

constituted a generation, raising questions about the very definition of the term *jīl* (generation) and the validity of its use in literary critical circles.

These debates took place during a period of extreme instability and uncertainty in the country. The optimism and hope that followed the 1952 Revolution, and the end of British colonial rule in the country, had all but disappeared by the following decade. The reality of life under Jamāl °Abd al-Nāṣir’s police state exposed the fallacy of the promise of a socialist, democratic, independent, post-colonial nation-state. The repression of almost all political activities, the absence of political and social freedom, the ongoing crackdown on writers and intellectuals, and Egypt’s catastrophic defeat by Israel in 1967, increasingly cast doubt on °Abd al-Nāṣir’s regime. The “Open Door” policies initiated under Anwar al-Sādāt in the decade that followed, and which focused upon economic liberalization at the expense of the majority of the population, only served to heighten the sense of disillusionment, spelling the death of the socialist dream in Egypt. The disenchantment felt by writers and intellectuals was further exacerbated by al-Sādāt’s dismantling of the cultural edifice established by °Abd al-Nāṣir, and his termination of state support for the arts. Al-Sādāt’s “Corrective Revolution,” begun in 1971, which targeted his political opponents, further marginalized members of the artistic community forcing many writers to leave Egypt in favor of self-imposed exile during this period.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, al-Sādāt’s policies that redirected Egypt’s interest away from the Arab world, and towards the United States, increased the antagonism between the regime and the intellectuals. This reached its height with al-Sādāt’s visit to Jerusalem in 1977, and the signing of the Camp David Accords the following year.

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<sup>4</sup> This is especially relevant to Bahā Ṭāhir’s novel discussed in Chapter Four.

Within this context, and given the growing sense that the success of the post-colonial project in Egypt was increasingly in question, the writers of the sixties generation struggled to represent the new social and political reality which confronted them. Writers turned away from the realist paradigms that had dominated literary production in earlier decades, and that had come to be associated with the establishment of the post-colonial nation-state. Instead they employed new literary techniques fracturing the time and space of the realist narrative. This new fiction displayed a focus upon the subjective, the merging of the worlds of dreams and reality, the use of stream of consciousness, depicting a world in which the individual was ever more alienated. Other writers drew upon the mythic, historical or folkloric tradition, as sources of inspiration. Chapter One of this dissertation provides an extensive discussion of the literary innovations of this group of writers, tracing the emergence and consecration of *jīl al-sittīnāt*. In doing so, it also presents the social, political, and cultural concerns which shaped the production of this group of writers.

Critics have focused upon the literary contribution of this generation, seeking to categorize their production in terms of aesthetic innovation. Here I am referring specifically to works such as Idwār al-Kharrāṭ's influential *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah: maqālāt fī al-zāhirah al-qaṣāṣiyyah* (1993, *The New Sensibility: Articles on the Narrative Phenomenon*)<sup>5</sup> and Muḥammad Badawī's *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr: dirāsah fī al-tashkīl wa-al-īdīyūljīyyā* (1993, *The New Novel in Egypt: A Study in*

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<sup>5</sup> Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah: maqālāt fī al-zāhirah al-qaṣāṣiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993).

Formation and Ideology).<sup>6</sup> Both critics identify the literary innovations in the work of this generation, while also tracing the socio-political, and economic conditions, which influenced the production of this group. Other critics such as Richard Jacquemond, in his work *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (originally published in 2003),<sup>7</sup> and Elisabeth Kendall, in *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt* (2006)<sup>8</sup> have approached this generation from a different angle, using literary history and sociology to trace the appearance and establishment of this group of writers within the literary and cultural sphere in Egypt. Both Jacquemond and Kendall analyze the literary field in Egypt according to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and their work has helped frame the contours of this project.<sup>9</sup> The cultural field is according to Bourdieu a space of contestation, “the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to limit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.”<sup>10</sup> (In this case, as will become clear, the question is specifically related to the definition of the category of literary generation.) Jacquemond’s analysis, built around the relationship between writers, literary production, and the state, explores the dynamics, negotiations,

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<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr: dirāsah fī al-tashkīl wa-al-īdīyūlūjīyyā* (Beirut: Al-Muʿasasah al-Jāmiʿīyyah li-al-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿ, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*, trans. David Tresilian (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008). This was first published in 2003. See *Entre scribes et écrivain: le champ littéraire dans L’Égypte contemporaine* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See in particular Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

and constraints that have shaped the field of cultural production in Egypt since the 1952 Revolution. Kendall's work examines the role of literary and cultural journalism in the promotion of literary experimentalism during the period of the sixties, paying particular attention to the avant-garde journal *Jālīrī 68* (Gallery 68) as *the* forum which launched the careers of the writers of the sixties generation, providing an independent space for literary innovation.

This dissertation undertakes an analysis of the literary production of seven members of the sixties generation, by focusing upon the spatial representations that appear in their work. It also seeks to bring together the analysis of the literary field with the interpretation of literary texts. Through a reading of the novels of Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, and Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, I contend that the analysis of space allows for the consideration of the political, economic, and social changes of the post-colonial period in Egypt, as well as connecting these changes to the aesthetic innovations for which these writers have become known. In examining the depiction of urban, rural, and exilic space, one sees the move away from the realist mode, which I read as a reflection of the growing disappointment with the post-colonial project in Egypt. Each of the novels considered in this dissertation plays with the narrative conventions of the realist tradition, and in doing so also raises questions about the legitimacy of the post-colonial nation-state. Faced with the increasing limitations placed on their freedom, their ongoing marginalization and alienation from Egyptian society, and the political and economic upheavals of the sixties and the decades that followed, the writers of this generation sought new ways to represent the space of the city, the countryside, and that of exile, and the individual's place within

these spaces. The spatial here thus emerges as fertile ground for the exploration of the significance of the contribution of the sixties generation in Egypt. As Eric Bulson notes: “spatial representations in novels *are* ideological, they are influenced by the culture, history, economy, and politics of a particular time and place, they reflect ways of seeing the world and the scores of individuals who live, and have lived, and will live in it.”<sup>11</sup>

The decision to select novels by members of this literary generation that span the second half of the twentieth century is a conscious one, intended to promote the consideration of the literary production of this generation beyond the boundaries of a single decade. (This dissertation examines novels published between 1966 and 2006.) Instead of a limited perspective, I suggest that the focus upon spatial representation in the novels of the members of this generation provides a way to read their contribution in the decades that followed, taking into consideration the social, political, and economic changes that impacted their writing in the years *after* their emergence onto the literary scene. This dissertation also seeks to readdress the critical direction that has largely dealt with the representations of the various spaces of and outside the nation—read here as urban, rural, and exilic—separately. Rather, by bringing together the analysis of the aforementioned spaces, one gains a broader and more complex understanding of the changes that took place in Egypt and their influence upon the work of these writers.

The focus upon space that motivates this project is connected to the broader “spatial turn” that has occurred in a number of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences in the past few decades. As Michel Foucault famously stated in a lecture

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Bulson, *Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination, 1850-2000* (New York/London: Routledge, 2007), 11.



he gave in 1967, space was to replace time as the central concern of the twentieth century:

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. The nineteenth century found its essential mythological resources in the second principle of thermodynamics. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.<sup>12</sup>

Alerting us to the way in which time has been privileged over space, Foucault's assertion has had a profound impact upon critical studies. Much of his own work has of course focused upon the relationship between time and space; *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961),<sup>13</sup> *The History of Sexuality* (1976)<sup>14</sup> and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975)<sup>15</sup> all demonstrate Foucault's preoccupation with the spatial, and the way in which an understanding of space is crucial to an understanding of power. (One of his central concerns of course being the relationship between space, power, and knowledge.) It is the latter two works in particular which have the most bearing upon the novels discussed in this dissertation (particularly those in Chapter Two). Both works reveal the ways in which power is negotiated between the individual and the state, capturing the ways discipline, as a political technology of power, is exercised through surveillance and examination,

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

maintaining control at the level of the mechanism of the body itself and of the body in space.

In seeking to readdress the dominance of the temporal over the spatial, Henri Lefebvre focuses upon spatial relations with the intention of providing a discourse that links mental, physical, and social space. In his seminal work *The Production of Space* (originally published in 1974), Lefebvre argues that social space does not precede human presence but rather is the product of it.<sup>16</sup> This is a result of the interaction of the triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, which correspond to the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived. The first is that of the routes and networks of everyday reality, the social practices of the individual as they pertain to the everyday, and as they serve to connect him/her to society and its space. The second is that of space as it is conceptualized and planned, the space conceived by urban planners and architects, associated with the authoritarian and repressive power of the state.<sup>17</sup> The third is that of representational spaces, the metaphorical and symbolical ways we understand and experience physical space, and also the space of art itself; it is “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users,’ but also of artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominant —and hence passively experienced space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.”<sup>18</sup> It is as representational spaces, aesthetic spaces that provide

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<sup>16</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-39.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

opportunities for the imagination (and reimagination) of the urban, the rural, and the exilic, that I examine the novels in this dissertation.

Lefebvre draws our attention to the difficulties inherent in such an endeavor stating that “the problem is that any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about.”<sup>19</sup> And yet literary texts, as representational spaces, play a crucial role in his theory of the formation of social space and the ways in which it is conceived, imagined, and lived by the subject, revealing the connections between spatial practice, and the spaces of authority and confrontation. This arrangement of representational space also depicts the writer’s anxiety about the ways in which the state exercises its power over space and the possibilities for opposition and dissent.

Drawing upon the work of Lefebvre, Marxist geographers have analyzed the role of capitalism in the production of space. Central within this context is the work of David Harvey and Edward Soja<sup>20</sup> both of whom discuss the relationship between postmodernity and the urban.<sup>21</sup> Harvey contends that the shift from modernism to postmodernism was

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>20</sup> In the work of Soja we find a similar triad to that of Lefebvre, this time in the form of First, Second and Thirdspace, which resonate with the perceived, the conceived, and the lived. What is striking is the way in which like Lefebvre’s representational space, Soja’s Thirdspace provides the opportunity for chances of resistance and difference: “If Firstspace is explored primarily through its readable texts and contexts, and Secondspace through its prevailing representational discourses, then Thirdspace must be additionally guided by some form of potentially emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious —and consciously spatial— effort to improve the world in some significant way.” Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford/Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 22.

<sup>21</sup> See for example David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change* (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989) and Edward Soja, *Postmodern*

in part built upon a changing experience of time and space. His point here is that global capitalism has so altered the way in which we experience time and space, thus leading to the “compression of our spatial and temporal worlds.”<sup>22</sup> The term “time-space compression” that he employs thus encapsulates the “processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves.”<sup>23</sup> It is not my intention here to suggest that the transformation from modernity to post-modernity that Harvey describes can be mapped directly onto the Egyptian context. Rather, what is useful for our purposes is the idea that the changes that took place in Egypt, beginning in the decade of the sixties, meant that writers were compelled to find new ways to represent time and space in their novels, to better represent their changing experience of reality.

This turn to a reflection upon the importance of the production of space has also found resonance within the literary critical sphere. Franco Moretti has famously argued that there is a need on the part of literary critics to focus upon “the study of space in literature” and “literature in space.”<sup>24</sup> In *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, Moretti proposes the use of maps as “analytical tools: that dissect the text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden.”<sup>25</sup> While this cartographic approach is not one that I utilize directly in this dissertation, Moretti’s work has been

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*Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London/New York: Verso, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 240.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1999), 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

fundamental in alerting critics to the importance of thinking about what can be gained from readings of novels that privilege space.<sup>26</sup> A preoccupation with the mapping of urban space does frame the discussion of the novels in Chapter Two of this dissertation, though it is a decidedly different form of mapping than the type that Moretti undertakes in his work. While Moretti is engaged in the production of maps, through the creation of an “atlas,” to better understand the relationship between geography and literature, I show the way in which each of the authors in this chapter provides the reader with a different metonymic approach to the mapping of urban space, which I argue, allows for the investigation of the negotiation of power between the individual and the state. Furthermore, if as Moretti has argued (following Benedict Anderson) that the novel acts as the “symbolic form” that readers needed to “make sense of the nation-state,” this dissertation asks what are the ways in which writers manipulate this form (and here I refer specifically to the form of the realist novel) to raise questions about the unity of the nation-state.<sup>27</sup> In some ways I thus consider the question that Moretti poses at the end of his work in a slightly different light. Moretti notes that the “paradigm shift” that has occurred in the history of the novel, away from the realism of the European novel and towards the Russian novel of ideas and Latin American magic realism was accompanied by a shift in space. This narrative shift is, according to Moretti, related to a geographic shift, such that “the new model is the product of a new space.”<sup>28</sup> Here I ask instead: what

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<sup>26</sup> In his work Moretti draws upon earlier attempts within the literary field to consider the significance of the spatial. In particular he points to the importance of the work of Pierre Bourdieu in mapping the social space of Gustave Flaubert’s *L’Education sentimentale*. Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, 110-113.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

are the transformations that took place in Egyptian society that led to a shift in the representation of space within the novel, and what are the new forms that emerged to represent these spaces?

This focus upon space is not to of course to dismiss the importance of the relationship between time and space. As Foucault states “it is necessary to notice that the space which today appears to form the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems, is not an innovation; space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space.”<sup>29</sup> The importance of time, and its relationship to space, particularly as it manifests in literature, is the focus of Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics.”<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin explains the use of the term chronotope as addressing the inseparability of time and space in literary analysis; “We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”<sup>31</sup> Here Bakhtin, deals with the changes that take place in the representation of time and space in the novel, focusing specifically upon Greek literature, arguing that such changes are connected to transformations that occur in the our experience of time and space beyond the world of the novel.

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 22.

<sup>30</sup> M.M.Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin/London: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

The relationship between representations of time, space, and the novel are central to Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community of the nation. Anderson famously argued that the novel and the newspaper "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation."<sup>32</sup> The capacity of the novel to serve such a function is largely based upon its ability to present the progression or movement of time in a linear fashion; "what has come to take the place of the medieval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of 'homogenous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence and measured by clock and calendar."<sup>33</sup> Anderson explains this idea of simultaneity-along-time as "simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present."<sup>34</sup> This idea of Messianic time, as Anderson refers to it, came to be replaced by the measuring of time by clock and calendar. This sense, then, that the characters of the novel are advancing through history is one of the hallmarks of the realist novel. It is also what connects the movement of time in the novel to that of the imagined community of the nation; "the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history."<sup>35</sup> The novels by the seven members of the sixties generation analyzed in this dissertation all manipulate the linearity of time, and by doing

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<sup>32</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

so also undermine the realist tradition and the idea of the nation-state with which it was associated.

Chapter One, “The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization,” presents the appearance of the writers of the sixties generation on the literary scene in Egypt. Focusing primarily on the journals *Al-Ṭalīʿa* (The Vanguard, 1965-77), *Al-Hilāl* (The Crescent, 1892-), *Al-Masāʾ* (The Evening, 1956-) and *Jālirī 68* (Gallery 68, 1969-71), I examine the discussions that took place in the cultural journals of the time, surrounding the new literary aesthetics that were appearing in these works, and the socio-economic and political climate of which they were seen to be both a part and an expression. This chapter presents the category of generation as it is constructed and used by the members of what Bourdieu has called the “field of cultural production” in Egypt. I extend Kendall’s discussion here to focus upon what I term the “anxiety over categorization” that the sixties generation created within the cultural sphere. The literary critical material of the time reveals an almost obsessive compulsion on the part of writers and critics to define and understand the new generation, which I argue has been overlooked by scholars in the field. This chapter then seeks to address both the definition of the generation of the sixties and the very need to define the generation displayed by members of the cultural community. I read the *Al-Ṭalīʿa* (The Vanguard) feature that began in September 1969, and that aimed at presenting and categorizing the emerging literary generation, *against* the impetus of the new writers themselves, as displayed upon the pages of the *Jālirī 68* (Gallery 68) journal. The latter, a short-lived but highly influential avant-garde journal, was created to cater to the production of the new generation, and privileged publication over categorization. In tracing the generational



debates that took place surrounding the emergence of the sixties generation I demonstrate how the anxiety over categorization reveals the way in which power and authority is negotiated in the literary field in Egypt. I conclude by showing that the discussions that took place throughout this period did not significantly alter the dynamics of the field and the critical interventions that sought to dislodge the generational category (and its dependence upon historical periodization) from its position of prominence ultimately did not succeed.

Chapter Two, “Urban Space, Surveillance, and the State: Reading the City in Ṣun<sup>c</sup>allah Ibrāhīm’s *Tilka-l-rā<sup>3</sup>iḥa*, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s *Waqā<sup>3</sup>i<sup>c</sup> ḥārat al-Za<sup>c</sup>farānī*, and Ibrāhīm Aṣlān’s *Mālik al-ḥazīn*” signals the move to a focus on literary texts. The analysis of the three novels that form the basis of this chapter is centered on the representation of the urban space of Cairo. In the shift away from the realist depictions of the urban metropolis as the site of national struggle, or of the alley as the cross-section of Egyptian society, these novels register a focus upon new spatial representations. Through the presentation of the city as the space of incarceration, the reimagination of the alley as a fantastic space, and the turn towards the previously ignored neighborhood of Imbaba, these writers reveal how the relationship between the individual and the state is one based upon surveillance and control. Within this context of state repression and surveillance, and given the state’s attempts to control and monitor the citizen population, these works also raise questions about the possibilities for individual and collective agency. The impotency of political action as a form of resistance against the encroachment of the state is mirrored in the physical impotency of the novel’s characters. The sexual here becomes the privileged site of agency.

Chapter Three “Re-imagining the Rural: The Mystical and the Mythical in °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim’s *Ayyām al-insān al-sab‘ah* and Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah’s *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswīrah*” moves the reader to the countryside of Egypt, specifically the villages of the Delta and Upper Egypt. These two novels represent a move away from the socialist realist works of the previous generation, with their concentration upon the countryside as the space of revolutionary struggle and political mobilization. The rural here is a space of suffering and degradation, in which the villagers struggle to contend with the difficulties of their daily life. The village is thus represented as mystical and mythical space, calling attention to the ongoing marginalization of the Egyptian village and its separation from the rest of the nation. This is particularly striking when read against the agricultural reforms that were begun in the 1950s, as part of °Abd al-Nāṣir’s “social revolution” and were intended to promote equity amongst the peasant population. Both novels take the reader back to a revolutionary moment that I argue is undermined as a result of the ongoing marginalization and exclusion of the Egyptian village.

The fourth and final chapter takes the reader beyond the boundaries of the Egyptian nation to explore the space of political and economic dislocation. “The Politics and Economics of Exile: Bahā° Ṭāhir’s *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* and Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī’s *Daqq al-ṭubūl*” registers a movement to Europe and the Gulf respectively; here the transgression of the boundaries of the homeland is not, as in earlier Arabic narratives, solely for the purposes of education. Instead, Europe here is transformed into the space of political exile, or displaced by the Arab Gulf as the site of economic exploitation. In both cases the novels under examination raise questions about the unity of the Egyptian nation-state in an age where the political, social, and economic flows extend beyond the

boundaries of the nation. The two works engage not only with the issue of national identity and belonging, but also with that of regional affiliation; the experience of economic and political dislocation serves to illuminate the failure of the Arab nationalist dream of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir.

In reading the spaces of the rural, urban, and exilic in conjunction, one sees the socio-economic and political changes in Egypt during the second half of the twentieth century. The representation of these spaces reveals a disillusionment with the post-colonial nation-state and the attempt on the part of the writers of this generation to find new ways to depict their experiences. As Bulson argues in his work “[t]here is no longer the assumption that spatial representations derive from a set of neutral and value-free literary conventions reflecting an innocent and timeless world-view. Representations of the city, country, landscape, and the nation conceal a complex network of social relations and historical processes that impact how readers imagine the world inside and outside the novel.”<sup>36</sup> The representation of space in these novels is thus to be read as reflecting the writer’s attempt to come to terms with the social, political, and economic upheavals of the post-colonial period in Egypt. To read these spaces together is to see the way in which both the rural and the urban do not serve as the idealized space of the nation. Furthermore, the transgression of borders to the space of exile serves to unsettle categories of national and regional belonging.

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<sup>36</sup>Bulson, *Novels, Maps, and Modernity*, 19-20.

## Chapter One<sup>37</sup>

### The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization

#### I: Introduction

In late 1969, the journal *Al-Ṭalīʿa* (The Vanguard, 1965-77) dedicated a number of issues to the discussion of the emerging literary generation in Egypt.<sup>38</sup> The feature “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʾ al-shabāb” (This is how the Young Writers Speak) began as a series of “testimonies” by approximately thirty artists (between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five), along with a number of articles by prominent critics. This became a reoccurring feature in the journal, sparking intense debates and controversies among writers, critics, and intellectuals, of all ages. These writings sought to understand what this new *jīl* (generation) of writers in the sixties represented,<sup>39</sup> who they were, and what role they aspired to play in the fraught political, economic, and cultural arena of late sixties Egypt. These deliberations took place in the aftermath of the catastrophic defeat of 1967, a time of intensified debates about the role and responsibility of writers and

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<sup>37</sup> My gratitude to Beth Holt who helped tremendously with the direction of this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> *Al-Ṭalīʿa* was established in 1965 and was published until 1977. Luṭfī al-Khūlī was editor-in-chief during the period under discussion. The nationalization of the Egyptian press in 1960 meant that *Al-Ṭalīʿa*, like the majority of the journals of the period, was under the control of the Ministry of Culture. Begun as a leftist, cultural periodical, it began publishing its own literary supplement in January 1972. For an excellent discussion of the history of cultural journalism in Egypt see Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 8-86; 154-163.

<sup>39</sup> The term *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the sixties generation) has come to be the most associated with the writers of this group. It is most broadly understood as designating those writers who began writing in the decade of the 1960s and who were associated with the new literary innovations of the time. Its most prominent members include Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Muḥammad Hāfīz Rajab, Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna, Raḍwā °Āshūr and Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm. As we shall see however debates surrounding this label and its significance were ongoing at the time.

intellectuals in the social and political future of the country.<sup>40</sup> While many of the writers of this generation had been producing work since the beginning of the decade, they were only labeled as a group following 1967.<sup>41</sup> Some raised questions about their relationship to the previous generation, debating whether it was one of antagonism or of understanding, cooperation or rejection, while others went as far as to question the very existence of a new movement or generation, in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the emerging group.

What motivated *Al-Ṭalī'a*'s feature was a desire to understand, analyze, and ultimately categorize the emerging literary generation; by specifying a particular age group; highlighting socio-economic and political markers; identifying the aesthetic innovations in their work; and distinguishing literary influences, the group could be defined, understood, and ultimately situated within the literary and cultural sphere in 1960s Egypt. *Al-Ṭalī'a*'s questionnaire is, in many ways, symptomatic of the larger anxiety about categorization that dominated literary discussions during this period.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Egypt's defeat against Israel's army in June 1967 and the loss of the Sinai Peninsula compounded the feelings of loss and disappointment that had plagued many writers and intellectuals throughout the decade of the sixties. The defeat of 1967 was intensely debated by both writers and critics; was it a significant break, a natural development given the events of the decade, or a crisis that was predicted by writers and intellectuals? I discuss this in greater length later in this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Al-Ṭalī'a* was very much a part of a wider, ongoing conversation that was taking place in a number of significant journals throughout the late 1960s. So for example the established journal *Al-Hilāl* (The Crescent) published a 3-part special edition dedicated to the short story beginning in August 1969 in which it showcased a large number of "young writers." These issues also included a number of articles that discussed the emergence of a "new generation" and the final parts, in September and October of 1970, included a segment entitled "Al-Jīl al-qāṣaṣī al-jadīd yatakallam" (The New Narrative Generation Speaks) reminiscent of *Al-Ṭalī'a*'s feature. *Al-Masā'* (The Evening) and *Al-Majallah* (The Magazine) both ran a series of articles in the late 1960s that also focused on the issue of the emergence of a new generation as it related to the genre of the short story.

This is particularly interesting when read against the impulses of the writers themselves. Much of the discussion that surrounded this emerging generation came in the aftermath of the establishment of *Jālirī 68*, an independent, avant-garde journal that began in May/June 1968 and published a large number of young writers (many of those interviewed by *Al-Ṭalīʿa* in fact).<sup>43</sup> The creation of this journal caused a stir on the literary scene, as evidenced by the plethora of articles that were published discussing its existence.<sup>44</sup> While *Jālirī 68* did include critical articles that explored the new literary aesthetics in the work of the writers published on its pages, its editorial board did not seem particularly concerned with this question of categorization. However, the anxiety surrounding this issue of categorization seemed to encourage, even necessitate, a clearer articulation of their position as a group. What the members of *Jālirī 68* stressed was not the biographical backgrounds of its authors, but rather a shared experience of a significant historical period, which inspired new literary styles and techniques. Its editorial board seemed concerned, first and foremost, with providing authors with an outlet for the publication of their fiction, and *not* in providing a specific definition of the literary group.

This chapter seeks to examine the emergence of the sixties generation in Egypt and the crisis of categorization that it provoked. Focusing primarily on the journals *Al-Ṭalīʿa*, *Al-Hilāl* (The Crescent, 1892-), *Al-Masāʿ* (The Evening, 1956-) and *Jālirī 68*

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<sup>43</sup> Approximately a third of the writers interviewed for *Al-Ṭalīʿa* had published work in *Jālirī 68* by the time *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s feature appeared at the end of 1969. Examples include °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Majīd Tūbyā, Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf, Amal Dunqul, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Mabruk, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, and Māhir Shafīq Mabruk.

<sup>44</sup> The introduction to the October 1969 issue of the journal contains a bibliography of all the articles written about *Jālirī 68* —a total of 22 in the first year after its publication. See *Jālirī 68* (October 1969): 3-5.

(Gallery 68, 1969-71), I present the major aesthetic innovations of the emerging generation, as well as the larger socio-economic and political changes of which they were seen to be both a part and an expression. In doing so I recognize my own role in this continued drive to categorize and classify, to distinguish one literary generation from the next. As Wijan van den Akker and Gillis J. Dorleijin explain in their discussion of literary generations, “generations are constructs that are used by the primary literary field of writers and critics to get a grip on their contemporary literary world.”<sup>45</sup> I then turn to focus upon the anxiety of categorization that the emergence of the sixties generation provoked. In a literary field that remains predominantly generational<sup>46</sup> (and here literary generation is understood as being related to historical periodization) these discussions were as much about categorization as they were about the negotiation of power and authority in what Pierre Bourdieu has called “the field of cultural production.”<sup>47</sup> The angst about whether or not this group constituted a generation, and what defined a generation, was part of a larger struggle over legitimacy within the field. The emergence of a new generation of writers seemed to pose a threat to the established figures in the

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<sup>45</sup> Wijan van de Akker and Gillis J. Dorleijin, “Talkin’ ’Bout Generations: The Concept of Generation in Literary Historiography” in *Janus at the Millennium. Perspectives on Time in the Culture of the Netherlands*, eds. Thomas F. Shannon and Johan P. Snapper (Lanham: University Press of America, 2004), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Critics in the field of Arabic literature largely agree that this remains the case. See for example Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 168-170, Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 2-3, Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr: dirāsah fī al-tashkīl wa-al-īdiyūlūjiyyā*, Ghālī Shukrī, *Ṣirāʿ al-ajyāl fī al-adab al-muʿāṣir* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1971) and Jalāl al-ʿAshrī, *Jīl warāʾ jīl*, (Cairo: Al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1987).

<sup>47</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

field, raising questions about whether or not aesthetic innovation was strictly the domain of the young.

Here I draw specifically upon the work of Richard Jacquemond and Elisabeth Kendall, who both delineate the cultural sphere in Egypt according to the theoretical framework presented by Bourdieu.<sup>48</sup> Bourdieu defines the field of cultural production as a “field of forces...a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces” in which individuals, institutions or groups are in constant contestation over positions of authority, positions which in effect decide “the legitimate definition of literary or artistic production.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the structure of the field of cultural production is based upon “the opposition, within the sub-field of restricted production, between the consecrated avant-garde and the avant-garde, the established figures and the new comers, i.e. Between *artistic generations*, often only a few years apart, between the ‘young’ and the ‘old’.”<sup>50</sup> As we shall see this opposition was manifest in a variety of ways. Some writers foreground an idea of generation as continuation, positioning themselves as an extension of the older literary tradition, dominated by giants such as Najīb Maḥfūz, Yūsif Idrīs, and Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, while others presented themselves as a self-contained generation striving to sever all ties with their predecessors. Still others argued for the abandonment of generational language and a focus upon literary exchange, influence, and interaction between writers *across* historical generations, in an attempt to overturn age as the basis of hierarchy within the field.

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<sup>48</sup> See Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 5-9 and Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 110-139.

<sup>49</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 30; 46.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



My focus on the emergence of the sixties generation is shared by other critics in the field. In her seminal work *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt*, Kendall examines the emergence of Egypt's avant-garde sixties movement, tracing the process by which these writers came to establish themselves as significant players within the Egyptian literary sphere. Kendall argues that journalism played a key role in promoting modernist literary techniques, pointing to *Jālīrī 68* as fundamental in this respect. *Jālīrī 68* is in her words an example of a “dissident [journal]...the real hotbed of experimentation” which paved the way for other independent journals that were able to at least partially separate themselves from the official literary establishment.”<sup>51</sup> Here I wish to extend Kendall's argument by examining this issue of categorization and the discussions that took place surrounding the terminology to be used. It is, I would argue, precisely this issue of how to define “generation” and how this could then be applied to the sixties generation, that was at the core of many of the debates of the period. Furthermore, as I show through the juxtaposition of the positions of *Al-Ṭalī'a* and *Jālīrī 68*, there was an anxiety about the issue of categorization on the part of established writers and critics in the literary field that almost compelled them to insist upon a clear definition of the emerging group of writers. Only through the process of categorization could this group be accepted or rejected by the literary establishment. In considering why this issue of categorization is important I draw upon the work of Van den Akker and Dorleijin who answer the question: “Does it really matter whether a group of people did or did not form a generation?” in the affirmative:

The generation model provides us with sharper insight into the historical processes that take place in literary circles...they enable us to find more precise answers to

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<sup>51</sup> Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 2.

questions such as: How do authors or groups of authors acquire their reputation? What is the meaning and influence of manifestoes? How and when does such a thing as consensus develop? Who or what individuals are responsible for this?<sup>52</sup>

I conclude with a discussion of the transformation of the sixties generation from what Bourdieu calls the “avant-garde” to the “consecrated avant-garde,” paying particular attention to the group of writers examined in this larger study.<sup>53</sup> In doing so I will focus on the way these emerging writers came to represent the established figures in the field, and the positions in the literary and cultural spheres that they came to occupy as a means of solidifying their standing, once their literary innovations were no longer in question.

## II: The Emergence of a Generation

There was little doubt by the late sixties that something momentous was taking place within the literary sphere in Egypt. There had emerged onto the scene a younger group of writers whose literary production exhibited new aesthetic innovations worthy of critical attention. Studies, largely published in the literary journals, sought to consider both the formal changes appearing in the new fiction and the larger context—social, economic, and political— within which these works had emerged. As far as the literary works themselves were concerned the following issues attracted the greatest attention: a) the move beyond socialist realism b) alienation c) the use of myth and folklore d) literary influences.

The move away from socialist realist literature, what writer Yūsif al-Shārūnī referred to as “a revolution against realism” was perhaps one of the most discussed of the

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<sup>52</sup> Van de Akker and Dorleijn, “Talkin’ ’Bout Generations,” 23.

<sup>53</sup> These writers are Jamāl al-Ghiṭānī, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Bahā° Tāhir, Yaḥyā Taḥir °Abdallah, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, and Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm.

above markers of the new literature.<sup>54</sup> This is not surprising given the way socialist realism had dominated literary production in the previous decade and had come to be associated with the Nāṣirist regime.<sup>55</sup> Writers were praised for the innovation and experimentation that challenged a vision of reality tied to the socialist realist literary project, which had championed the post-colonial nation-state in the years following the Egyptian Revolution. This challenge was also a refusal of a social reality that had grown ever more oppressive, and that had increasingly revealed the failures of °Abd al-Nāṣir's post-colonial project.<sup>56</sup> In a review of *Jālirī 68*'s first issue, Na°im °Aṭiyyah identifies the “new generation” of short story writers as rebelling against realism in:

Refusing to employ their literary tools to tell a story with clear signs and consecutive events or to draw for us characters within a realistic structure and scenes with precise details. This group [of writers] insists upon using the story as a tool to bring to life an atmosphere greater than just limited reality. And this atmosphere is full of symbolic styles.<sup>57</sup>

This atmosphere was thus intended to call into question the very reality it represented.

As described by Sabry Hafiz, the first period in literary production (from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the colonial rule) was marked by a concern for the realism of the literary text, and an understanding that literature was a representation of

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<sup>54</sup> Yūsif al-Shārūnī, “Ḥiwār ḥawl azmit al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1969): 131; 133.

<sup>55</sup> Writers and critics were nevertheless eager to credit the socialist realist movement for important strides in its time, particularly in emphasizing the political significance of artistic production in representing the ongoing class struggle. See for example Ibrāhīm Fathī, “Ba°d al-masā°il al-°āmah fi al-naqd,” *Jālirī 68* (October 1969): 64.

<sup>56</sup> This refusal is discussed in greater detail for example in relationship to the work of Ibrāhīm Aṣlān. See Idwār al-Kharrāt, “Ibrāhīm Aṣlān wa qīnā° al-rafd,” *Jālirī 68* (February 1971): 80-83.

<sup>57</sup> Na°im °Aṭiyyah, “68 Majallah tajrībiyyah,” *Al-Majallah* 139 (July 1968): 70. °Aṭiyyah goes on to analyze a number of stories from the collection such as those of Majīd Ṭubyā, Aḥmad al-Biḥīrī and Ibrāhīm °Abd al-°Āṭī which present the intertwining of lives, times and places, fantastical worlds and the subconscious respectively.

reality in a way that was recognizable to the reader. The second period (that began in the sixties) saw writers redefining the relationship between literature and reality, such that the latter became an inspiration for the former, but was not necessarily mimetically reproduced in it. As Hafiz explains:

The second phase of literary development substituted metaphoric rules of reference for the metonymic ones, thus liberating the literary text from slavish adherence to the logic and order of social reality and allowing for occasional flights into fantasy, the dissolution of time, a wider gap between the world of art and that of reality, and a higher degree of textual autonomy.<sup>58</sup>

Writers were in fact often critiqued for not moving far enough away from the socialist realist trends that had preceded them. So for example in a significant study of Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī's first short story collection *Al-Kibār wa-al-sighār* (The Old and the Young) Ghālib Halasā places al-Bisāṭī between the "old" and "new" generation, claiming that the majority of his stories unfortunately resonate more with the socialist realism of the previous generation. Missing from al-Bisāṭī's work are a number of the main features Halasā ascribes to this move away from the traits of socialist realism; an immersion in the subjective, the use of indirect discourse, the absence of a virtuous hero, the focus upon the flaws of a character, the breakdown of linear narrative, an excessive romanticism, and evidence of a wide variety of different intellectual influences.<sup>59</sup> Halasā pays the closest attention to *Mishwār qaṣīr* (A Short Journey), a story which plays on the futility and anxiety associated with human existence, calling to the reader's attention the

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<sup>58</sup> Sabry Hafiz, "The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57,1 (1994): 99.

<sup>59</sup> Ghālib Halasā, "Al-Kibār wa-al-sighār," *Jālirī* 68, (June 1968): 43. Sabry Hafiz undertakes a similar analysis. See "Majmū'at 1969 al-qaṣāṣiyyah," *Al-Majallah* 166 (October 1970): 74. The break down of the boundaries between the past, present, and the future was also discussed by °Abd al-Ḥamīd Ibrāhīm in an article that appeared in *Al-Masā'* 4709 (22 October 1969): 6.

absurdity of being, which Halasā argued, best represented al-Bisāṭī's move beyond socialist realism.<sup>60</sup>

This move away from the socialist realist tradition was closely connected with the traits of “*ightirāb*” (alienation) that were becoming increasingly noticeable in this literature, and which speak to the influence of writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus upon this emerging generation. As Elisabeth Kendall notes however, the position of these writers was somewhat different than their European counterparts; “their alienation did not seek to sever ties to life, but to reject old ties while striving for new ones...it was the basic image of normal men crushed in an intolerable world...not simply escapism and death.”<sup>61</sup> The growing sense that literature could not necessarily mirror reality, and that this reality was in fact much more fractured than the socialist realists had conveyed in their work, produced fiction in which the alienated individual —in both a literal and metaphorical sense— occupied an ever more arbitrary world.<sup>62</sup> In describing the work of Majīd Ṭubyā, Hafiz provides a useful description of the relationship between

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<sup>60</sup> Halasā was to build on this argument in a later article published in the *Jālirī* 68 issue dedicated to the short story in which he named Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, Sulaymān Fayāḍ and °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim as examples of writers who had continued the socialist realism of the likes of Yūsif Idrīs and °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī, while contributing important changes and variations to the existing literary style. See Ghālib Halasā, “Al-Adab al-jadīd: Malāmiḥ wa ittijāhāt,” *Jālirī* 68 (April 1969): 115. See also °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf's “Al-Baḥth °an ṭarīq jadīd li-al-qīṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970): 86. Here he credits Ibrāhīm Aṣlān and Aḥmad Hāshim Rajab with merging realism and expressionism and elevating the short story to the poetic, in the tradition of Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī and Yūsif al-Shārūnī.

<sup>61</sup> Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 151. Kendall also cites Sāmī Khashabah who notes that Egyptian writers of this period read translations of existentialist literature much more than existentialist philosophy, thereby accounting for the strong human presence in their work. See also Muhsin al-Musawī, *Al-Nukhbah al-fikriyyah wa-al-inshiqāq: qirā'ah fī taḥawwulāt al-ṣafwah al-°arīfah fī al-mujtama° al-°Arabī al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dār al-°Adāb, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> Sabry Hafiz, “Majmū°āt 1968 al-qaṣāṣiyyah,” *Al-Majallah* 47 (March 1969): 68.

the departure from the realist tradition and the increasing sense of alienation present in the literary works. He notes how these stories:

Depend on the point of fantasy, the separation from reality and the rejection of this reality in a relentless attempt to unite with it and originate from it. The numerous unfamiliar events, and the strange images immersed in the imagination and the historical cells cleverly dispersed throughout this world are all variations on one main tune, that of the individual's loss of security and balance, and the feeling of alienation from a reality full of deception in which any true connection is impossible.<sup>63</sup>

Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Ghālib Halasā and Ghālī Shukrī also pointed to this expression of alienation as a significant marker of this new innovative writing, with writers drawing on internal monologues or streams of consciousness to represent the individual's changed relationship with reality.<sup>64</sup> The latter argued that this "new wave" of literature had proved itself in 1968, with one of its dominant directions being that of "*al-ʿabath wa-al-lā maʿqūl*" (the futile and the absurd).<sup>65</sup> This form of expression was found in the work of a number of younger writers such as Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, and Ibrāhīm Aṣlān but also in the newer stories of Najīb Maḥfūz.<sup>66</sup> As far as the younger writers were concerned, each was seen as manipulating this sense of alienation in different ways; Ṭāhir's short story *Al-Khutūbah* (The Engagement) for example represented "the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See for example Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, "Majallat 68 wa-al-qīṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-muʿāṣirah," *Al-Masāʾ* 4514 (10 April 1969): 6, Ghālib Halasā's "Malāmiḥ al-adab al-jadīd," *al-Masāʾ* 4562 (28 May 1969): 6 and Ghālī Shukrī "Thaqāfat 68" in *Dhikrāyāt al-jīl al-dāʾiʿ* (Baghdād: Wizārat al-Aʿlām, Mudīriyat al-Thaqāfah al-ʿĀmmah, 1972), 211.

<sup>65</sup> Shukrī, "Thaqāfat 68," 211.

<sup>66</sup> So for example as Hafiz notes, Maḥfūz's collection *Taḥt al-maḥallāh* (Under the Awning) included stories in which the imagination mixed with reality, truth with dreams, the symbolic with the metaphoric, in a world overwhelmed by the absurd. Sabry Hafiz "Majmūʿāt 1969 al-qāṣṣiyyah," *Al-Majallah* 16 (October 1970): 68.

alienation of individuals accused for no reason in a strange world” (reminiscent of the work of Franz Kafka);<sup>67</sup> al-Bisāṭī’s *Hadīth min al-ṭābiq al-thālith* (Conversations from the Third Floor) represented “the alienation of the exploited and the repressed” who fill the stories’ actual prisons; and Aṣḷān’s *Fī jawār rajul ḍarīr* (Besides a Blind Man) represented the hero of the time, revealing his empty life, his anxieties, paralysis and fears.<sup>68</sup>

Another way in which these writers stood apart from their predecessors was in their use of myth, folklore, and elements of the historical tradition. Writers such as Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī and °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim were among those whose work most clearly interwove these elements into the fabric of their fiction.<sup>69</sup> Ghālī Shukrī for example commented on the enthusiastic reception of al-Ghīṭānī’s first collection *Awraq shābb °āsh mundhu alf °ām* (Papers of a Young Man Who Lived a Thousand Years Ago) noting the way the author merged elements of history into his writing, in terms of both content and style, even though he was not writing historical fiction.<sup>70</sup> Other writers drew upon popular songs and poems to better represent the internal world of their characters —this was often the case in works that dealt with the

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<sup>67</sup> Shafīq Maqār, “°An al-jadīd wa-al-qadīm wa-al-ladhī bayn bayn,” *Jālīrī* 68 (October 1969): 99. For more on the nightmarish world created by Ṭāhir see Sabry Hafiz’s “Lu°bat al-barā°a wa-al-dīnūna wa-al-tahqīqāt al-mustamirrah,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1972): 158-166.

<sup>68</sup> See Khalīl Kulfat, “Mulāḥazāt ḥawl kutāb 68,” *Jālīrī* 68 (October 1969): 74-77.

<sup>69</sup> For an excellent discussion of °Abdallah’s use of these different sources in his work see Idwār al-Kharrāt’s article “Al-Riḥla ilā mā warā° al-wāqi°iyyah,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 5 (May 1972): 188-194.

<sup>70</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, “Al-Baṣmah al-akhīrah fī adab al-sittīnāt,” *Dhikrāyāt al-jīl al-dā°i°* (Baghdād: Wizārat al-A°lām, Mudīriyat al-Thaqāfah al-°Āmmah, 1972), 238. °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf saw al-Ghīṭānī’s use of Mamluk and Ottoman history as a way to convey the current crisis caused by the defeat of 1967. See “Al-Baḥth °an ṭarīq jadīd li-al-qīṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah,” 91.

countryside.<sup>71</sup> Ghālib Halasā identified this as one of the leading waves in the writings of the emerging generation, saying that the attention to folklore “is the clearest in Egyptian colloquial poetry and in many stories and plays in which the artist resorts to stories, popular legends or to using the forms of popular arts such as *al-mawwāl* [popular love song] or *al-ḥadūtah* [popular story].”<sup>72</sup> As such the different myths, fables, and legends are to be seen as an integral part of the innovation, and not just the form in which the innovation occurs.<sup>73</sup>

There was also a great deal of discussion surrounding the sources of influence and inspiration, which these new writers were drawing upon. The writers Yūsif al-Shārūnī, Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Fuʿād al-Tikirlī and Najīb Maḥfūz (in his post-Trilogy novels) were the most cited as far as the Arabic literary context was concerned.<sup>74</sup> These writers were seen as displaying the earliest manifestations of this innovative movement in their work, beginning their careers as early as the 1940s. It was in these works that the shift away from socialist realism could be first detected: the break down of linear narrative, the turn towards literary expressionism, the fracturing of time and space, the focus on the subjective, the use of stream of consciousness, and the merging of the worlds of dreams

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<sup>71</sup> See for example Hafiz, “Majmūʿāt 1968 al-qaṣāṣiyyah,” 63. In this discussion Hafiz uses Ghālib Halasā’s short stories as an example of the use of popular culture in this way.

<sup>72</sup> Ghālib Halasā, “Al-Adab al-jadīd: Malāmiḥ wa itijāhāt,” 117.

<sup>73</sup> Shawqī Khamīs, “Al-Jadīd fī al-qiṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970): 128-138.

<sup>74</sup> See for example Sabry Hafiz, “Al-Uqṣūṣah al-miṣriyyah wa-al-ḥadāthah,” *Jālirī* 68 (October 1969): 83-91 and al-ʿAshrī, *Jil warāʾ jil*.



and reality.<sup>75</sup> Critics also noted the passing of the influence of Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekov, both of whom had served as significant sources of inspiration for the writers of the realist tradition.<sup>76</sup> Instead the similarities in style to writers such as Ernest Hemingway, J. D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, and the intellectual influence of Albert Camus were discussed as more relevant points of comparison for the work of the emerging generation.<sup>77</sup> Hemingway's influence could be seen in the use of short sentences, the absence of an idealized hero, and in the way that the external world became the way to understand the internal world of the characters, characters who often suffered emotional or physical wounds in their constant confrontation with death.<sup>78</sup> Camus offered writers a way to articulate their visions in a world in which they felt increasingly alienated. This was particularly pertinent, according to Ghālib Halasā, given the political upheavals that had beset the Arab world in the years following the Second World War; the period of anti-colonial uprisings had been replaced by brutal repression, violence, and a loss of the heroic values of the earlier period. The sense of futility and absurdity of life now

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<sup>75</sup> °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf, "Muqaddimah fī al-qiṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah," *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970): 186. Lūwīs °Āwad, "Hadha al-jil: i°ṣār ḥaqīqī am zawba°a fī finjān?" *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 70.

<sup>76</sup> Shukrī saw this as evidence of what he called the "rebellion" against the realism of the established generation. Shukrī, "Al-Baṣmah al-akhīrah fī adab al-sittīnāt," 235. See also Ibrāhīm Fathī's "Malāmiḥ mushtarikah fī al-intāj al-qaṣāṣī al-jadīd," *Jālirī* 68 (April 1969), 111.

<sup>77</sup> See for example °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf, "Al-Baḥth °an ṭarīq jadīd lil-qiṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah," 82 and Halasā "Al-Adab al-jadīd: Malāmiḥ wa ittijāhāt." See also Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, *Fajr al-qiṣṣah al-miṣriyyah ma°a sitt dirāsāt ukhrā °an nafs al-marḥalah* (Cairo: Al-Hay°ah al-Miṣriyyah al-°Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1975).

<sup>78</sup> See Halasā "Al-Adab al-jadīd: Malāmiḥ wa ittijāhāt," 118 and Sabry Hafiz, "Majmū°āt 1968 al-qaṣāṣiyyah," 65 and Halasā, "Al-Kibār wa-al-sighār," 43-51.

experienced by writers and intellectuals in the region thus drew them to the work of Camus.<sup>79</sup>

The literary innovations of these writers was largely discussed in relationship to the socio-political atmosphere of the time, an atmosphere which was seen both by writers and critics as influential in shaping artistic production. It was becoming increasingly clear that the socialist-democratic system promised by °Abd al-Nāṣir remained as elusive as ever. Within the cultural sphere, writers and intellectuals had continued to face stringent crack downs by the regime throughout the decade of the sixties.<sup>80</sup> The promise of a democratic, independent, post-colonial nation-state, pursued with such optimism in the fifties had given way to a much more foreboding reality. Sabry Hafiz sums up the changes in the following way:

The sixties was indeed a decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition of almost all political activities; massive industrialization and the absolute absence of freedom; the construction of the High Dam and the destruction of the spirit of opposition; the expansion of free education and the collective arrest of the intellectuals; the reclamation of thousands of acres and the catastrophic detachment of the Sinai peninsula from Egyptian territory in the defeat of 1967; severe censorship and the emergence of evasive jargon among the intellectuals; the deformation of social values and the students' and workers' upheavals; the enlargement of the public sector and the pervasive growth of corruption. During this decade, there was no public activity not subject to official control, everywhere one encountered not living but official beings concealing their individual personalities beneath a carapace of conformity, people who acted out social roles

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<sup>79</sup> See Halasā, "Al-Adab al-jadīd: Malāmiḥ wa ittijāhāt," 115-125. In this article Halasā recognizes the influence of Camus most clearly in Bahā Ṭāhir's *Al-Khutūbah*.

<sup>80</sup> Persecution began as early as 1954 with the expulsions that took place at Cairo University and largely targeted Communists and leftist intellectuals. Imprisonments continued throughout the decade reaching their height between 1959-64. For more see Marina Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech: Prose Literature and Prose Writers in Egypt Under Nasser and Sadat* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation* and Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal al-Ghitani* (Cairo: American University Press, 1994).

and repeated, automatically, slogans that were often contrary to their real hidden opinions.<sup>81</sup>

This disappointment and confusion led to literary production that had a strongly oppositional position; in the words of °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf these writers “basically refuse the state of the existing life, the loss of security, and the torn social relations masked by the hypocrisy of the middle class.”<sup>82</sup> The events of June 5<sup>th</sup> 1967 only served to compound these feelings of loss, defeat, and disappointment. The impact of 1967 was intensely debated by both writers and critics; was it a decisive rupture, a natural progression of the events of the decade, or a defeat that had been clearly predicted by the artists of the age?<sup>83</sup> Of great significance is the fact that though many of the writers of this emerging movement had been writing in the years preceding 1967, they were only discussed as a group in the years that followed the disaster.<sup>84</sup> Yūsif Idrīs went as far as to claim that everything that had been discovered in the aftermath of June 1967 was in fact predicted by the short story writers of the earlier years.<sup>85</sup> Ghālī Shukrī agreed, noting that

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<sup>81</sup> Sabry Hafiz, “The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties,” in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa Boullata (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980), 171.

<sup>82</sup> °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf, “Al-Baḥth °an ṭarīq jadīd li-al qīṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah,” 82. See also Abū °Awf, “Zalāl azmit 5 yunyū wa-al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah al-miṣriyyah,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 3 (March 1971): 71-78.

<sup>83</sup> This position was expressed by Ghālī Shukrī, for example, who insisted that 1967 was not a decisive break but instead a “crowning” of events that had preceded that year. It was as such part of the “historical progression of events.” See “Al-Baṣmah al-akhīrah fī adab al-sittīnāt,” 234.

<sup>84</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> Yūsif Idrīs’ testimony in “Ḥiwār ḥawl azmit al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah” *Al-Hilāl* (Aug 1969): 130. The younger Sabry Hafiz for example argued the exact opposite the following year, citing the failure of the short story writers to predict the crisis as evidence of their failure as pioneers, of the absence of real literary innovation and of the short story’s loss of its true role. Hafiz contrasts this to Maḥfūz’s collection *Khammārat al-qit al-aswad* (The Black Cat Tavern) whose stories possess

writers and intellectuals of what he called “*jīl al-taḥādī*” (the generation of confrontation) had been aware of the major issues of the time in the years leading up to 1967, waging the war for social justice, democracy, and freedom in their works.<sup>86</sup> Writers explained that though they did not write about the events of 1967 explicitly these events “permeated” their work.<sup>87</sup> In fact, for many this was yet another example of the failure of the international struggle for freedom, equality, and justice, and an additional burden that was placed upon the shoulders of this generation. This sense of the weight of responsibility is beautifully captured in the words of Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, in his *Al-Ṭalī‘a* testimonial:

The new generation of which I am a part, is the one that today stands at the canal waters. The ages of the officers and the soldiers there is between 20 and 22 and in them, and in the entire frontline, is everything I strive and wish for. Therefore, I

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the prophetic vision the younger writers lack. See Sabry Hafiz, “Majmū‘āt 1968 al-qaṣāṣiyyah,” 62 and “Majmū‘āt 1969 al-qaṣāṣiyyah,” 66.

<sup>86</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, “Al-Adab al-miṣrī ba‘d al-khāmis min yunyū,” *Al-Ṭalī‘a* 5 (May 1969): 101-108. Among the examples he gives of this “*jīl al-taḥādī*” are Son‘allah Ibrāhīm and Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī both of whom write of the failures of the regime in the years before the defeat.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Izz al-Dīn Najīb, testimony in “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā‘ al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī‘a* 9 (September 1969): 44. It is interesting to note that not all writers and critics privileged 1967 as the defining moment. In describing the different generations Sulaymān Fayāḍ divides them as follows: “The generation of the First World War represented by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, the inter-war generation at the head of which stand Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, Najīb Maḥfūz and al-Ḥakīm, the post-World War Two generation represented by Yūsif Idrīs, and then our generation, the Post-Tripartite Aggression generation.” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1969), 179. Fayāḍ, here positions himself with the writers of the new generation which in and of itself is striking given that he in fact belongs to an older generation, closer in age to Yūsif Idrīs. Al-Fayāḍ marks the Suez crisis of 1956 and the greatly celebrated nationalization of the Suez Canal as the defining moment for his generation. This designation seems rare within the critical material. Ghālib Halasā makes a similar move in which he marks 1958 as the beginning of the “new literature” in an article he published in *Al-Masā’* in 1969, but on the whole critics and writers made many more references to June 1967 and the catastrophic effect it had on Egypt’s social, political, economic, and intellectual life, than any earlier historical moment. See also Ghālib Halasā’s “Malāmiḥ al-adab al-jadīd,” *Al-Masā’*, 6.

hope that everything I write transcends to the level of what these youth, the youth of my generation feel.<sup>88</sup>

The events of 1967 were understood within an international context and not just as a specific defeat for Egypt. Writers and intellectuals sought to connect the aspirations of their generation to their counterparts in Europe and the United States.<sup>89</sup> This ongoing struggle to innovate, experiment, and find better ways to represent an ever-changing reality was connected to a larger battle in the name of socialism, democracy, and freedom. The battle was both social and political as well as artistic and aesthetic. It was acknowledged by these writers that literature and art had a vital role to play in the ongoing fight for liberty and equality in the post-colonial age. Here we see the “commitment” (*iltizām*) inherited from the previous decade.<sup>90</sup> But as Richard Jacquemond notes, it was reformulated to allow for a different utilization of the Sartrian notion:

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<sup>88</sup> Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, testimony in “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā’ al-shabāb,” *Al-Talī’a* 9 (September 1969): 54. Fārūq °Abd al-Qādir argues that al-Ghīṭānī’s work so thoroughly revolves around 1967 and that his use of Mamluk and Ottoman history is a way to deal with the present crisis, that he should in fact be labeled a “post-67” writer. See Fārūq °Abd al-Qādir, “Al-Wajh wa-al-qinā’,” *Al-Talī’a* 6 (June 1972): 188-195. For a more detailed study of the post-1967 story collections see Sabry Hafiz, “Majmū’āt 1969 al-qaṣāṣiyyah,” in which he discusses collections by Najīb Maḥfūz, Yūsif al-Shārūnī and Yūsif Idrīs, tracing the way in which these stories all capture the fear, absurdity, and confusion of the moment.

<sup>89</sup> For example, even though the journal *Jālirī 68* did not specifically reference the student movements in Paris of the same year, it is quite likely that the title was intended to make this connection.

<sup>90</sup> See for example the testimonial given by Raḍwā °Āshūr, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā’ al-shabāb,” *Al-Talī’a* 9 (September 1969): 18. The term “*iltizām*” (commitment) was in usage amongst socialist circles in the 1950s. It was however first coined by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in the 1940s, in his attempt to translate the Sartrian notion of ‘litterature engage.’ For more see Verena Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizām*) and Committed Literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq,” *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (2000): 51-62.

Sartre could be appropriated not only by the supporters of a literature that was in the service of the great national and social causes —and, as the case may be, in the service of the political party that claimed to incarnate them (commitment in the instrumental sense)—but also by the avant-gardes, which foregrounded instead the critical and liberating function of literature (commitment as liberation for the writer and for the reader).<sup>91</sup>

Literature was thus to be used both in the collective fight for socio-economic and political liberation, the “great national and social causes” of the age *and* in the individual quest for freedom to be attained through reading and writing.

These causes extended beyond national or even regional borders, uniting Arab writers and artists with their partners in the United States, Europe, Latin America and Africa. The influences cited, whether literary, political or philosophical, extended beyond the borders of the Arab world to include such thinkers as T.S. Eliot, Sartre, Dostoevsky, Lenin and Guevara. The ongoing battle in Vietnam, the struggles of the African Americans in the United States, and the student movements in France were all linked in the mind of these writers with their own struggles against capitalism, Israeli aggression, and US neo-colonial ventures in the region.<sup>92</sup>

### III: *Al-Ṭalīʿa*: Defining the New Generation

*Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s feature, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʾ al-shabāb” (This is how the Young Writers Speak), began in September 1969, and consisted of a questionnaire targeting members of the emerging artistic community; the journal published the responses of over thirty novelists, short story writers, playwrights, poets, critics, and even

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<sup>91</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 99.

<sup>92</sup> See the testimonies given by Sāmīr ʿAbd al-Bāqīʿ and ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsīm in “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʾ al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalīʿa* 9 (September 1969): 20-23; 32 and Muḥammad Fāris, “Qabl an yughriq al-nahr al-jamīʿ,” *Al-Ṭalīʿa* 11 (November 1969): 109-11.

a number of visual artists. This is interesting given the fact that in later decades the term sixties generation comes to primarily refer to novelists and short story writers, to the exclusion of other artists. Also, despite the inclusion of a few visual artists the focus was primarily upon writers of fiction. This was followed by a number of critical articles, which engaged with many of the issues raised by the artists' responses. Of those interviewed we find a number of renowned figures who would become some of the most prominent members of the sixties generation; writers like Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Amal Dunqul, °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Yūsif al-Qa°īd, Raḍwā °Āshūr, and Sabry Hafiz. We are also presented with a number of literary figures who do not seem to later achieve great literary prominence and whose names are not among those we generally associate with the literary "stars" of the generation. Missing also are key writers such as Bahā° Ṭāhir, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī and Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, who were already central to any discussion of the literary production of this period. This is of course not surprising: selections had to be made by the editorial team and no one could make precise predictions of who would or would not go on to achieve literary success. Furthermore, as the editorial team made clear in later issues, not all its questionnaires were in fact returned by the artists to whom they were addressed.<sup>93</sup>

In the opening pages of the journal, the editorial staff explains the impetus behind this feature: the emergence of new literary faces on the scene since approximately the beginning of the decade. *Al-Ṭalī°a*'s states that it is the "right" of this new Egyptian generation to have a "platform" from which to articulate their opinions and ideas and

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<sup>93</sup> We are told that *Al-Ṭalī°a* originally sent out questionnaires to one hundred and fifty artists. See "Kalimah min *Al-Ṭalī°a*," *Al-Ṭalī°a* 10 (October 1969): 95.

express the particularity of their experiences.<sup>94</sup> It is thus *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s goal to be this platform. The journal notes that this is only the beginning of the dialogue, encouraging all who have opinions about the topic to participate in the exchange taking place on its pages. It also acknowledges that this new literary phenomenon in Egypt is not unfolding in isolation, a realization which motivates an Arab wide survey in the December issue of that same year.<sup>95</sup>

What is particularly striking is the sense of orality that is conveyed in the feature's title. The use of the word “*yatakallamu*” (speak) suggests an immediacy that resonates with the importance and urgency that the journal's editorial staff wished to convey about the significance of the developments in the literary and cultural sphere. It also stresses the notion that the artists are being given the opportunity to voice their *own* positions and opinions in their *own* words; they are in a sense both being asked to classify themselves as an emerging group and situate themselves within the larger literary and cultural milieu. Of course the fact that the editorial board of the journal was making the selections cannot be overlooked; it was in effect deciding who was being given the opportunity to “speak.”<sup>96</sup> What is particularly interesting, I would argue, is the way in which the *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s feature is built upon the necessity to categorize; the artists are being asked to provide the necessary information that would allow them to be defined and situated

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<sup>94</sup> “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʾ al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalīʿa* 9 (September 1969): 14. This introduction was not signed by a particular author but seems to have been intended as an explanation by the editorial team.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s selection did not go unchallenged; the journal published the reactions of artists who objected to the selections that were made. See for example ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abu ʿAwf, “Istiftāʾ majallat *Al-Ṭalīʿa*: Idānah li-qaḍiyyat al-kuttāb al-shabāb,” *Al-Masāʾ* (12 October 1969): 6.



within the larger cultural context. The fact that this discussion is taking place on the pages of *Al-Ṭalīʿa* also speaks to the central role played by the cultural journals during this period (a point which is at the heart of Kendall's study of literary journalism in Egypt). The journal sets itself up here as the forum best able to accommodate the artists' "speech" and also provide a space for extended deliberations, critique, and commentary from members of the cultural community. In doing so it simultaneously elevates its own position, seeking to place itself at the heart of such discussions.

The way *Al-Ṭalīʿa* uses the term "*al-udabāʾ al-shabāb*" (the young writers) in its title immediately casts the debate in terms of the writers' ages, pointing to their youth as *the* source of innovation. The choice of this particular age range (eighteen to thirty-five) explicitly associates the literary innovation of the time with young writers, foreclosing the possibility of older writers being part of what was seen as a new literary movement.<sup>97</sup> The journal's editorial team, having realized this problem, published an amendment in the following issue, stating that although their label of "*jīl jadīd*" (new generation) was not intended to contain within it a specific age limit, they did realize that most of the innovative work was being produced by younger writers, hence the choice of their eighteen to thirty-five age range. They did not however include testimonies by older writers even in later issues.<sup>98</sup> This oppositional binary of old and young was central to

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<sup>97</sup> Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, who does not appear in *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s feature but who is associated with the writers of this generation, and whose work was published in *Jālirī* 68, makes an interesting remark about this issue of age. In *Al-Hilāl*'s August 1970 issue on the short story Ṭāhir argues that he is *not* a part of "*jīl al-shabāb*" (the generation of young writers) *because* of his age. He goes on to explain that thirty-five is the beginning of the end of his youth. He is careful to stress however that being labeled a young writer is by no means an insult but rather an honor he does not deserve. See Bahāʾ Ṭāhir's testimony in Muḥammad Barakāt, "Al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah bayn jīlayn," *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970): 95-96.

<sup>98</sup> See "Kalimah min *Al-Ṭalīʿa*," *Al-Ṭalīʿa* 10 (October 1969): 95.

the discussion surrounding the emergence of this generation. Critics regularly used the idea of “*ṣirāʿ al-ajyāl*” (a generational struggle) in framing this debate; questions were asked about whether this was an antagonistic struggle, or a sign of the health and vitality of the literary sphere, and a necessary part of the path towards literary innovation? This struggle between the generations was largely understood as a struggle between old and young with the question of innovation and influence taking center stage.<sup>99</sup> I will return to the consideration of this opposition shortly.

The biographical information that is included about each artist interviewed reveals a great deal about the way in which the journal’s editors understood this issue of categorization: along with the name of the interviewee, the reader is also provided with the artist’s age, official occupation (other than being an artist), salary, and works to date (both published and unpublished). This, along with the answers to the questionnaire, are intended to allow the reader to define and understand the position of each writer and by extension begin to understand this larger movement of “young writers.”

The artists are then asked to respond to three questions. The first: “When did you first establish the relationship between you and the art you now produce? When did you start producing work?” The second: “What is the climate that controls your relationship to your art with regards to a) the relationship between you and your fellow artists and the institutions related to this art b) the relationship between you and your field of

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<sup>99</sup> See for example Ghālī Shukrī “Thaqāfat 69,” *Al-Ṭalīʿa* (December 1968): 87 and Muḥammad Barakāt’s “Al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah bayn jīlīn,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970): 189-200. It was also the title of Ghālī Shukrī’s famous book *Ṣirāʿ al-ajyāl fi al-adab al-muʿāṣir* (The Generational Struggle in Contemporary Literature) (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1971). Jalāl al-ʿAshrī’s book *Jīl warāʾ jīl* (One Generation After Another) had the subtitle “Al-Ajyāl: liqāʾ am ṣirāʿ?” (The Generations: A Meeting or a Struggle?) in which he argued that even confrontation was a form of connection. See *Jīl warāʾ jīl*, 7.

employment whether it is an artistic field or not? c) The position of past artistic generations to your generation and your relationship to them.” The third: “What are the influences, social, intellectual, and artistic, that contribute to your artistic creation, and given these influences where do you stand with regards to the question of social change in your country generally, the question of Israeli aggression, and the larger issues of the contemporary world?”<sup>100</sup>

The questions that are used in *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s questionnaire alert the reader to the way in which the notion of literary generation is being framed. The answers to the first question —when combined with the artist's biographical information— reveal the way personal and professional biographies are taken to be constitutive of the conceptualization of literary generation. In the biographies the stress is upon age, but also occupation and salary as reflections of class and socio-economic standing within society. The first question however pushes this idea further. It is not just a matter of providing biographical information about each artist, but about locating the moment the artist as “social agent” is created.<sup>101</sup> This idea of the artist as producer, rather than just a “great individual” is very much in line with Bourdieu's articulation of the artist. As Bourdieu states:

Constructing an object such as the literary field requires and enables us to make a radical break with the substantialist mode of thought (as Ernst Cassirer calls it) which tends to foreground the individual, or the visible interactions between individuals, at the expense of the structural relations —invisible, or visible only through their effects— between social positions that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups, or institutions. There are in fact very few other areas in which the glorification of

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<sup>100</sup> “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʿ al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalīʿa* 9 (September 1969): 14-15.

<sup>101</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 29.

‘great individuals’, unique creators irreducible to any condition or conditioning, is more common or uncontroversial.<sup>102</sup>

Here each respondent is being asked to explain the origins of their artistic identity. This identity is based upon the establishment of a “relationship” between the artist and the chosen mode of artistic production, as well as upon the very act of producing artistic work.

Having identified the artist as an active producer of artistic work, the second question focuses on situating the artists within the larger literary and cultural sphere. The understanding here then is that the artist, as actor, is not isolated, but rather operates within a larger context: the emphasis is upon environment, whether it be artistic, cultural, intellectual or professional. The respondents are being asked to place themselves within the Egyptian cultural field, first taking into consideration their positions vis-à-vis their contemporaries. This in effect requires each artist to compare himself/herself to other artists in the field. Furthermore, there is a clear recognition of the importance of cultural institutions in the definition and ultimate success of the artist: as Bourdieu explains such institutions (galleries, publishing houses, museum etc.) play a fundamental role in the creation of the “meaning and value” of the work of art.<sup>103</sup> *Al-Ṭalī‘a*’s editors are clearly aware of the significance of such a role. The final section of the second question takes us back to Bourdieu’s assertion that the central conflict in the literary field of production is “between the consecrated avant-garde and the avant-garde, the established figures and the new comers, i.e. Between *artistic generations*, often only a few years apart, between the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 37.

‘young’ and the ‘old’.”<sup>104</sup> Here the young, emerging writers are being asked to situate themselves vis-à-vis their predecessors, a provocative request that as we shall see in the following section was the source of heated debate.

Finally, the third question reveals an understanding of the artist as a social and political actor in the realms of the national, the regional, and the international. Literature and art are seen as having a vital role to play in the ongoing battle for social, political, and economic equality in the post-colonial age. Here the reference to “Israeli aggression” foregrounds the importance of the 1967 defeat and its effect upon Egyptian society, as noted earlier in the chapter.

In the following section I focus primarily on the second question to show the way in which this issue of categorization and the relationship between the generations was a matter of great significance.

#### IV: Innovation and Experimentation: The Debate of Old vs. Young

*Al-Talī‘a*’s second question, which asked artists to position themselves in relation to their predecessors and contemporaries within the literary field, sparked intense debates about the relationship *between* the generations. It also raised the question about the relationship between innovation and age; within this discussion the idea of a new literary generation was increasingly associated with a young generation of artists. The emphasis on youth was taken up by a number of writers as a positive attribute, which meant that the responsibility for innovation and experimentation lay with them. In this case young writers positioned themselves as a new artistic generation that could lead the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 53.

transformation of the literary sphere. Their young ages were not considered a weakness to be used against them, but as an advantage, which allowed them to understand the contemporary situation in a way that their predecessors could not. It also meant that they were better equipped to explore new aesthetic forms to capture the changing world in which they lived. The poet Amal Dunqul, in his *Al-Ṭalīʿa* testimonial, expresses this very opinion, stating that he does not blame his predecessors for the waning of “*shabābahum al-fannī*,” or the “youth of their art.” Just as they were once the pioneers of their age, it now fell to the members of his generation to take over this role.<sup>105</sup> This sense of responsibility for innovation is at the heart of the now famous manifesto which Ṣunʿallah Ibrāhīm published in 1966 (along with Kamāl Qalash, Raʿūf Musʿad and ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim) on the back cover of his first novel *Tilka-l-rāʿiḥa* (1966; English translation: *The Smell of It*, 1966).<sup>106</sup> In it the writers articulate the idea that it is their responsibility as a new generation, because of the social and political climate in which they live, to break the existing boundaries in literature and art:

If this novel in your hands doesn’t please you, it is not our fault, but rather that of the cultural and artistic atmosphere in which we live, which through the years has been controlled by traditional works and superficial, naive, phenomena. To break the prevailing artistic environment which has solidified and hardened, we have chosen this form of sincere and sometimes painful writing...it is an art concerned overwhelmingly with the attempt to express the spirit of an age and the experience of a generation.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Amal Dunqul, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʾ al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalīʿa* 9 (September 1969): 18.

<sup>106</sup> Ṣunʿallah Ibrāhīm, *Tilka-l-rāʿiḥa* (Cairo: Dār Shahdy, 1986); English translation: *The Smell of It and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1971).

<sup>107</sup> Ṣunʿallah Ibrāhīm, “The Experience of a Generation,” trans. Marilyn Booth. *Index on Censorship* 9 (1987): 22.

The belief that innovation is the domain of young writers was used to either connect or separate them from the previous generation. In her testimonial, Raḍwā °Āshūr states that it is the responsibility of her generation to continue the “path” begun by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Najīb Maḥfūz and Laṭīfah al-Zayāt.<sup>108</sup> For °Ashūr, the revolution against the older generation is not an end in itself. Rather, she argues that the “experimentation” at the center of the conflict is but an “attempt at a deeper understanding of the surrounding world and a better expression of our visions.”<sup>109</sup> Similar opinions are expressed by a number of writers eager to stress their indebtedness to the previous generation, while showcasing the novelty and innovation that they, as young writers, have to offer. Many voiced the opinion expressed by °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim that as a new generation this group of writers share many of the same concerns as the old generation and are as a result a natural, organic continuation of them.<sup>110</sup> In reference to an interview between Lūwīs °Awaḍ and the poet Aḥmad Hijāzī, that was published in the magazine *Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr*, Qāsim stresses his agreement with °Awaḍ. In his response to question two of *Al-Ṭalī°a*'s questionnaire Qāsim states that:

I agree...that we do not belong to a new literary school, but I will add that this is not a weakness, for new schools in art and literature do not emerge from decisions but from fundamental social changes, and we the young writers [*al-udabā° al-shabāb*] have the same anxieties, sorrows and fears that shaped the sentiments of the established generation [*al-jīl al-mustaqir*] as Professor °Awaḍ calls them.

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<sup>108</sup> Raḍwā °Āshūr, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 17.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Qāsim expressed very similar sentiments in *Al-Hilāl*'s October 1970 issue in which he stated that his writing was born from the work of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, Najīb Maḥfūz and Yūsif Idrīs, that he was “made from them” and that he was “a result of their writing” that had remained in his heart and never left him. “Al-Jīl al-qaṣaṣī al-jadīd yatakallam,” *Al-Hilāl* (October 1970): 156.

When there occurs a complete change in the way of our life and the structure of our society and the shape of our ideas and when contemporary pens fail to comprehend this change, then it [this change] will find no one to pay attention to it, and other youthful pens will seize it.<sup>111</sup>

According to Qāsim, what unites these writers across historical generations is a sense of shared sorrows and a common understanding of the social, political, and economic struggles of the period. Age here does not have to be understood as a dividing factor but one that is overridden by a collective experience of contemporary society, that can be shared by different generations, and can thus act as a link between them.

Continuity, however, was not stressed by all. Some writers insisted on the fact that as a new generation they were separate, even cut off from what had preceded them. Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf for instance refers to the “emaciated ghosts” of the earlier generation, who had become irrelevant due to the immense societal changes that had taken place.<sup>112</sup> Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna explains this gap between the generations as a result of the changing circumstances facing his own generation:

I see that very few of them [the older generation] are able to appreciate the new meaning of life and art for our generation. We are a generation under siege [*jīl muḥāṣar*]. But the generation that preceded us was a generation that had the ability to break out. Our generation needs no value as much as it needs freedom. This freedom is that which the previous generation fought for, and the battle for which it seems to have lost...I respect the previous generation but I admit that it gave me little.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Abd al-Hakīm Qāsim, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 21.

<sup>112</sup> Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 15. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Mabruk was another writer who openly revealed the lack of influence that earlier writers had on his own work, stating that he had no strong connection to the previous generation. “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 41.

<sup>113</sup> Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 27.



Yūsif al-Qa°id notes regretfully that the way that the previous generation had “cut itself off” from its literary successors has resulted in what he refers to as the “barbed wire” between the generations.<sup>114</sup> This separation echoes the earlier and more inflammatory statement made by Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Rajab that “we are a generation without masters.”<sup>115</sup>

Some articulated their critiques in terms of the institutional difficulties they faced as emerging writers and the resistance they encountered from the previous generation, which as we have seen many described as closed off. °Abd al-°Al al-Ḥamamṣī and Aḥmad al-Shaykh both identify one of the major problems in this respect as the “*shilal*” (groups or cliques) that dominated the literary sphere in Egypt, dictating the trends in writing and publishing, and determining that literary success was based upon affiliation.<sup>116</sup> Writers like Ḍiyā° Sharqāwī tried to assess this situation and what was described as one generation being closed off from another, by considering the role of literary and cultural ministries and institutions, as well as publishing houses and the press. He argues, (and many of the writers agreed in one degree or another) that the

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<sup>114</sup> Yūsif al-Qa°id, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Talī°a* 9 (September 1969): 34.

<sup>115</sup> Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Rajab, *Al-Jumhūriyyah* (3 October 1963): 13. Jalāl al-°Ashrī begins his critical work, *Jīl warā° jīl* (One Generation After Another) by juxtaposing Rajab’s statement to that made by Yūsif Idrīs (a member of the previous generation). He quotes Idrīs as saying “jīlanā huwa ākhir al-ajyāl” (our generation is the last of the generations). °Ashrī argues that these two positions are indicative of the problems plaguing the literary sphere and hence the need instead to stress “tawāṣul al-ajyāl” (the continuity between the generations). See al-°Ashrī, *Jīl warā° jīl*, 7, 17.

<sup>116</sup> °Abd al-°Al al-Ḥamamṣī and Aḥmad al-Shaykh, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Talī°a* 9 (September 1969): 37-39.

responsibility for the failed dialogue across generations lay with the state institutions, the press, and publishing houses.<sup>117</sup> We are told by the poet Ḥasan Maḥsib for example that the publishing houses *Dār al-Maʿārif* and *Dār al-Hilāl* rarely published any new authors.<sup>118</sup> This crisis in publishing led many writers to seek venues outside of Egypt, namely in Lebanon. Zuhayr al-Shāyib regretfully notes how his work was welcomed by literary journals in Lebanon in a way that it was not in Egypt.<sup>119</sup>

These concerns are of course difficult to verify, but Stagh's work on publishing statistics during this period lends some credibility to Maḥsib's claims. In evaluating the publications during this time Stagh concludes "publishers gave more scope to new writers during the fifties, especially in the period 1955-60, than they did in the sixties, 1961-67."<sup>120</sup> She also traces what she calls the "flight to Beirut" which began in the 1950s, but increased significantly in the decades of the sixties and seventies.<sup>121</sup> It was not just the young writers who made note of this "*azmit al-nashr*" (crisis of publishing). Literary giants such as Najīb Maḥfūz also recognized the problems that plagued the

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<sup>117</sup> Ḍiyā° Sharqāwī, "Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb," *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 53. Al-Ghīṭānī argues a similar point in his testimonial.

<sup>118</sup> Ḥasan Maḥsib, "Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb," *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 25.

<sup>119</sup> Zuhayr al-Shāyib, "Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb," *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 46-47.

<sup>120</sup> Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech*, 51.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-113.

publishing world, but explained that this was due to the inability of the publishers to cater to the growing number of writers in the field.<sup>122</sup>

Writers also asserted that both institutions —the Ministry of Culture and the publishers— were guilty of the continued support of established writers at the expense of emerging ones, the provision of minimal compensation for new writers, and the failure to provide an appropriate forum for dialogue across generations, leading to what Sharqāwī calls the absence of any “real connection between the generations.”<sup>123</sup> Because of this the different generations live completely different realities and are described as occupying “closed circles” which prevent any cross-generational connection from being forged.<sup>124</sup>

Even those who were not critical of these institutions expressed the need for more formal venues for cross-generational dialogue, in the form of conferences and forums in which a “true dialectical relationship, a relationship based on influence” could be established.<sup>125</sup> This dialogue was not limited to literary production but many expressed the desire to extend the lines of communication across the different forms of artistic production, such that innovators in music, theatre, and the visual arts could be in conversation.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz’s testimony in “Ḥiwār ḥawl azmit al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah,” in *Al-Hilāl* (August 1969), 124. Rashād Rushdī attributed this to the fact that journals and newspapers had stopped printing literature. See “Ḥiwār ḥawl azmit al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah” in *Al-Hilāl* (August 1969), 133.

<sup>123</sup> Sharqāwī, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” 51.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Hafīz, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 29. Raḍwā °Āshūr echoed a similar desire in her testimonial.

<sup>126</sup> Sharqāwī, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā° al-shabāb,” 51.

The generational position that pitted “young” against “old” did not always work in the former’s favor. In some cases, established writers and critics took youth as a sign of inexperience. In Suhayr al-Qalamāwī’s article “Zāhirat al-°Aqqād lan tatakarrar” (The Phenomenon of al-°Aqqād Will Not Be Repeated) the critic shows little tolerance for much of the criticisms and concerns raised by the writers. Al-Qalamāwī, once a student of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, a Professor of Arabic Literature at Cairo University, and an established figure in the literary sphere at this time, displays marked suspicions of this younger generation. For instance, in response to the problems they encountered in publishing, she dismisses their worries as unfounded, explaining how other now prominent writers like Najīb Maḥfūz had never been published at such an early age.<sup>127</sup> Her skepticism is also striking in the title of her piece which immediately pits the young writers against the older “masters” of the Arabic tradition: what is implied in her title is that the greatness of writers such as al-°Aqqād and his generation—which includes her own mentor and teacher Ṭāhā Ḥusayn— will not appear again on the Egyptian literary scene.

What is noteworthy is Qalamāwī’s tolerance for writers who clearly paid homage to their predecessors, while stressing the innovations of their generation; critique from these writers was much more palatable to members of the literary establishment.<sup>128</sup> Such

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<sup>127</sup> Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, “Zāhirat al-°Aqqād lan tatakarrar,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 68. Other critics also exhibit skepticism in their writing over the excessive anger shown by the writers of the younger generation. See for example °Alī al-Rā°ī, “Inād Kūrdiliyyā wa-ḥikmat al-malik līr,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 71-74, Laṭīfa al-Zayāt, “Al-Jīl al-jadīd: bayna al-rafḍ wa-al-intimā°,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 74-80 and Luṭfī al-Khūlī, “Jīl al-thawrah, wa-al-tamarud wa-al-ḥujrah al-mughlaqah,” *Al-Ṭalī°a* 9 (September 1969): 80-88.

<sup>128</sup> Laṭīfa al-Zayāt makes a similar point in her article, arguing that it is not possible for the younger generation to deny their debt to the previous generation, since every generation is indebted to its predecessors. See al-Zayāt, “Al-Jīl al-jadīd: bayna al-rafḍ wa-al-intimā°,” 77.

writers Qalamāwī labels as the most promising, showing the greatest potential for future achievement. This is the case with both °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim and Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī who are both praised for the “appreciation” they grant their predecessors and the tradition at large.<sup>129</sup>

A similar paternalism is exhibited by al-Qalamāwī’s contemporary, the established writer and Lūwīs °Awad, in his article “Ḥadha al-jīl: i°ṣār ḥaqīqī am zawba°a fī finjān?” (This Generation: A Real Hurricane or A Storm in A Teacup?). °Awad, a literary innovator during the first half of the century, displays a notable hostility to the experiments of the young generation.<sup>130</sup> Again his title serves to call into question the legitimacy of the literary output of these young writers, deriding their force as a significant movement. Much of his criticism is directed against the “manners” of some of the writers who display what he calls “°uqūq” (disobedience), “juḥūd” (ingratitude) and “bajāḥah” (vanity), “biting the hands extended to help them.”<sup>131</sup> He further expresses his hope that these literary talents are real, and not the “talents of magicians.”<sup>132</sup> If their creations are the work of magicians, °Awad predicts they will soon dry up after

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<sup>129</sup> Al-Qalamāwī, “Zāhirat al-°Aqqād lan tatakarrar,” 68.

<sup>130</sup> °Awad was foremost among Marxist critics in formulating a theory of the relationship between literature and society and the importance of literary engagement. His poetry collection *Plutoland* (1938-1940) was an innovative experiment in the use of vernacular language and is seen by critics as a precursor to the “Free Verse Movement” in Arabic poetry. Expelled from his position as a Professor of English Literature at Cairo University, in the early 1950s, he later came to occupy the privileged position of literary editor of the state newspaper *Al-Ahrām* in 1962. See °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf, *Madkhal aqni°at al-mu°allim al-°āshir: Lūwīs °Awad bayna al-dīmuqrāṭīyyah wa-al-Mārksīyyah* (Cairo: Al-Majlis al-°Alā lil-Thaqāfah, 2001) and Lūwīs °Awad, *The Literature of Ideas in Egypt, Part I* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

<sup>131</sup> °Awad, “Ḥadha al-jīl: i°ṣār ḥaqīqī am zawba°a fī finjān?,” 69.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

producing what little literary creations they have to offer, after which they will become a burden on the literary movement, turning even on members of their own generation. He adds, that the absence of any clear articulation on the part of the writers of their position makes it impossible for him to really comment on their concerns. This idea in particular seemed to anger the poet Hasan Maḥsib, who responded with the provocative question of whether this so-called “established generation” had produced a manifesto outlining “a philosophy or clear point of view.”<sup>133</sup> °Awaḍ ends his article by posing the question as to whether this new generation is indeed tormented or whether it is merely enacting the biological anxiety that drives the young to revolt against their fathers, thus undermining the importance of the literary experimentation with which they were increasingly associated.<sup>134</sup> This opposition of father and son, old and young, that °Awaḍ employs in his closing remarks, reaffirms the generational hierarchy of the field, this time privileging experience over youth, and suggesting that one is to be valued over the other.

#### V: *Jālīrī 68*: Publication over Categorization?

The way *Al-Ṭalī‘a*’s feature insists that the emerging group identify and explain itself is particularly interesting when considered vis-à-vis the vision articulated by the journal *Jālīrī 68*. As Kendall argues in her work, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt*, the journal is fundamental for understanding how this

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<sup>133</sup> Ḥasan Maḥsib, “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabā’ al-shabāb,” *Al-Ṭalī‘a* 9 (September 1969): 24.

<sup>134</sup> The metaphor of reproduction is quite common in this context. For example Jalāl al-°Ashrī argues that there is a connection between the generations, since one generation produces the next. If this is not the case °Ashrī states, one would have to acknowledge that the predecessors were “*jīl °aqīm*” (a sterile generation), which he refutes. Al-°Ashrī, *Jīl warā’ jīl*, 18.

avant-garde movement —what became known as the sixties generation— positioned itself within the literary sphere.<sup>135</sup> What is striking is the way in which this independent journal (not funded by any state institution) that ran for only eight issues in total, managed to make its impact felt on the literary scene, publishing an impressive number of emerging writers.<sup>136</sup> In doing so, it brought considerable attention to this group, no doubt fuelling much of the desire to categorize that I have been explaining. This desire was, as I argue, further exacerbated by the absence of a clear manifesto printed in the journal.

In its very first issue, dated May/June 1968, the editor-in-chief, Aḥmad Mursī, provides a short editorial statement that offers some explanation of the vision of the journal.<sup>137</sup> Mursī first stresses the painful period of transformation that the Egyptian nation is experiencing, in the aftermath of the defeat of 1967, as it awaits its “moment of glorious birth.”<sup>138</sup> He then explains that given this context the journal has a role, even an obligation, to contribute a “modest brick in the edifice of the new, free, socialist-democratic nation.”<sup>139</sup> He goes on to say that “although *Jālirī 68* is not a political journal, it believes that if it succeeds in revealing the truth about that which moves the wings of the writers, poets, and artists of the members of “*jīl al-yawm*” [the generation of the day]

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<sup>135</sup> Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 110-139.

<sup>136</sup> For a complete list of the authors published by *Jālirī 68* see the appendix of the second volume of the journal compilation entitled “Kashāf majallat *Jālirī 68*”, *Jālirī 68*, al-juz<sup>3</sup> al-thānī (Cairo: Maṭbū<sup>3</sup>āt al-Kitābah al-Ukhrā).

<sup>137</sup> *Jālirī 68* was founded by Mursī, Ibrāhīm Mansūr and Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, along with Ghālīb Halasā, Sayyid Ḥijāb, and Jamīl °Aṭīyyah Ibrāhīm.

<sup>138</sup> Aḥmad Mursī, “Ṭaṣḍīr,” *Jālirī 68*, (April –May 1968): 2.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

then it would have lived up to the promise it made to itself to participate in the battle for freedom and reconstruction.”<sup>140</sup>

Mursī’s editorial is noteworthy in a number of respects. Firstly, the *Jālīrī 68* team is eager to stress here that its agenda is *not* political. This is of course despite the fact that it recognizes the tumultuous experiences the nation is undergoing as a result of the 1967 defeat. Furthermore, I argue that the role it assigns itself —of contributing to the rebirth of a new socialist-democratic and free nation— is in fact political. However, the emphasis here is not on the political positions of the journal’s founders or its contributors, nor is there a sense that the journal is advocating a particular political stance. I also maintain that the goal of discovering “the truth about that which moves the wings of the writers, poets, and artists of the members of the generation of the day” is to be achieved through the presentation of the work of the writers. The reference to “*jīl al-yawm*” (the generation of the day) also in many ways signifies the ways in which *Jālīrī 68* tried to carve out a different space for itself within the parameters of the discussion.<sup>141</sup> While it clearly prided itself on publishing new and emerging writers —as evidenced by the stories published in its issues— it nevertheless sought to locate literary innovation and experimentation in the work itself, regardless of the age of the respective writers. The emphasis here is on the significance of the contemporary moment; the binary between “old” and “young” is not relevant, rather the importance is placed upon the “generation of the day” as being those artists able to capture the significance of the present moment.

The importance of this distinction prompted the *Jālīrī 68* team to reiterate their position

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Kendall makes a similar argument in her work. See Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde*, 132.



in the editorial marking the passing of over a year since the journal's emergence, stating that "the question of innovation has nothing to do with a particular age just as it is not the privilege of just one generation."<sup>142</sup>

Aside from the aforementioned introduction by Mursī, the only other "manifesto" that was published in the journal came in the April 1969 edition dedicated to the short story. Here the editorial team justifies their choice of which works to include stating that they had to be representative of a "school or trend in the contemporary short story," saying nothing of such movements being associated with writers of a particular age.<sup>143</sup> This idea was stressed by Idwār al-Kharrāṭ (a member of *Jālirī 68*'s editorial board) in an article he published in *Al-Masā'* in April 1969 entitled "*Majallat 68 wa-al-qīṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-mu'āṣarah*" (*Journal 68 and the Contemporary Egyptian Short Story*) which emphasized how the published stories represented "the sensibility of this age."<sup>144</sup>

Both the absence of a clear manifesto, and *Jālirī 68*'s refusal to provide an explanation of the stance of its participants, seems to have frustrated members of the literary and cultural sphere. Sāmī Khashabah, in a piece he wrote in *Al-Ādāb*, criticizes

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<sup>142</sup> *Jālirī 68* (October 1969): 5.

<sup>143</sup> "Introduction," *Jālirī 68* (April 1969): 3.

<sup>144</sup> Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, "*Majallat 68 wa-al-qīṣṣah al-miṣriyyah al-mu'āṣarah*," *Al-Masā'* 4515 (10 April 1969): 6. I borrow the translation of "*ḥassāsiyyah*" as "sensibility" from Kendall. See *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt*. Al-Kharrāṭ developed this idea in his critical work *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah: maqālat fī al-ẓahirah al-qaṣaṣiyyah* (The New Sensibility: Articles on the Narrative Phenomenon) published in 1993. The term "*ḥassāsiyyah jadīdah*" was one al-Kharrāṭ began using as early as the 1960s and represents the critic's attempt to bring together the social, historical, and the aesthetic, revealing the way in which the interplay between these different forces was largely responsible for the explosion of innovation that took place in the sixties. I will expand upon al-Kharrāṭ's formulation later in this chapter.

the *Jālirī 68* group for not providing a clear definition of itself in its first editorial.<sup>145</sup> This echoes Lūwīs °Awaḍ’s criticism of the “young writers” of *Al-Ṭalī‘a*’s feature, and was perhaps part of what motivated the journal to try and define the emerging generation. This demand was partly answered in a short retrospective piece entitled “Li-mādhā 68? Wa li-mādhā kān yajib an tastamirru? Wijhat naẓar shakhsiyyah jiddan” (Why 68? And Why it Had to Continue? A Very Personal Point of View) published in *Jālirī 68*’s last issue, in which Idwār al-Kharrāṭ discusses the aims of the journal, which had tried to be “a sphere for adventure...an open forum” for literary innovation and experimentation.<sup>146</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ also explains that “*jīl 68*” (the 68 generation) was united by a strong sense of revolutionary spirit, an ongoing resolve to face the challenges of the age, and a refusal to accept artistic and literary forms that had lost their relevance.<sup>147</sup> Of significance of course is al-Kharrāṭ’s use of the term “*jīl 68*” (the 68 generation) which, like Mursī’s “*jīl al-yawm*,” (the generation of the day) emphasizes the importance of the contemporary moment, over the importance of the age of the writers.<sup>148</sup> In an article that appeared in the same issue, al-Kharrāṭ specified that the term referred to the entire literary age, and not just to the writers of the journal *Jālirī 68*.<sup>149</sup> Ghālī Shukrī notes that the choice of Idwār al-Kharrāṭ as a member of the editorial board is also one of the ways in which the

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<sup>145</sup> Sāmī Khashabah, “Al-nash°ah al-thaqāfiyyah fī al-waṭan al-°arabī,” *al-Ādāb* (July 1968), 74-6.

<sup>146</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, “Li-mādhā 68? Wa li-mādhā kān yajib an tastamirru? Wijhat nadhar shakhsiyyah jiddan,” *Jālirī 68* (February 1971): 5.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>148</sup> One could also consider the name of the journal as drawing attention to the importance of the contemporary moment.

<sup>149</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, “Ibrāhīm Aṣlān wa qinā° al-rafḍ,” *Jālirī 68* (February 1971): 78.

*Jālirī 68* group sought to cross generational boundaries, creating a sense of dialogue and exchange between writers of different ages.<sup>150</sup> The cross-generational position of *Jālirī 68* enabled the writers of this emerging generation to present themselves as a united, forceful group whose legitimacy stemmed from an aesthetic innovation which they shared with more established figures in the field. A number of writers and critics in the literary field expressed similar dissatisfaction with the binary between “young” and “old,” noting that the question should be one of innovation not of age. (I will return to this issue in the following section.) It was a way for the writers to avoid the charges of inexperience associated with their youth. It also meant that al-Kharrāt, who had begun his literary career in the 1940s and whose work was experimental even then, came to be recognized as one of the principal inspirations and founders of this movement, bolstering his own standing in the field.

Despite *Jālirī 68*'s attempts to present a framework that moved beyond the dichotomy of young and old, it nevertheless persisted in some instances. Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī's article “Al-tajdīd..wa *Majallat 68*” (Innovation and *Journal 68*) published in November 1968 in *Al-Masāʿ*<sup>3</sup> was an attempt at an objective appraisal of the journal's performance.<sup>151</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, whose work was published and discussed in *Jālirī 68*, states that it was “the dream of every young writer that there would exist one day a journal to take in the production of the youth and be able to create a serious literary trend.”<sup>152</sup> *Jālirī*

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<sup>150</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, “Al-Baṣmah al-akhīrah fī adab al-sittīnāt,” in *Dhikrāyāt al-jīl al-dāʿiʿ* (Baghdād: Wizārat al-ʿĀlām. Mudīriyat al-Thaqāfah al-ʿĀmmah, 1972), 236.

<sup>151</sup> Al-Bisāṭī himself had been published in the June 1968 edition of the journal. His short story *Ibtisāmāt al-madīnah al-rumādiyyah* was published alongside a critical study of the collection of which it was a part —*Al-Kibār wa-al-sighār*— by Ghālīb Halasā. *Jālirī 68* (June 1968): 43-56.

<sup>152</sup> Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, “Al-tajdīd..wa majallat 68,” *al Masāʿ*<sup>3</sup> 4379 (23 November 1968): 6.

68 was the realization of such a dream. And yet, according to al-Bisāṭī, it was not fulfilling its initial promises, as expressed in the editorial cited earlier by Mursī. It was hoped that *Jālirī 68* would act as a “platform for the new generation.”<sup>153</sup> However, as a result of the actions of its editorial board, the journal did not always represent the generation it claimed to stand for; al-Bisāṭī claimed that it published too many older, established writers —some from its own editorial board in fact. (It is interesting here to note how al-Bisāṭī seems to slip into the position which associates literary innovation with young writers specifically.) What was needed in his opinion was an examination of the editorial board such that it would better represent the needs of the youth. This is not surprising given that the most common grievance expressed by the young writers in the literary journals of this time was, as discussed earlier in this chapter, related to “*azmit al-nashr*” (crisis of publishing).<sup>154</sup> Muḥammad Badawī argues that this antagonism towards the establishment was an attempt on the part of the younger generation of writers to redefine their roles as writers and intellectuals: they simultaneously rejected the state’s attempt to dictate the function of the intellectual and tried to separate themselves from those enmeshed in the cultural apparatus of the state.<sup>155</sup> The majority of the writers from the emerging generation expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that publishing houses and the press favored established writers over them. *Jālirī 68* then was as much

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> See for example the testimonies in “Hākadhā yatakallamu al-udabāʾ al-shabāb,” *Al-Taṭīʿa* 9 (September 1969): 14-88, the testimonies in “Ḥiwār ḥawl azmat al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1969): 122-138 and Ṣalāḥ ʿAdas “Azmat nashr am azmat intāj,” *Al-Zuhūr, Mulḥaq al-Hilāl* (August 1976): 8-10.

<sup>155</sup> Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 228-235.

about propagating a different vision of literary innovation and categorization as it was about providing a legitimate forum for emerging writers to publish their work.

#### VI: Can One Speak of A Generation?

As we have seen from the discussion thus far, there was little doubt that new innovations were taking place during this period. However, the origins of this innovative movement and what it should be called was an incredibly contentious issue. The literary critical material from this time is replete with different terms employed by critics in their attempt to come to terms with the emerging movement. They seem to have struggled with what to call the new group of writers, who were producing a different kind of writing, but that had precursors in the work of more established authors, and who posited themselves as both confrontation and continuation. What makes the debates surrounding the sixties generation so fascinating is the opportunity they provided for writers and critics to think beyond traditional forms of categorization and that as a result produced rigid boundaries between generations. Thinking beyond the generational divide seemed to unsettle the binary of old and young, and by extension the hierarchy of the literary field in which authority and standing were largely associated with age. It did not entirely do away with this hierarchy however, but rather attempted to place the greatest importance on innovation over age. This was not just an attempt undertaken by the writers and editors of *Jālirī 68*, but was an issue that occupied critics in the years that followed. In trying to avoid the label of “*jīl*” (generation) critics resorted to other terms such “*ru’yah*” (vision), “*muwjah*” (wave), “*ḥarakah*” (movement) and “*itijāh*” (direction). Some sought to place the aforementioned terms under the umbrella of the generational label; Ghālī Shukrī for example stated that there were always new generations, but asked if this generation had a

new vision (*ru'yah*).<sup>156</sup> Ascertaining that there did indeed exist a new vision (he cited the existence of the journal *Jālirī 68* as an example of the expression of this new vision)<sup>157</sup> he made sure to state that age was *not* what separated one generation from the next. It was instead:

This vision which separates the avant-garde direction from the traditional conservative directions of writers from the same generation. That is, it is no longer the close age range that is the decisive factor in differentiating between one generation and the other, but the qualitative change in the view towards literature and life that has become the decisive criterion between the vanguard of the generation (even if its style takes on an experimental method that is imposed on many and even causes some people something of a shock) and between the rest of the generation that reach a high level of talent and exertion but in the scope of the prevailing literary and life experiences.<sup>158</sup>

A similar attempt to distinguish different movements *within* individual generations was expressed by Najīb Maḥfūz in a testimony he contributed to *Al-Hilāl*'s August 1970 special issue on the short story. As we see from his analysis of the current literary movement, Maḥfūz grapples with some of the same fundamental complexities as Shukrī, seeming to arrive at a slightly different conclusion:

There is indeed a new generation of short story writers in Egypt and this is a generation that has forced itself upon the literary scene and no one can deny this effective and productive presence. But this new generation has nothing in common with each other except its youth. They come together under the banner of one time period. Their ages are close and their experiences with writing in terms of duration is almost one. But apart from that there is not one artistic direction or one intellectual or artistic vision. They are different and varied waves, for there are some who write critical realism, and some who write socialist realism, and some

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<sup>156</sup> Shukrī, "Jīl jadīd am ru'yah" in *Dhikrāyāt al-jīl al-dā'i* (Baghdād: Wizārat al-A'lām, Mudīriyat al-Thaqāfah al-Āmmah, 1972), 59.

<sup>157</sup> Shukrī goes on to contrast the avant-garde efforts of *Jālirī 68* with the more conservative publication issued by *Nadī al-Qissah* in the same month of that year. Ghali Shukrī, "Jīl jadīd am ru'yah," 60.

<sup>158</sup> Shukrī, "Jīl jadīd am ru'yah," 60.

who lean towards experimentation and use modern styles like expressionism and symbolism or other styles of artistic writing. This means that if we speak about ‘*abnā*’ (the youth) of this generation we must differentiate between our speech about them as youth and our speech about them from an artistic perspective. *They are one generation but different movements.*”<sup>159</sup>

A similar position was expressed by °Abd al-Raḥmān Shalash for example who noted how the use of term “*adab al-shabāb*” (literature of the youth) was an “unfair designation...and that literary creation was not determined by the particular age of the poet, short story writer, novelist or playwright, but was rather the creation of those of all ages, who possessed literary talent.”<sup>160</sup> °Ādil °Abd al-Ṣamad posed a similar question; “Does our understanding of the literature of the old generation and the new generation revolve around the axis of age?”<sup>161</sup> Answering in the negative, °Abd al-Ṣamad argued for a critical perspective that understood the term “new” as relating to “progressive.” In this sense “*adab al-shabāb*” was to be understood as any literature that “succeeded in expressing, with honesty and fidelity, the given facts and pains of the age.”<sup>162</sup> °Abd al-Ṣamad further stressed the need to categorize literary works according to schools and not generations:

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<sup>159</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz’s testimony in Muḥammad Barakāt’s “Al-Qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah bayn jīlayn,” *Al-Hilāl* (August 1970), 190. Emphasis added. Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī made a similar point in the October issue of the same year stating that “We have a young generation of writers. And it is a generation that is distinct from the previous one. They do not create between them one school. Or even one wave but the opposite, for every one of them is distinct from the other. He has his own world and his own artistic treatment.” See al-Bisāṭī’s testimony in “Al-Jīl al-qaṣāṣī al-jadīd yatakallam,” *Al-Hilāl* (October 1970), 160.

<sup>160</sup> °Abd al-Raḥmān Shalash, “Adab al-shabāb wa-al-udabā° al-shubbān,” *Al-Zuhūr, Mulḥaq al-Hilāl* (September 1976): 9.

<sup>161</sup> °Ādil °Abd al-Ṣamad, “Adab al-shabāb fī al-mīzān,” *Al-Hilāl* (September 1976): 10.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

I am still convinced that the division of writers into ‘*shabāb*’ [young] and ‘*shuyūkh*’ [old], instead of the division into progressive, innovative writers, versus writers that are artistically backward and intellectually regressive (and this is the normal division), is the wrong direction... And the division of literature into ‘*adab al-shuyūkh*’ [literature of the old] and ‘*adab al-shubān*’ [literature of the youth] instead of its division into movements, schools or waves (and this is the logical division) is a distorted way which destroys the cause of artistic literature itself.<sup>163</sup>

The attempts of these writers and critics to find an alternative terminology to that of generation, or to separate the issue of age from that of innovation, resonates with the endeavors made by the *Jālirī 68* team. In the following section I turn to an examination of Idwār al-Kharrāṭ’s idea of “*al-ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*” (a new sensibility), a term he coined in the decade of the sixties, to refer to the aesthetic innovations taking place in the literary sphere, and which he developed in the following decades.<sup>164</sup> I present this an example of the attempt to replace generational language within the cultural field in Egypt. I then turn from the aesthetic contribution of the generation to a brief description of their cultural consecration, which is to say the way in which these writers came to occupy positions of power and prominence within the cultural sphere in Egypt, focusing primarily on the seven writers that are the subject of this larger study.

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<sup>163</sup> c̣Ādil c̣Abd al-Ṣamad, “Adab al-shabāb fī al-mīzān,” *Al-Hilāl* (September 1976): 10. See also Muḥammad Mahrān al-Sayyid, “Al-Qadīm wa-al-jadīd bayn al-shabāb wa-al-shuyūkh,” *Al-Ṭalīc̣a* 10 (October 1969): 89-90 and Faraj Ṣādiq Maksīm, “Mawāqif la ayyāl,” *Al-Ṭalīc̣a* 10 (October 1969): 94-95.

<sup>164</sup> In his exploration of the “new sensibility,” or what he terms the “post-Mahfouzian” novel, al-Musawī shows the way in which al-Kharrāṭ borrowed his formulation from the work of Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, and Susan Sontag, a point which interestingly is not mentioned by al-Kharrāṭ in his work. See al-Musawī, *Infirāt al-c̣aqd al-muqaddas: munc̣aṭafāt al-riwāyah al-c̣arabiyyah ba<sup>c̣</sup>d Mahfūz* (Cairo: Al-Hay<sup>3</sup>ah al-c̣Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1999), 76-78.



VII: “*Al-hassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*” and the Consecration of the Sixties Generation in Egypt

The debates that had raged in the late sixties and early seventies started to subside with the establishment and consecration of the writers in the years that followed —both in terms of their positions within the literary field and their literary innovations. In fact by the mid-seventies questions began to be asked about the emergence of new movements on the literary scene.<sup>165</sup> The different aesthetic directions within the movement grew clearer of course with the increased literary production of this group. Perhaps the best critical articulation and analysis of the movement is to be found in Idwār al-Kharrāṭ’s seminal work *Al-Hassāsiyyah al-jadīdah: maqālāt fī al-zāhirah al-qaṣāsiyyah* (The New Sensibility: Articles on the Narrative Phenomenon) published in 1993, which attempted a categorization of the different aesthetic trends within the larger movement.<sup>166</sup> This idea of a “sensibility” represents the critic’s attempt to bring together the social, historical, and the aesthetic, revealing the way in which the interplay between these different forces was largely responsible for the explosion of innovation that took place in the sixties and that continued in the decades that followed:

As for the period of the sixties, we witnessed great hopes and tragic failures, national successes and frustrations, glories and pains, and deep-seated changes in social relationships, unprecedented in the modern history of the Arab world. As for the seventies and eighties, the Arab countries came to know the supremacy of growing consumerist ‘values,’ the disappearance of socialist ideologies and practices, the brain drain, the explosion of sectarian violence from time to time, the assertion of Islamic fundamentalism... and the decline of both material and

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<sup>165</sup> See for example Fārūq °Abd al-Qādir “Malāmiḥ min jil jadīd fī al-qiṣṣāh al-miṣriyyah al-qaṣīrah,” *Al-Tali’a* 8 (August 1974): 147-149 and Aḥmad Ḥusayn °Abd al-Tawāb “Hal hiyyah ḥaqqan malāmiḥ min jil jadīd,” *Al-Tali’a* 9 (September 1974), 165.

<sup>166</sup> This idea was developed by critics who referred to the aesthetic developments that appeared in the sixties and continued in the decades that followed as “post-Mahfouzian.” See for example al-Musawi, *Infirāt al-°aqd al-muqaddas: mun°atafāt al-riwāyah al-°arabiyyah ba°d Maḥfūz*.

spiritual resources. All this combined with other far-reaching social and political disturbances.<sup>167</sup>

It is thus clear that the sensibility of which al-Kharrāṭ speaks extends beyond the decade of the sixties, and as will become clear in the later chapters of this dissertation, is manifest in the literature of the following decades.

In his work al-Kharrāṭ identifies the five main aesthetic trends, which make up this “new sensibility” providing detailed literary analysis of the work of the writers of this movement. What is important to remember—and al-Kharrāṭ himself was careful to emphasize—is the fact that any one writer could draw on a variety of different trends in his/her work. No one author need thus be designated to one single category. Here too al-Kharrāṭ continued to stress that his use of the terms, movement, phenomenon or wave did not refer to a limited generation or decade but to a larger sensibility that led to particular aesthetic innovations.<sup>168</sup> In his study, one can detect many of the issues that were discussed in the early years of the movement and which have been the focus of the discussion thus far. In this section I will briefly present the different trends identified by al-Kharrāṭ as a way of showing how the innovations of this group came to be identified and understood in the decades that followed, particularly when their significance was no longer in question.

In describing the explosion of innovation that took place in the sixties al-Kharrāṭ identifies some of the markers of what he terms the “new sensibility”:

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<sup>167</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 10.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 15. Jalāl al-°Ashrī took a different approach in his work *Jīl warā° jīl* in which he maintained the idea of generation but argued for “*tawāṣul al-ajyāl*” (the connection between the generations) showing the way in which each literary generation was affected by its predecessors. See *Jīl warā° jīl*.

Breaking the uniform narrative order, breaking the traditional complex, submersion in the interior not the focus on the exterior, destroying the progression of time in a linear path, the overlap of events in the present, the past, and the future. Threatening the structure of consecrated language and throwing it out of the museums of dictionaries for good. Expanding the meaning of reality to include once again dreams, myths, and poetry. Questioning —if not attacking— the existing social structure. Destroying the existing, accepted context of language. Invading the caves of the subconscious. Using the ‘I’ —not to express emotion and grief—but to expose the caves of the self, in order to reach that mysterious place, what I might call ‘that which is between the two selves,’ and that now replaces a supposed ‘objectivity’.<sup>169</sup>

He then proceeds to describe each of the trends. The first of the five trends that al-Kharrāṭ describes is “*Ṭayyār al-tashyī*” (The Wave of Objectification/Reification) in which characters appear like objects, representing only themselves. In these works the authors employ an objective language, bare and stripped down, void of emotion, much like the vision they represent. This vision of the world is both a refusal of it, with all its oppression and injustice, and also a deep engagement with it. These writers match the severity of the world with an aesthetic severity, while also suggesting the possibilities of other realities, other worlds. The work of Bahā° Ṭāhir, Ibrāhīm Āṣlān, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī and Jamīl °Aṭīyyah all fall within this category.<sup>170</sup>

The second trend is “*Al-ṭayyār al-dākhilī*” (The Wave of Interiority) which in many ways is on the other end of the spectrum to “*ṭayyār al-tashyī*.” Here the focus is on the interior world of the characters, presented in a language that is bursting with emotion and sensation. Conventional dialogue is not important, replaced instead with internal monologues or the stirrings of the imagination. Time here follows the logic of dreams. Internal and external worlds intermingle in a vision of obscurity and confusion.

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<sup>169</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 11-12.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

Few writers have dedicated themselves entirely to this wave, though notable among them is Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Mabruk, Muḥammad Hāfiẓ Rajab and the Syrian writer Ḥaydar Ḥaydar.<sup>171</sup>

The third wave identified by al-Kharrāt is that of “*Ṭayyār istīḥā’ al-turāth al-‘arabī al-taqīdī, al-tārīkhī aw al-sha‘bī*” (The Wave that Draws on the Traditional, Historical or Popular Heritage). Here the writers draw on folklore and popular stories, depending on the collective memory of the people. The most notable writers in this case are Yaḥyā Ṭāhir ‘Abdallah, and ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, though both Muḥsin Yūnis and Yūsif Abū Riyyah have also drawn on a similar tradition. Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī is identified as the writer who has most successfully drawn on the historical heritage in both the language and content of his work, to provide a critical commentary on the contemporary world.<sup>172</sup>

“*Al-ṭayyār al-wāqī‘ī al-siḥrī*” (The Wave of Magical Realism) is the fourth wave within “al-hassāsiyyah al-jadīdah.” Here the boundaries between the objective world of the senses and that of the imagination fall away. The work of Ibrāhīm ‘Īsā, Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd and al-Kharrāt himself fall into this category.<sup>173</sup>

The fifth and final wave is that of the “*al-ṭayyār al-wāqī‘ī al-jadīd*” (The Neo-realist Wave) which brings together writers such as Sulaymān Fayād, Ṣun‘allah Ibrāhīm, Salwā Bakr, Khayrī Shalabī and ‘Alā’ al-Dīb. This wave is a form of purification of the conventional realist form, using it in such a way as to express the opposition to existing

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 19.

forms of power. Writers employ a variety of modernist techniques, among them the use of documentary language, political discourse, and the story within a story.<sup>174</sup>

Despite the importance of al-Kharrāt's critical intervention, the writers of this group continue to be referred to predominantly as the sixties generation. The struggles that took place over categorization throughout the sixties and seventies did not ultimately alter the dynamics of the field, but seem to have subsided once the legitimacy of the sixties generation was no longer in question. This is further attested to by the fact that the innovative movement that caused a comparable stir on the literary scene in the decades that followed came to be known as the "nineties generation." This is in line with what Wiljan van den Akker and Gillis J. Dorleijin label as the "idea of alternate generations," such that "once a generation has established itself, it is succeeded by a new one."<sup>175</sup> As such the idea of a literary generation continues to be understood as related to a particular decade.

The consecration of the literary innovations of the sixties generation was accompanied by the establishment of the members of the group as significant actors within the Egyptian literary sphere—I am intentionally limiting the discussion to the accomplishments of the seven authors discussed in this study. Consecration here is understood as the recognition of the writers as important players within the cultural sphere, and is reflected (though not exclusively) in the reception and translation of their works and in the conferral of awards, both sources of material and cultural acclaim.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>175</sup> Van den Akker and Dorleijin, "Talkin' 'bout Two Generations," 11.

The decade of the seventies proved to be particularly challenging for writers and intellectuals in Egypt. Almost immediately after taking power Anwar al-Sādāt began to dismantle the cultural establishment instituted under °Abd al-Nāṣir, closing down journals and newspapers, withdrawing state support from the arts, and cracking down on leftist oppositional critics, forcing many writers and journalists into retirement. This reached its zenith with arrests that took place in September 1981, when critics of the Camp David agreements were imprisoned on the pretext of instigating religious unrest.<sup>176</sup> This policy of persecution and marginalization pushed many writers into exile during the years of al-Sādāt’s regime. With the coming to power of Ḥusnī Mubārak there was a reversal of the cultural policies of the state, with greater emphasis placed upon establishing links between intellectuals and the institutions of power. This is perhaps most notable for example in the fact that many of the writers of this generation were recognized by the state, and awarded accordingly, during this period. This policy did not of course prevent numerous confrontations from erupting over the years between the writers and the state, surrounding issues of censorship, domestic and foreign policy, and the exercise of state power. Each member of this generation has negotiated this position in different ways, with some writers (like Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm) insisting upon a complete separation from the regime of power, while others (such as Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī) have maintained crucial links with the institutions of power. Such choices have of course affected the position and recognition of each writer within the literary field. I briefly map

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<sup>176</sup> For more see Stagh’s *The Limits of Freedom of Speech* and Barbara Harlow “Egyptian Intellectuals and the Debate on the ‘Normalization of Cultural Relations,’” *Cultural Critique*, No.4 (Autumn 1986): 33-58.

out the literary careers of each of the seven writers, at the end of this chapter, in an attempt to reveal this process of consecration.<sup>177</sup>

### VIII: Conclusion

By the end of the sixties there had emerged onto the scene a young group of writers whose literary production exhibited new aesthetic innovations worthy of critical attention. As I have demonstrated in this chapter the analysis of these innovations, and the discussion surrounding this emerging movement, revealed an anxiety about the very issue of categorization. The origins of this innovative movement and what it should be called was an incredibly contentious issue. What was at stake in these discussions was the positions of power and authority within the literary and cultural field. The choice of categorization (either by the emerging writers or the established figures in the field) speaks to issues of positioning, legitimacy, and influence. What this group of emerging writers chose to call itself, and how its members understood this designation, reveals a great deal about how they wished to situate themselves vis-à-vis their predecessors, what they understood as being the social and political role of the writer, as well as how they imagined gaining access and authority within the field. The response of the established figures in the field to these choices of self-identification and categorization also reveals an anxiety about their positions within the field and the source of literary innovation. I thus emphasize the significance of the generational debates that raged on the pages of the literary journals during this time. As we have seen the understanding of the category of generation could be manipulated to stress either the innovation or the inexperience of

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<sup>177</sup> See Appendix A.

young writers. It was used to either undermine or strengthen the emerging movement, to forge or break ties with the previous generation. *Jil*, as a category, could also be undercut in an attempt to forge cross-generational alliances and interactions.

What is striking is the way generational language continues to dominate the literary field in Egypt. So for example, al-Kharrāṭ's argument for an alternative terminology, while an important critical intervention, failed to become the principle means by which this group is identified. The generational debates are then I would argue a way to understand how innovation, authority, and legitimacy were, and continue to be, negotiated within the cultural sphere in Egypt.



## Chapter Two

### Urban Space, Surveillance, and the State: Reading the City in Şun‘allah Ibrāhīm’s *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa*, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s *Waqā’i‘ ḥārat al-Za‘farānī* and Ibrāhīm Aşlān’s *Mālik al-ḥazīn*.

#### I: Introduction

Egypt’s capital has long captured the literary imagination of its writers. From the earliest prose narratives of the twentieth century such as Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s *Ḥadīth ‘Īsā Ibn Hishām* (1907; English translation: *A Period of Time*, 1992),<sup>178</sup> the city of Cairo has dominated literary production in Egypt. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century Egypt’s novelists and short story writers drew on this urban setting and on the experience of its inhabitants in the development of these two relatively new literary genres. Cairo was the backdrop against which writers depicted the nation’s struggle against British colonialism, the possibilities of national independence, and the people’s confrontation with a rapidly changing world. Much of the early focus of these works was upon the popular quarters of the city; the neighborhood of Sayyidah Zaynab captured by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī’s greatly celebrated novella *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (1944; English translation: *The Lamp of Umm Hāshim*, 2004),<sup>179</sup> or the alleys of Jamāliyyah immortalized by the novels of Najīb Maḥfūz. It is the latter, who, more than any other

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<sup>178</sup> Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s *Ḥadīth ‘Īsā Ibn Hishām aw faṭrah min al-zamān* (Cairo: Al-Dār al-Qawmiyyah li-al-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nashr, 1964); English translation: *A Period of Time*, trans. Roger Allen (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992).

<sup>179</sup> Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1984); English translation: *The Lamp of Umm Hāshim*, trans. Denys Johnson Davies (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

writer, has come to be seen as the foremost chronicler of Cairo; *Zuqāq al-midaqq* (1947; English translation *Midaqq Alley*, 1992)<sup>180</sup> *Khān al-Khalīlī* (1945; English translation *Khan al-Khalili*, 2008)<sup>181</sup> and *Al-Thulāthiyyah* (1956-57, *The Cairo Trilogy*)<sup>182</sup> amongst countless other works captured the lives of Egypt's middle class, in novels in which Cairo's alleys and streets, its architecture and edifices, were as important as its people. As Samia Mehrez explains Najīb Maḥfūz's uses the metaphor of the *ḥāra* (alley) in old Cairo "to represent Egyptian society at different historical junctures and the various transformations that beset it."<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, the city itself was intended to represent the nation at large.

From the time of al-Muwayliḥī, realism had become the dominant literary paradigm in Egypt, within the context of a national movement which insisted upon the relationship between socio-political, economic, and aesthetic reform. With the 1952 Revolution writers and intellectuals undermined the liberal ideology of their *nahḍāwī* (Renaissance) predecessors, embracing socialist realism, and insisting upon the moral obligation of the committed writer. With the emergence of the writers who came to be

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<sup>180</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz, *Zuqāq al-midaqq* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1965); English translation: *Midaqq Alley*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

<sup>181</sup> Maḥfūz, *Khān al-Khalīlī*, (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1979); English translation: *Khan al-Khalili*, trans. Roger Allen (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

<sup>182</sup> The Cairo Trilogy is composed of *Bayn al-qaṣrayn* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1959); English translation: *Palace Walk*, trans. William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny (New York: Doubleday, 1990), *Qaṣr al-shawq* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1957); English translation: *Palace of Desire*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins, Lorne M. Kenny, Olive E. Kenny (New York: Doubleday, 1991) and *Al-Sukkariyyah* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1962); English translation: *Sugar Street*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins and Angele Botros Samaan (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>183</sup> Samia Mehrez, "From the Hara to the °Imara. Emerging Urban Metaphors in the Literary Production of Contemporary Cairo" in *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space and Global Modernity*, ed. Diane Singerman (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 145.

known as *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the sixties generation) there emerged a new literary direction and new aesthetic values, with writers attempting in one way or another to represent the new social and political reality that culminated in the defeat of 1967 and that led to further disappointments in the decades that followed. Much of the literary output of this generation of writers called into question the realism that had been firmly established as the norm by earlier writers, and that had come to be associated with the establishment of the post-colonial nation-state, a nation-state whose success was being increasingly called into question.

This chapter traces the different urban spaces that came to be represented in the literature of *jīl al-sittīnāt* and what these spaces reveal about the socio-economic and political changes that beset, Cairo—and Egypt—in the following decades. The literature of *jīl al-sittīnāt* shows a significant shift in focus, away from the realist depictions of the popular quarters of the city as the site of national struggle, or of the *ḥāra* as the cross-section of Cairene society.<sup>184</sup> What we see instead are representations of “new” urban spaces such as the working-class neighborhood of Imbaba or of “old” spaces in new ways, mostly clearly represented in the reimagination of the *ḥāra* as a fantastical space or of the urban landscape of Cairo as a prison. In tackling these new spatial representations, the writers of this generation showcased their stylistic

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<sup>184</sup>This is not to suggest of course that Najīb Maḥfuz’s own depiction of the city of Cairo did not undergo any transformation during this decade. Critics have noted Maḥfuz’s own shift away from realist representations in novels such as *Awlād Ḥārītnā* [1959] (Beirut: Dār al-Adāb, 1986); English translation: *Children of Gebelawi*, trans. Philip Stewart (London: Heinemann, and Washington: Three Continents, 1981) and *Al-Liṣṣ wa-al-kilāb* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1962); English translation: *The Thief and the Dogs*, trans. M.M.Badawi and Trevor Le Gassick (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1984) and *Thartharah fawq al-Nīl* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1985); English translation: *Adrift on the Nile*, trans. Frances Liardet (New York: Doubleday, 1993). Rather what I am suggesting is that the writers of this generation were consciously moving away from the realist mode epitomized by the novels I cited earlier.

innovations, engaging in a post-colonial aesthetic, to present searing critiques of the state under °Abd al-Nāṣir and Anwar al-Sādāt, revealing how both regimes used techniques of violence, repression, and surveillance to monitor and control the urban population of Cairo. The struggle for power in these novels thus becomes a struggle over space—in this case urban space.

The focus here is upon a reading of three novels from the writers of this generation: Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm’s *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa* (1966; English translation: *The Smell of It*, 1971),<sup>185</sup> Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s *Waqā’i° ḥārat al-Za°farānī* (1976; English translation: *The Zafarani Files*, 2009)<sup>186</sup> and Ibrāhīm Aṣlān’s *Mālik al-ḥazīn* (1981, English translation: *The Heron*, 2005).<sup>187</sup> Structurally, each of these novels presents us with a different metonymic approach to the mapping of urban space.<sup>188</sup> The first provides the reader with a map of Cairo through individual itinerary, in which the movements of the protagonist are intended to recreate a plan of the entire city. This plan however is dictated by state surveillance and the limits this places on the protagonist’s movements. The second is the *ḥāra* (alley) re-imagined. If Maḥfūz’s alleys are intended as “microcosms of the city” of

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<sup>185</sup> Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm, *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa* (Cairo: Dār Shahdy, 1986); English translation: *The Smell of It and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1971).

<sup>186</sup> Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, *Waqā’i° ḥārat al-Za°farānī* (Cairo: Maktabat Matbūlī, 1985); English translation: *Zafarani Files*, trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab (Cairo: The American University Press, 2009).

<sup>187</sup> Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, *Mālik al-ḥazīn: riwāyah miṣriyyah* (Cairo: Maṭbū°āt al-Qāhirah, 1983); English translation: *The Heron*, trans. Elliott Colla (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

<sup>188</sup> I am grateful to Professor Brent Edwards for his suggestion that the mapping in these novels can be framed in such a way.

Cairo, replicating its social and economic divisions,<sup>189</sup> this is, I would argue, the microcosm gone awry. Al-Ghīṭānī paints a portrait of the *ḥāra* in which the microcosm of the street comes to stand in for the macrocosm of the Egyptian nation, but it is a fantastical microcosm in which the existing social order is undermined. Finally, the third novel is a portrait of an individual neighborhood, again intended to represent the nation. This time however, it is not the popular quarters of Cairo (once home of the Egyptian middle-class) that are fulfilling this metonymic function, but the working-class neighborhood of Imbaba, long ignored in the literary imagination. Here this peripheral space comes to the forefront as the site where the struggle against the repressive state apparatus is played out.

All three novels are involved in a post-colonial aesthetic heavily invested in a critique of the excesses of the colonial and post-colonial nation-state. This critique is directed against the state's repression of its citizens, particularly with regards to the question of state surveillance. In many ways these novels are a literary expression of surveillance: Ibrāhīm's novel is largely a book about the inability to write a book, precisely because of the system of surveillance inflicted upon the protagonist. Al-Ghīṭānī's novel *is* the record of the surveillance carried out by the state upon the inhabitants of the alley, and the form of the novel replicates that of the official state documents. In the case of Aṣḷān, the temporary breakdown in the system of state control allows for a libratory moment both for the inhabitants of the neighborhood of Imbaba and for the figure of the writer.

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<sup>189</sup> Samia Mehrez, "Re-Writing the City: The Case of *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*" in *The Arabic Novel Since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews and a Bibliography*. *Mundus Arabicus*. Volume 5. ed. Issa J. Boullata (Cambridge: Dār Mahjar, 1992):143-167.

The excesses of the state are represented in the novels in terms of the aesthetic of excremental literature in post-colonial critique.<sup>190</sup> In the case of the three works under examination however, the bodily excess is both excremental and sexual, the latter becoming *the* privileged site of agency. Sexuality in the three novels is the figure of agency and potency, understood in this context as a specifically male form of agency. The absence of viable means of political resistance is mirrored in the sexual lives of the protagonists; to be politically impotent is to be physically impotent. It is also to be creatively impotent. Unable to mobilize individual or collective political action against the repressive regime of the state, or to successfully resist through literary production, the characters turn to sexual fulfillment, only to be thwarted once again.

The struggle to fulfill their roles as writers and intellectuals thus emerges as a central concern of these urban narratives. Long considered the “literary architects of the city” whose works “reconstruct and remap” Cairo, each of the writers under discussion strives to fulfill this role in the face of the increasingly repressive presence of the state.<sup>191</sup> As Samia Mehrez has argued, writers within the Egyptian literary sphere consider themselves the “conscience of the nation, responsible for articulating its collective disillusionments and for voicing its silenced realities” and it is with the difficulties of realizing this vocational objective that these writers contend. I would argue that this idea of writers as the “conscience of the nation” is related to Edward Said’s famous articulation of the role of the public intellectual as one who “is endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or

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<sup>190</sup> Joshua Esty, “Excremental Postcolonialism,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring, 1999): 22-59.

<sup>191</sup> Mehrez, “From the Hara to the ʿImara,” 148, 145.

opinion to, as well as for, a public.”<sup>192</sup> This applies quite accurately to the role of the Egyptian literati, as it was understood by *jīl al-sittīnāt* for whom the writer had a political as well as artistic purpose. As such the novels can also be seen as allegories of the writer’s vocation representing the struggles of the writer to realize his function as a public intellectual during the regimes of °Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt.

## II: *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa*: Individual Itinerary and Mapping Ibrāhīm’s Cairo

*Tilka-l-rā’iḥa*, Ibrāhīm’s semi-autobiographical work, depicts the crisis of Egyptian intellectuals living under the Nāṣirist regime.<sup>193</sup> Written following Ibrāhīm’s own release from prison in 1964, the novel follows a newly released prisoner (who remains nameless throughout) as he contends with the parole regulations that control his new life.<sup>194</sup> His daily life in the “free world” is not however so removed from his existence in prison. The protagonist’s days appear monotonous and repetitive; everyday

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<sup>192</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

<sup>193</sup> *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa*, first published in 1966, was immediately confiscated by the censor upon its release. It would appear in print again, in 1968, in the Lebanese magazine *Shi’r* (Poetry) though in an edited version. This was followed by its reissuing in 1969 by a small publishing house in Cairo, again in a heavily censored version of the original and without the author’s permission. The novel appeared in its complete form in 1971 in an English translation of the text. The Arabic original was published in its entirety in 1986. This first complete edition in Arabic includes an introduction by Ibrahim in which he recounts the history of the novel’s censorship and publication. See Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm, *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa* (Cairo: Dār Shahdy, 1986) and Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech*, 184.

<sup>194</sup> Between 1959-64 a great number of Leftists and Communists were imprisoned by °Abd al-Nāṣir —among these of course were many writers, intellectuals, and cultural practitioners. Ibrāhīm was arrested in 1959 for his membership in the Egyptian Communist Party, spending the next five years in the famous al-Kharjah internment camp. *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa* is based largely on this experience. Ibrāhīm and others like him experienced strict parole regulations upon their release. For more see Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech*, Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation* and Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal al-Ghitani* (Cairo: American University Press, 1994).

he walks the streets of Cairo, rides the metro, and inevitably returns home in time for the daily visits of the police officer. The return to the city that was once his home is neither comforting nor joyous; Ibrāhīm's protagonist is isolated and disconnected, alienated from the world around him. Upon his release from prison he experiences no emotions, remaining completely detached he notes how "this was the moment I had continually dreamed of throughout those past years. I searched within myself for some unusual sensation, of pleasure or joy or excitement, but found none."<sup>195</sup> His solitude is apparent from the opening line of the novel: when asked by the policeman about his address —his release contingent upon the existence of a place of residence —the protagonist replies that no such place exists:

‘What’s your address?’ said the officer.  
 ‘I haven’t got one,’ I said.  
 ‘Where, then, are you off to? Where are you going  
 to stay?’ He looked at me in amazement.  
 ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I have no one.’<sup>196</sup>

In this early description the nameless protagonist is entirely alone, with no address, with no one. After searching for hours for a place to stay —and having no luck locating willing family or friends— he is forced to spend yet another night in prison. It is during this stay in prison that he witnesses the rape of one inmate by another. This return to

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<sup>195</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 1. Citations in this chapter are from the English translation of the text. Şun‘allah Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1971).

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



prison and the sexual assault that takes place is of great significance and is a point we will return to later in the discussion.<sup>197</sup>

This sense that the individual is disconnected from his surroundings is clear in the way in which the protagonist moves through, and experiences, the streets of Cairo. This movement dominates much of the novel with Ibrāhīm engaging in a form of mapping through the creation of individual itinerary. Leaving his new apartment in the neighborhood of Heliopolis, a newer suburb of Cairo, the protagonist travels daily to visit family and friends around the city. These visits of course do nothing to foster a sense of connection or community for the protagonist, but merely serve to heighten his sense of isolation. The location of his new “home” is in and of itself particularly significant.<sup>198</sup> The suburb of Heliopolis represents the changing geography and expansion of the city of Cairo and also serves to separate the protagonist from the city of his past, the downtown Cairo with which he is more familiar and, as we shall see, serves as the backdrop to many of his recollections. His movement from point A to B, from his home to those he is visiting, is a significant part of the “action” of the plot, especially given the fact that remarkably little else happens in the novel. For much of the early part of the novel, we as readers follow the protagonist as he walks down nameless streets, in a neighborhood in

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<sup>197</sup> This scene was also one of those excised by the censor when the novel was first published. For more details regarding the exact phrases removed in the different versions of the text see Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech*, 191-193.

<sup>198</sup> Heliopolis is a residential neighborhood of the city built in the early part of the twentieth century by the Belgium businessman Baron Empain and was intended to house the well-to-do European and native population. One of the earliest examples of the satellite cities built in order to alleviate the city’s housing problem the suburb’s population continued to grow throughout the century, driven by the exodus of the upper and middle classes out of downtown Cairo. As an autobiographical note the author himself has resided in this neighborhood for a number of years. For more on the history of Heliopolis see Andre Raymond, *Cairo*, trans. Willard Wood (Cairo: American University Press, 2001), 329-333.

which he is clearly a stranger. The descriptions of his movement are, as is typical of Ibrāhīm's descriptions, short, stripped down, and void of emotion: "I went out into the street. I walked to the Metro" is repeated ad nauseam as we follow the protagonist on his daily excursions.<sup>199</sup>

It is these trips on the metro that transport the protagonist to the familiar space of downtown Cairo. As we follow the protagonist on his walks through these streets we are presented with an excess of detail. In the description of his walk which continues for four pages we are told *exactly* which street he took and which square he crossed:

I got up and left the cafe. I walked to the bridge and boarded a bus. I got off at the beginning of Soliman Street. I sat down in the first cafe I came to. I drank a coffee, then lit a cigarette. I got up and walked to Tewfik Street, then I branched off into Tewfikiyya and stood in front of the Cairo Cinema. It was showing a comedy. I went off in the direction of Fouad Street, which I crossed. I turned down into Sherif Street. I continued walking, crossed Adly Street, then Sarwat Street, and went off in the direction of Soliman Street, and continued on until I reached the Square. Water from the sewers overflowed the street. Pumps were set up everywhere, pumping the water out from the shops into the street. The smell was unbearable... I crossed the street and went back in the direction of the Square, then I plunged down into Kasr El-Nil Street until I reached the cinema there... I left the cinema and once again walked in the direction of the Square, and back into Soliman Street. This time I walked on the opposite side to the one I had come by. When I reached the Metro Cinema I found that it too was showing a comedy. I passed by it. I stood in front of the Americaine Cafe, undecided. The Rivoli Cinema was on my left and there was a vast crowd in front of it. The cinemas of Emad El-Din Street came to my mind. I crossed the street and continued walking up Fouad Street to Emad El-Din; I turned into it, walking on the left-hand side... I continued on to the end of the street. I cut into Ramses Street and made off in the direction of Bab El- Hadid Square. For a moment I had the impression I was being followed; I may have been mistaken.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 25; 35; 49.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-51.

The itinerary produced in this lengthy description does not necessarily serve to familiarize the reader with the space at hand but in fact contributes to a sense of disorientation. Even a reader acquainted with the geography of downtown Cairo is overwhelmed by the details provided. This is familiarization to the point of exhaustion. Furthermore, the protagonist's present experience of Cairo is recounted in a staccato, detached, style, identified with Ibrahim's writing. The brevity of the statements and the jarring punctuation would have shocked both readers and critics, accustomed to long descriptive passages of narrative prose. What is significant also is that, despite the fact that this is the Cairo with which the protagonist is familiar, the Cairo of his past and of his memories, the tone of the description remains as distant and cold as before. The focus seems to be on the act of walking itself, rather than upon an engagement with the surroundings, except of course when he notices that "the water from the sewers overflowed everywhere" and that the "smell was unbearable."

This focus on filth and excrement is part of the post-colonial aesthetics that Ibrāhīm employs in his critique of the excesses of the nation-state. Here it serves to remind the reader of the degeneration of this urban metropolis and of the gradual disintegration of its infrastructure under the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir. As Joshua Esty explains "shit has a political vocation: it draws attention to the failures of development, to the unkept promises not only of colonial modernizing regimes but of post independence economic policy."<sup>201</sup> This is not the only time that the putrid sewer waters appear. In the early pages of the novel the protagonist's sister arrives home informing him that "the sewers in

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<sup>201</sup> Esty, "Excremental Postcolonialism," 32.

the town are overflowing.”<sup>202</sup> Again the observation passes with no additional commentary but the symbolic significance of the reoccurrence of human waste is not lost on the reader, echoing the putrid “smell” of the title of the novel, *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa* (*The Smell of It*). This image of overflowing water is also used as way to connect public and private space; the latter does not seem impervious to the deterioration and decay of the outside world. The flooding of the Cairene streets is mirrored in the flooding of the protagonist’s apartment. Both events are described with the same indifference. Just as the earlier comment made by his sister elicits no response, the water filling his apartment is ignored:

I got up and taking the toothbrush and soap, went to the bathroom. I found that the whole floor was covered with water, which had made its way into the hall. The tap had gone wrong. Standing in the middle of the water, I washed my face and cleaned my teeth, then returned to my room, leaving my wet footprints all over the place. I dressed and left the room, locking it after me.<sup>203</sup>

The alienation of the protagonist in the present and his detachment from his surroundings is made all the more apparent when juxtaposed alongside the descriptions of the downtown streets of his past. Arriving at the area of his childhood home he decides to find the house he grew up in, even hoping that his mother still lives there. Ibrāhīm provides an account of the path the protagonist takes, as he retraces the route he took with his father:

I crossed Clot Bey Street. I left Faggala Street and cut across the small streets connecting it with the Square. I felt that I was approaching the place where the house was, and that by cutting across several side streets I would get near to it. I decided, however, to approach it from the direction of Faggala Street as we used to do, my father and I.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 40.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

This reenactment is immediately followed by a nostalgic recollection from the past, in a flashback, which takes us back to the protagonist's trips home with his father:

We would come by tram. We'd take it from the Square before it turned off into Zahir Street. I used to love this quiet street because it was full of trees whose dense branches used to meet high across the middle of it, shutting out the light. I used to love the sound of the trolley-arm thrusting its way with difficulty between the branches overhead. Even so the tram would charge down this street at top speed and we would give our faces to the noon wind and my father would put his hand on his tarboosh to stop it flying off... We'd pass through Khalig Street, then turn to the right. Ahead of us would stretch a vast dark void into which I was frightened to fall and I'd cling on to my father, and he would catch hold of my bare knee with his warm hand. After a while my eyes would grow accustomed to the darkness and I would make out the large square, the mosque a mass of darkness in the middle of it. The tram would pass round the mosque and we would leave behind us a closed-down cinema to which we used to go with my mother in the summer. Then we'd plunge into tree-filled Zahir Street. I'd rest my head against the wooden partition at the rear so as to enjoy to the full the extraordinary speed of the tram and I'd catch sight of my father closing his eyes against the wind that violently assailed us.<sup>205</sup>

Gone is the detachment and coldness that the reader has come to expect from any descriptions of the protagonist's experiences of the city. This memory is replete with emotion, the neighborhood is described with a fullness and texture, and the experience is recreated in his mind through the sights and sounds of the streets. This vitality is all the more apparent when compared with the return to the present moment. The description of the street lacks all of the luster of the past recollection. Instead the protagonist describes his experience in the following way:

The street came to an end. I turned to the right. The house I remembered was very high and had wide wooden balconies, from one of which my mother once threw herself and fell on the balcony below. I ran my eye over the houses. They were all low. Only one had balconies made of wood. I told myself that this must be the one. I slowly approached it. The balconies were small and the entrance narrow. The

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

entrance I remembered was a wide one. I passed through the entrance and slowly mounted the stairway. The stairs ended sooner than I had expected.<sup>206</sup>

This depiction of the street reveals the same apathy and lack of emotion that the reader has come to expect of the protagonist. It is recounted in a disengaged, dispassionate manner, what critics have termed Ibrāhīm's hyper-realism or neo-realism. According to Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Ibrāhīm's work is an example of what he terms "*al-ṭayyār al-waqi'ī al-jadīd*" (the neo-realist trend) focusing on the basest details of everyday life and purifying the traditional form so as to arrive at a style that is highly accurate, sharp and yet pervaded by an ongoing sense of disjunction, in an attempt to articulate the ongoing refusal of existing forms of power.<sup>207</sup> The indifference, with which he remembers his mother throwing herself off the balcony, is the same indifference with which he receives the news of her death. Upon hearing the news he realizes his appointment with the parole office is approaching and he gets up to leave. The novel closes with the same routine actions, which dominate the narrative:

I looked at my watch. It was getting near to the time for my appointment with the policeman. I got to my feet. 'I must go now,' I said. I said good-bye to them and went down the stairs and out of the house. I crossed the side roads until I came to Ramses Square, then I turned off in the direction of the Metro tram stop.<sup>208</sup>

### III: State Surveillance and the Prison of Cairo

The event with which the novel closes, the compulsory return home of the

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>207</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 19-20. A similar position is articulated by Jacquemond who sees Ibrāhīm's hyper-realism as the attempt to "subvert reality under the guise of taking the cold, neutral, and objective representation of it to extremes." Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 93-94.

<sup>208</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 56.

protagonist to meet his parole officer, is the primary structuring device of the plot. It is the action around which the protagonist's days are organized and which produces a sense of monotonous repetition (within the space of the novel the officer visits the protagonist almost ten times). The figure of the policeman is the symbol of the repressive force of the state apparatus which bears down so heavily upon the protagonist; as the officer tells him at the very start of the novel "we have to know your whereabouts" at all times.<sup>209</sup> So it is that the policeman arrives on a daily basis, signing the protagonist's black book, that bears his name and photograph. Ibrāhīm's novel is, in many ways, an account of life in the prison that the city of Cairo has become under the surveillance of the modern state apparatus of °Abd al-Nāṣir's police state. This literary work presents a system of state coercion and control as described by Michel Foucault, capturing the ways discipline, as a political technology of power, is exercised through surveillance and examination, maintaining control at the level of the mechanism of the body itself and of the body in space. If for Foucault the prison is the microcosm of society, for Ibrahim it is also the microcosm of the city, in which the citizen is continually observed, monitored, and examined.<sup>210</sup> Here the rhetorical function of the city has been transformed; instead of fulfilling a metonymic role in which the city is a stand in for the entire nation, Ibrāhīm's Cairo is a metaphorical prison.<sup>211</sup> This association is made explicit when, after being released from prison, he is forced to return there to spend his first night of freedom.

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>210</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>211</sup> For more on the shift from metonymy to metaphor, especially as it pertains to the writing of sixties author °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim see Muhsin al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 110-125.

Having no home to return to he is brought back to the prison cell: “Night came and he [the policeman] said he was unable to do anything. He called over a third policeman and said to him, ‘Lock him up’, and they led me off to a locked room with a fourth policeman standing at the door.”<sup>212</sup> This city as prison can be seen as what Lefebvre terms “abstract space” the “space of power” in which “the bureaucratic and political authoritarianism immanent to a repressive space is everywhere.”<sup>213</sup> Here the state monopolizes power dictating the movement of the individual within his urban environment. This power is manifest in a number of ways. It dictates where the protagonist goes, how long he stays, and when he must return home so that even in movement there is a constant sense of confinement. It is also a presence that accompanies him as he moves through the city, exemplified in the moments when he feels he is being followed, captured in the description of his downtown wanderings cited earlier.

This sense of imprisonment also pervades the private space of the protagonist’s apartment. Not only is he required to be there at a certain time of course, but his past imprisonment also influences his experience of his current domestic space. In an episode that captures this relationship between prison and home, past and present, the protagonist hears his neighbor tapping on the wall. These soft knocks take him back to his time in prison when the inmates used such a practice as a means of secret communication. As happens frequently in the novel we jump from present to past based on a process of association; as the protagonist explains the tapping to his sister we travel back in time:

‘We always used to do this,’ I said to her, ‘when we wanted to send messages or warnings to each other.’

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<sup>212</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 2.

<sup>213</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 51.



*That used to happen every morning. We'd open our eyes to the measured sound of tapping on the wall. We'd jump to our feet. We'd plan everything and try to remember not to forget anything, though sleep still lingered in our eyes. We'd squat down by the wall, shivering with cold. The tapping would stop. We'd wait. Then we'd hear their feet on the stone floor. The rattle of chains and keys. We'd leap back to our places as the key struck against the lock. Then they'd come in. Our eyes would fasten on dull expressionless eyes. Our ears would be struck by abrupt, rapid sounds that didn't let up. Our hearts hung upon hands were heavy, stout, cruel, and unthinking, and around us the walls met at four corners. The door was locked, the ceiling near. No way of escape.<sup>214</sup>*

The sense of incarceration and surveillance that dominates the protagonist's relationship to both the space of home and city is reinforced by the way in which time operates in the novel. The repetition of the protagonist's routine creates a sense of monotony and tedium that mirrors the experience of imprisonment. Each day is indistinguishable from the other: he rides the metro, visits relatives or old acquaintances, unsuccessfully attempts to write, making sure he is back home in time for the officer's visit. It is only this last event—this banal manifestation of the power of the state—that seems to give his days any direction or purpose. It is this repetition that calls into question the narrative time with which the reader is familiar. As Benedict Anderson famously argued the novel and its relationship to the imagined community of the nation-state is based upon the “presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogenous empty time.’”<sup>215</sup> This “homogenous empty time” is understood as the unfolding of events in a linear manner with an ongoing sense of progression. This linearity of events is very much a part of the realist tradition and the vision of the nation-state that it propagated. In Ibrāhīm's case however this sense of linearity and progression is undermined: we are presented with a novel in which the

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<sup>214</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 30-31. The use of italics in the English translation is used to signal the movement from present to past. In the Arabic original the events of the past are highlighted in bold.

<sup>215</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24.

protagonist seems to repeat the same actions with no sense of movement or progress. In the novel we experience the protagonist's past and his present but are given no sense of his future. He appears to be stuck in time and place. The reader can imagine that the fate of Ibrāhīm's protagonist is to live out his life in an endless cycle of sameness. This sense, as well shall see in the following section, is reinforced by the fact that the only form of resistance, presented in the practice of writing, fails to produce the possibility of change.

#### IV: Creative Impotency and the Role of the Writer

Surveillance is so crucial to Ibrāhīm's novel not only because of what it reveals about the repressive nature of the state apparatus but also because of the way in which it is tied up with the figure of the writer. *Tilka-l-rā'iḥa* is a literary expression of surveillance, a book that is in effect about the inability to write a book, precisely because of the state surveillance exercised upon the writer. State power limits both the writer's ability to produce and circulate his work. We see this on the level of plot with regards to the protagonist's ongoing struggle to write and in terms of the author's own autobiographical experience. In both *Al-Lajnah (The Committee, 1981)* and *Bayrūt (Beirut Beirut, 1984)* Ibrāhīm takes up the issues of publication and censorship that dominated his experience with *Tilka-l-rā'iḥa*, using it as material for his creative works.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup>For an excellent examination of the ways in which these three works construct an ongoing narrative about their own publication and reception see Mehrez, "Sonallah Ibrahim and the (Hi)story of the Book," in *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal al-Ghitani*, 39-58.

The act of writing is presented in this novel as an alternative to acts of political resistance, or to be more precise as a form of political resistance to the repression inflicted upon the individual by the regime. The inability to engage in direct confrontation with the forces of the state drives the individual to wage war in the intellectual realm. Ibrāhīm's writer is both the symbol of the alienated intellectual and a type of everyman; his namelessness in particular pushes the reader to see him in this light. He is the individual born of the Nāṣirist regime, disappointed by the failures of the post-colonial state, monitored and imprisoned by the system he supported, alone in a city that was once his home.<sup>217</sup> This sense of alienation is an expression of the experience of intellectuals abandoned by the revolution they supported. It is also a reflection of the importance of the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus whose work had been translated into Arabic in the 1950s and continued to exercise enormous influence on writers and intellectuals in the Arab world.<sup>218</sup> In Ibrāhīm's protagonist we can recognize the sense of estrangement, the process of "detachment and separation" central to Camus' philosophy of alienation.<sup>219</sup> But there are also the echoes of Sartre's "commitment," a sense that literature has a role to play in the political and social struggles of the

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<sup>217</sup>From very early on Communist and leftists intellectuals in Egypt found themselves in a contentious position vis-à-vis the regime. Arrests began as early as 1954 and would continue in varying waves throughout the following decade. This persecution went hand in hand with the establishment of a state monopoly over cultural, intellectual, and educational institutions which forged an uneasy alliance between the intellectuals and the state. For more on this see Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement* and Jacquemond *Conscience of the Nation*.

<sup>218</sup>For more on the influence of existentialist thought on Arab writers see al-Musawi, *Al-Nukhbah al-fikriyyah wa-al-inshiqāq: qirā'ah fī taḥawwulāt al-ṣafwah al-ʿarīfah fī al-mujtamaʿ al-ʿArabī al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2001).

<sup>219</sup>Abraham Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (Amsterdam: Rodopi BV, 2002), 23.

contemporary moment. This is the cause of the protagonist's relentless battle to create, even as he continues to fail in this endeavor.

Despite numerous attempts to sit and write the protagonist is repeatedly paralyzed in his attempts. This paralysis makes the following exchange with the young Nahid, all the more ironic:

'Are you writing stories?' she said.  
 'Yes,' I said.  
 'Out of books?' she said.  
 'No, from my head,' I said to her.  
 'Then you're really somebody,' said Nihad.  
 I lit a cigarette.<sup>220</sup>

Both the protagonist and the reader are aware of course that next to nothing has been written since his release from prison. Failing to write the protagonist chooses instead to masturbate, the empty pages in front of him a constant reminder of his failure:

Again I sat myself at the desk. I seized hold of the pen but was unable to write. I closed my eyes. I imagined yesterday's girl with her white body lying before me on the bed, full and rounded, her hair fresh and fragrant, while I kissed every part of her, passing my cheek along her thigh and resting it against her breast. I put my hand down to my, own thigh and began playing with myself. At last I gave a deep sigh. Tired, I sprawled back in my chair, staring vacantly at the paper in front of me. After a while I got up and gingerly stepped over the traces left by me on the floor under the table. I went to the bathroom. I washed my socks and shirt and hung them up at the window.<sup>221</sup>

The substitution of sexual gratification for literary creation does not however satisfy the protagonist. "Staring vacantly at the paper in front of him" he is only further reminded of his failure. The bodily traces left on the ground are another example of Ibrāhīm's use of the aesthetic of excremental fiction in his writing. Like the sewer water that flooded the

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<sup>220</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 22.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 32. This is one of the passages that caused problems with the censors and was removed in a number of early versions of publication and was the reason for Ḥaqqī's searing critique discussed on p.100 of this chapter.

urban space of Cairo, here is another symbol of human excess. His semen, his bodily excess staining the floor is, like the blank paper, another testament to his inadequacy. One final example of bodily excess appears when the protagonist passes wind in the company of others. Describing the scene the protagonist tells us that:

A small child entered the room who I realized must be his daughter. She stood beside me. I was tired and wanted to go to the lavatory. I broke wind and the child smelt it. 'There's a smell of kaka,' she said. I affected to pass it over, but she repeated: 'Smell of kaka.' I began sniffing round myself and saying 'Where?' to her until the smell had disappeared.<sup>222</sup>

The “smell of kaka” detected by the child harks back to the stench of the novel’s title and is another example of the way in which symbols of bodily waste are used to represent the larger socio-political “filth” created by the Nāṣirist regime. But it is also recognition of his own implication in “ethical, aesthetic, or political failure.”<sup>223</sup> It is not only that the state has failed its people but that the intellectual, represented by Ibrāhīm’s protagonist, is failing to successfully challenge the repression of the state either by political action in the public sphere or by subverting power through literary production.<sup>224</sup>

The attention Ibrāhīm pays to the simplest, most banal details of the everyday—down to the basest physical bodily functions such as passing wind and masturbation—

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>223</sup> Esty, “Excremental Postcolonialism,” 34.

<sup>224</sup> This use of excremental aesthetics is one of the ways in which Ibrāhīm’s work recalls the fiction of James Joyce. The connection to the latter is made explicit in the novel’s epigraph in which Ibrāhīm quotes the protagonist of James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a way to set the stage for what the reader is about to encounter: “This race and this country and this life produced me . . . and I shall express myself as I am.” On the one hand we are invited to identify Ibrāhīm’s work with the innovations of Joyce—here too is an author who is part of the literary vanguard of his time. On the other hand Joyce’s novel, a story about Stephan Daedalus’ arrival at artistic consciousness, is intended to resonate with the position of Ibrāhīm, his protagonist or even both.

was the cause of much the criticism (and indeed part of the cause of its banning upon publication) leveled against the novel by the critics at the time.<sup>225</sup> In his column in the weekly newspaper *Al-Masāʾ* Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī launched a virulent attack of Ibrāhīm’s work:

I am still pained by this short novel whose reputation has been spreading through literary circles recently. It would have been worthy of being considered among the best of our literature had its author not slipped into error, out of foolishness and a decadent sense of taste. He did not find it sufficient to present us with the hero as he is masturbating (had it been limited to this then it would have been relatively easy to bear). No, he went beyond that to describe the hero’s return home one day later to see the traces of semen spilled on the ground. I found this physiological description truly disgusting, and it left such an ill effect on me that I could not appreciate the story in the slightest, despite the outstanding skill evident in it. I am not attacking it in terms of its moral aspects, but rather on the basis of its flawed sensibility and vulgarity. This is a shameful repulsiveness which must be checked, and which the reader must be spared from having to swallow.<sup>226</sup>

Ḥaqqī, who belonged to an earlier generation of writers, resisted this innovative move on the part of Ibrāhīm and his contemporaries to present all aspects of human existence, even the most sordid elements of private life. For Ḥaqqī literature should depict life realistically and sincerely but in the service of progress and socio-political advancement, exposing social inequalities, poverty, and the struggle for justice and freedom. Descriptions like those of Ibrāhīm served no purpose in Ḥaqqī’s vision of literature as a revolutionary tool for social change. The difference between these two visions of literature is noted in the novel itself: as the protagonist reads a literary journal we are told how according to Maupassant the “artist must create a world that is simpler, more beautiful than ours. He said that literature should be optimistic, throbbing with the most

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<sup>225</sup> For the exact passages censored and the phrases that were removed from these scenes see Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech*, 193-195.

<sup>226</sup> Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī qtd. in Şunʿallah Ibrāhīm, “The Experience of a Generation,” trans. Marilyn Booth. *Index on Censorship*, 9 (1987): 19-22.

beautiful of sensations.”<sup>227</sup> Guy de Maupassant was of course an influential figure for the writers of Ḥaqqī’s generation. Ibrāhīm offered an answer to Ḥaqqī’s critique in the introduction to the 1986 edition of his work saying “doesn’t the situation require a little baseness to express the baseness exemplified in physiological behavior like that of hitting a defenseless individual until death or placing an air pump in his anus and an electrical wire in his genitals? And all this because he expressed a different opinion or defended his freedom or his national identity?”<sup>228</sup> The “baseness” of masturbation or passing wind is then according to Ibrāhīm a necessary means of representing the baseness of a repressive system which continues to torture its citizens.

The connection that is made in the novel then is between sexuality, excremental excess, and writing. Unable to write the protagonist turns to sex, and yet his creative impotency is mirrored by his sexual impotency. It is not only that the writer chooses masturbation over writing, but also that he chooses it over an experience with a woman. In both the encounter with his former lover and with the prostitute brought to him by his friend he is unable to perform sexually. His impotence in the present stands in contrast to his performance in the past:

*How was it she had continued to remember when I had forgotten? When my lips had travelled up her thigh and I had kissed her there for the first time and she had looked at me with a mixture of joy and astonishment and embarrassment, and said: ‘Where did you learn this?’*

I stretched out my hand to her breast, but she pushed away and said ‘No.’ I let her be and lay down beside her. I waited for her to turn round to me suddenly and hug me to her, but she didn’t. I remained awake. I had a feeling of pain between my thighs. I got up and went to the bathroom. Having freed myself of my desire, I returned and stretched out beside her. I slept and awoke. I slept again.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Ibrāhīm, *The Smell of It*, 32.

<sup>228</sup> Ibrāhīm, “Introduction,” in *Tilka-l-rā’iḥa*.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

Sexual activity thus becomes the privileged site of agency, solitary masturbation taking the place of political or intellectual activity. The focus here is upon *male* agency, potency, and ultimately impotency. The rape of the prison inmate —referred to earlier in the chapter— presents one example of the exercise of male power and dominance through sexual violence. Masculinity in this context is understood and manifest through sexual activity, and within the prison walls it is specifically violent sexual activity. Outside the prison walls the protagonist, the writer, is both sexually and creatively impotent. Here then is the intellectual under °Abd al-Nāṣir: weak, ineffective, and no longer certain of his/her purpose. The transformation of the urban space of Cairo into a space of imprisonment, in which the state monitors and controls its citizens, inhibits the writer from engaging in the act of creation.

V: *Waqā' i° hārat al-Za°farānī: An Ordinary Alley?*

Any reader of Egyptian novels from the first half of the twentieth century is no doubt well acquainted with the alleys and backstreets of the old quarters of the capital city. Life in the Egyptian *ḥāra* (alley) is captured most vividly, though not exclusively of course, in the novels of Maḥfūz, which transformed this urban space into a familiar narrative trope, “a microcosm of the city.”<sup>230</sup> It is this tradition —and the assumed familiarity with it on the part of his reader— upon which al-Ghīṭānī relies in his novel.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Mehrez, “Re-Writing the City: The Case of Khīṭat al-Ghīṭānī,” 143-167.

<sup>231</sup> The relationship between Maḥfūz and al-Ghīṭānī especially as far as the city of Cairo is concerned is well known and well documented. In his 1987 book *Mahfūz Yatadhakkar* (Najīb Maḥfūz Remembers) for example al-Ghīṭānī writes the city as seen and remembered by the great author, but in doing so also writes his own city. As Mehrez notes “as al-Ghīṭānī writes Maḥfūz in



Al-Ghīṭānī is not of course merely recreating Maḥfūz’s Cairo in his literary work. The social fabric of the urban metropolis itself has undergone significant transformation by the time al-Ghīṭānī is publishing his work. As he notes:

The *ḥāra* in which Maḥfūz lived during the twenties is different from the one in which I have lived in the mid-seventies. During Maḥfūz’s time, Old Cairo was the center for middle-class merchants and high-ranking civil servants. The alleys of Jamāliyya were of a strange social fabric. In the same *ḥāra* one would find a palace with entertainment gardens, an average size house that belonged to a merchant’s family, a huge quarter inhabited by tens of poor families, all next to each other, sharing the same space... Today some alleys have been transformed into social garbage-bins... How saddened I am today when I see them flooded with sewage water.<sup>232</sup>

The Egyptian *ḥāra* is no longer the heart of al-Ghīṭānī’s Cairo, but rather has become as Mehrez states “the margin to the center, dwelling place for the predominantly poor and underprivileged, whose lives and actions are monitored and controlled from without.”<sup>233</sup>

I would go even further in stating that in *Waqāʿiḥ ḥārat al-Zaʿfarānī* the periphery becomes the center, with Zafarani Alley and all its social inequalities coming to represent the larger Egyptian nation. This is even clearer once the impotency curse takes control of the alley and its libratory potential is revealed.

In *Waqāʿiḥ ḥārat al-Zaʿfarānī* al-Ghīṭānī constructs a portrait of what appears initially as the typical Cairene street. While Ibrāhīm recreates the urban landscape by presenting the protagonist’s movement through the streets via an individual itinerary, what we are given in al-Ghīṭānī’s novel is a representation of a conventional alley, by

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the text, he himself is written in it, not only as a younger son of Jamāliyya, a district of Old Cairo, the real home and fictional setting for several of both writers’ works, but also as another critical eye in al-Qāhira (Cairo) and ultimately as part of a new generation of Egyptian writers for whom Maḥfūz is at once an important beginning and a necessary point of departure.” Mehrez, “Re-Writing the City: The Case of Khīṭat al-Ghīṭānī,” 143.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 146.

way of descriptions of its geographical location and the architectural layout of its buildings. We are told from the very first page of the novel that the alley lies in the neighborhood of al-Husayn, near the mosque, not far from Masmāt alley. Whether or not Zafarāni alley actually exists in this location is not however the point. Even if it is not a real *ḥāra* the reader can imagine its existence, assuming it to be a realistic depiction of a familiar urban space. But it is also of course a space which the reader of the Arabic literary tradition knows to be laden with symbolic significance.

What is given more attention is the internal layout of the alley. Each time a character is mentioned we are told where *exactly* his/her house lies. So for example in the first page of the novel, with our first introduction to Sheikh Atiya we learn that he lives “on the ground floor of house number 7 in Zafarāni Alley.”<sup>234</sup> A little later we are given more details: “Zafarāni, it should be noted, is a dead end that leads nowhere. House number 7 stands at the far end, and it is here, in a narrow room tucked under the main staircase, that Sheikh Atiya resides.”<sup>235</sup> This description of the alley as a “dead end” is particularly significant of course given the events of the novel: once the curse is discovered the inhabitants of the alley are trapped there with nowhere to go. We will return to this discussion later in the chapter in dealing with the impotency curse. Al-Ghīṭānī then provides the reader with a simplified map of the *ḥāra* —from the descriptions provided the reader could produce a simple sketch of the position of the houses. So for example if one was to enter the *ḥāra* looking for the home of Sayyid Effendi one would know that “his apartment is situated on the top floor of Umm

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<sup>234</sup> Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarāni Files*, trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab (Cairo: The American University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Kawsar's house, which is fifth on the right as you enter Zafarani Alley but, as it stands opposite the low house belonging to Hagg Abdel Alim, which only has two stories, his apartment faces a wide, empty space."<sup>236</sup> The location of each character's house is presented as necessary information that must be imparted to the reader regardless of the story being told about the character. So midway through a narrative concerning an argument between Hassan Effendi and his wife, we are told that "Here it must be pointed out that Hasan Effendi lived in a two-storied house which was the third on the right as one entered the alley, not counting Hagg Snaibar's bakery."<sup>237</sup> It is not in fact clear why this must be pointed out, for this piece of information adds nothing to the story being told.

On the one hand of course this attention to geographical space and the layout of the *ḥāra* is part of the form of the novel, which is presented as a number of official government files collected about the events taking place in Zafarani. It is because of this state project of monitoring the alley, its inhabitants, and their movement that exact location is of utmost importance —we shall return to this point in our discussion of state surveillance. On the other hand, however, this process of mapping is what makes the *ḥāra* come alive for the reader, who, after reading descriptions such as those quoted above is very much aware of the spatial reality of Zafarani.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>238</sup> This process of mapping is not unique to this novel but very much a part of al-Ghīṭānī's larger literary project. For an excellent discussion of this process as it relates to his novel *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* see Mehrez's "Re-Writing the City: The Case of Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī," 143-167.

No portrait of an Egyptian *ḥāra* would be complete without the neighborhood café. Daturi's café is the site which brings the different inhabitants of Zafarani together, and it is perhaps all the more significant as *the* public, communal space within the alley; the majority of events in the novel take place within the private sphere of the home (or in fact on the balconies of the houses which as spaces straddle the public/private divide) making the site of the café all the more important. It is an example of Lefebvre's representational space, a space that is "alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house, or: square, church graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, or action of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time."<sup>239</sup> This is certainly the way in which it is imagined and understood by its owner Daturi who insists, "a cafe was a place for sharing worries and longings."<sup>240</sup> For him it is the essence of everything he loves about the alley:

The alley in which he had lived all his life, where he was born, which he loved, and about which he said that each stone and each tile contained a piece of his flesh and a part of his life. It was the alley that he would defend jealously whenever an obnoxious stranger entered or an impudent vendor passed through it. Pointing to the dust of Zafarani, he would say it was a vitamin that nourished his blood; he would never leave it.<sup>241</sup>

The importance placed on the neighborhood café will reoccur later in the chapter, in our discussion of *Mālik al-ḥazīm*. Of significance also in relation to Aṣlān's novel is the role of construction, and the transformation of the landmarks of the alley. Daturi (like the Mallims we will meet in Aṣlān's novel) dreams of building an apartment building on his piece of land. His dream however is not to reap profits at the expense of the inhabitants,

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<sup>239</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 42.

<sup>240</sup> Al-Ghiṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 215.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

but rather to provide affordable housing for the people of the neighborhood, refusing to take any “key money” from those wishing to secure a place in the yet to be built apartment block. Unlike the characters in Aṣḷān’s novel, who wish to seize the chances provided by the *infītāḥ* (Open Door) policies of al-Sādāt to amass personal wealth and be part of the forward march of progress, Daturi’s construction is a nostalgic nod to the past, an attempt to salvage something of the world which is transforming rapidly in front of his eyes: “He wanted a design reminiscent of the sweet old days: big rooms, little fountains in the halls, mashrabiya screens instead of windows. Money would be no object. The building must stay there after his death, a landmark in the neighborhood: the Daturi Apartment Building.”<sup>242</sup> It is a landmark that tries to change the social space in the service of social equality. His vision for his private housing project nevertheless maintains the integrity of the shared space of the café and is an example of the way in which “communal or shared spaces, the possession or consumption of which cannot be entirely privatized, continue to exist.”<sup>243</sup> Daturi’s description emphasizes this very fact:

He had no conditions except that it be located in the old neighborhood. He could tear down the cafe and sell it, provided that he leave a big space for a modern cafe on the ground floor of the apartment building, with many tables, a television set so that the patrons might watch the soccer games and Thursday night movies, and a special corner for chess players.<sup>244</sup>

As we have seen from the discussion thus far al-Ghīṭānī creates what at first appears to be the quintessential Egyptian *ḥāra*, located in the old district of Jamāliyya, with the familiar site of the café at its center. In the following section I will move to

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>243</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 57.

<sup>244</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 292.

explore the way in which al-Ghīṭānī undermines the “reality” of the alley through the introduction of the impotency curse into Zafarani.

#### VI: The Zafarani Curse: A Case of the Supernatural

What at first appears as an alley like any other quite quickly transforms into a space in which supernatural occurrences seem to be the norm. I would argue that it is this fantastical element that allows al-Ghīṭānī to move beyond a mere realistic depiction of the Cairene alley. It is also one of the ways in which his literary innovations can be read.

As the author notes in an interview with Issa J. Boullata:

Cairo is a complex and complicated city with different layers of time. I am concerned with its history, its streets, its topography, its people who lived in it and passed through it or those who are still living in it. Cairo is my favorite universe, and I mean specifically Old Cairo. But it is my take-off point from which I set out toward all humankind. I don't limit myself by merely portraying reality in a naïve way.<sup>245</sup>

With the impotency curse that Sheikh Atiya puts on the men of the alley, the people of Zafarani find themselves in the realm of the fantastic, having to accept the impossible as possible. The introduction of the curse into the space of the alley, and the transformation it causes to the men of Zafarani, changes the way in which the reader understands and experiences the alley. Zafarani is no longer the quintessential Egyptian *ḥāra*, but an exceptional space in which supernatural occurrences take place. What al-

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<sup>245</sup> While al-Ghīṭānī is discussing the city in his works in general, I would argue that in *Waḡāʿiḥ Ḥārat al-Zaʿfarānī* we witness an attempt to move beyond a “naïve” depiction of the city by drawing upon elements of the fantastic. See “New Directions in the Arabic Novel. An Interview with Jamal al-Ghitani” by Issa J. Boullata. *The Arabic Novel Since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews and a Bibliography. Mundus Arabicus*. Volume 5. Ed. Issa J. Boullata. (Cambridge: Dār Mahjar, 1992), 8.

Ghīṭānī does here is very much in line with what Rosemary Jackson describes as the way in which fantastic narratives function:

They assert that what they are telling is real —relying upon the conventions of realistic fiction to do so— and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what— within those terms is manifestly unreal. They pull the reader from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and everyday world into something more strange, into a world whose improbabilities are closer to the realm normally associated with the marvelous.<sup>246</sup>

Here the fantastic is utilized by al-Ghīṭānī as a subversive strategy, to undermine the existing social order; as we shall see the curse changes the world as the Zafaranis, and the readers, know it. Gender roles are both overturned and reversed, and socio-economic differences are eliminated. The revolutionary possibilities offered by these changes extend beyond the limited space of the alley to the outside world, fulfilling the function that Jackson—in her reading of Jean-Paul Sartre— ascribes to the fantastic, that of “transform[ing] this world.”<sup>247</sup> In the unique space that the alley has become, al-Ghīṭānī is able to imagine an alternative to the current world order, a libratory moment in which state power might be thwarted and social justice achieved.

Before turning to the subversive and even libratory possibilities of the curse, it is necessary to consider the way in which this fantastic device alters the space of the alley. Because the curse is not limited to the people of Zafarani but, as the Sheikh informs the inhabitants, any man to enter the alley will be “impaired” and any Zafarani woman to sleep with a man anywhere will “impair” him, the alley is increasingly isolated from the rest of the city.<sup>248</sup> Gradually non-Zafaranis stop entering the alley and most of inhabitants

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<sup>246</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Meuthen, 1981), 34.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>248</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 80-81.

stop exiting it. This sense of isolation —and its potential threat to the rest of the country— is recorded in an official report documenting the incidents taking place. In the report the official advises that “it should be noted that the spell has almost completely isolated the alley from the rest of the country, a fact that facilitates the committing of acts within that parameter”<sup>249</sup> —and here the “acts” being referred to are those of a politically subversive nature. The inability of the state to carry out its surveillance project over Zafarani alley is a point I will return to later in the discussion. The creation of a space of “enclosure” in which the extraordinary has become the norm is according to Jackson a fundamental way in which space is transformed in fantastic literature.<sup>250</sup> Here the alley as enclosure oscillates between a space of liberation and one of imprisonment; while the alley is temporarily out of the reach of state control this freedom is at the same time something of a burden. We are told over and over again that the once bustling alley has fallen dead: it is so quiet in fact that it is “as if the whole of Zafarani were taking part in a funeral procession somewhere.”<sup>251</sup> This silence and the sense of confinement is compared by Rumana (known as the politico) to the time he spent in prison, to “the cells in solitary confinement, the prison-within-the-prison where all the sounds of the world were banished except for that train that he used to hear twice toward the end of the night.”<sup>252</sup> Here too we witness a rhetorical shift in which the alley takes on a metaphorical purpose, coming to symbolize a prison.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>250</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 46.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 86.



This sense of the alley as an extraordinary space is heightened by the figure of the Sheikh, the cause of the curse and an almost mythical figure who does not actually ever appear in the novel. All the information that is known about the Sheikh is gathered through hearsay, and not one of the inhabitants of the alley ever see the Sheikh in person. He first delivers his messages to them from behind a screen and then later recruits Oweis to be his messenger.<sup>253</sup> The latter's descriptions of his encounters with the Sheikh add to this aura of mystery: "The door to the room stood open. He uttered a greeting and the sheikh's voice came out as if it had originated inside his ears, as if it were a voice that a man would hear without seeing anyone."<sup>254</sup>

The transformation of the alley provides a space in which challenges to the existing social order seem possible. The transmutation of the men of Zafarani, which results in a loss of virility, establishes a form of equality amongst the inhabitants. Obvious immediately is that all men become equal since they are all impotent (and by extension all the women bear the same burden): we are told for example "what restrained them all was that everybody was suffering the same thing."<sup>255</sup> Joseph Massad states that the way "the Nassir's system brought about equality among the citizenry [was] through the castration of men."<sup>256</sup> This loss of virility is equated in the novel with a loss of

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<sup>253</sup> In trying to compile a file about the Sheikh, the State discovers that he does not exist as far as their records are concerned. The authorities admit his existence but cannot corroborate it with any tangible evidence: "There is indeed a Sheikh Atiya in the alley. A search, however, revealed that the Authority has no files on him, nor is anything known about him. We have neither pictures of him nor a description." See al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 187.

<sup>254</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 113.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 327.

manhood and the men of the alley are repeatedly described as women.<sup>257</sup> I will return to the significance of sexuality as the site of agency and potency shortly. Beyond this however, the Sheikh is able to take advantage of the inhabitants' fear of the curse to establish rules, which ultimately have a leveling effect. All the people of Zafarani are forced to wake, sleep, and eat at exactly the same time, eradicating the socio-economic differences that are representative of social stratification.

The alley does not remain permanently isolated however. On the contrary the impotency curse becomes the way in which Zafarani alley forges a connection with the outside world, even beyond the borders of the nation. Refusing to comply with the state, the inhabitants of the alley insist on solving their situation alone. The end of the novel witnesses their movement against the Sheikh, violating all his rules and refusing to succumb to his power. Instead they stage what is described in the official sources as an "insurrection."<sup>258</sup> I would argue that it is at this moment that the space of the alley is transformed into what Lefebvre calls a "differential space" the space of subversion, opposition and dissent, a space that "accentuates differences."<sup>259</sup> This internal uprising is accompanied by a spread of the curse worldwide, with a number of bulletins and cables from cities around the world reporting the spread of the Zafarani epidemic.<sup>260</sup> This global

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<sup>257</sup> For an excellent discussion of issues of gender and the allegorical use of sex in the novel see Massad, *Desiring Arabs*.

<sup>258</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 323.

<sup>259</sup> Lefebvre, 52. I take this reading of differential space as oppositional space from al-Musawi's *Islam on the Street*, xxii, 74.

<sup>260</sup> Once again al-Ghīṭānī combines the real and the imaginary in presenting the locations hit by the curse. While Paris and India both appear in the news wires, so too do places such as Galantia and Isteffendial. *Zafarani Files*, 330.

phenomenon seems to suggest an international revolution of sorts, an attempt to overturn the forces of repression and persecution and establish a new world order. The novel closes with the following declaration:

Farewell, old time, eras of darkness and distortions of truth; farewell to death by starvation, to miserable love, to frustrated hopes, to suppressed desires, to deferred promises, to unjust systems, to relative justice, to complicating that which is simple and making difficult that which is easy. It will not be long now. The era of the spell is here, to change the world.<sup>261</sup>

This potential for change seems possible only as a result of the extraordinary context created in the space of the alley.

#### VI: Sexuality as Agency

The possibility for change that comes from the mobilization of the inhabitants of the alley is built upon a privileging of male sexuality as a site of agency. As was noted earlier the impotency that befalls the men of Zafarani calls into question their masculinity. Here we see the way in which gender is defined by sexuality; once the men can no longer perform sexually not only are they labeled women, but they also lose their position vis-à-vis their wives. The alley becomes what Massad calls “a postmanly world full of women and their equals.”<sup>262</sup> They struggle to protect their wives from the pimps who enter the alley. They are taunted by their wives for their weakness and lack of masculinity. An example of this is the exchange that takes place between Usta Abdu and his wife:

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<sup>261</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 330-331.

<sup>262</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 326.

From now on, she could not keep someone who was a man only in name. He said it wasn't his problem alone, that what had happened to him had happened to everybody else as well. She punched him and he shrank in terror. In the past when that happened, he would at worst run away while she chased him, or he'd return her blows. Twice he had bitten her on the shoulder and the buttocks. He now looked so small in her eyes, as she held her slipper with its wooden heel; his pleading eyes had provoked her. She was cruel to him for reasons she couldn't even name; perhaps because he kept flailing about all day long like a fish, and all to no avail.<sup>263</sup>

Their manhood disappears once they are no longer able to satisfy the sexual or reproductive desires of the women.

What the curse does is reveal the relationship between sexuality, reproduction, and the technologies of power. As Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality* the production and deployment of sexuality in modern society became an issue of great political significance. The development of biopower, techniques designed to subjugate bodies and control populations was “an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes.”<sup>264</sup> The political significance of sex was its relationship to both the disciplines of the body and the regulation of the population.

The Sheikh understands the importance of controlling the reproductive powers of the people as a means of exercising his power, stating, “the best option, he deemed, was to deprive them of fruit. He knew that a sterile human was like a leafless tree; such trees could be softened by the heat of fire... After the shock, people would obey him.”<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 88.

<sup>264</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 140-141.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

What the Sheikh recognizes here is the importance of what Foucault calls “the power over life,” the ability to regulate and control the reproductive power of the population. As Foucault explains “the power of life” is based upon the development of two poles: the first being the disciplining of the body (understood as machine) and the second being control of the body as a productive species. It is the second pole that helps us understand the significance of the Sheikh’s curse, as a literary rendering of the state’s control of:

The species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population.<sup>266</sup>

What is interesting is the way in which the negation of the men’s sexual agency is also a negation of their power to act as independent subjects. Once their sexual potency is called into question, they find themselves subject to the Sheikh’s whims, following his repressive dictates, showing little sign of resistance. Ultimately, however, it is this repression that drives the inhabitants of the alley to revolt against the Sheikh, the state, and the larger system of injustice.

#### VII: *Waqāʿiʿ hārat al-Zaʿfarānī* and the Literary Expression of Surveillance.

Al-Ghīṭānī’s creation of the exceptional space of Zafarani alley, a space that seems to straddle the divide between the real and the imaginary, allows for the opportunity of an “escape.” The refusal of the existing reality and the utilization of the impotency curse as a means of liberation, which we witness at the end of the novel, seem to suggest a possibility for change. What is particularly interesting is the way in which

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 139.

al-Ghīṭānī uses the tools of the state to represent a moment of resistance *against* the state. As with Ibrāhīm’s novel, here too is a literary expression of surveillance. But while Ibrāhīm’s protagonist could not produce his novel because of state surveillance, al-Ghīṭānī’s al-novel *is* the record of surveillance. The first section of the novel entitled “File One” is followed by the following explanation; “Containing Profiles of Certain Subjects Residing in Zafarani Alley; Information Drawn from Sources Who Are Closely Informed about All that Goes on in the Alley.”<sup>267</sup> And so the story unfolds, told through files, reports, memorandum, and appendices from the various State Security departments that get involved in the Zafarani case.<sup>268</sup> This type of documentation is written in a style that remains detached, maintaining a distance between the “narrator” and the events being described. As the author himself explains “in *Waqā’i*<sup>c</sup> I made use of Ibn Iyas’ experiment with language even though the subject is not historical. Ibn Iyas wrote about the most horrific events with the same *calm* that he wrote about the simplest events. There was a...distance between him and the event. In *Za<sup>c</sup>farani* I expressed events with an objective spirit because it is a report and it’s not possible to [be emotional] in a report.”<sup>269</sup> This objectivity and the matter of fact way in which the events are described stand in contrast of course to the fantastical, almost mythical, nature of the events themselves. This tension between the “real” and the “fictive,” the “official” and

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<sup>267</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 1.

<sup>268</sup> In an interview with al-Ghīṭānī in which he compares the form of *Zaynī Barakāt* to that of *Waqā’i<sup>c</sup> ḥārat al-Za<sup>c</sup>farānī* al-Ghīṭānī points to the way in which he recreated the entire world of Mamluk Egypt, paying attention to details of the clothes, food, and language of the time. With *Zafarani Files* however he states that the novel is all “a collection of files and reports, therefore it was necessary that I resort to the cold style of the report.” Al-Ghīṭānī, “Jadaliyyat al-tanāṣṣ,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 4 (Spring 1984): 78.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

“unofficial” narrative is fundamental to al-Ghīṭānī’s larger literary project. Mehrez notes that by insisting upon the:

Dialogical nature of narrative, he simultaneously collapses the conventional boundaries between genres and, more importantly, he challenges the traditional confines of disciplines. In doing so, he displaces the borderlines which are usually set between the “fictional text” and the “historical text;” between the two worlds which have so conveniently been separated into the “imaginary” and the “real.”<sup>270</sup>

In this novel the conflation seems to be less between the historical and the fictional text, but rather between the official format of the files and the nature of the material they contain.

Within these documents occasional references are made to dates and times as if to hint at the veracity of the information they contain. Early in the novel we learn of an event that took place on 8/4/1971 —this appearing to be a few years prior to the current events. Later in the novel reference is made to the defeat of 1967. Other than that very few allusions are made to “real” time such that the reader could be forgiven for attributing a sense of timelessness to the events. This presentation of time works to strengthen the idea that Zafarani alley is not a part of the “real world” but has entered a mythical realm as a result of the fantastic impotency curse.

This sense of scrutiny that pervades the novel is also mirrored in the behavior of the Zafaranis themselves. The people of the alley —and here this is particularly true of the women— spend a great deal of their time spying on one another. Fights are monitored from the balconies, secrets are passed from one household to the next, and the inhabitants keep a close eye on the comings and goings of their neighbors. It is as if the inhabitants have internalized the mechanism of surveillance exercised by the state.

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<sup>270</sup> Mehrez, “Re-Writing the City: The Case of Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī,” 149.

Throughout the novel a number of characters remark on their sense of being watched and observed. For example Umm al-Khair (Radish-head's mother) silently gazes at the Zafaranis from her rooftop:

While the inhabitants were standing on their balconies, they would have the weird sensation of being watched. They would raise their heads and, with a shudder, their eyes would meet those of Umm al-Khair, whose head seemed to survey the whole alley and, with the fence hiding her body, appeared to be floating there, detached... Everyone thought it was himself alone she was watching, looking at just him or her personally.<sup>271</sup>

The word surveillance (*mutāba<sup>c</sup>ah*) is used on a number of occasions. For example we are told “Skina kept Rhode under constant surveillance” and that “certain facts were established after intensive surveillance was successfully conducted, on account of her proximity, by Umm Suhair.”<sup>272</sup> Atif expresses his irritation repeatedly throughout the novel at his inability to escape unnoticed to meet Rhoda because of the “sharp prying eyes on all sides of him.”<sup>273</sup> This is not however the only way that the inhabitants monitor each other's movement and behavior. It is also by way of the constant quarreling amongst the people of the alley that “the most intimate secrets in Zafarani Alley usually came to be known.”<sup>274</sup> In fact when the Sheikh starts to reveal the Zafaranis' secrets, one of the inhabitants points out that the only reason he knows such things is because of the people themselves. Sheikh Atiya is said to keep a watchful eye over the inhabitants. This is not however a benevolent gaze but instills fear and constant paranoia amongst the people of Zafarani: “at no time would the feeling leave the people that the sheikh was

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<sup>271</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 11.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 153; 19.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



close to them, that he watched over them, and knew just what was going on among them.”<sup>275</sup>

As the events in Zafarani unfold, the presence of the state is imposed upon the lives of its people. The secret police try and infiltrate the alley and a slew of state agencies and bureaus are established to combat the influence of the Sheikh. Here lies al-Ghīṭānī’s critique of the police state established under the rule of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir and its suffocating hold over the citizen population. This critique is presented with a great deal of irony and mockery; the proliferation of government agencies alone, and their focus on the most mundane of details in the alley, alerts the reader to the absurdity of the endeavor. To combat the perceived threat of the oppositional forces present in the alley the state creates organizations such as the “Special Security Authority, Department for the Suppression of Religious Fanaticism” and “Department for the Suppression of Subversive Ideas,” and the more ridiculous “Supreme Department of Eavesdropping” and “Supreme Authority for Buildings Built with Red Bricks” clearly meant as parodies of the political climate under ʿAbd al-Nāṣir. Not surprisingly, however, these agencies are unable to discover the source of the Sheikh’s power and instead propose an alternative plan. As word of the events in Zafarani leaks out to the rest of the world the government fears the tarnishing of the image of the nation. Its response to the media frenzy that ensues is to flatly deny the veracity of the claims made about the curse of Zafarani. When this strategy fails the government decides to solve the problem once and for all by erasing the alley from existence. This is best encapsulated in the plan that is articulated by the state official:

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 65. A little later in the novel we are told “the sheikh knew everything, lived with every family, counting every breath and movement.” Al-Ghīṭānī, *Zafarani Files*, 118.

He then proposed that an official declaration be issued and distributed to our embassies abroad denying the existence of a Zafarani Alley in the country. This had to be carried out simultaneously with an emergency plan, for which immediate allocations had to be made and which consisted in notifying all the inhabitants of the alley that *they* must vacate their homes, upon which they would be moved into government housing in different, distant places in such a way that no two families would be close to each other. Then a new plan would be drawn up for Zafarani in such a way as to preserve the old style in new buildings. The Information Authority would cover the project, thereby giving the impression that it was no more than a manifestation of interest in the preservation of old neighborhoods. Thus many internal and external goals would be met.<sup>276</sup>

This plan of course does not succeed, but here al-Ghīṭānī is drawing attention to an important dimension of state power, the organization of bodies in space. When unable to adequately police its citizens or control their existence in a particular space, its response is to alter the physical and material reality of that space.

It is in taking on his own literary project of surveillance that al-Ghīṭānī undermines and critiques the repressive power of the state apparatus. The writer here uses the official tools of state documentation, to present a portrait of Zafarani alley, a space whose fantastic nature provides a libratory moment and the opportunity for the people to reclaim their right to the space of the *ḥāra*.

#### VIII: Ibrāhīm Aṣlān's *Mālik al-ḥazīn*: Placing Imbaba in Time and Space

The protagonist of Ibrāhīm Aṣlān's novel *Mālik al-ḥazīn* is the district of Imbaba; a site that at once encapsulates memories of a glorious past, the struggles of a tempestuous present, and the uncertainty of a fragmentary future.<sup>277</sup> If Maḥfūz is the

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>277</sup> Located on the West Bank of the Nile, opposite the upper-class neighborhood of Zamalek, Imbaba, once stood amidst a vast area of agricultural land. What began as a small rural village, that dated back to at least the medieval period, was to undergo vast change, becoming by the beginning of the twentieth century, one of Cairo's fastest growing areas. Much of Imbaba's

chronicler of Jamāliyya, then Aṣlān is surely the chronicler of Imbaba, and it is this work more than any other that has placed the people and places of this district on the literary map.<sup>278</sup> *Mālik al-ḥazīn*, tracks the lives of Imbaba's inhabitants during one single day,<sup>279</sup>

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growth occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century: the completion of the Aswan Dam in 1902 as well as the building of the tram line in 1918, meant that land was available for development and a firm connection was at last established with the rest of the city. Beginning in the 1940s formal housing was developed in the district, areas such as “Madīnat al-Taḥrīr” and “Madīnat al-°Ummāl,” that were meant to serve as low-income housing. This marked the beginning of the transformation of the largely agricultural area to an urban one, a transformation that is encapsulated both symbolically and literally by the disappearance of the famous Imbaba market: the agricultural village's need for a market—which also served to connect it to the rest of the capital across the river—was increasingly replaced by the need for urban housing. The period that followed the 1952 Revolution saw continued construction in the area, this time in the form of Soviet style housing projects constructed under the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir. Neither these housing blocks, nor the earlier colonial style construction that preceded the Revolution were able however to cater to the ever-growing population. The state's attempt to incorporate the rural migrants into the growing urban proletariat proved increasingly difficult, leading to the development of more informal communities or °*ashwā'iyyāt*. This situation was only exacerbated with the end of the Nāṣirist regime and the dismantlement of the welfare state by al-Sādāt's regime. Imbaba's position on the outskirts of Cairo, both geographically and economically, resulted in the absence of basic infrastructure—such as water, electricity and sewage—for much of its population. See Raymond, *Cairo: City of History*, Janet AbuLughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), Stevan Bullard, “Informal Development in Cairo, the View from Above: A Case Study Using Arial Photo Interpretation to Examine Informal Housing in the Imbaba District of Cairo”(PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2006) and Maureen O'Malley, “Scenes from Cairo's Camel Market,” *Inscriptions* (1992).

[http://www2.ucsc.edu/culturalstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol\\_6/MaureenOMalley.html](http://www2.ucsc.edu/culturalstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_6/MaureenOMalley.html).

<sup>278</sup> Though not originally from the district of Imbaba, Aṣlān spent the majority of his life in this popular neighborhood, moving only recently to the wealthier suburb of Moqattam. *Mālik al-ḥazīn* is only one of a number of his works that take Imbaba as their setting. Of significance also is the appearance of a number of his characters in more than one work.

<sup>279</sup> This compression of time in the novel to a single day is significant as a strategy employed by a number of sixties writers. In this case Aṣlān both limits the actions of the novel to a single day and uses numerous techniques of flashbacks and recollection to make sure that the past(s) is ever-present. For other examples of this compression of time see Hafez, “The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties,” in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980), 186.

January 17, 1977, the day of the infamous Bread Riots in Egypt<sup>280</sup> with which the novel closes.

This novel is, I would argue, Aṣḷān's attempt to put Imbaba on Egypt's map, to claim its people, its places, its past(s) and its present(s) a place in the literary imagination.<sup>281</sup> It is also a searing critique of the "Open Door" (*infītāḥ*) policies initiated by al-Sādāt's regime, against which the riots erupted, and which heralded the end of any hope of a socialist state in Egypt.<sup>282</sup> In choosing to present this pivotal moment in modern Egyptian history through the lives of the capital's "periphery," Aṣḷān is pushing for a shift in the locus of attention: though marginalized, Imbaba is by no means marginal but rather comes to stand in for the larger Egyptian nation. It is a novel that refuses a simplistic understanding of the district: remembered largely as the site of the famous Battle of the Pyramids, where the Egyptian people stood against Napoleon's invading armies, it remains frozen in time in the national imagination.<sup>283</sup> When Imbaba is

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<sup>280</sup> The Bread Riots of 1977 refer to the violent uprisings that erupted in opposition to the World Bank and IMF policies aimed at terminating basic food subsidies. For more on this see John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 229-231.

<sup>281</sup> The novel was in fact originally entitled *Imbaba madīnah maqfūlah* (Imbaba: A Closed City) but was then changed to the existing *Mālik al-ḥazīn* (The Heron). Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 113.

<sup>282</sup> The "Open Door" policies (*infītāḥ*) refer to the increasingly liberal economic policies that were instituted under President Anwar al-Sādāt. Along with the dismantlement of many of the socialist policies of the Nāṣirist regime (such the subsidization of staple goods) came rampant inflation, the abandonment of basic welfare programs, greater intervention on the part of the World Bank and IMF, a turn towards foreign investment, a focus upon private investment, and a steady increase in the importing of consumer goods. Much of Aṣḷān's critique in this novel is leveled against the speculation and consumerism of the period and against the logic of *infītāḥ* which ensured that the rich got richer at the expense of the majority of the Egyptian population. For more see Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*.

<sup>283</sup> For references of this historical incident in existing histories of Cairo see Desmond Stewart, *Great Cairo: Mother of the World* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1981), 175

mentioned within a contemporary context it is more often than not as a den of drug-dealers and prostitutes.<sup>284</sup> The novel's view is a more expansive one that refuses the idea of a passive periphery, but rather considers the way in which this periphery impacts the center, even as the latter continues to thwart its efforts. *Aṣlān* presents the reader with an array of characters, who, the author insists, should be viewed as active agents involved in shaping the political, social, and economic fabric of their city and the nation at large. To understand the position of this working-class neighborhood and the transformations it is forced to undergo is to understand the larger socio-economic and political changes in Cairo and the nation at large. It is to understand also the roles such "peripheries" play as possible sites of confrontation and resistance.<sup>285</sup>

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and Max Rodenbeck's *Cairo: A City Victorious* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 118-123 and Janet Abu Lughod's *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971).

<sup>284</sup> Both *Mālik al-ḥazīn* and *Aṣlān*'s later novel *ʿAṣāfir al-Nīl* (Nile Sparrows, 1991) have perhaps become even more significant in the decades following their publication as a means to counter the predominantly negative image of Imbaba and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the area. With the siege of Imbaba that took place in the 1990s as a result of the government crackdown on the Islamists, the district came to be seen as a breeding ground for religious fundamentalism and an example of the dangers posed by the "urban poor." For an excellent study of the media representation of this campaign see Dianne Singerman's "The Siege of Imbaba" in *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space and Global Modernity*, ed. Dianne Singerman (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 111-145. For more on the idea of the urban poor as a political threat, see Eric Denis "Urban Planning and Growth in Cairo," *Middle East Report 202* (Winter 1996): 7-12 and Eric Denis and Asef Bayat, "Who is Afraid of the ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt," *Environment and Urbanization* 12:2 (October 2000): 185-199.

<sup>285</sup> In the novel I argue that we are presented with two types of resistance which have been articulated by Asef Bayat. On the one hand we witness the ways in which the inhabitants practice policies of "quiet encroachment" to deal with the policies of the state —erecting informal housing and relying upon the support network of the neighborhood for example. On the other hand we are presented with "direct, intentional action" at the end of the novel through the riots and demonstrations that take place. For more on the difference between "quiet encroachment" and intentional political acts see Asef Bayat, "'From Dangerous Classes' to 'Quiet Rebels': Policies of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South," *International Sociology* 15:3 (September 2000): 533-557.

Aṣlān provides a portrait of the neighborhood of Imbaba, a neighborhood, intended to serve as a model of resistance for the rest of the nation. The representation of Imbaba's streets, its geographical location, and its relationship to surrounding areas comes alive before the reader's eyes through the wanderings of the novel's characters. What is interesting in comparison to Ibrāhīm's narrative, is the way in which Aṣlān focuses on a multiplicity of perspectives; we learn of a character's movement for example from a first, second, and third person perspective such that one journey is narrated from a number of different vantage points.<sup>286</sup> This is I would argue one of Aṣlān's innovative techniques. Through this we are presented with the main streets of the neighborhood, the major routes that connect, as well as separate, it from the rest of the city. As °Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Ḥajmarī states:

Place in this narrative text is almost the main character, with its own external features consisting of streets, alley, a river and a square...etc. Such that most of the features of the place like its streets and alleys are not referred to in the text by the name 'street' or 'alley' but in most cases by their name alone as if they were intimate and known characters.<sup>287</sup>

The importance of the external features of the square —and I would add the café— will be discussed shortly. The familiarity of names, as we will see in the following examples, is assumed particularly with the streets that lie *inside* Imbaba. So for example we trace

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<sup>286</sup> This focus upon movement is particularly significant given the way in which this novel encourages the reader to understand space through the ways in which it is inhabited by its people. For more on this point see Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī misr*, 119.

<sup>287</sup> °Abd al-Fatāḥ al-Ḥajmarī, *Takhayyul al-ḥikāyah: baḥth fī al-anṣaq al-khitabiyyah li-riwayāt Mālik al-ḥazn li-Ibrāhīm Aṣlān* (Cairo: Al-Majlis al-°Alā lil-Thaqāfah, 1998), 131. Al-Ḥajmarī draws on the work of Michelle Porter, *Buhūth fī al-riwāyah al-jadīdah*, trans. Farid Antonius (Manshūrāt °Awīdat, 1982), 43.

the steps of Usta Qadri<sup>288</sup> as he tries to avoid bumping into his neighbors as he makes his way home:

For a number of weeks he continued to leave his house and walk along the Nile until al-Mounira. He would turn and return through the worker's projects to the railway station until Sidi Ismail al-Imbabi. He would then enter from the Al-Garn school, passing by Ahmed Ashour the grocer and from Murad street he would sneak through Qatr al-Nada until Fadlallah Uthman in order to return home.<sup>289</sup>

This route is followed soon after with an alternative mapping, that is necessitated by Sheikh Hosni's ongoing inquiries into Usta Qadri's whereabouts:

He used to leave from Fadlallah Osman to Al-Salam street from the back, until al-Mudir garden, passing by the nuns, then crossing Sudan street and passing through *Iskān Nāṣir al-sha'bi* [Nāṣir's housing projects] until *Nādi Ṭal'at Ḥarb* [Ṭal'at Ḥarb Club]. He kept walking in the garden facing the Zamalek bridge looking at the side entrance to the Balloon Theatre until he reached *Ṭariq al-Nīl*. Turning left he would head to Kit Kat square.<sup>290</sup>

The above passages are just two of many examples that proliferate in Aṣḷān's novel. The reader gradually becomes familiar with the geographical layout of the neighborhood and

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<sup>288</sup>To avoid confusion I will use the transliterations of names as they appear in the English translation of the text. See Ibrāhīm Aṣḷān, *The Heron*, trans. Elliott Colla (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

<sup>289</sup>This is my translation. In the English text the translator excises some of the detailed geographical description and replaces them with the following: "For a number of weeks, he continued to leave his house and go along the Nile until al-Mounira, then return through the workers' projects toward the train station. From Murad Street, he'd sneak through Qatr al-Nada and Fadlallah Osman and return home." See Aṣḷān, *The Heron*, trans. Elliott Colla, 36. This excision perhaps points to an assumption on the part of the translator that a familiarity is needed on the part of the reader with the geography of the area in order to fully appreciate aspects of the novel. I would add that perhaps many of Aṣḷān's Arabic readers may also be missing this familiarity and it is precisely such descriptions which are intended to introduce Imbaba and its surroundings to the reader. Important to note also is that Fadlallah Uthmān and its people becomes the focus of one of Aṣḷān's short story collections entitled *Ḥikāyāt min Fadlallah Uthmān* (Stories from Fadlallah Uthman).

<sup>290</sup>This is my translation. In the English text the translator replaces this description with the following "When he heard that Sheikh Hosni had been coming around, asking about him, he began to change the course of his walks, wandering all over creation before he finally returned to Kit Kat Square." See Aṣḷān, *The Heron*, trans. Elliott Colla, 36.

its relationship to the rest of the city.<sup>291</sup> Obvious immediately of course is the juxtaposition of the wealthier upper class neighborhood of Zamalek across the river from Imbaba. It serves as a constant reminder to the residents of Imbaba (and by extension to the reader) of what they are not: the most affluent of Egyptian society who inhabit spacious apartments in Cairo's most sought after locations. As Amm Omran stands on the roof of his building, outside his room, looking at the city skyline, this opposition is made very clear:

His wooden room was in the rear of the small rooftop with its cramped, covered toilet. Amm Omran walked forward and stopped behind the large wooden chair. He looked out over the buildings' rooftops, Kit Kat Square, the large yellow Khalid Ibn al-Walid mosque, and the three thoroughfares that led into the neighborhood: al-Sudan Street, al-Nil Street, and Murad Street which intersected the first two... the flooded asphalt, the nearby river covered by a layer of light mist, the trees on the opposite bank, the bright lights in the windows, and the closed balconies of the massive Zamalek apartment buildings stretching off into the pitch-darkness of night. Then he opened the door and turned on the lights. He shut the door tight behind him.<sup>292</sup>

The contrast between this passage's opening and its closing is immediately apparent: while Amm Omran is destined to spend his days in a cramped room on the roof of an old building, his view is of the luxurious buildings in the "other" Cairo. The characters of *Mālik al-ḥazīn* do not ever really interact with this "other" Cairo, rather they remain on its outskirts, allowed only to pass by these prosperous areas during late night strolls, or stare at the buildings from across the river. The bridges, that the characters return to time and again, seem to serve as much as dividers as they do connectors, segregating the area from the rest of the city.

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<sup>291</sup> Al-Ḥajmarī provides a very useful chart in which he records all the appearances of places in the novel. See al-Ḥajmarī, *Takhayyul al-ḥikāyah*, 125.

<sup>292</sup> Aṣlān, *The Heron*, 127.



Where the characters end up however is invariably Kit Kat Square,<sup>293</sup> the site of the café that continues to bring the community together: it is here that eventually all the people of the neighborhood gather on this fateful night. The two spaces, of both square and café, are transformed in this novel into Lefebvre's "differential spaces" in which possibilities of opposition and resistance are temporarily available. Kit Kat square, named after the cabaret, famous for entertaining the British soldiers during the colonial period, is ever-present throughout the novel. With its "dancing and drumming and kings and ministers and singing" Kit Kat became the favorite haunt of King Farouq, until the coming of the Revolution in 1952.<sup>294</sup> We learn of its significance as the site where the Mamluk soldiers faced the invading armies of Napoleon, an event that is memorialized in the architecture of the square "*its giant stone entrance, [with] the writing on the lofty arch: 'The battle of the Pyramids took place here on the 21st of July 1798.'*"<sup>295</sup> This is once again the site of confrontation, this time between the Egyptian security forces and the people of Imbaba.<sup>296</sup> As the people of Imbaba stand in front of the "giant stone entrance" defending their neighborhood against the riot police, the reader cannot help but

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<sup>293</sup> This focus upon Kit Kat Square is emphasized in Egyptian film director Dawūd °Abd al-Sayyid's adaptation of the novel entitled *Al-Kit Kāt* which was released in 1991 and became an instant success.

<sup>294</sup> Aşlān, *The Heron*, 116.

<sup>295</sup> Aşlān, *The Heron*, 113. For references to the Battle of the Pyramids see Rodenbeck, *Cairo: The City Victorious* and Raymond's *Cairo*. Though Imbaba receives little attention in historical and contemporary accounts of the capital it is always mentioned in association with this historic confrontation.

<sup>296</sup> The apocalyptic scene in the closing pages of the novel, depict clashes between the demonstrators and the riot police. The demonstrators that are part of the eruption of popular uprising that takes place during the Bread Riots are cut off from the rest of the city and find themselves forced into Kit Kat Square by the police. The young men of Imbaba defend the entrances to their neighborhood managing to hold the police at bay. Aşlān, *The Heron*, 153.

draw parallels between the contemporary Egyptian government and the invading forces of Napoleon. The picture painted by Aşlān however allows us to see the multiple faces of Imbaba and its infamous Kit Kat Square: it is at once a site of resistance, a place famed for lascivious entertainment, and home to neighborhood communities struggling to survive in an ever-changing world.

This fear of foreign domination, represented in the past by the Napoleonic armies, lives on in the present. Throughout the evening the characters discuss an important story that has been reported in the day's newspaper—that of the “foreigner” who is claiming ownership of Imbaba. The first mention of this rumor comes very early in the opening pages of the novel. Listening to Qasim Effendi read from his daily copy of *Al-Ahram*, the customers of the café first learn of the legal battle that is unfolding over their neighborhood. The reader learns of this second-hand, through the re-telling of this reading by Abdullah, the café's waiter:<sup>297</sup> “It says in Qasim Effendi's *Al-Ahram* that the owner of the café—and the cinema and the bookstore and Husayn's fish shop and Hagg Hanafi's milk store and the mosque, in fact, the owner of all of Kit Kat Square— turns out to be some foreigner. He's alive and well and is going to sue in court.”<sup>298</sup> We are told

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<sup>297</sup> This is a significant technique employed by the author throughout the novel. The same events are often told from a number of different perspectives, and in this case the contents of the article are re-told to the group by Abdullah. In another part of the novel the group is given a different version of the same account by Qasim Effendi himself. Here, and throughout the novel, the reader is rarely given a definitive version of any one event and can as such make no claim to knowledge of any one truth. We are never really sure “what” exactly happened or whose version of events to believe. I would argue that this strategy is very much in line with the epigraph with which the novel opens, a quote by Paul Valéry in which he says “Oh Nathaniel. I urge you to be accurate not clear.” In presenting multiple versions of these events Aşlān is perhaps choosing a form of accuracy over clarity. Aşlān, *Mālik al-ḥazīn*, 5. The translation of the epigraph is my own.

<sup>298</sup> Aşlān, *The Heron*, 10.

a little later that this “foreigner” is an “Italian named David Mousa who was visiting Egypt and had filed a complaint with the Chief of Police in Imbaba against the citizens of the Kit Kat neighborhood on the grounds that they had illegally appropriated land which was his rightful property.”<sup>299</sup> This illegal appropriation is explained in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper article as the presence of “squatters all over the place” (the inhabitants of the *‘ashwā’iyyāt* that proliferate in the area) and the “tall buildings and commercial areas” that have appeared everywhere.<sup>300</sup> However, as the reader comes to discover (and what Abdullah himself already knows even this early on) is that the real threat to the café — and the neighborhood at large — is not from a “foreigner” trying to retrieve the land he lost after leaving Egypt in 1956, but from the capitalist, exploitative ventures of Maallim Sobhi and his ilk. These men, the maallims of Imbaba, represent the benefactors of al-Sādāt’s economic policies, and the harbingers of the new world order, who possess the economic means to alter the spatial reality of the neighborhood.

The battle over the sale and demise of Awadullah’s café is one of the pivotal events of *Mālik al-ḥazīn*. (The end of a particular world order —represented by the destruction of the café— is further stressed by the death of Am Migahid whose funeral takes place that very evening.) Once again we see the contestation over power articulated as a contestation over space. The story is as follows: Maallim Subhi, the poultry vendor persistently harasses Maallim Atiya to sell him his lease to the café so that he can carry out his plans of knocking down the entire building and erecting a large apartment block in its place. However, his plans are thwarted by Maallim Atiya who takes payment from

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 68.

Maallim Subhi on numerous occasions, but refuses to vacate the building. The situation is ultimately resolved in Maallim Subhi's favor, Maallim Atiya incurring an injury for his lack of cooperation. This drive to develop, construct, and reap profits from such endeavors is part of a larger critique leveled by the novel against the "Open Door" (*infītāh*) policies initiated by al-Sādāt, in which black market trading and speculation were the hallmarks of the day. The battle over Awadallah's café, and the plans to construct an apartment building in its place, reveal the effects of the economic policies of the state upon the urban space of the city. What we witness here is the production of a new space, a shift from "the representational space" of the café, the space of the social life and the lived reality of the everyday, to the "representation of space" in the form of the planned apartment building, the space "constructed by planners, professionals, technocrats, and urbanists," a space that is "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose."<sup>301</sup>

Awadallah's café is important in the novel in so far as it represents a particular social order, in which the people of the neighborhood (or more accurately the men) come together. The café is ever-present in the novel and in the lives of the characters. Not only do they inevitably end up there throughout the evening but it features prominently in the endless flashbacks that present the community's past: the time of the action may differ but the site remains the same. It is therefore not an exaggeration to call it the "focus of the narrative and the center of events."<sup>302</sup> It is once again through the rich oral narrative

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<sup>301</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33.

<sup>302</sup> Al-Ḥajmarī, *Takhayyul al-ḥikāyah* 127. While al-Ḥajmarī provides an excellent analysis of the use of the café and the significance of place in general in Aṣlān's novel, his overly structuralist analysis fails to connect this use with the larger political and social context of the events of the novel.

provided by Am Omran that we learn of the café's beginnings: during the time of Baron Meyer, Hagg Awadallah first built a grocery shop:

But the grocery store didn't do so well, and he transformed it into Awadallah's cafe. The Nubians used to love to sit there. They worked in Kit Kat, then they'd come to the cafe and drink tea with milk. Nubians love tea with milk better than anything else. And Hagg Awadallah became the chief sheikh in the area... Muhammad Atiya couldn't find a space to open a cafe. So when Hagg Awadallah happened to die that same week, Muhammad Atiya began to rent the cafe because Awadallah's sons had become effendis. They were educated now and didn't want to work in a café.<sup>303</sup>

A number of the inhabitants of the neighborhood are acutely aware of the significance of the disappearance of such a crucial landmark. Abdullah, the waiter in the café, continues to struggle with what he sees as the end of his entire world. Awadallah's café is not only a part of himself, but also a part of the people of the neighborhood:

Abdullah couldn't work or be a waiter except in Awadallah's cafe. "You see, this cafe you're in became a cafe at the same time I became a waiter," he told a customer... In sum, without Awadallah's café", there's no Abdullah. "What would he do then? When he got up in the morning and couldn't come here, where would he go? How would he survive?... "He sold me out and sold everybody out."<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Aşlân, *The Heron*, 116-117.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 102. Again Amir Awadallah voices a similar sentiment: "It was directed at you. Against your world. Your exhausted, depleted world. As this mosque here is your witness. Yes. The cafe was nothing but the last gasp of this huge body softly passing before you as if it were a cloud pulsing with colors and shadows. Its memory would always be in your heart." These passages forge an important relationship between people and place such that it becomes a matter of life and death. Interestingly, we are told next to nothing about any of the characters before they came to Imbaba—their lives begin and end in this area.

This sense of betrayal eventually gets the better of him and in the closing pages of the novel Abdullah, unable to control his anger, attacks Maallim Atiya, stabbing him as punishment for this treachery.<sup>305</sup>

It is at the café that all the characters gather before the outbreak of the riots that shake their entire world: in some ways the café is the physical embodiment of this potentially transformative moment. But just as the riots that flare up on that fateful night are extinguished and their political possibilities smothered, the café too is destined for demolition.<sup>306</sup>

#### IV: Resisting the New World Order

The demolition of the café, and the crumbling of the world it represents, seems inevitable by the end of *Mālik al-ḥaz̄n*. If the neighborhood's residents cannot stop the onslaught of Maallim Subhi and those like him, the people of Imbaba nevertheless put up a fight against the violence of the state and its encroachment upon their space. The novel, and the night it depicts, culminates in the violent protests of the 1977 Bread Riots, and Aşlān's novel goes to great lengths to explain these events. The police siege of Imbaba is bravely resisted by its inhabitants who refuse to be bombed or gassed into submission. As

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 139. This incident comes immediately before a section entitled "Handprints of Blood" in which we observe Maallim Subhi's boys (who are described as "celebratory harbingers of the new order") dipping their hands in the blood of a freshly slaughtered calf and marking the walls of the café as a way to bless the new endeavor. Given the violence that has just preceded this, and the violence that will soon follow, the scene is set for the apocalyptic unfolding of events. Aşlān, *The Heron*, 142-143.

<sup>306</sup> This inevitability is expressed, for example, by Amir Awadallah who realizes that "he'd just have to get used to life without the cafe. It was bound to go. If not today, then tomorrow. He was certain of it." Aşlān, *The Heron*, 142-143.

the demonstrators make their way down Sudan Street, the riot police blocks off the Zamalek bridge, trying to force them to surrender at Kit Kat Square:

He [Yusif] saw the huge demonstration approaching from al-Sudan Street near the Shurbagi Factories. He saw the soldiers streaming out of the alleys located between the Nasser public housing blocks. They fired bullets and canisters, then retreated and disappeared. He saw thousands of rocks raining down on the soldiers from inside of Imbaba, pushing the troops back across the square.<sup>307</sup>

What ensues is a scene of street warfare in which the government troops are held at bay by the Imbabans who emerge victorious, even if only momentarily:

Pushed back by the young men of Imbaba, the riot police had abandoned the nearby roads and regrouped far from the wet square, now empty except for the rocks, tear gas canisters, and bullets. The young men occupied the streets of their neighborhood and were sitting in the doorways of the buildings, leaning against walls, exchanging whispered remarks and laughing.<sup>308</sup>

This scene is the climax of events that have been taking place throughout the day in different parts of the city. Much earlier, as Yusif goes to meet Fatima downtown, he witnesses the demonstrations that have erupted in the streets of Cairo and that represent the reclamation of the streets by the people. It is in the downtown streets of Cairo and Imbaba that the people confront and resist the violence and repression of the state:

He sensed a faint echo in the air... Yusif became more aware of the echoing sound, as if a distant uproar were stirring. Was this possible? Yusif thought not. In order to cross 26th of July, he walked through an opening in the guardrail. He saw Fatma standing next to the bus stop. When he reached Talaat Harb Street, the echoes began to resonate against the walls of the massive buildings. He stood at the end of the street and could see that it was blocked off in the distance. Yes. January.<sup>309</sup> It was a demonstration...

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>309</sup> This is perhaps a reference to the significance of this month in Egypt's political past, harking back to the Burning of Cairo on January 26th 1952. This violent protest against the corrupt monarchy and British colonial rule in Egypt was a significant turning point and marked a period of increased agitation, only months before the outbreak of the Revolution. The demonstrations of January 1977—which succeeded in reversing the plans to cut government subsidies—did not

This is followed later by scenes of the utter destruction wrought upon the capital: again it is Yusif who provides us with descriptions of the broken store windows, the torched buildings, and the fires that scorch the city.<sup>310</sup> The scenes lay the groundwork for the apocalyptic climax that takes place at the end of the novel. What Aṣlān succeeds in doing is connecting the different parts of the city through this one political moment, while also allowing Imbaba to momentarily emerge as the primary, or in fact last, site of resistance.

#### X: The Role of the Intellectual and the Pursuit of Writing.

Not all the inhabitants of Imbaba share in this moment of popular uprising and potential resistance. In fact, Yusif, possibly the novel's other protagonist, remains for the most part disengaged from the unfolding events that surround him. If, as a number of critics have argued, Yusif is to be seen as the heron of the novel's title,<sup>311</sup> then he seems destined to stand on the sidelines watching in despair the injustice that surrounds him.<sup>312</sup>

The book's epigraph, which the author seems to be directing at his protagonist Yusif,

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however precipitate mass political change. In his introduction to the English translation, Elliott Colla points to the way in which this novel is a critique of the Egyptian left and its inability to seize upon this critical moment as a catalyst for political transformation. Colla, "Introduction," in *The Heron*, viii.

<sup>310</sup> Aṣlān, *The Heron*, 80-81.

<sup>311</sup> In the translator's note Colla points to *Kalīla wa dimnah* as the original source of this story, in which the heron teaches a pigeon how to escape the tricks of the fox, only to eventually succumb to them himself. This utilization of Arabic *turāth* is also to be found in the titles of some of the stories that seem to mimic the story cycles of *Kalīla wa dimnah* and the *1001 Nights*. For example "Amm Omran Carries a Late Night Message from the King." For an extensive explanation of the *Kalīla wa dimnah* tale and its significance see Ḥasan Ḥammād, *Mālik al-ḥazīn: Dirāsah bunyawīyyah takwīniyyah* (Cairo: Modern Press, 1994), 62-65.

<sup>312</sup> See for example Al-Ḥajmarī.



points us to the grief that will follow: “They say you sit near the waters of streams and creeks and that if these waters were to dry up, grief would overwhelm you, and you’d fall silent, mournful.”<sup>313</sup>

When he first sees the demonstrations downtown he is unable to take part in them, preferring instead to get drunk alone in a bar. He first notices the gathering crowds as he is going to meet Fatma. As he sits on the bus headed downtown he remembers his earlier sexual failure with her. His impotency is of course to be understood on a number of levels, both as a political and sexual paralysis.<sup>314</sup> Here again, as in the novels of Ibrāhīm and al-Ghīṭānī, political agency is associated with sexual potency. His inability to take part in the demonstrations in the streets of Cairo is mirrored by his sexual inability. Both forms of paralysis find further resonance in his inability to write. He is the figure of the disillusioned intellectual, poised to act, but never able to do so.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Aṣlān, *The Heron*, 2.

<sup>314</sup> It is interesting to note that he never uses the key to his friend Magid’s apartment. Instead of being the key to consummating his relationship with Fatima, Yusif uses it to empty canisters during the police raid on Imbaba. These canisters, on which appears the writing “F.L. 100 — Federal Laboratories USA, 1976” are a symbol of Egypt’s problematic relationship with the West, specifically the US, an ally that provides the government with weapons to use against its own citizens. Yusif’s actions, which seem pointless given the magnitude of the unfolding scene, are in contrast to those of Faruq, Shawqī, his son Abduh, and Gaber the grocer who, during the raid, pick up the canisters and throw them back at the soldiers. Aṣlān, *The Heron*, 152.

<sup>315</sup> This figure of the isolated individual is to a large degree part of the critique of the intellectual and artistic climate of the time. Much of the state sponsorship of the arts that characterized the earlier decades disappeared with the establishment of al-Sādāt’s regime. Writers and intellectuals used to a certain level of engagement from the state found themselves sidelined. The ties between the realms of the social, the cultural, and the political were increasingly severed. Al-Sādāt reversed °Abd al-Nāṣir’s position, withdrawing state support of the arts, and leaving artists and intellectuals to fend for themselves. This also meant that the cultural and intellectual battle that remained ongoing between °Abd al-Nāṣir and his cultural critics was increasingly stifled under al-Sādāt. So for example Yusif is shut out from the Writers’ Union and during the student demonstrations members of the cultural institutions withdraw their support for the protests fearing the potential backlash. This position, as well as the disappointment felt with the Camp David Accords, and the abandonment of state socialism in the name of the liberal policies of the

Throughout the novel we are subjected to Yusif's extended deliberations about his inability to write, or more accurately his inability to write about the "right" things. He is plagued by what he should or shouldn't write, unable to decide what is worthy of literary immortalization. As he sits in the bar alone:

He ate a handful of soaked ful beans and poured himself a shot thinking about the novel he wanted to write and the pages he'd filled up with notes. Despite the years that have passed and your present drunkenness, you still remember everything, because you've already written it dozens of times, though you did nothing with the material afterwards.<sup>316</sup>

Interestingly, Yusif's yet to be written novel, like *Mālik al-ḥazīn* itself, also begins with rain. Here of course there are immediate parallels with the novel that the reader holds in his/her hands. Is *Mālik al-ḥazīn* the novel Yusif would have wished to write? Are Yusif's own struggles with his role as writer and intellectual those of Ibrāhīm Aṣḷān himself?<sup>317</sup> The fact that this novel took almost a decade to write is, to some degree, evidence of a trying labor of love, and of the difficulties of writing faced by the author himself.

If throughout the duration of the novel Yusif is unable to come to terms with his role as a writer, this is to some degree resolved after the siege of Imbaba. After the

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*infītāh* caused many intellectuals to leave Egypt during this period. For more see Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech: Prose Literature and Prose Writers in Egypt Under Nasser and Sadat*, Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* and Ṣalāḥ ʿĪsā, *Muthaqqafūn wa ʿaskar, murājaʿāt wa tajārib wa shahādāt ʿan ḥālat al-muthaqqafīn fī ḡal ḥukm ʿAbd al-Nāṣir wa-al-Sādāt* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1986).

<sup>316</sup> Aṣḷān, *The Heron*, 73. Yusif's struggle to write these stories finds an interesting contrast in the ease of Am Omran's oral narratives from which we in fact learn a great deal about past and present Imbaba.

<sup>317</sup> Critics seem to largely agree on this point. See for example Ḥammād, *Mālik al-ḥazīn: dirāsah bunyawīyyah takwīniyyah*, al-Kharrāt's *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah* and al-Hajmarī, *Takhayyul al-ḥikāyah*.

violence has subsided he achieves a moment of clarity in which his purpose as a writer is finally revealed to him:

He wanted to write everything down. To write a book about the river, the children, the angry crowds taking revenge on the storefront windows, and the trees along the Nile road and the advertisements for products and films. Say that you saw them with your own eyes setting fires. And that everything, even the green river weeds, responded to them. Write that you walked on the carpets of glass covering the city and its sidewalks. Say that eyeglasses were crushed over the eyes of men, that even the vanity mirrors in girls' purses were broken, that if a young man were to have taken the mirrors, the river would have parted for him. Write about the cafe and Omran and everybody: Write about the world of insomnia, the smoke, the trees at night, and the little birds. The afarit of Imbaba.<sup>318</sup>

If Yusuf's past is any indication however, the reader is justified in doubting the completion of his project. Aşlān's novel in fact ends as it began, in a cyclical manner in which the beginning is in the end, and the end is in the beginning.<sup>319</sup> Here again we are led to question the linear progression associated with realist texts and are instead presented with constant repetition. The book opens and closes with references to the rain: the first paragraph of the novel begins: "YESTERDAY IT RAINED. It poured. In the narrow alleys, even the doorsteps of the buildings were flooded. But today it stopped altogether. And, even though the sun remained hidden all day long, the air was warmer. A while ago, evening arrived early."<sup>320</sup> The novel ends in a very similar fashion: the penultimate section is entitled "Some Rain" and is a description of the wet night of the siege of Imbaba. What we are presented with then is a circular, rather than a linear,

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<sup>318</sup> Aşlān, *The Heron*, 154-155.

<sup>319</sup> Al-Ḥajmarī, *Takhayyul al-ḥikāyah*, 106.

<sup>320</sup> Aşlān, *The Heron*, 3. Ḥasan Ḥammād provides an interesting reading of the significance of the water metaphors in the novel. To him the drought symbolizes the dearth of literary and cultural production in the decade of the seventies. While there is some merit to his analysis it relies on an overly romanticized notion of Aşlān as the sole literary producer, the heron saddened by the disappearance of the river. Ḥammād, *Mālik al-ḥazīn: dirāsah bunyawīyyah takwīniyyah*.

progression of narrative: the actions of the novel take place in one day only which ends as it has begun, or begins as it has ended.<sup>321</sup>

## XI: Conclusion

This chapter has sought to examine the different literary spatial representations of the city of Cairo, through a reading of three novels from the writers of *jīl al-sittīnāt*, as a way of addressing the socio-economic and political changes that beset the capital (and the nation at large) throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The focus on representations of urban space in these novels allows for an examination that takes into account the ways in which many of the struggles for power in these works are a struggle over space. To read the novels in this way is to examine the different strategies of mapping undertaken by the novelists, in their attempts to understand, interpret, and represent the space of their city. As Mehrez has argued the novelists are engaged in a familiar practice in Arabic literary tradition, in which writers “depict their own familiar urban spaces and contexts. In the process, they reconstruct them from their respective political and ideological positions as literary architects of the city.”<sup>322</sup> So as we have seen from the discussion Ibrāhīm juxtaposes the newer neighborhood of Heliopolis with the

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<sup>321</sup> This issue of the one day is also interesting as far as the question of genre is concerned. In his discussion of the text Ḥammād notes that Aṣṣalān’s preoccupation with time is distinguished in the “day” of the novel according to different types of light —sunset, dusk etc... This, Ḥammād notes, is much more characteristic of the short story genre than that of the novel. This is of course significant not only as Ḥammād notes, because Aṣṣalān does not in fact consider himself a novelist, but also because this novel itself only became a novel out of necessity. Having first intended to write a collection of short stories Aṣṣalān was pushed to make it into a novel after winning the prize awarded only for the writing of novels. Ḥammād, *Mālik al-ḥazīn: dirāsah bunyawīyah takwīniyah*, 73.

<sup>322</sup> Mehrez, “From the Hara to the ʿImara,” 148.

downtown Cairo of his youth. Al-Ghīṭānī creates a fantastical space based upon the Jamāliyya district of which he is a product, and Aṣḷān brings to the foreground the neighborhood of Imbaba where the author lived for much of his life.

The three novels offer the reader different metonymic approaches to the notion of mapping. Ibrāhīm's novella takes a more traditional approach by means of individual itinerary, in which the reader moves through the Cairene capital via the movement of *Tilka-l-rā'iḥa*'s nameless protagonist. It is in following his movements through the streets of the capital that the reader is acquainted with the modern metropolis. This attention to physical and geographical detail serves to disorient the reader even as it appears to familiarize him/her with the surroundings. Intrinsic to Ibrahim's work however is the limitations that are placed upon the movement of this protagonist. The latter is all too aware of the restrictions placed upon his movement by the terms of his parole: the novella as such pays as much attention to his domestic incarceration as it does to his wanderings in the streets of Cairo. In al-Ghīṭānī's *Waqā'i' ḥārat al-Za'farānī* a similar atmosphere of imprisonment pervades the novel, this time in the portrait that is painted of a single *ḥāra*. The impotency curse that strikes the *ḥāra* transforms it into prison, effectively severing it from the rest of country. In this case the traditional Cairene *ḥāra* is turned on its head, but this quintessential symbol of Egyptian urban existence is still made to stand in for the larger Egyptian nation. And finally, with Aṣḷān's *Mālik al-ḥazīn* the reader is once again presented with a portrait, this time of the neighborhood of Imbaba, in a work that seeks to place this marginalized area and its people on the literary map. It is through their lives and their experiences that Aṣḷān launches his virulent attack upon the *infītāḥ* of the al-Sādāt era.

More than just providing literary mappings of the city, the works in question provide a literary expression of surveillance, focusing on the ways in which the state exercises control over its citizens, organizing their bodies in space. In many ways Ibrāhīm's novella is a book about the inability to write a book, precisely because of state surveillance. We are presented with an author striving to write, yet entirely incapable of doing so. His attempts are interrupted and arrested, both by the policeman's constant infringement upon his space and by his own sexual urges. It is the latter, expressed predominantly through the solitary act of masturbation that comes to represent any form of agency that the protagonist still possesses. In the place of intellectual and political action comes sexual activity. And yet if male agency and potency is expressed through sexuality, Ibrāhīm presents a protagonist whose only successful conquest occurs in isolation. If *Tilka-l-rā'iḥa* presents the effects of state surveillance upon the individual, and its detrimental consequences upon creativity, *Waqā'i'c ḥārat al-Za'farānī* is the very record of this state surveillance. Here al-Ghīṭānī manipulates the form of government documentation in a novel that draws attention to the pervasive nature of state control. Through the files, memorandum, and official documentation the author weaves the narrative of the impotency curse that strikes the *ḥāra*. In its very form the novel embodies the structure of the system which it seeks to critique and undermine. It is not—as is the case with the other two novels—that the writer's vocation is so explicitly presented within the narrative. And yet through the manipulation of the form of the novel al-Ghīṭānī draws our attention to the ways in which official records of surveillance (in this case specifically textual forms) can be manipulated and undermined in the creative endeavor. Here too, sexuality, active male sexuality, is agency. Yet this is also

undermined. The proliferation of the impotency curse provides the possibility of justice, albeit a justice that does not go unquestioned. Furthermore, it is through this “official” form, and through the manipulation of this understanding of sexuality as power, that this novel presents the reader with new possibilities and alternative realities.

The relationship between sexuality and creativity is also at the very heart of Aṣlān’s *Mālik al-ḥazān*, in which the protagonist Yusif struggles with both his own sexual impotency and his inability to complete the writing of his novel. It is the latter task, which he is able to complete by the end of *Mālik al-ḥazān*; the moment of political uprising represented in the Bread Riots seems to provide Yusif with the necessary impetus to complete his literary endeavor, or at least attempt its completion. It is during the momentary lapse in government surveillance and control over the neighborhood of Imbaba and its inhabitants that both political uprising and intellectual production seem possible.

All three works stand as allegories of the writer’s vocation presenting the reader with the ways in which the respective authors struggle to render legible both the urban setting that surrounds them and their very own position within it. These novels are also reflections on the role of the writer, as a public intellectual, in Egyptian society. In some ways this takes us back to the novels of Maḥfūz; in his reading of *Children of the Alley*, Jacquemond notes how the writer in this novel is a “public writer” a “social actor with a precise function, an intellectual who is responsible for communicating the words of the dominated to the dominant classes.”<sup>323</sup> In the three novels discussed in this chapter the

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<sup>323</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 3-4.

writers struggle to perform this task as a result of the increasingly repressive presence of the state.



## Chapter Three

### Re-imagining the Rural: The Mystical and the Mythical in °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'ah* and Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah's *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah*

#### I: Introduction

°Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'ah* (1969; English translation: *The Seven Days of Man*, 1996)<sup>324</sup> and Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah's *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah* (1975; English translation: *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 2008)<sup>325</sup> take the Egyptian countryside as their setting. Both novels present a rural world that is harsh and severe, the site of suffering and difficulty on the part of the peasant population. This reality results in a re-envisioning of the space of the village; Qāsim presents the world of the Sufi ritual, as it is lived and experienced in the Egyptian Delta, as a space of transformation and possibility, the site of an experience which may be seen as an alternative to the degradation and hardship of rural existence. The practices of the Sufi brotherhood go as far as to alter the villagers' experience of their physical surroundings. Reported and seen through the eyes of the growing child Abdel-Aziz,<sup>326</sup> village life is recast in a way that distinguishes this rural narrative from the works of the previous generation. °Abdallah by contrast situates his novel in the Upper Egyptian village of al-

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<sup>324</sup> °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'ah* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-°Arabī, 1969); English translation: *The Seven Days of Man*, trans. Joseph Norment Bell (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

<sup>325</sup> Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-°Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1975); English translation: *The Collar and the Bracelet*, trans. Samah Selim (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

<sup>326</sup> To avoid confusion I cite names as they appear in the English translation of the text.

Karnak, which is depicted as a mythic space, isolated from the rest of the nation.<sup>327</sup> His village is a peripheral world, populated by landless peasants who struggle under the weight of an inescapable destiny. Theirs is a world which seems to stand outside the spatial and temporal parameters of the nation, operating within its own cycles of repetition. This isolation is particularly striking given that the novel ends at the height of the revolutionary moment in Egypt; the separation of the village at this moment of possibility seems to suggest a reconsideration of the national, expressing a sense of uncertainty and doubt, which is a hallmark of work of the writers of °Abdallah's generation.

These novels, by two writers from the sixties generation, are significant for the spatial shift which they register, and can be read in contrast to the socialist realist works of the previous generation. Such works are best exemplified by °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's classic novel *Al-Arḍ* (1954; English translation: *Egyptian Earth*, 1962).<sup>328</sup>

This work can in many ways be seen as *the* village novel of this earlier period;

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<sup>327</sup> Samah Selim also reads the space of the village in this novel as a "mythic landscape." However, her analysis is not focused upon spatial construction in °Abdallah's novel. She argues instead that this work "encodes this bleak vision of rurality in a dramatically new narrative language, thereby fully disengaging the village from the conventional and symbolic structures of representation through which it has been articulated from the foundational period onwards. The opacity of the novel's abbreviated, poetic language and the elision of conventional narrative point-of-view embed the novel in a competing folk narrativity." Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (New York/London: Routledge Curzon), 228. What I am arguing here however is that the representation of the rural as mythic space is used by °Abdallah as a way to emphasize the ongoing marginalization of the Upper Egyptian village of al-Karnak in relationship to the Egyptian nation, ultimately calling into question the transformative possibilities of the revolutionary moment. This is particularly significant when read in light of the agricultural reforms of the period, intended to improve the lives of the rural population. It is also in this depiction that his aesthetic innovations can be read, showing the traits of a form of magical realism.

<sup>328</sup> Al-Sharqāwī, °Abd al-Raḥmān, *Al-Arḍ*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-°Arabī, 1968); English translation: *Egyptian Earth*, trans. Desmond Steward (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). First published 1962 by Heinemann.

descriptions of the fields, the land, and the toil of the workers are the focus of al-Sharqāwī's narrative. While the author presents an unromantic view of rural life, aware of the hardships that the peasants must endure, he concentrates on the possibility of revolutionary struggle; the peasants are able to mobilize against the power of the government forces that imposes itself upon their lives. The "earth" of the title, the land of the Egyptian countryside comes to serve a metaphoric purpose, as a symbol of the larger Egyptian nation. *Al-Ard*, published only two years after the Revolution, expresses a moment of optimism and opportunity; set in the 1930s, the novel presents the rural as the space of political transformation and change, the heart of the fight for social reform and justice during the colonial period in Egypt.

It is useful here to consider the centrality of the rural question in the years that followed the July Revolution of 1952, and that dominated the political and economic climate throughout the decade of the fifties and sixties.<sup>329</sup> Agricultural reform and the redistribution of land were central to the strategies of the Nāṣirist regime, and were framed under the rubric of "the social revolution." The first agrarian reform law initiated by °Abd al-Nāṣir in 1952, targeted large landowners, limiting the land ownership of both individuals and families; individual ownership could not exceed two hundred faddans while an additional one hundred faddans was approved for a family with two or more children.<sup>330</sup> Expropriated land was parceled out amongst small farmers, and *not* divided amongst the landless peasants. The agrarian reforms were implemented gradually until,

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<sup>329</sup> This is of course not to suggest that agrarian reform was not part of the political discourse in the years preceding the Revolution. Reformists advocated programs for change throughout the 1940s in response to growing disturbances in the countryside. For more see Hamid Ansari, *Egypt: The Stalled Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 57-69.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

in 1969, the limit was set at fifty faddans per individual, or one hundred per family.<sup>331</sup> In describing the changes that took place in °Abd al-Nāṣir’s policies, Hamid Ansari states:

The economic policies during the Nasserist regime shifted in the 1960s from relying heavily upon limited agrarian reforms, domestic savings, and investment in the private sector to a socialist strategy, whose aim was to maintain equity through redistribution based on dispossessing the urban and landed bourgeoisie. Growth and equity, however, proved difficult to maintain simultaneously. This fact became evident in the failure to raise sufficient revenues to finance the first five-year plan in the 1960s. During this period, the Nasserist regime faced the inevitable choice of further squeezing the dominant class or maintaining social peace by sacrificing equity. Nasser chose the latter course, but not before taking some repressive measures against the landed and urban bourgeoisie.<sup>332</sup>

This trend was extended under the regime of al-Sādāt who instituted policies of desequestration to the detriment of small peasants.<sup>333</sup> Ansari thus argues that the reforms instituted during the period of °Abd al-Nāṣir’s rule “failed to satisfy the expectations of the peasant masses” and what was witnessed instead was “a rise in the influence of rich and middle-class peasants.”<sup>334</sup> The influence of the latter was in fact further enhanced with the *infitāḥ* (Open Door) policies instituted under al-Sādāt.

It is this within this context that Qāsim and °Abdallah produce their rural novels that depict the village as mystical and mythic space respectively. Both novels provide truncated descriptions of the village; the move away from the socialist realist depictions of the countryside, and the alternative spatial representations that emerge in these works, suggest disillusionment with the policies of the state, and the recognition of the ongoing

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<sup>331</sup> Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 281.

<sup>332</sup> Ansari, *Egypt: The Stalled Society*, 4.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

marginalization of the rural communities, on the part of the two authors. Furthermore, each of these works questions the position of the rural communities vis-à-vis the nation. Qāsim's world of Sufi ritual, which is increasingly threatened by the end of the novel, is cast as an alternative to the suffering of rural existence. While the novel ends with the appearance of the possibility of political change, through the depiction of the village café as a space, filled with debates about feudalism and cooperatives, it is introduced as a space of speech rather than action, whose impact upon the lives of the villagers remains questionable.<sup>335</sup> Although the café is meant to demonstrate the rising climate of ideas, discussion turns into sweeping generalizations that are soon to become the markers of the nationalist discourse. °Abdallah's work is significant for its focus upon the landless peasants of the Upper Egyptian village, who appear to live in a mythic world, isolated from the rest of the nation. The novel ends with the revolutionary possibilities of the 1952 Revolution, but here too these events are separate from the lives of the landless peasants, who stand outside of the transformative possibilities such a revolutionary moment represents.

## II: The Struggle for Survival: Rural Life in *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'ah*

°Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's first novel *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'ah* is a complex and moving work that is built around the practices of Sufi ritual. Set in a small village near the town of Tanta, in the Egyptian Delta, the novel describes the week leading up to the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Sayyid Bedawi, one of the foremost Sufi saints in

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<sup>335</sup> See al-Musawi, "Beyond the Modernity Complex: °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's Re-Writing of the *Nahḍah* Self-Narrative," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 41 (2010): 22-45.

Egypt. Each of the seven days of the title represents both an event in the preparatory process, and a chapter in the novel; “*Al-Ḥadrah*” (The Evening Gathering); “*Al-Khabīz*” (The Baking); “*Al-Safar*” (The Journey); “*Al-Khidmah*” (The Lodgings); “*Al-Laylah al-kabīrah*” (The Big Night); “*Al-Wadāʿ*” (The Farewell); and “*Al-Ṭarīq*” (The Path).<sup>336</sup>

Told from the perspective of the young Abdel-Aziz, the son of Hagg Karim, the leader of the Sufi brotherhood in the village, the narrative follows two threads simultaneously; the ritual practices that take place throughout the week and the maturation of the young Abdel-Aziz.<sup>337</sup> Each chapter is both a stage in the Sufi rites and a different moment in Abdel-Aziz’s own life, moving the reader both through a week and a lifetime.<sup>338</sup> Through Abdel-Aziz we see the compelling thrust of time on these peasants, but we also see Abdel-Aziz, as he perceives his troubles and agonies, without being able to come to terms with his own life. This bewildered, yet resilient attitude, dramatizes a semi-autobiographical narrative. Within this context Qāsim represents the time and space of Sufi ritual and community as an alternative to the degradation and suffering of life in the countryside; the brothers’ nightly gatherings, and the yearly journey to the festival, offer respite from an otherwise miserable existence. The world of the festival also serves to

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<sup>336</sup> I take the translations of each chapter from the English version of the text. °Abdel Ḥakīm Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, trans. Joseph Norment Bell (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

<sup>337</sup> A number of Qāsim’s works are set in the same village and continue to trace the growth and development of Abdel-Aziz, whom Samia Mehrez describes as the author’s “Dedalus-like protagonist.” See Samia Mehrez, Introduction to *Rites of Assent: Two Novellas* by °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, trans. Peter Theroux (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), xii. He reappears for example in Qāsim’s later novella *Al-Mahdī*. See Qāsim, *Al-Mahdī* (Beirut, Dār al-Tanwīr, 1984). The choice of this setting of course reflects Qāsim’s own biographical background, having grown up in a small village close to Tanta himself.

<sup>338</sup> For an excellent synopsis of the novel and a discussion of its events see Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 167-177.

connect the countryside to the city, here represented by Tanta, the site of the Saint's shrine. The rural and the urban are thus both opposed and connected; the city is the goal of the brothers' journey, the focus of their spiritual and physical path. It is also the symbol of state power and dominance that is exercised upon the villagers and the rural writ large. The celebrations provide the opportunity for the villagers to "occupy" the streets of Tanta, temporarily thrusting themselves upon the city. And yet the police, the embodiment of state power, dominate this moment of confrontation. Furthermore, by the end of Qāsim's novel, the space of Sufi ritual and experience, as an alternative to the wretchedness of rural existence, is increasingly threatened. The movement from the brotherhood's Sufi circle, to the café at the end of the narrative, is accompanied by the death of Hagg Karim and the loss of almost all the family land. The possibility of community as represented in the space and time of Sufi ritual is thus in danger of disappearing by the end of the novel.

Muḥammad Badawī begins his description of the world of Qāsim's novel *Ayyām al-insān al-sab'ah* by describing it as the "lowest of the low," the "underworld of the lowest worlds of the Egyptian countryside."<sup>339</sup> In considering how it differs from the rural narratives that preceded it, Badawī notes that:

There are no traditional characters, like the *ʿumda* [village chief] or *shaykh al-khufarā* [head of the watchmen] from among the employees of the administration. There are no marginal characters rebelling against the social context. Moreover, we are with a work that does not concern itself with a great event that divides the novel into two stages, and stands between them delimiting and dividing them. And finally, we are with a history of a particular kind, a history of a marginal and

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<sup>339</sup> Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 21.

marginalized group concealed from the context that the ideology of the revolution raged about in the years of the sixties.<sup>340</sup>

This is the world of the Sufi brotherhood that the novel describes, the space of ritual and experience that I argue provides an alternative to rural existence. This “underworld” is in fact the preferred world, another world that is lived and experienced by this specific Sufi circle. The Egyptian countryside, as represented in the fields, is the space of labor and struggle; the villagers’ lives are wretched, dominated by their work on the land in their continued endeavor to survive. This is particularly important when considered in light of the policies of land reform instituted by the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir in the 1950s and 1960s, which were intended to improve the lives of the rural population of Egypt. As John Waterbury notes however, by the time of °Abd al-Nāṣir’s death (only a year after the publication of Qāsim’s novel):

The ‘feudal’ landowners had been swept away through successive land reforms, but there were still millions of landless peasants and about half the agricultural surface was still farmed by tenants. A new kind of capitalism, state capitalism as some call it, had taken over the power structure of the country and instituted monopolies in the name of the people in several domains. The distribution of income remained sharply skewed, absolute poverty probably continued to involve most of Egypt’s population, and disease and illiteracy were only marginally eroded.<sup>341</sup>

The rural as a contested space during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, as a result of the agricultural reforms and the redistribution of land, is particularly interesting when considered in light of the literary output of the period. As Muhammad Siddiq notes the

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 48. In describing the situation in the countryside in the decade of the seventies, Waterbury notes, “there are nonetheless problems in Egyptian agriculture that can at best be swept under the rug, but not hidden from view eternally. While food deficits grow, so too does land fragmentation, the proliferation of dwarf-holdings, and the absolute growth in rural poverty and landlessness. Productivity and equity may be very much at odds in the present situation, with the trade-offs masked only by the flow of migrants to the cities and abroad.” Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 304.



novels of the 1960s did not tend to focus primarily upon rural space. Siddiq attributes this—at least partially—to the centrality of Cairo during this time, stating that “any conjecture about this phenomenon must take into account the high political drama unfolding in the capital Cairo during much of this decade, at the center of which, for better or worse was always the towering image of Nasser.”<sup>342</sup> Siddiq goes on to explain some of the events taking place during this time, which contributed to the focus upon the urban metropolis, both on a national, regional, and international level. He attributes this partly to ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s position as leader of both the Arab world and the non-aligned states. Furthermore, the “state-sponsored projects originating at the center, such as the high dam in Aswān, the agrarian reforms of 1961, land distribution and reclamation, rapid industrialization and urbanization, contributed much to the fascination with Cairo’s magnetism during this period.”<sup>343</sup>

While the agrarian reforms, and land reclamation and distribution, originated in the capital, the effects were of course intended to be felt in the countryside. The ongoing marginalization and poverty of the rural population, despite the reforms that were implemented in the aftermath of the Revolution, is, I would argue, significant in light of the way Qāsim presents the world of Sufi ritual as an alternative to the plight of the peasants. This is particularly important given that critics have read Qāsim’s return to a “mystical heritage” as related primarily to the alienation experienced by the writers and intellectuals throughout the sixties. As Mehrez writes:

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<sup>342</sup> Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel*, 100.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

Such a return to a mystical heritage almost coincides with the unbearable Arab defeat of the sixties, thus pointing, perhaps to an already existing sense of exile and alienation even within the homeland: an internal exile that sent many writers of this generation in search of experimental narrative forms and a new literary language through which they could give vent to their rebellion and sense of loss.”<sup>344</sup>

A similar position is taken by Samah Selim who reads this novel as an expression of the existential crisis of the writer and intellectual that was being articulated in fiction throughout the decade of the 1960s. Selim states that “the conflict between the two mutually antagonistic worlds of which Qasim speaks —and which can be rendered in a number of analogous dualisms (past/present; tradition/modernity; country/city)— is realized, in *The Seven Days of Man*, through the familiar trope of the divided self now returned in a decade of lost hopes and unities.”<sup>345</sup> Selim provides a poignant analysis of the trope of the divided self, as it is articulated in the character of the coming of age Abdel-Aziz, who struggles to reconcile these opposing positions.<sup>346</sup> What interests me here however, is the way in which the rural world *itself* is divided. The space of Sufi ritual and mystical practice is posited in the novel as an alternative to the hardship of village life. I would argue that this mystic world of escape serves to thus highlight the continued suffering and deprivation experienced by villagers in the Egyptian countryside.

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<sup>344</sup> Mehrez, introduction to *Rites of Assent*, xiii.

<sup>345</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, 186.

<sup>346</sup> Muhsin al-Musawi also provides a striking analysis in which he reads the divided Abdel-Aziz as emblematic of the post-*nahḍa* hero who in his struggle displays a marked difference from the earlier heroes of the bourgeois epic; “Abd al-Azīz’s is a soul in conflict, one torn between desires, between urban aspirations and local attachments. He represents the long-lived *nahḍah* legacy: a division between an awareness of science and responsiveness to urban allurements, enchantments, and desires on the one hand, and a communal spirit of faith and peaceful togetherness on the other. He carries inside him the simmering tension and doubt that has been the bane of urban novelists —the inheritance of *nahḍah* aspirations, and, on the artistic level, the perpetual Western model of narrative.” Al-Musawi, “Beyond the Modernity Complex,” 26.

This is particularly interesting given that Qāsim is writing during the period of °Abd al-Nāṣir's agricultural reforms.

The division between the villagers' daily exertions, and the possible escape represented in the Sufi rituals, is mirrored in the division between day and night. In the opening chapter of the novel entitled "*Al-Ḥaḍrah*" (The Evening Gathering) which represents the first stage in the preparation for the pilgrimage to the shrine of Sayyid Bedawi in Tanta, one of the brotherhood's meetings is depicted. This nightly ritual is set up in opposition to the difficulties of the day, the misery of the morning "when the sun blazed at its hottest and its harshest, unrelenting rays reached every corner, when the men labored long hours in the fields and the women hurried silently out to them with jugs of water and bundles of bread. The day was no time for pleasant words and storytelling. These were things for evening."<sup>347</sup> This opening description presents the reader with the reality of rural existence, the daily struggle and toil that the peasants must endure. This sense of exertion is encapsulated in the character of Hagg Karim, whose countenance reflects the division between day and night; while he appears happy and content in the evening, we are told "during the day he was fearsome. He gripped the lead rope of his two animals with a rough fist and lashed back with his whip. The blade of his plow split the belly of the earth as the two beasts pulled and twisted beneath the yoke, dripping white foam from their mouths onto the cracked surface of the land."<sup>348</sup> "The belly of the earth," "the cracked surface of the land" is not here the image of fertility and abundance, the metaphorical image of the larger Egyptian nation. Instead it is the site of the misery

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<sup>347</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 1-2.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

and suffering of the village's men, forever laboring under the burning sun. The sense of the bareness of the land is presented during one of Abdel-Aziz's walks through the fields, following the departure of Hagg Karim and his followers to the *mūlid* (festival) of Sayyid Bedawi. In passing through the fields and land, "the brown earth [that stretches] to the horizon, bare except for a few thin, indiscriminate wheatstalks," Abdel-Aziz is reminded of the scarcity of joy in the villagers' lives.<sup>349</sup> This is itself a reflection that is made consistently throughout the novel: "His imagination was crowded with the images of their faces, thin faces with olive skin. There were few joys in their lives, few trips. But when these occasions came, their faces would beam with happiness."<sup>350</sup> So it is that the hardship of the everyday, breeds longing in the hearts of the villagers for the journey to the Saint's shrine in Tanta; we are told "their yearning had ripened in the heat of the midday sun over long days of uninterrupted toil."<sup>351</sup>

In fighting these experiences of suffering and adversity the villagers draw upon the memories of their annual journey to help them survive the difficulties of their otherwise wretched existence:

Tomorrow at the break of day they would be back in their fields, with their feet sinking into the mud and the palms of their hands sore from gripping their short hoes. The sweat would be back on their foreheads, and the whirlwind of toil and misery would begin again. But for a few days to come they would still have the stories to tell, and the laughter. Sitting on the piles of topsoil or the mud benches in front of their houses they would relate the events of the days of the moulid. Out of these gatherings would come the seeds of longing for a new journey, seeds nourished by long days of hardship and suffering under the scorching heat of the

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 100. This description is also noteworthy for the way the images of the faces impress themselves upon the memory of the young Abdel-Aziz.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 27.

sun, until, when the year had rolled around, the crier called them again to the mould of the Sultan.<sup>352</sup>

It is against this backdrop of destitution and poverty that the world of Sufi ritual is cast as an alternative. In the following section I read Hagg Karim's *dawwār* (guesthouse) and the shrine of Sayyid Bedawi as spaces of opportunity and change that allow the villagers to escape the stifling misery of the village.

### III: Spaces of Possibility and Transformation

The first chapter of the novel, “*Al-Hadrah*” (The Evening Gathering) takes place in the *dawwār* of Hagg Karim, the area attached to his home, in which the members of the Sufi brotherhood come together for their meetings. These meetings reinforce the bonds of friendship and community between the brothers, through the reading of sacred texts, but also through the indulgence of bodily desire, understood to be part of the culture and practices of the mystic path. So while the brothers in these evening gatherings regularly consume hashish, the indulgence in food and sex appears at other moments of the “seven days.” What is particularly remarkable about the early introduction of the brothers’ gathering, in the space of Hagg Karim’s house, is its separation from the rest of the village. The spiritual community represented in the brotherhood is physically separate from its surroundings, and it is their presence in the house that defines the members of the group. So in the early descriptions of the gathering, the detachment of Hagg Karim’s house is noteworthy:

When the circle of shadow had come to rest beneath the lantern, and the rectangle light that shone out through the door to the street, cutting the porch into two dark halves, had ceased to move, the people began to stir. They were coming back from

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 168.

the mosque after the night prayer, looking like feeble, broken ghosts, the remnants of their last recitations still on their lips. As they passed the porch of the guesthouse they mumbled faint greetings and then moved on to be swallowed up by the darkness of the lane. In their sad and dismal houses there awaited them darkened rooms and sleep until dawn. But ahead of the companions of Hagg Karim lay the delights of the evening gathering.<sup>353</sup>

The *dawwār* of Hagg Karim is described here in opposition to the lanes and homes of the rest of the village; while his house is bathed in the light and warmth of community and fidelity, the surrounding spaces are those of darkness and isolation. The ritual and sociability of the brotherhood, “the delights of the evening gathering” are a means for the villagers to resist their increasing marginalization.<sup>354</sup> There is a sense of inclusion/exclusion that is mirrored here in the position of Hagg Karim’s house vis-à-vis the rest of the village. In his reading of this passage Badawī offers an interesting perspective, stating that this description of the world of the brothers, as it is represented in the space of the *dawwār*, shows the main characteristic of the group, namely “its marginalization, and its isolation, and its contradiction with what is going on around it.”<sup>355</sup> This marginalization and isolation is captured in the position of the house in relationship to the rest of the village. It also stands in opposition of course to the village mosque, the symbol of official religion, and the place from which the “feeble, broken ghosts” return.

The world of the village is transformed through the rituals that take place in the *dawwār*. One of the primary ways in which this is achieved is through the recitations of

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>354</sup> Although the nightly gatherings are restricted to the men of the village, the women experience a similar sense of solidarity and community in the gathering that takes place for the baking of the bread for the journey to Tanta. These scenes are described in the second chapter of the novel, “*Al-Khabīz*” (The Baking).

<sup>355</sup> Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 28.

poetry, the telling of stories, and the readings of sacred texts. These activities weave together the personal narratives of the men with the texts of the larger tradition. The group listens to recitations of the famous *Burdah* poem of al-Buṣīrī, the epics of the Banī Hilāl tribe, but they also tell each other tales of their own fortunes and losses:

There had to be calm every evening, when they could open their hearts to each other and talk. The conversations started, and stories began to unfold. In every breast there was a heart, and every heart had its own special concern. Life was a journey about which each of the men had something to tell, the things he had seen or heard, the hardships and the joys he had encountered. And so in the evening each of them came to the meeting of the brothers.<sup>356</sup>

It is through these conversations that the men transcend the world of the village, moving beyond its borders, as if recreating the longed for journey to the Saint's shrine; "In these moments there would emerge behind the limited world of everyday life another world, a marvelous and boundless world, one that awakened men's longings and filled their hearts with fervor."<sup>357</sup>

The world that the brothers create is intended to stand in contrast to the suffering of the everyday. As Badawī describes:

It is as if the evening gathering is the only comfort from the cruel sweltering day or that it is the world that the dervishes create to escape from the harsh, tempestuous life of the field, the sun, the water, and the sweat, trying to challenge the law of this miserable reality with their own personal law. So in the face of the severity of life and the rule of self-interest and the cruelty towards one's wife, children, and animals we find the gentleness of life, the recession of the law of self-interest, in the face of the thrust of love and the victory of hope in a faraway, untainted place that the patient and the worshippers possess.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 5.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>358</sup> Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 22-23.

This other world is also represented in the Arab and Islamic textual and oral tradition that is interwoven with the personal narratives of the men. This past is thus a part of the continuous present of the Sufi rituals, which proceed in constant cycles, seemingly disconnected from the linear progression of historical time; this is mirrored in the experience of time as it relates to the larger work as a whole. Given that the movement in time is signaled by the different stages in the cycle of the *mūlid* of Sayyid Bedawi, the narrative is governed by the time of the Sufi ritual that seems to bring together the past, the present, and the future. This is itself significant when read in light of the production of the writers of Qāsim's generation, which as al-Kharrāṭ explains, "destroy the progression of time in a linear path" in their works.<sup>359</sup> This circularity is in many ways also a move away from the realist tradition and the vision of the nation which it propagated.

The creation of a "marvelous and boundless world" extends beyond the house of Hagg Karim through the performance of the *dhikr*, which seems to actually transform the physical space of the village connecting it to the larger universe:

It was an immense world, deserts and sands, seas and rivers, trees, clouds, and tiny specks, and in the breast of every creature, however small, even in the particles of dust floating in a ray of sunlight, there was a warm throbbing heart that praised the name of God and blessed the most fortunate of his creatures. In this strange journey through the regions of the universe, through the heavenly spheres and the bottomless depths, the men's hearts were kindled with longing, and the recitation raged like an uncontrollable fire.<sup>360</sup>

This description captures the way in which the religious practices of the brotherhood transform the village into what Selim describes as "the timeless circle of the mythic,

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<sup>359</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 12.

<sup>360</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 34.



utopian community, mythic because imaginatively constructed, as dream, as refuge.”<sup>361</sup>

The mythic —created here through mystic experience— is cast by Qāsim as an alternative to the exploitation and degradation experienced by the villagers.

Just as the *dawwār* of Hagg Karim is presented as the space of brotherhood and community, a sanctuary amidst the harsh world of the village, so too is the shrine of Sayyid Bedawi. Located outside of the village, in the town of Tanta, is the shrine that represents the hopes and dreams of the peasants. As Muhsin al-Musawi describes the shrine can be seen as functioning as even more than Lefebvre’s representational space, “it emerges as a catalyst for feelings, traditions, yearnings and aspirations. It operates as the locus and magnet toward which every heart’s aspiration and longing are directed.”<sup>362</sup>

This is particularly clear in the scene that takes place in the third chapter —“*Al-Khidmah*” (The Lodging) which describes the lead up to the *mawlid* of Sayyid Bedawi. As a result of the manipulation of time in the novel, this chapter is both the third step in the men’s path to the festival, and a later period in Abdel-Aziz’s life. Here we are in the company of an older Abdel-Aziz, now living in the city to pursue his studies. It is both from the perspective of the older Abdel-Aziz, and from the flashbacks from his youth, that the reader is presented with the picture of preparations that are underway in the city of Tanta. The description of the scene, that describes the arrival of Abdel-Aziz and the men to the Sultan’s dome, communicates the idea of the shrine as “locus and magnet”:

The beginning of New Street was bordered by dusty old buildings on both sides. A succession of awnings stretched from one side of the street to the other and formed a continuous roof of canvas, giving the effect of a dark subterranean vault. The

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<sup>361</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, 204.

<sup>362</sup> Al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature*, 110.

looks in the men's eyes grew softer. They would not see the splendor of Bedawi's mosque until their apprehension had subsided in the restful shade of this street. Suddenly the shrine was before them. Abdel-Aziz recognized the hesitation in his father's steps when the Sultan's dome appeared. He had expected it. The men's hearts were one with the heart of Hagg Karim. They were distracted from every other thing as their eyes clung in awe to Bedawi's shrine...They were like flecks of iron drawn toward the pole of a magnet.<sup>363</sup>

Abdel-Aziz no longer shares the community's longing for the shrine—we are told that while the men are like “iron drawn toward the pole of a magnet,” he is “made of a different metal.”<sup>364</sup> The transformation he has undergone, and his increasing alienation from his village community, is all the more apparent when the narrator here switches back to a recollection in the past, from Abdel-Aziz's youth in the village. This scene from childhood presents a young boy who longs to get just one glimpse of the shrine from the roof of his house: “If only he had been able to see it just once. His eyes wandered aimlessly over the dome of the mosque and the crescent top.”<sup>365</sup> The description of the final visit to the shrine, in the chapter “*Al-Wadāʿ*” (The Farewell) captures the same sense of longing—at least on the part of the older men, even if this is not shared by Abdel-Aziz:

They were going into the immense halls of the mosque. These men who had lived for thousands of years in mud huts were filled with yearning for the splendor and beauty of these immense halls.

With this longing and devotion, with these rough hands, domes, columns, and great halls had been erected, and temples had been hewn out of solid rock. Coolness and shade had been created in the heat of the desert...The two leaves of the door had been swung wide open. Inside loomed the great structure of thick brass latticework that surrounded the tomb. The polished metal scintillated in the light of the huge chandeliers with their hundreds of dazzling eyes. The men stood humbly in the

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<sup>363</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 117.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

opening of the door for a moment. Then they entered and moved counterclockwise around the tomb, holding on to the brass grill and rubbing their faces against it...Ahmed Bedawi was searching for his own world in the things he saw around him, that world he had created for himself out of the books with the yellow pages. Every time he found something from it he was carried away with joy. He kissed the rock and looked toward Abdel-Aziz.<sup>366</sup>

What is so telling about this passage, as far as our discussion of the creation of the alternative space of Sufi ritual and mysticism is concerned, is the connection that is made between the material and the spiritual. The halls of the mosque, in all their beauty and splendor, clearly stand in opposition to the homes of the villagers, the “mud huts” they have inhabited for thousands of years. But the end of the description also brings together the experience of ecstasy and devotion experienced both in the *dhikr* that takes place in the village, in the gatherings of the members of the brotherhood, like those described in the *dawwār* of Hagg Karim, and in the shrine of Sayyid Bedawi. The reference to the “books with the yellow pages” here strongly connects this scene with the readings that took place in the first chapter in the home of Hagg Karim. It is suggested that the world that the men create, through the recitations of the sacred books of the tradition, is a recreation of the space of the sacred shrine, or that both worlds in fact serve to connect the worldly to the divine. It is both through the reading of the texts and the experience of the Shrine that the men attempt to transcend the physical world, or transform their experience of it.

This scene is so central in the novel not only because it marks the culmination of the entire journey undertaken by Hagg Karim and the men, but also because it signals the beginning of the end of their lives. The “farewell” of the chapter’s title both points to the end of the yearly pilgrimage to the Saint’s tomb and the impending departure from Tanta,

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 176-178.

and also to the ever-looming death of the group. The men we see here are aged and ailing; the once strong and powerful Hagg Karim is old and frail. The others suffer from blindness and decrepitude. The following chapter tells of the slow demise of Hagg Karim and his eventual death. This is foreshadowed in his departure from the tomb of the Saint: “They left the tomb. But Hagg Karim’s spirit remained there...Hagg Karim’s eyes were once again gazing intently at the things around him. It was a look that village healers recognized in the eyes of a man about to die.”<sup>367</sup>

#### IV: Connecting the Urban and the Rural

The shrine is of utmost significance within the novel, not only as the site that draws the villagers, the manifestation of their hopes and desires, but also because of the way in which it connects the village and the city, which in this novel are both linked and opposed. Tanta, as the site of the Saint’s shrine, is the villagers’ longed for destination. The annual *mawlid* of the Sheikh provides the opportunity for the village to exercise its dominance over the city, even if only temporarily. The peasants arrive in Tanta and take over its streets. Abdel-Aziz notes with pride that his people encroach upon the city and its streets: “Here they were. They had set up a place to stay in the city. They would impose themselves, their breath, and the clattering of their sandals on this city for a week. He felt better when he thought about that.”<sup>368</sup>

The overwhelming presence of the villagers, and their occupation of the streets of Tanta, is best captured once the festival of the Saint is underway. In the chapter entitled

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 131.

“*Al-Laylah al-kabīrah*” (The Big Night) Qāsim presents the peasants as a communal body that inflicts itself upon the physical space of the city. Through the *dhikr* that the people perform, a collectivity is born that seizes control of the urban space:

The whole mosque was shaken to its foundations by the pounding of feet and the hoarse barking sounds rising from the men’s throats. The roaring, crushing noise could not be resisted. No hesitations were possible before it...The two rows were jumping up and down and pounding the floor of the mosque with their feet. The heart of Tanta was a slaughtered animal beneath all those naked feet. The body of the city —thousands of old buildings, twisting alleys, and ornamented streets— was being crushed beneath this rumbling flesh.<sup>369</sup>

The physical, corporal image of the peasants as a body flattening the city of Tanta is recast at other moments to represent the larger relationship between the village and the city. As he walks the streets of Tanta, Abdel-Aziz imagines the people of the countryside as physically enveloping the city: “Even in the dark narrow alleys he could see the faces of country folk. They were wandering through the veins of the city, through all its tiny capillaries and to its nerve ends. The countryside had clasped thousands of arms around the city and embraced it. It had breathed its breath in a long kiss into its lungs.”<sup>370</sup>

This imposition of the villagers upon the space of the city is however only temporary. Even during the festivities of the *mawlid* the dominance of the urban over the rural is reasserted and reinforced by the display of the power of the state, represented in the presence of the police. This is best captured in the scenes that take place in the train station as the villagers arrive in Tanta. Not only do fences surround the station in order to restrict the movement of the arriving passengers, but also the officers guarding the station violently attack them as they make their way through the gates:

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 155.

All the gates in the high fence of iron and concrete surrounding the open space in front of the station were shut, except three, which were heavily guarded. At each gate there were several employees and a squad of policemen—a human machine set there to strike fear into the hearts of the peasants who kept pouring out of the station. They would swoop down on the people like kites, battering with their sticks whoever or whatever got in their way.<sup>371</sup>

The display of violence and brutality in this scene is, according to al-Musawi, an example of the state's manipulation of "abstract" space, the "space of power."<sup>372</sup> The state's control of this space is in many ways to be seen in opposition to the people's attempt at temporarily laying claim to the streets of Tanta. The opposition between the state, as represented by the police, and the people is not however so clearly defined, but rather Qāsim draws our attention to the inextricable relationship between the two. The police, men who hail from the countryside, are forced to control their own people, even as the latter resist containment. This entangled relationship is exposed during the evening festivities of the *mawlid*, as the villagers erect tents for every kind of entertainment:

The policemen were there too, some mounted on the back's of the government's big English horses and others standing on both sides of the way—country faces in uniforms of khaki. They seemed to want to take off those uniforms and move with the crowd, but like puppets they were bound by unseen threads to the headquarters tent, to sullen old officers who contemplated in despair these masses they could not possibly control.<sup>373</sup>

The relationship between the village and the city extends beyond the movement of the inhabitants, but is manifest in the transformation of physical space. In thinking about the origins of the city, Abdel-Aziz traces it back to its rural origins:

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<sup>371</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 112.

<sup>372</sup> Al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street*, 121. Al-Musawi is here drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's formulation of abstract space. See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 51.

<sup>373</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 149.

In Mahalla el-Kubra there was a canal that cleft the heart of the city. He thought of it, and of the people like swarms of flies on both banks, washing their clothes and their cooking utensils —the voices of women, their little battles and the clattering of copper pots...Mahalla el-Kubra was nothing but an oversized village, with its dust and its flies and its canal. But this was Canal Street in Tanta, with geometrical promenades, trees with trimmed branches, and facades of apartments in tall buildings. There had been a canal here too. But it had been buried, and this splendid layout of pruned trees and tall buildings had replaced it. He could hear the echoes of the voices far beneath his feet, the women and their little battles along the banks of the Tanta canal. He laughed to himself. They were far away, sunken beneath the asphalt, along with the flies and the fleas and the mosquitoes. The village was a graveyard, day and night. Order and cleanliness, that was what he admired. The echo of those voices was a long way off, down beneath his feet, buried under the asphalt.<sup>374</sup>

In Abdel-Aziz's mind the two places are opposed; the over-sized village of Mahalla el-Kubra is the anti-thesis of the clean, beautiful, organized space of Tanta. What underlies his contemplation of the relationship between the two, however, is an understanding of the village as the *origin* of the city. The canal that once split Tanta's streets lies buried beneath the asphalt, a memory of the city's rural origins. As Ṭāhā Badr states this description reveals Qāsim's brilliance in attending to the relationship between the city and the countryside in both the past and the present. Badr argues that Abdel-Aziz's recollections from the past depict a time when "the world of the village was more deeply rooted and established in the city...and when the city itself was closer to the village. He [Qāsim] points to the great transformation in the position of the city with the filling of the Tanta canal and its conversion to a street that has become one of the most important streets of the city."<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>375</sup> cAbd al-Muḥsin Ṭāhā Badr, *Al-Riwāʿī wa-al-ard, 1870-1938* (Cairo: Al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li-al-Taʿlif wa-al-Nashr, 1971), 209.

The Tanta that Abdel-Aziz imagines to be so markedly different from the oversized village of Mahalla al-Kubra, is not in fact the only side of the city that we see. While Tanta may have buried the evidence of its rural roots, the dirt and decay of the city itself can nevertheless be seen in its streets and buildings. Tanta is not the urban sanctuary that Abdel-Aziz imagines it to be, a city of modern buildings and beautifully maintained gardens. As Abdel-Aziz continues his walk in the city, the downtown area he encounters is significantly different from the idealized picture he first presents:

As he approached the center of the city, the bright clean colors began to fade. Here they were overlaid with a film of dusty gray. The pedestrians walked more briskly, the carriages rattled along at greater speeds, and the automobiles roared through the streets, spewing smoke from front and rear. The fronts of the buildings were covered with dust, and around the entrances plaques advertised doctors and lawyers. On either side were shops with big signs over their doors announcing a grocery store, a cigarette shop, or even an automobile mechanic's workshop. The promenades in the island in the middle of the street began to lose their self-respect, and the elegant little barriers that lined them were bent or broken. The feet of the pedestrians had ravaged them, and effaced forever all but the last traces of the grass that had grown there.<sup>376</sup>

This is a very different Tanta than the one Abdel-Aziz first invokes; this is a city caked in dirt, its buildings displaying the signs of the community's commercial obsession. Hagg Karim and his men are aware of the relationship of opposition and connection between the village and the city. They recognize Tanta as a foul world which conflicts with their rural existence, but also as the site of their desires and their longings; on the train to the city this contradiction is made increasingly clear: "They were travelling to a city of sons of whores. Yet it drew them toward it, despite all the trouble it promised. Was not the

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<sup>376</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 103-104.



tomb of the Sultan there?”<sup>377</sup> This recognition on the part of the men captures the contradiction inherent in their relationship to the city of Tanta; it is both separate and connected to their life in the village, and it is the *mawlid* of Sayyid Bedawi, represented in the sacred shrine that is the physical embodiment of this connection.

The transformation of the village is captured in the image of the buried canal, the symbol in many ways of the death of the rural, or its absorption into the urban. The changes to the rural are also registered in the world of the village itself. In the following section I will turn to a discussion of the changes that take place in Abdel-Aziz’s own village, and the way in which the village as the space of Sufi ritual is increasingly threatened by the end of Qāsim’s novel.

#### V: The Disappearance of the Space of Sufi Ritual

The final chapter in Qāsim’s novel takes the reader back to the village where the narrative began. This section, entitled “*Al-Ṭarīq*” (The Path) represents the seventh and last part of the Sufi ritual. Here, however, the reference marks the end of the brotherhood’s journey on its spiritual path *and* the death of Hagg Karim.

When Abdel-Aziz returns to the village to care for his dying father and take up his role as head of the family, the world of the village has been transformed. The end of the brotherhood suggests the end of the sense of community and solidarity that helped the villagers survive the difficulties of their everyday lives. Life in the village has if anything become much harder. Hagg Karim’s family has lost all its land, sold to pay for the yearly preparations of the *mawlid* and the pilgrimage to Tanta. The disappearance of the

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 97.

family's land is poignantly connected to the death of Hagg Karim. In a remarkable scene in which Abdel-Aziz tends to the little tract of land that the family still possesses he suddenly embraces the soil in recognition that "this is his land and his people."<sup>378</sup> The power of this realization is undermined however with the immediate collapse of his buffalo, the only other possession of worth that the family still owns. Unable to treat its broken leg, the men of the village, now headed by Abdel-Aziz's uncle, decide to sell the animal to the butcher—a strategy which is explicitly contrasted to Hagg Karim's approach to such situations in the past. Ahmed Badawi explains that "Hagg Karim used to do it that way. He would slaughter the animal with his own hand, distribute the meat, collect the money, and buy a buffalo better than the one that had fallen."<sup>379</sup> Abdel-Aziz's uncle and his men are however, unlike those of Hagg Karim, "there was a sternness in their faces, and their laughter was loud and strong. They sat together in the late afternoon, but not for the affectionate conversation of old friends. They came together to listen to the radio and the news broadcasts, and they commented with ardor and enthusiasm on what they heard. They were full of bitterness, and they were hasty and severe in their judgments."<sup>380</sup> The reader is, I would argue, thus invited to connect these three events—the death of Hagg Karim, the collapse of the water buffalo, and the loss of the land—to the transformation of rural life and the disappearance of the world of Sufi ritual.

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 204.

This transformation is encapsulated in the appearance of the village café as the alternate space of community, replacing the circle of the brotherhood that convened in the *dawwār* of Hagg Karim. The café is representative of the end of the mystic, collective experience of the Sufi circle. Instead, we see the imposition of the outside world, exemplified in the blasting radio that reverberates through the café:

By now the men were no doubt longing to leave. They would crowd into that room where the radio was blaring and where playing cards were being slapped with excitement on the low wooden tables set out on the earth. The glowing coals would be heaped on the clay bowls of the pipes, and the men would become engrossed in a conversation that never ended because you never knew when it had begun. But it was not the conversation he had known. It was a market place jumble of words, cries, and noise...In the old days the men used to speak slowly and deliberately. They lived without all this bedlam. But these were boisterous, exasperated men. They talked about politics, cooperatives, feudalism, oppression, Kennedy and Khrushchev. Abdel-Aziz felt he had to leave.<sup>381</sup>

Evident immediately is the introduction here of the linear time of the outside world—that had up until this point been absent from the depiction of the life of the village. The cyclical movement that is captured in the ongoing Sufi ritual and the yearly preparations for the *mawlid* of Sayyid Bedawi, is displaced here by the dominant linear time. The references to Kennedy and Khrushchev situate the events of the novel in a particular historical moment that had been ignored in the early chapters of Qāsim's work. Here, this alternative relationship to time seems to have disappeared with the gradual disappearance of the space of Sufi ritual.

The change that has occurred to the gatherings of the men of the village is noted by Ahmed Bedawi, one of Hagg Karim's group whose experience in the new world that the village has become is testament to this transformation:

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 207.

He still went to the gatherings of the men, although he sat at the edge of the group. When they talked he would listen amazed, and smile. When he was totally bewildered by what he heard, however, he would speak. He would speak as though he were sitting in the hall of the guesthouse [*dawwār*] under the light of the big lantern. They always brushed aside what he had to say. Humbled he would say no more.<sup>382</sup>

It is this marginalization of the men of Hagg Karim's circle that suggests a reading of this change as part of the establishment of a new order. In her analysis of the end of the novel, Samah Selim suggests that, because of the role played by Abdel-Aziz's uncle in the closing scenes, there is no transition from one world to the next, from the old to the new, but rather that the end of the novel reveals the "coexistence" of the two worlds all along. She goes on to say however that "In this alternate community, the loud political space of the coffee-house once and for all replaces the fragile dream-world of the past, and reflects the real pressures and interventions of a historical time that is common to both the village and the city."<sup>383</sup> The placement of this scene in the café, following the death and displacement of the members of the Sufi order speaks, I would argue, to the violent replacement of one world with another, and not with the sudden appearance of a side of village life that existed all along.<sup>384</sup>

The representation of the café and its role in the lives of the villagers is intended to be met with ambivalence on the part of the reader. While the men of Hagg Karim's old circle seem isolated in this new world, Abdel-Aziz appears to find a community in

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>383</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary*, 204-205.

<sup>384</sup> A number of critics read the end of the novel as representing the violent end of one world and the emergence of another. See for example Sāmī Khashabah "Jīl al-sittīnāt fī al-riwāyah al-miṣriyyah," *Fusūl* 2:2 (1982): 117-125 and Sabry Hafiz, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties" in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature* ed. Issa J. Boullata (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1980), 171-187 and Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 20-45.

which he can momentarily immerse himself, amidst the noise and clamor of the café culture. The novel closes with Abdel-Aziz choosing to join the men in the café, instead of returning home to his empty room on the roof:

He turned off into a dark lane. It was impossible to make out the way, but he kept on walking until he sensed that the lane had come to an end. He was there. The threshold of the door was a good deal lower than the level of the lane. He stepped down, holding on to the lintel of the door to support himself. The courtyard was totally dark. He felt out the path with each step. Before him, through the cracks of an old wooden door, gleamed narrow slices of a brilliant white light. He made his way into the coffeehouse. The small room seemed to be ablaze with the light of the mantle lantern, the shouts, the cries, and the excitement. It was a little parcel of boisterous life buried beneath the silence of the village, but its power was overwhelming. Without any interruption in the noise and the activity, a place was made for him between two of the men. The radio was turned all the way up, and the shrill voice of a woman singing provided an earsplitting accompaniment to the clamor of the men.<sup>385</sup>

This description of the café is somewhat reminiscent of the *dawwār* of Hagg Karim and the gathering of the brothers. Just as Hagg Karim's house seemed separate from its surroundings, a space away from the rest of the village, the café lies "buried beneath the silence of the village," a center of energy and activity that contrasts with the stillness and darkness of the rest of the village. In both cases the spaces of the *dawwār* and the café seem to suggest the "underworld" of the countryside, the space of the "marginal and the marginalized" as Badawī states. The blazing lights and the shouts and cries, also recall the evening gatherings of the brothers, though in this case the men's words are "strong and bitter, full of frustration and anger" as they listen to the news on the radio and debate "politics, cooperatives, feudalism, oppression, Kennedy and Krushchev."<sup>386</sup> Though the

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<sup>385</sup> Qāsim, *The Seven Days of Man*, 216.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 207.

café may, as Selim argues, represent the space of the political, in which the men of village angrily oppose their position of oppression and marginalization, it is not necessarily the space of action. What is stressed in the scene is the continuous *talking* of the men; “Abdel-Aziz found himself speaking, quietly at first, but then excitedly at the top of his voice. As the broadcast continued its struggle with the boisterous voices of the men, his excitement increased. Everyone was talking.”<sup>387</sup>

The reader is thus left wondering whether the “power” of the small room of the café is the power of action or of speech alone, for as al-Musawi states the “noise recalls the noise of 1967, where there is excitement and rhetoric with no action.”<sup>388</sup> Despite the transformation of the world of the villagers, represented in the replacement of the space of Sufi ritual, with that of the political space of the café, the marginalization of the village community remains in question at the end of the novel. The efficacy of the space of the political—as represented in the village café—and its possibility for affecting change in the lives of the villagers is by no means certain.

#### VI: Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah’s *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswīrah*: The Rural as Mythic Space

Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah’s novel *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswīrah* is set in the Upper Egyptian village of al-Karnak and tells the generational story of a family’s continued struggle to survive. Hazina, the mother and matriarch, is left to care for her family alone after the death of her husband Bikhīt al-Bishari. Alone with her daughter Fahima, the two women long for the return of Mustafa, the son who is exiled away from Egypt,

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 217-218.

<sup>388</sup> Al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street*, 115.

working first in Sudan and then in Palestine. The tragedies that befall the family appear as part of a larger world of suffering and affliction. Fahima marries al-Haddad after her father's death, only to discover he is impotent. Hazina's attempt to help her daughter, by having another "man" impregnate her, only ends in misery, and with the return of Fahima to her family home. The cycle is repeated with the following generation; Fahima's daughter Nabawiya becomes pregnant out of wedlock and pays for her transgression with her life.

The repetition of these cycles of violence and transgression take place against the backdrop of the Upper Egyptian village, a landscape that °Abdallah transforms into a mythic space, dominated by the house and the temple, both sites of violence and confinement. In his analysis of the novels of the period following the sixties, Hafiz notes how one of the defining features of this literature is the way in which space is often rendered as mythic or fantastic, and al-Karnak here is an example of this representation.<sup>389</sup> In transforming the Egyptian village into a mythic space separate from the rest of the country, °Abdallah draws attention to its ongoing isolation and marginalization. This is further emphasized by the fact that the space and time of the outside world, which is governed by a linearity that opposes the circularity that dominates the life of the village, remains separate from the world of the peasants. The events that take place throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and culminate in the Revolution of 1952, are disconnected from °Abdallah's Upper Egyptian village. Furthermore, in separating the village from the rest of the nation, at the height of the anti-colonial struggle and the moment of independence, the author calls into question the position of the rural within

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<sup>389</sup> Hafiz, "The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Response," 106.

the larger Egyptian nation. This should, I argue, be read in light of the fact that

°Abdallah was writing at a time when the failures of the post-colonial project were becoming increasingly clear. As Muḥammad Dhinūn al-Ṣā'igh states °Abdallah was writing when:

After Egyptianisation and nationalization, and the return of the Egypt citizen to all the signs of economic life, and the return of companies characteristic of the period at the end of sixties and the decade of the seventies, there emerged an alienation inside the Egyptian citizen. [This occurred] when this citizen felt that the possibilities for economic growth for him were slight and that there were a number of barriers facing him and a kind of competition that did not give him the opportunity to grow economically, particularly the presence of new classes that replaced the foreign colonial power that was there.<sup>390</sup>

The recognition of the economic failures of the post-colonial state in Egypt is significant given the fact that the novel ends at a moment of national independence and optimism.

°Abdallah presents the reader however with a village that remains marginalized within this moment, significant given the policies that had been implemented to improve rural existence. Furthermore, given the way in which the world of the village is presented as one which is governed by a circularity and a sense of entrapment, there is a suggestion that this peripheral space will continue to be one of abject poverty and suffering.

In describing the centrality of the rural world in his work, °Abdallah establishes a connection between the position of the individual and that of the village:

I am the son of the village and I will remain that way. My experience is almost all in the village...and the obvious life of the village is that of “al-Karnak” in Luxor or “Old Tiba” and I think that what befell the nation befell it. It is a small, forgotten, exiled village, in the same way that I am exiled and forgotten...It is also a village in confrontation with the contemporary world...So when I am far from my village I look for it in the city and I look for my family, my relatives, and my people that live with me. And I don't live except in its lower world...and when I meet with

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<sup>390</sup> Muḥammad Dhinūn al-Ṣā'igh, *Thanā'iyāt al-makān: al-ightirāb fī adab Yahyā al-Ṭāhir °Abdallah* (Al-Sharjah: Dā'irat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-I'lām, 2004), 55.



them [my people] we meet as “Saʿidis” and as children of “al-Karnak,” and we live together our Egyptian pain, and our Arab calamity, and our distance from the age as alienated individuals.<sup>391</sup>

These words, taken from an interview with ʿAbdallah, capture the centrality of the rural world and the experience of its people to the life and work of the author. This is of course the rural world from which he originates, as a native of al-Karnak himself.<sup>392</sup>

What is particularly interesting to me here is the idea that ʿAbdallah expresses of the village of al-Karnak, as “small, forgotten, exiled” just as he too is “exiled and forgotten.” The sense of alienation that is experienced by the individual is echoed in the position of the village vis-à-vis the rest of the nation. It is this sense of alienation too that marks the literary production of ʿAbdallah and the writers of the sixties generation, coloring the representation of space in their literary works. The rural world that we encounter in *Al-Tawq wa-al-iswiraḥ* is the world of a village on the periphery, marginal and marginalized. This is made all the more apparent as a result of the way in which the rural is presented as mythic space.

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<sup>391</sup> Yaḥyā Tāhir ʿAbdallah, *Al-Kitābāt al-kāmilah* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḡbal al-ʿArabī, 1983), 491. This is taken from an interview that is cited in this edition of the complete works, that took place between the author and the journalist Samīr Gharīb, and was first published in the journal *Al-Mustaḡbal al-ʿArabī* (Arab Future).

<sup>392</sup> ʿAbdallah’s move from al-Karnak to Cairo is part of a larger trend of rural to urban migration that had been ongoing since the first half of the twentieth century. As Waterbury explains “rural overpopulation and land hunger fed a steady exodus to the cities. Mobilization of able-bodied men during the Second World War accelerated the process, and Cairo’s population grew at 4.8 percent per annum between 1937 and 1947. Probably half of the 800,000 new Cairenes of those years were of rural origins, and many of the recruits among them stayed in the city after demobilization.” Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 208. This exodus to the city continued in the decades that followed. As was explored in Chapter Two, housing projects such as those described in Aṣlān’s novel, were built to cater to the increasing numbers of rural migrants, from Upper and Lower Egypt.

The representation of the rural as mythic space can be seen also in the work of sixties writer Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī. In his first novel *Al-Tājir wa-al-naqqāsh* (1976, The Merchant and the Painter)<sup>393</sup> al-Bisāṭī describes the world of a nameless little village huddled amidst a river and a mountain. This novel (the publication date of which is almost contemporaneous with that of *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswīrah*) bears a striking resemblance to °Abdallah’s work, particularly as far as the depiction of rural space is concerned. The mountain, that dominates the space of the village, takes on mythic proportions within the world of the villagers (in a similar way to that of the temple in °Abdallah’s novel) seeming to possess magical qualities, harboring demons and supernatural beings. It is also interesting to note that the form of both novels are comparable; al-Bisāṭī novel, like °Abdallah’s, is composed of a collection of short tales, each with an individual title, that recall oral or folk stories.<sup>394</sup>

In both cases this is not the rural world with which the reader is familiar, the world of fields and agricultural land, of laborers and farmers. As Muḥammad Badawī states:

It is wrong to imagine that the narrative text—long or short—tells of the village in its entirety, or of its social composition, or that it represents all its classes and their behaviors according to the different levels. Despite the fact that Yaḥyā adopted a theoretical treatise of political ideas, and that he announced them in some of his speeches and some of his stories, he never wrote about the village in the fields, or in the struggles of its people with nature, and he did not present optimistic heroes from among the downtrodden. Instead he created and produced a text whose men and women struggle with a heavy destiny that seems eternal owing to its excessive weight on their souls. It is indeed a historical destiny, deeply rooted and far-reaching, filled with superstition.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Al-Tājir wa-al-naqqāsh* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1976).

<sup>394</sup> For more see p.178 of this chapter.

<sup>395</sup> Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 48.

This shift in focus is in many ways a reflection of the concerns of °Abdallah’s generation, who rebelled against the idea of the epic, creating instead fragmented narratives that did not include “optimistic heroes from among the downtrodden.” There is no sense here that the possibility of revolutionary political action and community exists for the peasants of this novel. To this end we are presented with a landscape that is dominated by the ancient temples of the Pharaohs, strongly connecting this village to its historic (and mythic) past. It is a land where “the hills are black and the sand on either side is yellow. Kings walk the country. Sun passes through sky and water. In the water is a moon and in the sky is a moon.”<sup>396</sup> As Muḥammad al-Ṣā’igh describes it, “Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah chose ‘al-Karnak’ as a theatre for his novel, the place where Egyptian eternity — embodied in the magnificent statues that the ancestors sculpted and the Pharaonic temples with all the obscurity and magic that they inspire, and that is reflected in the contemporary community, in its poverty, ignorance, sickness, and yearning to be liberated from this place in searching for a means to survive.”<sup>397</sup> It is the temple in particular, which, as will become clear later in the discussion, is central to the village, and by extension the novel.

The absence of the descriptions of the land and fields is also particularly telling in this context. To return to °Abdallah’s explanation cited at the beginning of this section, one notices his focus upon what he calls “the exiled and the forgotten,” the lower world of the Egyptian countryside. This is the case in *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah*; °Abdallah

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<sup>396</sup> °Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 6.

<sup>397</sup> Al-Ṣā’igh, *Thanā’iyyāt al-makān*, 461.

creates a narrative that revolves around the poorest villagers. The characters of his novel are not only landless (with the exception of the family of Sheikh Fadil) but they do not even work on the land as laborers. This is an interesting departure from his earlier works which focus upon rural families that own land and enjoy a position of power and privilege in the village. This is the case particularly in his two earlier short story collections *Thalāth shajarāt kabīrah tuthmirū burtuqālan* (1970, Three Trees that Bear Oranges)<sup>398</sup> and *Al-Daff wa-al-ṣandūq* (1974, The Tambourine and the Chest).<sup>399</sup> In fact the family of Sheikh Fadil reappears in many of the stories of these collections.

°Abdallah’s representation of the village can be read in light of the broader move away from the realist paradigm that characterized much of the work of writers of his generation. As Jacquemond explains, “the 1967 defeat, and the crisis in the literary field that it revealed, called into question the realist mode that had prevailed since the middle of the 1950s.”<sup>400</sup> [I would add here that, as I argued in Chapter One, the events of 1967 were of course only one reason among many for this shift.] Jacquemond goes on to explain that, while works of this nature preceded the disaster, the break with the dominant realism was accelerated in its aftermath. This realist mode had come to be associated with the optimism of the nationalist moment in Egypt which the failures of the post-colonial state increasingly called into question. Within this context writers from rural areas like °Abdallah rewrote the village narrative producing what he terms “an Egyptian

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<sup>398</sup> °Abdallah, *Thalāth shajarāt kabīrah tuthmirū burtuqālan* (Cairo: Al-Hay’ah al-°Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1970).

<sup>399</sup> °Abdallah, *Al-Daff wa-al-ṣandūq* (Baghdad: Wizārit al-I°lām, 1974).

<sup>400</sup> Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 91.

version of Latin American magic realism.”<sup>401</sup> This is in line with what al-Kharrāt terms as ‘*Al-ṭayyār al-wāqī‘ī al-siḥrī*’ (The Wave of Magical Realism), which he identifies as one of the aesthetic innovations of the “new sensibility” that was emerging at this time.<sup>402</sup> In depicting the village in this way I argue that °Abdallah “seeks to delegitimize not only the form of realism but also the content of nationalism.”<sup>403</sup> The village of al-Karnak here is thus separate from the rest of the Egyptian nation.

Given this move away from socialist realism, the question of form is particularly striking with regards to °Abdallah’s novel —literary critics have raised the question of whether it is a novel at all. In his analysis of °Abdallah’s work, Sabry Hafiz argues that this is not in fact a novel but should be seen as a “*qiṣṣah qaṣīrah ṭawīlah*” (a long short story).<sup>404</sup> Hafiz goes on to explain that this label is appropriate for this work, given the way in which it in fact begins with a number of short stories. °Abdallah’s novel opens with several short stories that he published in earlier collections. The story “*Al-Shahr al-sādis min al-‘ām al-thālith*” (The Sixth Month of the Third Year) appeared in his earlier collection *Al-Daff wa-al-ṣandūq* (1974, The Tambourine and the Chest). Parts of his

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 95. Here he also cites Muḥammad Mustaghāb and Sa‘īd al-Kafrāwī as examples of writers who were developing this model of writing.

<sup>402</sup> Al-Kharrāt, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 19.

<sup>403</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 893. In discussing the post-colonial novel in Africa Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that writers undermine the realist mode as part of their larger critique of the failed nationalist project.

<sup>404</sup> Sabry Hafiz, “Qīṣaṣ Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir °Abdallah al-ṭawīlah,” *Fusūl*, 2:2 (1982): 196. In her analysis Selim traces the difference between the Arabic terms “*riwāyah*” and “*qiṣṣah*” and their verbs “*rawā*” and “*qaṣṣa*” to explain the different narrative strategy employed by °Abdallah and its relationship to the oral, folkloric tradition. Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, 217-218.

story “*Al-Mawt fī thalāth lawḥāt*” (Death in Three Scenes) also published in the same collection, reappears in a slightly modified version in this novel. Hafiz notes the way in which the reappearance of these stories marks a conscious strategy on the part of the author to connect his long and short works. What it also does is draw attention to the narrative strategy employed by the author in his work. The novel is made up of chapters that are in turn composed of shorter sections, of varying lengths. Some of these sections are given their own titles as if to suggest their existence as independent tales —this is the case with the section “*Al-Shahr al-sādis min al-‘ām al-thālith*” mentioned previously, and which appears in the opening of the novel. It is the cumulative effect of these individual sections that moves the reader through the narrative, as if the novel itself were composed of a succession of short stories or folk tales.<sup>405</sup> This is in part also related to ‘Abdallah’s own literary project which clearly intended to bring together the oral and the written. In discussing his work he states that:

If I speak and speak well I will find who will listen to me and this is what I do... I have to speak and not write because my nation doesn’t read... And when I speak my listeners increase because people are not deaf. I don’t think that addressing intellectuals is an issue of importance... I asked myself: Who am I writing for? I found that the people that I am writing about don’t read my art... and they are exiled, alienated, and dispossessed... For this reason I think that speaking is better and the stories that I write I have already told a hundred thousand times to a hundred thousand people... For this reason also I say that I don’t exert much energy in writing my stories because I record what I say in my gatherings and exchanges.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> In his analysis Badawī compares the short tales that make up the novel to the Egyptian *mawwāl* (popular love song) of “*Ḥaṣan wa Na‘īma*” or “*Shafīqah wa Mitwallī*.” He goes on to argue that as opposed to the story cycle of the Arabian Nights, which ultimately ends with the possibility of happiness for the principle characters, here the narrative, like the *mawwāl* begins as it ends, with a sense of foreboding and defeat, both for the characters and the larger community. See Badawī, *Al-Riwāyah al-jadīdah fī Miṣr*, 53-55. For an in-depth discussion of ‘Abdallah’s folkloric narrative strategies see Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary*, 214-229.

<sup>406</sup> ‘Abdallah, *Al-Kitābāt al-kāmilah* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī, 1983), 491.

It is perhaps then instructive to consider the individual segments of *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah* as the oral stories that °Abdallah describes here; the narrative in this novel seems to be composed of smaller units that suggest that we approach the work as one composed of a multitude of shorter stories.

°Abdallah's own biographical experience also encourages a connection between the written and the oral. As he describes in the quote cited earlier, his emphasis is upon the spoken and not upon the written word. He was in fact known to be a remarkable storyteller and performances of his work were famous throughout the literary circles in Cairo during the 1960s and 1970s. He composed his stories in his head, reciting them from memory for his audience, and only writing them down for publication.<sup>407</sup> The creation and publication of his work, with its emphasis upon orality and recitation, and upon the tales of the folk tradition, is echoed in the form of the novel itself. Selim focuses upon the role of the oral storyteller, both in terms of the novelist himself and with regards to the narrator of *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah*, showing the way °Abdallah seems to have bridged the gap between the writer and the traditional storyteller.<sup>408</sup> This is particularly interesting when read against the crisis of the writer and intellectual discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation. The shift in space, from the urban to the rural, brings with it a shift in narrative and in the attitude towards the role of the writer.

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<sup>407</sup> For more see "Introduction" to *Al-A°māl al-kāmilah*, 5.

<sup>408</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary*, 216-217.

## VII: The House as the Space of Death

In his analysis of the relationship between myth and literature Northrop Frye argues that mythic structures revolve around cycles of life and death.<sup>409</sup> It is these cycles that form the basis of °Abdallah’s narrative, though it is death more than anything else that dominates this world. This loss pervades the house of Fahima and Bikhit al-Bishari, the space that is central to the novel and that seems to stand alone amidst the rural world of al-Karnak. It is also where the story begins and ends, creating a sense of repetition and circularity that is of course echoed in the title of the work. The house as a space of confinement resonates with the *ṭawq* (the collar) and the *iswiraḥ* (bracelet) of the novel’s title that both convey a similar idea of continuity, but also of entrapment. The opening of the novel presents the now invalid Bikhit as he passes his days outside the house, marking the passage of time by the movement of the sun. He has in many ways become an extension of the structure of the house, laid out on the bench, he is reliant upon his wife and daughter to move him from one spot to another:

Bikhit al-Bishari stretched out on the stone bench that circles the trunk of the doum tree. At the end of those long years that had passed like a boat lifted from a spot of sun a deposited in a spot of shade, he took to gazing at the sun as it raced through the sky and shouting at times, “I want the sun!” and at others, “I want the shade!” Thus all day long. Thus, the day passes. Thus, the days that make up a life pass. She and her daughter carry the boat from the sun to the shade and from the shade to the sun.<sup>410</sup>

He longs to escape both the house and his life, wishing for the sleep that will carry him straight to God. His wish is eventually granted: “Hazina uncovered his face. There, she

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<sup>409</sup> Northrop Frye, “The Novel as Displacement: Structuralism” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 134.

<sup>410</sup> °Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 3.



saw three colors —black, blue, and yellow— and she divined the approach of death...Hazina heard and Fahima heard and Shaykh Fadil heard the door close behind the Angel of Death with the soul of Bikhith al-Bishari in his arms.”<sup>411</sup> In her analysis of the novel *Selim* contrasts the sense of confinement experienced by the multiple members of the family to the ongoing activity of death saying that “unlike the angel of death, the story’s characters do not move freely through this landscape; rather like Bikhith al-Bishari, the invalid patriarch, they are fixed and imprisoned by it.”<sup>412</sup>

It is seems that only through death can the members of the family leave the confines of the home —any other attempts that are made by the characters are ultimately thwarted. So while Mustafa is able to escape the home and village struggling to overcome the poverty and destitution of life in al-Karnak, he must eventually return.<sup>413</sup> And when he does he is destined to suffer the same fate as his father —he spends the end of his days paralyzed, alone with his mother Hazina in the family home. This is just one of many generational repetitions that produce the sense of circularity and continuity that structure the novel. Fahima too is only able to leave the home temporarily. Her marriage to al-Haddad and the move to his home is short-lived; when her husband divorces her she finds herself back in the familial home, this time with her daughter Nabawiya. Again, like her father, she can only escape the confines of the home through death. In fact the scene of her passing is described in the same language as that of Bikhith al-Bishari:

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<sup>411</sup> °Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 14-15.

<sup>412</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary*, 218.

<sup>413</sup> In the scene in which Mustafa’s return home is described “The Meeting that Follows a Long Absence” the family house is tellingly described as a tomb in which “The ghost of Bikhith al-Bishari, the father and husband, whispered in the air. Fahima’s ghost, daughter and sister, whispered in the air.” °Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 58.

“Hazina collected all the blankets in the house and piled them onto her body. She wet a cloth with water and vinegar and applied it to Fahima’s forehead; she stayed by her side till morning. Terror struck her when she saw her daughter’s face turn the three colors: yellow, black, and blue.”<sup>414</sup>

The home as the space of death and imprisonment is perhaps best captured in the experience of Fahima’s daughter Nabawiya, who is raised by her grandmother following her mother’s death. In love with Sheikh Fadil’s son, she aspires to break through the boundaries of her world, a transgression for which she is punished. While she loves the son of Sheikh Fadil, she is pursued with zeal by her cousin al-Sa<sup>°</sup>di who wishes to marry her. With the return of her Uncle Mustafa however, Nabawiya is confined to the house; realizing she has become a woman, Mustafa insists she no longer work in the houses of the wealthier families, like that of Sheikh Fadil. Furthermore, al-Sa<sup>°</sup>di’s request for her hand in marriage (which Mustafa turns down) serves to enforce the idea that Nabawiya must be kept in the house.

And yet her tragedy does not end there. The discovery of her pregnancy spells the end of her life. In perhaps the most tragic scene of <sup>°</sup>Abdallah’s novel, Nabawiya is beaten and buried alive by her uncle, who insists she reveal the identity of her lover:

Enraged Mustafa meted out the searing blows to Nabawiya and turned the lovely face into a swollen pulp. He gathered up the raven hair in two strong hands bulging with purple veins and threw the body desired by men onto the ground. He dragged her along, kicking the sinful belly over and over with his feet, then he left her there for a moment—a heap of broken-boned flesh moaning at the foot of the wall—in order to dig the pit.

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<sup>414</sup> <sup>°</sup>Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 39.

He tossed the hoe aside, lifted Nabawiya and stood her up in the pit. Then he shoveled the earth back in over the body up to the neck, leaving the head exposed and the hair grazing in the dirt.<sup>415</sup>

What is so powerful about this description is the way in which Nabawiya literally becomes part of the grounds of the house, enveloped in the earth outside her home. Her paralysis surpasses that of her father's, and her containment in the house ultimately leads to her death. Refusing to reveal the identity of her lover she remains buried in the grounds of her home, with only her head above the earth. When al-Sa<sup>c</sup>di learns of her transgression he puts an end to her life in a scene that even surpasses Mustafa's brutality:

Al-Sa<sup>c</sup>di kicked in the door of Bikhit al-Bishari's house with a ferocious blow...He drew, from beneath the folds of his torn robes, the sharp-toothed scythe and seized the grimy bundle of lunatic black hair as he would grab hold of a bundle of clover, and he sheared off the long proud neck. The dovecote tottered, the doves took flight, and the wolf howled at the sight of the spurting blood soaking his garments and running, snake-like in the dirt. Howling he carried off the head, its eyes still shining with life.<sup>416</sup>

The way in which Nabawiya becomes a part of the earth is captured in the comparison that is made between her hair and a bundle of clover, which al-Sa<sup>c</sup>di brutally attacks with his scythe. In this remarkable scene the field momentarily replaces the house of Bikhit and Hazina, as the site of this unimaginable violence.

## VII: The Temple: The Mythic as the Site of Violence

°Abdallah's village is a mythical space, in which supernatural occurrences take place. The ancient Pharaonic temple brings together the world of the human and the divine in a scene that recalls the mythic tales of the past. After discovering her husband

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<sup>415</sup> °Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 68.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

is impotent, Fahima solicits the help of her mother Hazina. When the latter's remedies fail to restore al-Haddad's sexual potency, Hazina takes her daughter to the ancient temple to discover whether she is the cause of the problem:

Here is the ancient massive-stoned temple, ruined by impudent time. The seven gates of the temple are still intact, however. Above every gate sits a winged sun disk guarded by two interlaced snakes. There inside, is the hall of columns where the people of old used to offer their prayers. In this hall they burned piles of incense brought from the farthest reaches of the civilized world. Inside, trapped in his narrow chamber lurks the naked-loined god of procreation. The unfinished obelisk—the sonorous obelisk—and the sacred pond lie beyond. Its waters neither rise nor fall in spite of the springs that weep ceaselessly into its small basin.<sup>417</sup>

It is here, with the walls of the ancient temple, that Fahima is impregnated by the “god of procreation...the man who boasted of his manhood, so that God turned him into cold black, his genitals exposed for all eternity.”<sup>418</sup> Of significance is the fact that this is one of the few detailed descriptions of physical space that is given in the entire novel. And it is this space that is “the breach between the real and the legendary, from which comes the sperm that pierces Fahima's womb in the darkness of the temple vault that is filled with incense, myths, histories, and secrets.”<sup>419</sup> Here it is instructive to return to Jacquemond's description of °Abdallah as producing a form of Egyptian magical realism. °Abdallah invokes elements of the ancient Egyptian mythic tradition in creating a scene in which Fahima is impregnated by the god of procreation. The reality of this situation is not called into question but presented as entirely plausible within the world of the novel. In this way °Abdallah's presentation of the temple as a mythic space can be read as part of a

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>419</sup> Hafiz, “Qışaş Yahyā al-Ṭāhir °Abdallah al-ṭawīlah,” 197.

magical realist narrative strategy. In describing this strategy Christopher Warnes states “its most characteristic feature is that it naturalizes the supernatural, integrating fantastic or mythical features smoothly into the otherwise realistic momentum of the narrative.”<sup>420</sup>

The mythic here is used in a scene of brutality and force rendering the temple a space of violence:

Fatima is alone now, and the chamber is damp and musty. Bats fly close to her face and disturb the still air. Fatima can hear the sound of her breath and of her beating heart. Slowly, by the faint rays descending from a skylight high up in the ceiling, her eyes make out the silhouette of the naked black giant, and she sees two red eyes glowing like coals. She tries to scream but the scream sticks in her throat. She tries to still the sudden violent shaking of her body as she watches the naked giant move closer.<sup>421</sup>

And from this mythical encounter Fahima’s daughter Nabawiya is conceived, the daughter who will be the cause of Fahima’s divorce and return to her family home. She, like her mother, will also conceive an illegitimate child that will bring about her downfall. The temple remains in Fahima’s mind a site of violence and brutality. As she walks with her mother over the burial grounds of the dead, Hazina re-tells the story of the workers who died in the old temple. This story of Arab workers that come into confrontation with the French antiquities inspector, and the foreman overseeing the excavation of the temple, seems to take on similar mythic proportions. It is also perhaps a way to connect the colonial and post-colonial moments in the mind of the reader. Refusing to listen to the workers’ complaints about the condition of the old temple, the foreman compels them to keep working. As a result “the earth groaned by its Lord’s command and the world turned upside down. It happened at midday and the men’s

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<sup>420</sup> Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 151.

<sup>421</sup> cAbdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 25.

bodies were removed just before sunset.”<sup>422</sup> As a result of the accident, the French inspector drowns in the Nile and the foreman’s wife keeps giving birth to babies that die in their first month.

In listening to this story Fahima cannot help but be taken back to her own experiences in the temple, though she struggles to keep her memories at bay:

End of the story, “The Accident in the Temple.” Fahima tried to think of another story to take her mind off what had happened in the god’s chamber...Voices croaked in Fahima’s ears, dogs howling, cats screeching, frogs croaking, flesh crackling and grindstone grinding, a grindstone rhythmically, incessantly grinding, and to this regular continuous beat the naked black man comes closer, his stone feet pounding on the stone floor.<sup>423</sup>

Immediately following this scene Fahima collapses and dies.

#### IV: Al-Karnak’s Connection to the Nation

As I have been arguing thus far, Abdallah’s village of al-Karnak is a mythic space, where the house and temple function as sites of violence. The village of al-Karnak here appears as isolated and marginalized, the exiled space of which Abdallah speaks. This is I would argue intensified by the way in which time operates in the novel. The movement of time in the novel, at least in so far as the world of the village is concerned, suggests a circularity and repetition; the reader comes to mark its passage by the generational cycle of the family of Bikhit and Hazina.<sup>424</sup> The cyclical nature of time is

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>424</sup> In her reading of the novel Nadia Ya<sup>°</sup>qūb examines the way in which <sup>°</sup>Abdallah’s novel draws on narratives techniques from the Arabic popular epic or *sīrah*. One of the main ways this is accomplished is through the use of epic time, which Ya<sup>°</sup>qūb contrasts to the historic time associated with the realist novel. She thus notes for example that “like the characters of the *sīrah*, Fahīmah and Hazīnah live in a world which is characterized by recurring cycles, in which events repeat themselves in familiar patterns. Nadia Ya<sup>°</sup>qūb, “The Tale of Those Who Did Not Travel:

further stressed by the fact that the characters seem to be destined to carry out the same fate through the generations.

The separation of al-Karnak in time and space is intensified by the way in which linear time seems to operate outside of the limits of the village. At the same time that the novel tells the story of the family of Bikhit and Hazina it also tells the story of the anti-colonial struggles in the Arab world. This is in fact the only means for the reader to identify the narrative with an actual historical moment. The world outside the village is experienced only through the travels of Mustafa, the exiled son whose presence in the novel is largely marked by his absence from the village. The lands of Sudan, Palestine, and the Levant seem to exist as faraway destinations, significant only as places from which letters from Mustafa come back to his family. The loss of Palestine in 1948 brings Mustafa back to Egypt to work in the British Camps in the Canal Zone. It is from there that he launches attacks on the British officers, leading a rag-tag group of men; “Mustafa commands all forty of the men: chosen men, strong and sturdy, obedient to him in everything, cunning as foxes, agile as cats, brave as Bin al-Walled, resourceful as Musawi, talented as Eve at trickery and card game.”<sup>425</sup> Al-Şā’igh sees this as an indication of the way in which °Abdallah presents the liberation of Egypt through the struggle of her “children.”<sup>426</sup> Rather, I point here to the way in which this in fact works to stress the separation between the village of al-Karnak and the rest of the Egyptian nation.

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Reading Yahyā al-Ṭāhir °Abdallah’s *The Neckband and the Bracelet* as *Sīrah*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* Vol. 36, No. 2 (2005), 128.

<sup>425</sup> °Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 49.

<sup>426</sup> Al-Şā’igh, *Thanā’iyyāt al-makān*, 471. In this critical work al-Şā’igh compares the representation of space in *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswirah* to that in *Ḥikāyah °alā lisān kalb* (A Story Told By a Dog).

The village and its people seem entirely removed from the nationalist moment and the events taking place in the rest of the country.

The historical events of the novel reach their height around the moment of national revolution in 1952. The experience of national fervor finds its way into the world of the village through the experience of Shaykh Fadil and his friends, who listen to the songs of Umm Kulthum and write articles proclaiming their patriotic commitment. Here we see the brief appearance of the character of the journalist Muhammad Ahmad al-Sharqawi in the narrative who brings together a multitude of “exemplary verses and some popular sayings” in order to write an article about the revolutionary moment. In his article entitled “The Sea of the Past Flows into the Sea of the Present but the Sea is Not Yet Full” he decides to include the following points:

1. “My country, my country/To you my love and fealty.” An anthem sung by Sayyid Darwish for the revolution of 1919. Suitable for all voices and insurrections. Wonderful when sung in chorus. Why, I wonder?...
  4. “If immortal fame should distract me from my country/Immortal my soul would yearn for it.” Even palace life cannot distract the poets from love of the nation...
  5. “By God, no other day but the Day of Independence/ Shall Egypt celebrate with pomp and pageant.”...
- How true you son of Egypt, son of all Arabs! The words of the great Tunisian poet are equally appropriate here: “If the People should one day to choose to live, Fate must comply/Night give way to day and the chains that bind them break.”<sup>427</sup>

This interruption into the narrative of the rhetoric of national independence seems entirely out of place given the reality of the villagers’ lives that seem wholly unconnected to the larger events taking place in Egypt. Selim notes that the language of the texts cited by the journalist draw attention to the separation I am identifying here between the village and the rest of the country. Selim states that:

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<sup>427</sup> c Abdallah, *The Collar and the Bracelet*, 51-52.



This quixotic intervention into the text starkly foregrounds the social and discursive tensions inherent in the high-pitched language of nationalism —a generic, declamatory language constructed by an urbane, elite class and bordering on empty cliché. It is a leisured, hypertextual language, in the sense that it quite literally grows out of other, remote texts (the patriotic lyrics of a song; the national anthem and various pithy lines of poetry) and not the lived experience of the long-suffering liminal community which it perhaps claims to represent, yet which nonetheless effectively exists at its farthest margins and outside of the logic of its historical hegemony.<sup>428</sup>

At the height of the nationalist moment the village of al-Karnak is wholly disconnected from the rest of the nation. In stressing this isolation and separation, °Abdallah calls into question the possibilities of this revolutionary moment and the vision of national unity with which it was associated. Writing in the decades that followed national independence °Abdallah returns to the moment of change, but rather than positing it as a moment of optimism, it is recast as one that even in its origin was built upon the exclusion of the rural village, here represented by the Upper Egyptian village of al-Karnak.

## V: Conclusion

°Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim and Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah both present interesting cases within the writers of the sixties generation in their focus upon the rural in Egypt. Their originality their move away from the socialist realism that dominated the depictions of rural narratives in the previous decades, and their turn to alternative modes of representation. In this chapter I have shown the way in which Qāsim and °Abdallah reimagine the rural as mystical and mythical space respectively; while the former serves to provide an alternative to the degradation and suffering of rural life, the latter stresses the position of the rural village of al-Karnak as alienated and isolated from the rest of

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<sup>428</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, 226.

Egypt. The two authors present novels whose forms are connected to this spatial reimagination. Qāsim recreates the time and space of Sufi ritual in chapters which mirror the preparations and journey that precede the yearly pilgrimage to the shrine of the Sufi saint. °Abdallah tells his story of generational struggle through a novel that in its composition echoes the folk tales of the oral tradition. In both cases I argue this reimagination of the rural space of Egypt serves to call into question the position of the rural vis-à-vis the nation. While °Abdallah's novel ends with the moment of revolutionary possibility and change, the village of al-Karnak is outside this transformative moment. Qāsim's novel on the other hand presents the end of the space of Sufi ritual, replaced with the political world as it is represented in the village café, but whose efficacy is questionable.

## Chapter Four

### The Politics and Economics of Exile: Bahā' Ṭāhir's *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* and Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī's *Daqq al-ṭubūl*

#### I: Introduction

Egyptian novelists and short story writers have long drawn on a number of different spaces —national, regional, and international— in the construction of the literary landscapes of their works. In the early decades of the twentieth century writers regularly transgressed the borders of the Egyptian nation-state, in novels and short stories that moved beyond the space of the homeland. Works such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *Adīb* (1935; *Man of Letters*),<sup>429</sup> Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's *ʿUsfūr min al-Sharq* (1938; English translation: *A Bird from the East*, 1966)<sup>430</sup> and Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī's *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (1944; English translation: *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*, 2004),<sup>431</sup> all depict characters who travel to the West for their education.<sup>432</sup> Europe in these works serves a largely metaphorical purpose, as Egypt's "other" and the place from which the protagonist can evaluate and assess the progress of his native country.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Adīb* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Iʿtimād, 1935).

<sup>430</sup> Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *ʿUsfūr min al-Sharq* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Lajnat al-Taʿlīf, 1938); English translation: *A Bird from the East*, trans. R. Bayly Winder (Beirut: Khayyats, 1966).

<sup>431</sup> Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1984); English translation: *The Lamp of Umm Hāshim*, trans. Denys Johnson Davies (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

<sup>432</sup> I am grateful to the Nader K. Uthman for bringing this to my attention. See Nader K. Uthman, "A Storied Exile: Poetics of Displacement in Modern Arab/ic Novels" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009).

<sup>433</sup> It must be noted of course that a physical journey is not always required for this purpose of education. In many cases the encounter with the Western "other," and the transformation of the protagonist that results, is accomplished through a process of reading and an intellectual journey

It is within the context of this Arabic (in this case specifically Egyptian) narrative tradition that I situate the two novels by the writers of the sixties generation examined in this chapter. Here we witness a change in the spaces represented; Europe as the space of education and progress is transformed, becoming instead the space of political exile, or displaced by the Arab Gulf, as the space of economic migration and exploitation. This change is a reflection of the socio-economic and political reality of the post-colonial period, addressing the dislocation —economic and political— that took place under the regimes of Anwar al-Sādāt and Ḥusnī Mubārak.

This chapter examines the move beyond the boundaries of Egypt in Bahā° Ṭāhir's *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* (1995; English translation: *Love in Exile*, 2001)<sup>434</sup> and Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī's *Daqq al-ṭubūl* (2006; English translation: *Drumbeat*, 2010).<sup>435</sup> In addressing their critiques of the Egyptian state, both writers transgress the borders of the nation in representing alternative homelands.<sup>436</sup> The representation of a space of community

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of sorts. In this case the literary, cultural, and intellectual sources that serve as the Arab writer's Western interlocutor can also bring about a change similar to the one that takes place during actual encounter. For an extensive discussion of this issue and the complexity of the Western encounter see al-Musawi's "Before Bidding Farewell: What Do Narratives of Education Say?" in *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 41-71 and "Arabs and the West: Counternarratives and Narrative Encounters" in *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2003), 163-205.

<sup>434</sup> Bahā° Ṭāhir, *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1995); English translation: *Love in Exile*, trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001). Citations from the text are from this translation.

<sup>435</sup> Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, *Daqq al-ṭubūl* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 2006); English translation: *Drumbeat*, trans. Peter Daniel (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010). Citations from the text are from this translation.

<sup>436</sup> An interesting comparison can be made here to Muḥammad Mansī Qandīl's novel *Qamar °alā Samarqand* (*Moon Over Samarqand*, 2004) in which the author uses the post-Soviet space of Uzbekistan, as a mirror for Egypt, in order to present the abuses of the authoritarian regimes of °Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt. For an excellent discussion of this novel see Margaret Litvin,

beyond the limits of Egypt can be read both as a reflection of the socio-economic changes of the period and as a critique of the failure of the post-colonial nation-state. The move beyond the limits of the nation thus serves to unsettle both national and regional forms of belonging.

These works can be considered in light of what theorist Arjun Appadurai has termed “ethnoscapes.” In discussing movement and flows in the new global culture Appadurai suggests a relationship between five main “scapes”: ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes. The idea of the ethnoscape resonates with the worlds that are captured in the novels of Ṭāhir and al-Bisāṭī. In explaining the idea of ethnoscape, Appadurai states that:

By ethnoscape I mean the landscapes of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks, of kinship, of friendship, of work, and of leisure, as well of birth, residence, and other filiative forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more people deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move.<sup>437</sup>

Appadurai’s notion of “scapes” captures the way in which these movements through global culture are both based upon power and seem to undermine the primacy of the nation-state.

I begin by examining the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* in which Ṭāhir imagines the space of political exile, in a nameless European city, where the novel’s protagonist tries

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“Egypt’s Uzbek Mirror: Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl’s Post-Soviet Islamic Humanism,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 42 (2011): 101-119.

<sup>437</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference,” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel et al. (MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 32.

to escape from the disappointments of the failed Nāṣirist project and the transformations that have beset Egypt with the coming of al-Sādāt to power. The lyrical descriptions of the city of exile invite a reading of it as a possible space of salvation. Here the protagonist struggles to shield himself from the world, secluding himself in his relationship with the young Brigitte. This proves impossible with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacres of Sabra and Shatila that destroy the possibility of escape imagined by the protagonist. Furthermore, the scenes of violence and destruction that the second half of the novel documents (through testimonials and journalistic accounts), serve to stress the failure of the Arab nationalist dream that existed during the time of °Abd al-Nāṣir.

I then move to an examination of Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī's *Daqq al-ṭubūl* which focuses on the exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf. Here the author is invested in spatial manifestations of inequality and domination, revealing how the space of migration is one of exploitation. This move also reflects the changing economic climate in Egypt throughout the second half of the twentieth century, that led to increased migration to the Gulf countries, particularly during the regime of al-Sādāt and that continued under the regime of Mubārak. Al-Bisāṭī's realist depiction of the nameless Arab Emirate is transformed into an exceptional space with the events of the World Cup football tournament, that leaves the country emptied of all but its foreign workers. This temporary situation, in which an alternative reality is imagined, only serves to accentuate the system of exploitation that exists. Furthermore, I argue that the experience of the Egyptian characters —the nameless protagonist and Zahiya— is a reflection of the futile promise of the post-colonial Egyptian nation-state that failed to provide economic

security for its citizens. Unable to support their families in their homeland, both characters are forced to seek employment in the Emirate. Given the context of exploitation and abuse, al-Bisāṭi's novel lays bare the failure of the Arab nationalist dream of the past.

## II: City of Exile/City of Salvation?

Bahā' Ṭāhir's *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* is set in a nameless European capital. The opening of the novel presents the time and space of the narrative, explained through the relationship between the nameless protagonist (and first person narrator) and the young Brigitte. The novel opens with the following explanation:

I DESIRED HER IMPOTENTLY, like one afraid of incest.  
 She was young and beautiful. I was old, a father and divorced. Love never occurred to me and I didn't do anything to express my desire.  
 But she told me, later on, "It was written all over your face."  
 I was a Cairene whose city had expelled me to exile in the north. She was like me, a foreigner in that country. But she was European and with her passport she considered the whole of Europe her hometown. When we met by chance in that city, "N," to which I was tied by work, we became friends.<sup>438</sup>

The opening alerts us to the movement of time in the narrative plot; the protagonist begins by alluding to the fact that the love between the two characters has been revealed. This is signaled to the reader primarily through the statement "But she told me, later on, 'It was written all over your face.'" Shortly after this opening he in fact retells the details of the scene in which they reveal their love to one another. And yet this is not where the story begins. Rather, from this moment the protagonist moves back in time to his

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<sup>438</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 3.

“chance” meeting with Brigitte, and from that point in the past begins to retell the story of their love. As we shall see from the discussion their love does not survive the present; the unfolding of the events in Lebanon—which connects the narrative to an external, historical time—quickly spells the end of their love affair. What is significant is that the narrative of their love affair initially seems to operate within an enclosed space that is cut off from the outside world. In my reading of the descriptions of the spaces of city, I will show how the reader is alerted to the passage of time through the changing of seasons, registered in the falling of leaves and the blossoming of flowers. The separation of time in the novel, between the time of the city of exile and that of the outside world, marks a significant innovation on the part of the author. While this is not the complete break down of linear time that al-Kharrāt associates with the writers of Ṭāhir’s generation, it is nevertheless a manipulation of the linear progression of time and serves to separate the city N, as if to suggest that it occupies a space detached from the surrounding world.<sup>439</sup>

This opening also introduces us to the two central characters of the novel, both exiles from their homelands, struggling to make a home for themselves in this foreign city.<sup>440</sup> The protagonist, a middle-aged journalist and staunch supporter of °Abd al-Nāṣir suffers increasing marginalization with the coming of al-Sādāt to power.<sup>441</sup> Becoming as

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<sup>439</sup> For more on the break down of linear time in the narratives of this generation see al-Kharrāt, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 7-33 and al-Musawī, *Infirāt al-°aqd al-muqaddas: mun°atafāt al-riwāyah al-°arabiyyah ba°d Maḥfūz*, 69-108.

<sup>440</sup> A similar situation forms the basis of an earlier short story by Ṭāhir. In *Bil-ams ḥalimtu biki* (1984; Yesterday I Dreamt of You) the protagonist also works in a nameless city in Northern Europe, entering into a relationship with the foreign Anne Marie. See Ṭāhir, *Bil-ams ḥalimtu biki* (Cairo: Al-Hay°ah al-Miṣriyyah al-°Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1984).

<sup>441</sup> Shortly after coming to power Anwar al-Sādāt carried out purges in both the political and cultural spheres. His “Corrective Revolution” begun in 1971 effectively toppled his political opponents and marginalized the left wing of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU). Beginning that



he calls it “the consultant who no one consulted,” he chooses to leave Egypt and settle in this European city, working as a correspondent for the same newspaper and relegated to writing the most inconsequential of articles. The presentation of the protagonist fits into al-Musawi’s description of the writer in what he calls the “post-Mahfouzian period.”

Describing the novels that fall into al-Kharrāṭ’s “new sensibility,” al-Musawi states that in these works we see the “picture of the humiliated writer, not the prophet, the one who is abandoned not the one who is curious, the exiled not the diviner.”<sup>442</sup> Brigitte, a young woman from Austria, leaves her homeland after she and her African husband suffer a racist attack that results in her miscarriage. It is important to note that while the protagonist, in the opening of the novel, suggests that “all of Europe” was Brigitte’s homeland, she in fact is quite adamant that this is not the case. The third exile is the protagonist’s old colleague Ibrahim, also an Egyptian journalist and Communist, who is imprisoned under the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir, endures persecution with the purges instituted by al-Sādāt, and leaves Egypt to Iraq, Syria, and finally settles in Beirut.<sup>443</sup> The

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same year al-Sādāt took steps to dismantle the cultural edifice established under °Abd al-Nāṣir; literary magazines were shut down, writers and intellectuals deemed hostile to the regime were removed from their positions, and prevented from publishing. This policy of marginalization and attacks against members of the literary and cultural sphere continued throughout the decade of the seventies, up until a month before al-Sādāt’s assassination in fact; in September 1981 over 1500 intellectuals were arrested. The antagonism exhibited by the state towards members of the intellectual and cultural establishment led many of them to leave Egypt during this period. For more see Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech*, Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* and Ṣalāḥ °Isā, *Muthaqqafūn wa °askar, murāja°āt wa tajārib wa shahādāt °an ḥālat al-muthaqqafīn fī ḡal ḥukm °Abd al-Nāṣir wa-al-Sādāt* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1986).

<sup>442</sup> Al-Musawi, *Infirāt al-°aqd al-muqaddas*, 70. In this work al-Musawi examines novels that were written primarily in the 1980s, but does so as part of what he sees as the continuation of the literary innovations that emerged in the sixties, and are intertwined with al-Kharrāṭ’s ideas of “a new sensibility.”

<sup>443</sup> °Abd al-Nāṣir’s persecution of the Communists in Egypt began as early as 1954, when he targeted Cairo University, imprisoning a number of Communist intellectuals, along with liberals

three characters are “unexpectedly” united in this foreign city, meeting at a human rights conference on Chile with which the novel opens, and constituting a temporary community of exiles.

I read these characters as exiles based on the notion that the state of exile refers to both forced and chosen departure from the homeland. According to Bettina L. Knapp “Exile may be involuntary (one is banished or expelled from one’s native land by authoritative decree), or voluntary (one escapes persecution, evades punishment or stressful circumstances, or carves out a new existence for oneself). The fact or state of being deported, expelled, proscribed, expatriated, or simply leaving one’s homeland implies prolonged separation from one’s native country.”<sup>444</sup> It is my contention here that the characters of the novel can be read as examples of the second form of exile.

Ṭāhir’s choice to situate events in a *nameless* city, “the city ‘N’” is necessary of consideration here.<sup>445</sup> On the one hand, the reader is told that the city is in Europe, thus

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and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. These attacks reached their height in 1959 when all suspected members of the Communist Party were arrested, and only released in 1964, when the Party was officially dissolved. The struggle between °Abd al-Nāṣir and the Communists plays itself out in the novel in the discussions that take place between the protagonist (a staunch Nāṣirist) and Ibrahim (the committed Communist). For more on this struggle between °Abd al-Nāṣir and the Communists see Gordon, *Nasser’s Blessed Movement* and Idrīs, *Al-Muthaqqaf al-°arabī wa-al-sulṭah: baḥṭh fī riwāyat al-tajribah al-nāṣiriyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1991) and °Īsā, *Muthaqqafūn wa °askar*.

<sup>444</sup> Bettina L. Knapp, “Introduction,” in *Exile and the Writer: Exoteric and Esoteric Experiences. A Jungian Approach*, ed. Bettina L. Knapp (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 1. For an excellent discussion of self-imposed and forced exile, especially as far as the Arabic literary tradition is concerned, see al-Musawi’s *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 162-218.

<sup>445</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 3. An interesting comparison can be made here to Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s novel *Shaḥ al-madīnah* (1992; *City Trance*) in which a nameless protagonist also finds himself in a nameless city. He is viewed with suspicion by the inhabitants of the metropolis in a narrative in which the protagonist seems to experience a similar sense of estrangement to that of Ṭāhir’s characters. In both cases the reader encounters an alienated Nasserite intellectual in a world which no longer contains a shared sense of communal belonging. See Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, *Shaḥ al-*

allowing a connection to be made to a real geographical location. On the other hand, the absence of an actual location, a nationally defined space, suggests an idea of this city as representing the possibility of the existence of a “supranational community” based upon a form of “internationalist solidarity.”<sup>446</sup> As we shall see however, this community proves untenable, a reflection of the failure of the internationalist movements of the earlier decades, and not a realistic possibility within the current context. This is also perhaps an attempt on the part of the author to distance the events of the novel from those of his own life; Ṭāhir spent many years away from Egypt in self-imposed exile in Geneva.<sup>447</sup>

In his discussion of the novel Jābir °Aṣṫūr makes an interesting point in his comparison of the namelessness of both the protagonist and the city. He notes that the namelessness of the former does not in fact prevent the reader from discovering a great deal about the character’s history, which is told through the first person discourse (direct and indirect). However, the namelessness of the city is a sign of how little we are told

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*madīnah*, (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1992). For a reading of the novel, within the context of post-colonial Arabic narrative tradition see al-Musawī, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, 292, 330-331 and *Infīrāt al-°aqd al-muqaddas*, 80.

<sup>446</sup> Lorenzo Casini, “Beyond Occidentalism: Europe and the Self in Present-Day Arabic Narrative Discourse,” *EUI-WP RSCAS* 30 (2008): 11-12.

<sup>447</sup> Ṭāhir, like the protagonist of his novel, worked as a journalist for many years, joining the Egyptian Radio Service following his graduation from university in 1956. During this time he helped establish the “Second Program,” the radio’s cultural station, where he worked for a number of years producing dramatic plays for radio. He was forced to leave his job in 1975, when he was targeted by al-Sādāt’s attacks on members of the cultural sphere. His unemployment was accompanied by difficulties in publishing his fiction. This drove him to leave Egypt in 1981, for Geneva where he lived and worked as a translator for the United Nations, not returning to Egypt until 1995. It is also during this time in exile that he wrote *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā*. Some critics thus assume that the novel takes place in Switzerland but this is in fact never stated. See for example °Alī al-Rā°ī, *Al-Riwāyah fī nihāyat al-qarn* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḡbal al-°Arabī, 2000), 194. See Appendix A of this dissertation. For an in-depth biographical account of this period in Ṭāhir’s life see Sulaymān Fayād, “Būrtrīh mālik ḥazīn,” in *°Ālam Bahā’ Ṭāhir: Ḍayf dār majdalāwī li-°ām* 2005, ed. Muḥammad °Ubayd Allāh (Amman: Dār Majdalāwī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī°, 2005), 15-25.

about it. We know nothing of the country in which it is located or anything of its history.<sup>448</sup> I would add that this namelessness, when considered in light of the descriptions of the space of the city and its time, seems to support the reading of its separation from the external world.

In exploring the representation of the city of exile, I wish to consider it in relationship to the condition of the protagonist. Lorenzo Casini, in his reading of the novel, focuses upon the sense of estrangement experienced by the protagonist and Brigitte. While the former experiences marginalization in the workplace and separation from his family, the latter cuts herself off from the world following the racist attack which results in her miscarriage. This causes Casini to see the idea of exile in Ṭāhir's novel referring "not so much to the physical location in which the love story (*al-ḥubb*) between the Egyptian protagonist and an Austrian woman (Brigitte) takes place (an unnamed European city) as to the existential condition experienced by both lovers."<sup>449</sup> While I am in agreement with Casini in reading this sense of estrangement as the cause of an existential anxiety, for both characters, I would argue that the "exile" is both existential and physical. This sense of estrangement is of course one of the primary ways in which the protagonist recalls the condition of writers and intellectuals of Ṭāhir's own

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<sup>448</sup> Jābir °Aṣfūr, "Naqḍ al-ṭhanā'iyah al-qadīmah," in °*Ālam Bahā' Ṭāhir: Ḍayf dār majdalāwī li-°ām* 2005, ed. Muḥammad °Ubayd Allāh (Amman: Dār Majdalāwī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2005), 128-129.

<sup>449</sup> Casini, "Beyond Occidentalism," 10. Casini also notes how the words for exile in Arabic (*manfā* and *ghurbah*) bring together these ideas of exile and estrangement. During the sixties in Egypt, the idea of exile as estrangement gained traction with the influence of writers such as Camus, Sartre, and Kafka. The term *ightirāb* (from the root which also means to be/feel strange) was used within this context to convey a sense of estrangement, often associated with existentialism. In the decades that followed the term *ghurbah* came to be more closely associated with the term *manfā*, to convey a meaning of banishment or exclusion from the nation or homeland. See Casini, "Beyond Occidentalism," 12.

generation, whose work captures this sense of alienation. My point here is that the protagonist's attempt to escape this condition of estrangement is manifest in the novel as a form of physical escape.<sup>450</sup> This escape, as I would argue, is twofold; on the one hand his departure from Egypt is cast in the novel as itself a kind of fleeing. My reading is in line with what ʿĀdil ʿĀlīm argues is the motivation behind the choice of “exile” in Ṭāhir’s novel, namely the “defeat” suffered by the characters that necessitates a change in their “mode” of existence.<sup>451</sup> One of the primary ways in which this change is articulated, I contend, is through the change of physical location, namely to the space of the exilic city. On the other hand even after this change of location the protagonist continues to flee from his defeats and his failures, seeking solace in the beauty of the city.

The descriptions of the nameless city that we find in the novel encourage a reading of this exilic space as a space of refuge. From the opening page of *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* the reader is presented with the natural beauty of the city; as Maḥmūd ʿĀlīm states “gardens and water are always in our path throughout the novel.”<sup>452</sup> Descriptions of the mountain, the woods, and the river suggest a peace and tranquility which the protagonist craves. They also mark the progression of time in the narrative; from the appearance of the trees and the flowers the reader discovers it is summer. (The

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<sup>450</sup> I am in agreement here with ʿĀlīm’s reading that the protagonist of this novel has the feeling that he is “escaping from everything.” ʿĀlīm, *Al-Riwāyah fī nihāyat al-qarn*, 195.

<sup>451</sup> ʿĀdil ʿĀlīm, *Fī al-sard al-riwāʿī* (Beirut: Al-Dār al-ʿArabiyyah li-al-ʿUlūm Nāshirūn, 2010), 53.

<sup>452</sup> Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlīm, “Mulāḥazāt ʿalā hāmish *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā*,” in *ʿĀlam Bahāʿ Ṭāhir: Dayf dār majdalāwī li-ʿām* 2005, ed. Muḥammad ʿUbayd Allāh (Amman: Dār Majdalāwī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿ, 2005), 123.

narrative time of the plot is in fact only between summer and autumn.). The description of the woods is poetic, lyrical, suggesting momentary relief for the protagonist:

I drove the car along the highway, crossing a wood en route to the airport, then turned on a packed dirt path between the trees and parked in the shade. The wood was cool and quiet and the new leaves which had a short while ago begun to re-adorn the trees were radiant green, almost diaphanous. They gathered in a precariously delicate dome, swayed by the light wind causing the sun rays to sneak through the scattered gaps, forming yellow waves coursing quickly on the grass and then disappearing, only to make another surprise appearance. The successive waves as they passed stirred up the little yellow and white wildflowers that adorned the land in the summer. The first time we went abroad on a one-week tourist trip to Bulgaria, I was dazzled by that ornamental pattern on the ground and so was Manar.<sup>453</sup>

Such descriptions, relayed from the perspective of the protagonist, proliferate in the novel. (They also, as will become evident later in the discussion, stand in sharp contrast to the descriptions of the violence and destruction that unfolds in Lebanon.) It is primarily through the free (direct and indirect) discourse of the narrator—as exemplified in the passage cited here—and through his dialogue with other characters that the events of the novel are relayed. What is particularly interesting is that the internal thoughts of the protagonist do not just focus on his feelings. Idwār al-Kharrāt, in discussing the innovative contributions of Ṭāhir as part of the sixties generation, notes that the first person narrator is “very careful to describe what he sees and narrate what happens.”<sup>454</sup> Al-Kharrāt sees this as resulting in the transformation of the first person discourse into part of the larger dialogue that dominates much of Ṭāhir’s work. What I think is

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<sup>453</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 5-6. Maḥmūd Amīn al-°Ālim takes note of the beauty of the language that is used in descriptions such as the one of the forest, going as far as to compare them to the poetry that is read and quoted by the characters. Furthermore, al-°Ālim also reads these passages in opposition to the descriptions that take place in Lebanon. See Maḥmūd Amīn al-°Ālim, “Mulāḥazāt °alā hāmish *Al-Ḥubb fī-al-manfā*,” 121.

<sup>454</sup> Al-Kharrāt, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 183.

noteworthy in this context, is how this discourse and dialogue are used both to present descriptions of the striking beauty of the city and later to convey the horrors of the events in Lebanon. The scenes of violence and destruction are told to the reader either through conversations between the characters (one of whom is/was a witness to the events), or through the thoughts of the protagonist as he watches the events unfold on the television. I will return to this issue later in the discussion.

The solace afforded by the protagonist's enjoyment of this natural haven is limited however; in his walk through the woods, he is taken back to the memory of a trip he took with his wife Manar. This memory only serves to bring forth a slew of unpleasant recollections about the slow failure of his marriage. It is against these particular memories that the protagonist struggles. In recognizing that his experience of the natural beauty of the woods has triggered his reminiscences of the past, he abruptly terminates his walk:

I said, no, I am not going back to that, not in this beautiful place nor this sunny morning. I am not going to succumb today to this empty wandering where a scene with Manar surfaces from anything I see or just surfaces for no reason. Then one scene leads to another and hours pass this way. No, not today. If the serenity in this forest cannot save me from that, anything would be better than staying here.<sup>455</sup>

Situated amidst the river and the mountains is the café that acts as the communal space of the characters; it is here that the protagonist meets daily with his new love Brigitte and it is here too that he is reunited with his old colleague Ibrahim. In describing the café the narrator says:

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<sup>455</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 9-10.

I really liked this oval-shaped café jutting into the river like a shell cast on the rocky tongue of land. A long path lined on both sides with beds of well-tended flowers led to its quiet location on the riverbank.

There were only a few customers, so we easily found a place at an open window overlooking, across the wide river, the mountain, which at that time of the year was covered with green forests and gardens. In the midst of the trees were scattered white houses with red tile roofs that jutted like graduated pyramids as they went higher up until at the very top they appeared like tiny red triangles in the midst of the trees.<sup>456</sup>

It is not only, as we can see from this description, that the café is a space that almost exists in harmony with nature, but also that it is a space of tranquility and peace that invites forgetting. I would argue that the café (and the secret garden discussed shortly) can both be read as examples of Lefebvre's "representational spaces," spaces that are "alive," that "speak[s]," and that "embrace[s] the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately impl[y] time."<sup>457</sup> The characters of this novel seem intent on living in a present that is both perpetual and removed from the rest of the world. Ibrahim makes note of this "peace and serenity" and when he begins to lament the position of the Arabs and the regression that has characterized their situation, he quickly notes, "such talk should not come in such a place."<sup>458</sup> As the novel progresses, and it becomes increasingly clear that the protagonist's love affair with Brigitte is destined to come to an end, the café as a space of refuge from the world and its events, is evident: "I stood for a moment out of breath when I saw the oval building jutting out into the river. I

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<sup>456</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 24-25.

<sup>457</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 42.

<sup>458</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 25-26.



felt that tears were welling up in my eyes. What a blessing that our café is still here!  
 What a blessing that it will give us both shelter!”<sup>459</sup>

The river, which the café overlooks, traverses the space of both the novel and the city. Its beauty acts as a distraction for the characters and draws them away from their current situation, with its reminders of the disappointments of the current political reality. So for example during a heated discussion between the protagonist and Ibrahim about the power struggle between ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and the Communists in nineteen sixties Egypt, the protagonist breaks off from the conversation to contemplate the river; “I focused my eyes on the river and for a long time I didn’t see anything. But I came to when I became aware of motion and noise on the still surface. A swan was supporting its weight on its tail, rearing and quickly sweeping the waves with its wings, leaving behind two parallel lines of white froth.”<sup>460</sup>

The sense in which nature can serve as a distraction and an escape is further emphasized by the presence of the protagonist’s “secret garden,” an enclave in the city to which he retreats when he is in need of solace.<sup>461</sup> Following Ibrahim’s confession that he no longer has any interest in visiting historical sites during his travels, but prefers to see the “trees and the green” in any city he visits, enjoying anything that reminds him of his “childhood, of the Nile, and the sycamores and the willows,” the protagonist takes him to

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>461</sup> The chapter in which the protagonist and Brigitte admit their love for each other is in fact entitled “*Layl ḥanūn..ḥadīqah ḥāniyyah*” (Tender Night..Gentle Garden) encouraging an association between the escape provided by the secret garden, and that provided by the love affair with Brigitte.

his “secret garden.”<sup>462</sup> From Ibrahim’s words of course we notice how some memories of the past are welcome; in contrast to the protagonist’s recollections cited at the start of this chapter, here the reminders of the landscape of his youth are a welcome distraction for Ibrahim. Once again, we are presented with a description that places great emphasis upon the beauty of the natural world, and the possibilities it offers for respite from the surrounding world:

I followed his steps in the middle of walkways lined with high poplars with their thick green foliage and the chestnut trees that had begun to bear their round green nuts. He walked also taking in the beds of flowers on both sides of the walkways. There were roses showing off their red and yellow petals in the youthful flush of early summer and next to them were beds of pansies in different colors: white, violet, and brown and in the middle of each of them a round yellow ring of small dots like intricate ornaments. Ibrahim seemed totally absorbed taking in the flowers, and we didn’t exchange a word until we sat on a bench in a corner overlooking the whole garden.<sup>463</sup>

The way in which the protagonist is drawn to these spaces in the city seems at times almost unconscious. After a troubling conversation with Yusuf, the young Egyptian journalist in partnership with the Arab Prince (who, in turn it is discovered, is in partnership with supporters of Israel) the protagonist finds himself driving to the river. Of importance also is how the changing leaves mark the progression of time from summer to autumn:

I decided to go home and rest there for a short while, but instead I drove the car to the riverbank and parked it near the café, then I began to stroll in the quiet streets near the river. It was cold and cloudy and it looked as if it was going to rain soon, but I didn’t care... My feet led me unconsciously to my little secret garden. There was nobody there. Exhausted, I sat on the nearest bench. All the trees had turned dull yellow and shed leaves covered with a brown layer, the color of rust, on the

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<sup>462</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 86.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

ground. I felt cold after a short while, so I got up and walked briskly on the short crisscrossing path that always led back to the starting point. Calm down. Forget this prince for good. Didn't you promise Brigitte and yourself to avoid this world? But that's what I've already done. I have withdrawn inside my skin and tried to forget everything.<sup>464</sup>

As I have argued thus far, the protagonist's desire to "avoid this world" can be grasped in his experience of the nameless city of exile, and the way it is depicted as a space of escape. This need to escape is also built into his relationship with Brigitte which is represented as a haven from the world, in much the same way as the city is.<sup>465</sup> Furthermore, it is because of his "promise" to Brigitte that he decides to completely detach himself from the surrounding world; he not only stops writing articles, but refrains from even reading the news. In thinking about his relationship with Brigitte, the protagonist envisions it as a means for them both to evade the misery of the past and present:

I walk in the middle of masses of stone houses pierced by the few small windows of light that have stayed up. I walk feeling cold so I put my hands in my coat pockets, walking faster, yet not wanting to go home. I don't want to be bound by any place. I wish I could soar above this thick, massive, wall-filled world, and you with me to another world, soft and transparent, unbound by bricks or appointments or newspapers or wars or hunger or death or yesterday's worries or tomorrow's surprises, a world that we make together, ageless even if short-lived, here and now, a world that rectifies all the past and erases it, a world that fixes the present, keeping nothing but joy.<sup>466</sup>

The desire to escape the world is, I argue, articulated both in the relationship between the protagonist and the space of the city and in his relationship with Brigitte. The city 'N' is

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

<sup>465</sup> c̄ Adil ̄irghām sees the love affair between the protagonist and Brigitte as one of the primary ways in which the two characters try to overcome the "existential predicament" in which they find themselves. See ̄irghām, *Fī al-sard al-riwāʿī*, 53.

<sup>466</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 163.

cast in opposition to the protagonist's native Cairo. To return to the opening passage, which I cited at the start of the section, we notice how the protagonist states "I was a Cairene whose city had expelled me to exile in the north." In the following section I turn to an examination of Cairo, as representative of the homeland and the source of the protagonist's exile.

### III: City 'N' versus Cairo

Cairo is, in Ṭāhir's novel, first described as the city that "expelled" the protagonist into exile. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the protagonist in fact chooses exile as a result of the increasing marginalization he faces with the coming of al-Sādāt to power. Refusing to write an article in support of the new President, the professional success he enjoyed under the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir comes to an end. The protagonist states, "I was only one step away from editor-in-chief, then Sadat came and everything was lost."<sup>467</sup> The protagonist's experience here is a reflection of the larger changes that take place with the death of °Abd al-Nāṣir.

His failure in the professional realm is mirrored by his failure in the personal one, and the two seem entangled in the larger political failure of the Nāṣirist project. So for example °Abd al-Nāṣir comes to be the source of much of the disagreements with his wife Manar, symbolizing the collapse of his marriage: "Manar, whose situation in the paper was frozen like mine and on my account, came to consider Abd al-Nasser her personal enemy... The leader turned into an old domestic toy with which we hit each

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 28.

other in our quarrels, then put aside only to pick up again after a while.”<sup>468</sup> As <sup>c</sup>Ādil Ḍirghām notes the destruction of “the private and public dreams” here cannot be “separated from each other.”<sup>469</sup>

Hence the protagonist’s estrangement at work is mirrored in his divorce and separation from his family. While he first attributes his expulsion from Egypt to political and professional reasons alone, he soon notes how his separation from his family renders him a stranger in his own city: the protagonist explains “That was one of the reasons I left the country. It was difficult for me to be in the same city with my children but apart from them, making appointments like friends or strangers.”<sup>470</sup> He soon adds that after his divorce he wanted to leave all of Egypt behind. As such the reader comes to learn that the protagonist’s departure from Egypt is a result of both personal and professional reasons, which in turn are connected to the larger political context of post-Nāṣirist Egypt. Cairo, as representative of the homeland, is thus associated with the failures that lead the protagonist to escape to the city of exile.

It is also through the changes that the family undergoes that Ṭāhir presents the transformation of Egyptian society.<sup>471</sup> The protagonist’s ex-wife Manar abandons her secular, feminist ideals, and embraces the turn to religious conservatism. This change is captured in a scene in which the protagonist sees Manar’s newspaper column. Turning to read her weekly column about women’s rights, he notices the change of her photograph.

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>469</sup> Ḍirghām, *Fī al-sard al-riwāʿī*, 53.

<sup>470</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 97-98.

<sup>471</sup> Casini reads the function of the protagonist’s family in the novel in a similar way. See Casini, “Beyond Occidentalism: Europe and the Self in Present-Day Arabic Narrative Discourse.”

Instead of seeing “the picture in which her smiling face appeared in the middle of the halo of her parted black hair, long and flowing on both sides of her face,” he finds the face of a veiled woman, with a “white scarf covering her hair and surrounding her face.”<sup>472</sup> Her new appearance, a symbol of her turn towards religious conservatism is mirrored in her newspaper article, the title of which is “Between Sharia and History: What Happened to Women’s Rights?”<sup>473</sup>

The growth of religious conservatism is also represented in the protagonist’s son Khalid.<sup>474</sup> So for example he cancels his participation in an international chess tournament because he reads a *fatwa* that the game is forbidden in Islam. He also tries to exercise control over his younger sister Hanadi, preventing her from going to the club with her friends, explaining that it is not appropriate for her to mix with other men. Khalid explains this to his father during one of their telephone conversations:

His voice came through, calmly, “Peace be upon you.”

“We’ve been through that already. What’s the story with your sister?”

“Well, Father, immoral things take place at the club and there are bad young men and I ...”

“There are bad people and good people every place on earth. Let her learn on her own and protect herself.”

His voice grew angry as he said, “If I, a man, have stopped going to the club, how can you expect me to let *her* go? Are you going to spoil her just as Mom does and every time she sheds two tears, you’ll give her what she wants? Hanadi is no longer a little girl, and here I am in charge of her.”

“Are you raising your voice at me, Khalid? And you are in charge of her? I haven’t died yet, my son.”

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 202-203.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>474</sup> It is interesting to note that in conversations between Ibrahim and the protagonist, the former repeatedly refers to Khalid as Nāṣir by mistake. This is somewhat ironic given that Khalid seems to represent many of the changes to Egyptian society that the protagonist resents and that he associates with the passing of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir.

“God forbid. I didn't mean it like that. I meant. . .”<sup>475</sup>

If Khalid represents the growing religious trends in Egypt, then his sister Hanadi seems to embody the economic attitudes associated with the al-Sādāt period. The *infitāḥ* (Open Door) policies of al-Sādāt, which encouraged private investment and consumerism, are reflected in the young Hanadi's attitude towards her father.<sup>476</sup> Her conversations with the protagonist are dominated by her requests for expensive gifts, as rewards for her success in school:

“I am not thinking about the score. I am thinking about something far more important.”

“Which is?”

“The gift you'll give me when I pass my exams.”

“Like?”

“Like you should start saving right now. This year I'd like a membership in the Equestrian Club. I want to learn how to ride horses.”

“Is it that very expensive?”

“Well, we're talking about five hundred, a thousand, as much as you like.”

“A thousand? Really? All for sixty percent? What if it were ninety percent?”

“I would ask you to buy me a car, of course.”<sup>477</sup>

Once again the child's position is reflected in the mother's behavior. Just as both Manar and Khalid exhibit signs of increasingly religiosity, both Hanadi and her mother are concerned with the accumulation of material belongings. In remembering a scene from his past, the protagonist recalls how Manar embraced the consumerist drive of the post-Nāṣirist era:

Manar began her own schemes. She began to save her own money and buy silver from Khan al-Khalili and sell it when the price went up. She told me one day in a casual manner that she had bought a quarter of a taxi. That was the first time I'd

<sup>475</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 205-206.

<sup>476</sup> For more on al-Sādāt's economic policies see Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*.

<sup>477</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 96.

heard that you can buy fractions of a taxi and that was before she owned the whole taxi and before she bought on the installment plan, from the Journalists Union, a parcel of land they advertised in Hurghada and another one in the Pyramids area.<sup>478</sup>

I began this discussion by showing the way in which the novel sets up an opposition between the city of exile and the city of Cairo. The latter comes to serve a number of functions within the literary text. It is from the estrangement experienced in his homeland (represented by Cairo) that the protagonist flees. This estrangement is associated with both the professional and personal realms, and is connected to the failure of the Nāṣirist project in Egypt. His marginalization in the workplace, as a result of the coming of al-Sādāt to power, reflects the changing political climate in the post-Nāṣirist period. Furthermore, the depiction of the protagonist's family in Cairo serves as a reflection of the socio-economic changes of the larger Egyptian society. Thus as Siddiq states the novel "exploits the shift in space occasioned by forced exile and physical dislocation from Egypt to reflect on the identity of the homeland."<sup>479</sup> It is from this changed society, and his failed position within it, that the protagonist tries to escape. His attempt to isolate himself in the city 'N' (and through his relationship with Brigitte) fails however as a result of the events that take place in Lebanon. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that culminates in the massacres of Sabra and Shatila destroys the peace and tranquility of the exilic city. The tragic circumstances compel the protagonist to end his isolation and reengage with the world and with his profession. Furthermore, the scenes of bloodshed and devastation, recorded in the documentary form of interviews and

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>479</sup> Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel*, 90. Along with *Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* Siddiq also cites Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm's *Najmat ūghuṣṭus* (1974; *The August Star*), *Beirut Beirut* (1984), and Ibrāhīm °Abd al-Majīd's *Al-Baldah al-ukhrā* (1991; *The Other Village*) as examples of novels that deploy this shift in space in a similar way.



newspaper articles, stand in sharp contrast to the lyricism of the earlier descriptions of the city. In coming to terms with the events in Lebanon, the protagonist is also forced to confront the death of the Arab nationalist dream of °Abd al-Nāṣir.

#### IV: The Impossibility of Escape

Ṭāhir's exilic city initially appears to offer the possibility of escape, a place for the protagonist to flee from the disappointments of the past, and the present. This is not however entirely possible. The momentary peace that the city provides is destroyed by the devastating events that unfold in Lebanon, that, according to Karmah Sāmī, return the reader to the "real world."<sup>480</sup> This is also what introduces "real" or "historic" time into the narrative placing us firmly in the summer and autumn of 1982. From his place of exile, the protagonist watches the horrors unfold in the Arab world, tormented by the paralysis of the Arab regimes in the face of the violence and destruction that is unleashed on the people of Lebanon:

I turned the radio dial from Morocco to Cairo to Baghdad waiting at every moment for something to happen, something other than these pictures with which television and the papers assaulted my eyes every minute. I was waiting for anything to change this humiliation.

But nothing happened.

Nothing but tanks and bombs, flying and leveling, and planes shelling, and Israel's healthy soldiers smiling at my face on the screen, raising their machine guns in victory salutes. In the refugee camps naked children and mothers wearing plastic slippers ran, slapping their own faces in the midst of huts whose roofs had slid down on their walls to create jagged piles of rubble, of dust and bricks and twisted iron rods amid black and white smoke. And Egypt expresses regret and the economics committee holds a meeting to discuss the five-year plan. And Tyre falls and Sidon falls and the Ain el-Helweh refugee camp is razed and Rashidiyyeh and

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<sup>480</sup> Karmah Sāmī, "Al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā: buṭūlat al-lā baṭal," in *Ālam Bahā' Ṭāhir: Dayf dār majdalāwī li-°ām* 2005, ed. Muḥammad °Ubayd Allāh (Amman: Dār Majdalāwī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī°, 2005), 143.

Miyya-Miyya refugee camps fall and are burned down. Saudi Arabia expresses regret and announces that the new crescent moon has been verified and sends messages to the kings and presidents. Algeria denounces the war, and announces extending new incentives to foreign investors. And the planes are all over Beirut: 200 dead, 400 wounded, 90 dead, 180 wounded. Just figures reported in the news. A whole street burns down and all its buildings lose their facades after it is hit with fuel air explosives. The pictures show the remnants of life in the bare rooms: overturned tables, children's toys stained with blood, photographs, and small statues of the Virgin Mary smashed on the floor in the midst of fires and corpses lying on their backs and others doubled on their sides. A paralyzed old woman in a shelter is sitting in a wheelchair, trying to push it forward or backward in the middle of a ward that has lost its walls but the stones scattered on the floor impede her movement in any direction. She lifts the white shawl off her head and cries.<sup>481</sup>

This violence culminates in the Sabra and Shatila massacres that the novel describes in explicit detail. Ibrahim, having returned to Lebanon, is a witness to the events that unfold and it is from him that the protagonist first learns of the tragedy. Calling the protagonist from the refugee camp in Beirut, Ibrahim struggles to describe the horrors he has seen:

When I arrived at Sabra the corpses had formed barricades in the small alleys of the camp, barricades that you had to climb over if you wanted to pass through the camp. You also had to pass through the smell of death and the vast swarms of flies. In one of the streets the ground was slippery and my feet sank. There was wet lime on the ground covering a large pit and from the pit peered smashed heads and blackened arms and legs.<sup>482</sup>

These images of death and mutilation invade the space of peace and tranquility that the protagonist has tried to inhabit in his place of exile. On the one hand of course the descriptions of the horrors taking place in the refugee camp stand in stark contrast to the lyricism and poetry of the passages describing the city of exile. In fact, such passages completely disappear from the novel following Ibrahim's disclosure of the details of the

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<sup>481</sup> Tāhir, *Love in Exile*, 135-136.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

massacre. (The exception to this comes at the very end of the novel when the suggestion of the protagonist's death is represented as a wave carrying him gently away.) As such it is increasingly clear that the protagonist's attempts to separate himself from the political realities of the present, as well as forget the disappointments of his past political engagement and commitment, are shattered with the beginning of the war.

The scene in which the protagonist learns of the massacres of Sabra and Shatila brings together the use of dialogue and observation that I discussed earlier. The reader is presented with the horrors of the events first through the conversation between Ibrahim and the protagonist —during which he dictates part of the article which he wishes the protagonist to publish on his behalf. Then the reader observes the events as if he/she, like the protagonist, were watching the report on television:

After that the camera moves around in silence. It moves through narrow alleys in the midst of destroyed houses from which are jutting twisted steel rods and remnants of broken furniture, but there are no signs of any life or movement. Then the camera takes its time as it takes long shots:  
Piles of corpses strewn over the ground.  
Corpses behind corpses and corpses next to corpses.<sup>483</sup>

Ṭāhir's concentration upon the actual, historical, events of the present —namely the invasion of Lebanon— destroys any possibility of escape imagined by the characters of the novel. What is noteworthy is the way Ṭāhir uses the historical events in his work. There is a focus upon the *truth* of the narratives and experiences that the author draws upon. This is made very clear by Ṭāhir himself, in an afterword in which he explains that the descriptions of the experiences of Sabra and Shatila and the invasion of Lebanon are based on eyewitness accounts. So for example Ṭāhir explains that “In the sixth chapter:

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<sup>483</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 236.

the Norwegian nurse's testimony on what took place at the Ain el Helweh refugee camp is real. It is a blending of published testimony and a personal interview of her conducted by the author. Her name has been changed."<sup>484</sup> The nurse's testimony to which Ṭāhir refers is one of the primary ways in which the horrors of the war are relayed in the novel. Her character appears as a nurse here too, this time being interviewed by the protagonist and a fellow journalist Bernard, in the hope that they will be able to publish her experience in the refugee camp as evidence of the atrocities committed by the Israeli army. What is particularly striking is the way the author draws upon the eyewitness accounts and testimonies —the tools of journalistic investigation and writing— in the composition of his fiction.<sup>485</sup> Maḥmūd Amīn al-°Ālim reads this use of such testimonies as part of the novel's attempt to present "a documentary picture of our current age."<sup>486</sup> While I am not in agreement with al-°Ālim's assertion that these accounts undermine the centrality of the protagonist's narrative, I would argue that the desire to "document" is very much a part of Ṭāhir's literary project and speaks to the overlapping roles of fiction and journalism as suggested by this novel. It is not just individual testimonies or interviews that are used but also actual articles published in the newspapers.<sup>487</sup> Through the utilization of these accounts Ṭāhir draws our attention to the intersection between

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>485</sup> It is worthwhile in this context to consider that journalism in the Arab world, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, played a significant role both in the circulation of ideas of reform and opposition and in the development of Arabic narrative discourse. Ṭāhir's use of journalistic accounts in his work suggests a continuation of a tradition that brings together the two genres of fiction and journalism. For more see Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi Books, 1993).

<sup>486</sup> For more see al-°Ālim, "Mulāḥazāt °alā hāmish *Al-Ḥubb fī-al-manfā*," 119-120.

<sup>487</sup> See for example Bernard's column that appears in Chapter Ten. Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 232-233.

journalism and fiction, both forms of writing here invested in representing and documenting the violence of the state.

The use of journalistic accounts and the documentary style that dominates the latter half of the novel recalls what al-Musawi says about the works that constitute the “new sensibility” of the “post-Mahfouzian” period. In discussing what he calls the “self-reflexive novel” al-Musawi notes how such works often include sources from “the news, journalistic reports, rumors and transmitted information” that allow for the reexamination of reality and “all it contains in terms of the violation of the rights of people, communities, and the writer himself.”<sup>488</sup>

In an interview with the author about the writing of this novel, Ṭāhir notes the difficulty in undertaking such a task as representing the massacres of Sabra and Shatila:

This novel has a long story. Its writing took ten years or more but I wasn't writing regularly. I began it after “Sabra and Shatila.” I was violently defeated and agitated about these massacres but I said it is a lie to write about an experience you haven't seen or haven't participated in. So I stopped and there remained within me—despite this—something urging me to write to fulfill an obligation to those martyrs.<sup>489</sup>

Ṭāhir's words here help us understand the use of factual accounts in his narrative as a means to come to terms with the horrors that have taken place and to do justice to the victims of such violence. In the afterword in which he lists the real sources used in the

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<sup>488</sup> Al-Musawi, *Infirāṭ al-‘aqd al-muqaddas*, 75.

<sup>489</sup> Ṭāhir, “Qarīban min Bahā Ṭāhir: ḥiwār ma‘a Al-Bahā’ Ḥusayn” in *‘Ālam Bahā’ Ṭāhir: Dayf dār majdalāwī li-‘ām* 2005, ed. Muḥammad ‘Ubayd Allāh (Amman: Dār Majdalāwī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 2005), 171.

novel the author states that the interviews and articles are real, as is “the blood of the martyrs.”<sup>490</sup>

The intersection between journalism and fiction is not only raised in the form of the novel but by the characters themselves. Evident immediately of course is the fact that the protagonist and the other main characters are all journalists, struggling to come to terms with the role and efficacy of their profession. The political role of the journalist, the sense that he/she is committed to the struggle for freedom, equality, and democracy is one that is shared with the writer of fiction. Both here seem to serve the function of Edward Said’s “public intellectual” as one who “is endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public.”<sup>491</sup> (This also recalls the struggle over the role of the writer discussed in Chapter Two.) This is emphasized not only by the fact that the protagonist’s character resonates with that of Ṭāhir himself, bringing together the writer of fact and fiction, but also by the literary figures that populate the novel; Ernest Hemingway, Federico García Lorca (whose poetry Brigitte’s father and husband read to her), and Pablo Neruda (whose poetry the protagonist reads to Brigitte), all appear in the novel as reminders of the political and artistic role of the literary writer. This is striking when read against the work of the Arab exilic poets themselves, who include the same figures in their poetry. Thus, as al-Musawi argues, these figures come to populate the literary landscape of the exilic poems of the Iraqi modernist poet °Abd al-Wahāb al-Bayātī (1926-1999) for example, transforming them into “textual homelands.” Creating a community of exiles,

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<sup>490</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 278.

<sup>491</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 11.

made up of such poets as Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and Antonio Machado, al-Bayātī draws on their “figures, experiences and texts.”<sup>492</sup> In explaining this al-Musawi states that:

°Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī addresses the theme of exile as a textual engagement whereby land is displaced onto a poetic terrain. His poetics builds on his life in exile, his readings, and interaction with classical and modern literatures...It is only through the impersonation of similar poets, like Nazim Hikmet, Rafael Alberti and, in a way, Federico García Lorca, that al-Bayātī recreates a new homeland, a poetic space of forebears and ancestors who hold many things in common and who offer him lineage and filiation. It should not be surprising then that the poem grows into a homeland where the poet survives calamity and death.<sup>493</sup>

Ṭāhir can perhaps be seen as creating a similar “textual homeland” in his novel, a space that is occupied by the protagonist and a community of literary exiles, comparable to those that appear in the poetry of al-Bayātī.

The relationship between the poetic and the political is captured in the death of the Lebanese poet Khalīl Ḥāwī, who committed suicide in despair over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.<sup>494</sup> Symbolically, within the novel, the protagonist collapses from a heart attack immediately after reading the news of Ḥāwī’s death in the newspaper:

As I stood there I picked up the first newspaper under the clippings. On the first page there was a picture that I recognized. I read the news story and the severe ringing returned to my ear. I sat on the chair at once holding the paper in my trembling hands. I said to myself perhaps I didn’t understand. I read the story again, No, there’s no hope to unread what you have read! You’ve already read it and that moment at which you were still in the dark and he was still alive will never return,

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<sup>492</sup> Al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry*, 193.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-192.

<sup>494</sup> For more both on the work of Khalīl Ḥāwī and the elegy written to him by al-Bayātī see al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry*, 141-143.

not ever. Yes, Khalil Hawi has shot himself in the head in Beirut. This happened. It is over. There's no hope to 'unknow' it.<sup>495</sup>

In an earlier discussion about the poet, Ibrahim asks if he is related to the politician George Ḥāwī, Secretary General of the Lebanese Communist Party. Answering that he does not know, the protagonist notes how the relationship between the poet and the politician has been transformed:

It occurred to me that in the past we knew the politicians thanks to the poets. We knew the rulers Sayf al-Dawla and Kafur because of Mutanabbi, not vice versa. But today we want to know the poet through the politician. We kill our poets with silence and we kill them with forgetfulness. I wanted to ask Ibrahim, 'If it is true that poets are the nation's conscience, what is the fate of a nation that forgets its poets?'<sup>496</sup>

The protagonist's formulation here of the political role of the poet is striking for the way in which it relates to the classical understanding of the poet in Arab society. The protagonist suggests that it is al-Mutanabbī, the poet, who is responsible for presenting the greatness of his patron, first Sayf al-Dawlah and later Kāfūr; the politician is thus indebted to the poet. And yet the patron-poet relationship to which he refers also renders the poet vulnerable to the patron's favor—as the biography of al-Mutanabbī well attests.<sup>497</sup> The protagonist here seems to mourn the passing of the poet's political role, as

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<sup>495</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 147. The chapter in which this incident takes place is symbolically entitled “*Ṭubūl Lurkā li dam al-shā‘ir*” (Lorca's Drum for the Poet's Blood).

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>497</sup> The tenth century poet al-Mutanabbī (915-965) was forced to leave the court of his favorite patron Sayf al-Dawlah after falling out of favor with the Hamdanid Prince. Critics and historians attribute this to a number of factors; the rivalry with fellow poet and Sayf al-Dawlah's cousin Abū Firās, intrigues at court, and al-Mutanabbī's own political aspirations. Al-Mutanabbī's fame as a poet however meant that he was able to soon join the court of the Ikhshidid regent of Egypt Kāfūr. For more on the relationship between poet and patron, and al-Mutanabbī's life see Margaret Larkin, *Al-Mutanabbi: Voice of Abbasid Poetic Ideal* (Oxford: One World, 2008).



“conscience of the nation,” and as public intellectual. This expectation of the poet is very much in line with what al-Musawi reads as the role of Arab poetry since the 1940s in particular, which has “spoken for an Arab conscience, as much as it has debated positions and ideologies, nationally and worldwide.”<sup>498</sup>

The corruption of the role of the poet in particular, and the intellectual in general, is further explored in the episode that unfolds concerning the Arab Prince and the establishment of an Arabic newspaper. Yusuf, an exile from Egypt much like the protagonist, is employed by an Arab Prince who is interested in establishing a newspaper in the city of exile. Initially the Prince employs the idea of the responsibility of the writer as a public intellectual to try to convince the protagonist to join his venture:

I believe that writers, I mean real writers, are the most precious resource we have because it is they who constitute the mind and the conscience. Do you think we would have fallen so low had the nation’s conscience been clean? Therefore I believe that safeguarding our writers should be one of our utmost priorities. That’s why I took the liberty of urging Yusuf since you left the hospital to persuade you to go and rest anywhere you like and I took the liberty of sending him with a modest contribution for this purpose. Actually, I consider it an obligation, nothing more.”<sup>499</sup>

However, it is quickly revealed that the Prince is motivated by a desire to gain the throne in his country and views the newspaper as a political weapon that can serve his aspirations for power. Furthermore, when the protagonist discovers the Prince’s cooperation with Zionist groups his willingness to participate in the project evaporates.

Following the events of Sabra and Shatila the protagonist rediscovers his role as a public intellectual and returns to writing articles. Ending his separation from the world he

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<sup>498</sup> Al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry*, xvii. For a more extensive discussion of the political role of the poet throughout the first half of the twentieth century see *Arabic Poetry*, 1-30.

<sup>499</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 173.

once again takes up his role as a journalist saying that “What mattered was to write as much as possible, for ultimately something must get through.”<sup>500</sup> This marks the end of his isolation and the beginning of his reengagement with the world.

The events in Lebanon seem to encapsulate the death of the Arab nationalist dream which the protagonist defiantly clings to even after the death of °Abd al-Nāṣir.<sup>501</sup> As Ḍirghām notes “this war, from the point of view of the novel, would not have taken place in such a glaring manner if the nationalist direction of °Abd al-Nāṣir had continued.”<sup>502</sup> Hanging in the protagonist’s apartment, visible as he opens the door, is a photograph of the President, “a smiling Abd al-Nasser looked at me from his color photograph on the wall.”<sup>503</sup> It is in front of this photograph that the protagonist stands, raising his eyes in appeal, as the bombing of Lebanon continues. Feeling helpless the protagonist despairingly asks the image of °Abd al-Nāṣir what he should write in times such as these. The internal monologue that conveys the protagonist’s sense of betrayal takes place immediately before the protagonist suffers the heart attack that results in his hospitalization. Struggling to come to terms with the meaning and impact of the events in Lebanon, the protagonist is unable to accept this new political reality. In the climax of

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>501</sup> Edward Said reads the tragedy of the 1982 events in Lebanon as an example of exiles continuing to be exiled *by* exiles. He states “All Palestinians during the summer of 1982 asked themselves what inarticulate urge drove Israel, having displaced Palestinians in 1948, to expel them continuously from their refugee homes and camps in Lebanon.” Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 178. This perspective adds an interesting dimension to Ṭāhir’s novel, which seems to raise the question of the Palestinian refugees primarily as a symbol of the failure of the Arab nationalist project.

<sup>502</sup> Ḍirghām, 51-52. It is perhaps also useful to think about the way this war not only presents the violence of Israel against the Palestinians, but also of Arabs against each other.

<sup>503</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 95.

this scene that marks the protagonist's recognition of the end of the Nāṣirist project, the photograph shatters as he falls to the ground. Discovering the broken frame after his return from hospital, the protagonist chooses not to replace the glass, recognizing the futility of his reliance upon a dream that has long disappeared:

On one of the shelves I saw the picture of Abd al-Nasser whose glass was shattered when I fell with it to the floor. The broken glass had scraped off part of his mouth and distorted his smile, so his face looked sad. Once more, I decided to get a new frame for it. Then I stood in the middle of the little living room, looking around. Nothing remained to be done! There had been nothing to be done to begin with, so in resignation I returned to the desk, sat down and began to go through the mail.<sup>504</sup>

The events in Lebanon seem to mark not only the end of the Arab nationalist dream but also the death of the possibility of the establishment of an internationalist community. The international solidarity suggested at the start of the novel, by the coming together of the community of exiles, is increasingly undermined. Following the massacres of Sabra and Shatila political protests are organized on the streets of the city. The space of this city of exile is momentarily recast in the novel as the space of political activity and resistance; it seems to emerge briefly as Lefebvre's "differential space," that of opposition and dissent.<sup>505</sup> The characters note how what cannot take place in Cairo and other Arab capitals (namely public demonstrations denouncing Israel's policies) is instead taking place in this European city. And yet the efficacy of this expression of resistance is highly suspect. The idea that Europe continues to be the site of political action and opposition is greatly undermined by the issue of immigration and human rights that is raised in the novel. The human rights conference with which the novel

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>505</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 52.

opens and the lack of interest it generates seems to spell the death of any form of international solidarity and of Europe as the space of political revolution. Arriving at the conference the protagonist interprets the presence of the very few journalists as a sign of the lack of international solidarity in the present:

Who did you want to come? Who cares now, here or anywhere else? Who cares about a conference held by a committee named The International Doctors Committee for Human Rights about human rights violations in Chile? What Chile and what rights? The time of horror, my friend, was over when they slaughtered thousands in the capital's soccer stadium there. The time of shedding tears over Allende was over when the military killed him. They killed him three years after Abd al-Nasser died. They fought Abd al-Nasser saying he was a dictator. Why was Allende the one who was elected? The wolf said to the lamb: if you haven't muddied the water because you are a dictator, you have muddied it because you are a democrat. However you choose to look at it, you are still my lunch.<sup>506</sup>

This international solidarity thus immerses in the novel as a thing of the past, part of the struggle for democracy, social and economic equality, intended to bring together the peoples of Latin America, Europe, and the Arab world. This clearly no longer has any viability in the world of Ṭāhir's novel. As Casini writes "This internationalist community is not projected towards an utopian future but is only evoked with a deep nostalgia for the past, in order to recall a period full of expectations that have not been fulfilled."<sup>507</sup> Within this context the Spanish Civil war seems to symbolize the moment of resistance against the forces of fascism, and a time in the past when Europe still held the opportunity of the establishment of a new world order. This war has resonance for a number of characters in the novel: Dr. Muller for example, the organizer of the human rights conferences on Chile, served in the international brigades, along with Brigitte's

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<sup>506</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 10.

<sup>507</sup> Casini, 12.

father. The latter, who fought on the side of the Republicans, instills in his daughter a love of the poet Lorca, a symbol of the struggles of the time. It is the work of this poet that she reads in college, and that her husband Albert recites to her. The protagonist identifies Lorca, among others, as symbolizing the promises associated with that war:

In our youth, that war which we did not live through and which we only knew by reading about it, meant many things to us: the dream of a new world, one united against dictatorship and injustice, the dream which collapsed leaving behind a few symbols: Hemingway and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Malraux and *L'Espoir*, Picasso and *Guernica*, and Lorca's poems, the symbols that fixed our imagination in our early youth.<sup>508</sup>

The collapse of the dream represented in the Spanish Civil War resonates with the failure and disappointment represented in the assassination of Salvador Allende and Pinochet's military coup in Chile in 1973 (less than a decade before the events taking place in this novel). Furthermore, if we return to the protagonist's deliberations on the conference cited earlier, parallels are made between the assassination of Allende and the death of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir, who both symbolize the failure of the promise of a new world order.

Despite the struggle undertaken by the protagonist he is unable to affect any real change, either through his writing, or the political activism represented in the street demonstrations. In fact, the novel ends with an overwhelming sense of failure and foreboding; the protagonist's refusal to cooperate with the Arab Prince ultimately results in the loss of his, and Brigitte's jobs. Unemployed and defeated Brigitte decides to return to her home in Austria. Her attempt to escape from the world and its misery in this city of exile, in the end proves impossible. The fate of the protagonist is much more precarious; the final scene of the novel ends in a literal haze of the unknown. Travelling

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<sup>508</sup> Ṭāhir, *Love in Exile*, 55.

to the Prince's castle to confront him, the protagonist stumbles upon Pedro (the Chilean refugee from the human rights conference) now selling drugs to make ends meet.

Significantly this takes place “at a small park on the riverbank, a deserted park in the midst of the fog and the cold.”<sup>509</sup> What is particularly striking about this final scene is the way in which we witness a return to the lyricism of the early parts of the novel. Earlier the protagonist expressed his desire to dive into the river and disappear:

Who am I? And why don't I go down right now to the bottom of the river, to watch from deep in the water the undulating bellies of the white swans and pray that the current would carry me very far away, away from the swans, the ducks, the trees, the mountains, and people; far away to a gap buried in the midst of the rocks where I would sneak and lie low and where the moss and weeds and snails and fish would cover me and hide me forever? If only I could totally vanish!<sup>510</sup>

This desire to disappear is it seems fulfilled at the very end of the novel. His collapse, and suggested death, is described in a poetic language, reminiscent of the scenes of natural beauty that were the focus of the first section of this chapter. The scene of his death echoes the earlier desire to disappear deep in the river bed:

I wasn't tired. I was sliding into a calm sea, carried on my back by a soft wave and the melody of a pleasant flute.  
I said to myself, 'Is this the end? How beautiful!'  
The voice was coming from far away, saying, 'Sir, sir!' but it kept getting lower as the sound of the flute kept rising.  
The wave was carrying me away.  
It was undulating slowly and rocking me. The flute was accompanying me, with its long, plaintive melody, to peace and tranquility.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., 277.

The episodes of escapism associated with the contemplation of the natural sites of the city—the river, the mountain, and the garden—culminate in this final scene. The city as a space of salvation and retreat is undermined once the events in Lebanon force the protagonist to confront the current political reality. As a writer and intellectual there is no possibility for Ṭāhir’s protagonist to remain isolated from the world. It appears from the end of the novel that escape is only afforded the protagonist through his death.<sup>512</sup>

#### V: *Daqq al-ṭubūl*: Spatial Inequality or an Emirate Divided

Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī’s *Daqq al-ṭubūl*<sup>513</sup> tells the story of a nameless Arab Emirate, that finds itself emptied of its native inhabitants, in the wake of the World Cup football tournament. Leaving the migrant workers in control of the Emirate, the locals travel to Europe to support their national team. Once again the author takes us beyond the limits of the Egyptian nation-state, transporting us to a space beyond its borders. This Emirate is not, as in the case of Ṭāhir’s novel a space of political exile but one that brings together migrant workers from around the world, specifically of course from the “third

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<sup>512</sup> Maḥmūd Amīn al-°Ālim reads this ending as representing the death of the protagonist but not of art. He states that “What lives, and continues, and delivers the message.. —that the flute carries with its ‘long plaintive melody..’— is art, is writing, it is the journey of artistic creation to complete this novel, and it is deliverance through art, through artistic expression that reveals the truth, after the failure to achieve deliverance through work or deliverance through love.” See “Mulāḥazāt °alā hāmish *Al-Ḥubb fī-al-manfā*,” 124.

<sup>513</sup> *Daqq al-ṭubūl* was very well received by critics upon its publication. It was awarded the “Sawiris Cultural Award” for the novel in 2009, one of the most highly regarded independent literary awards in Egypt. It is also noteworthy as one of the few Egyptian novels to explore this issue of economic migration to the Gulf. The other notable example is of course Ibrāhīm °Abd al-Majīd’s *Al-Baldah al-ukhrā* (London: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 1991); English translation: *The Other Place*, trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1997). See also Muḥammad °Abd al-Salām al °Umārī’s *Ihbitū Misr* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1989). For a discussion of the latter novel see al-Musawī, *Infirāt al-°aqd al-muqaddas*, 317-320.

world.”<sup>514</sup> In this case the focus is on both political *and* economic dislocation.

Furthermore, the descriptions of this city and its neighborhoods seem to appear as manifestations of the economic inequality of the system, revealing the way in which the construction of space is ultimately a “product of power relationships.”<sup>515</sup> What is particularly interesting is the way in which al-Bisāṭī creates a temporary state of exception, in which hierarchies are overturned. This not only draws attention to the existing system of exploitation but also to the failure of national and regional forms of belonging. It is not just that the post-colonial Egyptian nation-state has failed to provide economic opportunity and security for its citizens, but that the dream of regional Arab unity and cooperation has been replaced by a system of economic exploitation and inequality. This can also of course be connected to the exploitation of foreign workers within the larger system of global capitalism.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> The fact that *Daqq al-ṭubūl* is a city novel, as opposed to one that describes life in the Egyptian countryside, is something of an anomaly within al-Bisāṭī’s oeuvre. Along with *Al-Khaldiyyah* (2004; English translation: *Over the Bridge*, 2006) and *Layālī ukhrā* (*Other Nights*, 2000), *Daqq al-ṭubūl* is the only other urban narrative amongst his thirteen novels. It is also interesting to note that in both *Al-Khaldiyyah* and *Daqq al-ṭubūl* al-Bisāṭī creates cities that seem to exist between the real and the imaginary; *Al-Khaldiyyah* for example tells the story of a protagonist who builds an architectural model of his ideal city, only to have his fictional city come to life before his very eyes. Once again however, the opportunity to create a utopian society free of social and economic inequality is momentary, and the protagonist’s city winds up recreating the disparities of the real world. See al-Bisāṭī, *Al-Khaldiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1995); English translation: *Over the Bridge*, trans. Nancy Roberts (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006) and *Layālī ukhrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2000).

<sup>515</sup> Jon L. Berquist, “Introduction” in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, ed. Jon L. Berquist and Claudia V. Camp (New York/London: T&T Clark, 2007), 8.

<sup>516</sup> Theorists have argued that the international movement of wage labor can be seen as the unequal exchange of different modes of production. Within this context the exploitation of foreign migrant is understood as generating profit for the capitalist system. See Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, trans. Marjory Mattingly Urquidí (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Social scientists have drawn on the example of Latin America in considering the experience of the Gulf countries. See for example Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi, “Migrants’ Strategies of Coping and



Once again the reader is presented with a reference to a real geographic location, but not given a specific country. This serves to partially separate the space of the Emirate from the “real” world, but also from the author’s own experience. Al-Bisāṭī spent a number of years working in Saudi Arabia, and though the novel is not strictly autobiographical, it certainly resonates with the author’s own experience.<sup>517</sup> What is particularly important is the way al-Bisāṭī’s city seems to straddle the boundaries between the real and the imaginary; while the reader is reminded of any number of places within the Arabian Gulf, one cannot determine—with any degree of certitude—which one, if any, serves as the basis for this novel. It is also worth noting that the fact that the World Cup here is being held in France (which is revealed to the reader as the locals make their exodus) provides some means to date the events of the novel. France has hosted the World Cup only twice, in 1938 and 1998. And in 1998 Saudi Arabia was a participant—this is significant perhaps because of al-Bisāṭī’s own experience in the kingdom. Given that Saudi Arabia is a kingdom however, and not an emirate, the identification between real and imaginary country does not hold. The similarities between monarchy and emirate as forms of government are also no doubt on al-Bisāṭī’s mind.<sup>518</sup>

Furthermore, as will become clearer throughout this chapter, the extraordinary circumstances of the football tournament, which effectively empties the Emirate of all but its foreign workforce, adds to this sense of the unreal.

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Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE,” *British Journal for Middle Eastern Studies* 26, 2 (November 1999): 271-298.

<sup>517</sup> Al-Bisāṭī worked and lived in Saudi Arabia between 1980-85. According to the author he wrote nothing during his time away from Egypt. For more on this see Jirjis Shukrī’s interview with al-Bisāṭī “Al-Riwāʿī al-miṣrī Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī: Abḥath ʿan al-makān qabl al-riwāyah,” *Al-Mustaqbal* (25 October 2005): 18.

<sup>518</sup> I am grateful to Professor Edwards for bringing these issues of date and place to my attention.

The novel opens with the narrator and nameless protagonist, a worker from Egypt, describing the physical changes to the landscape and infrastructure of the Emirate that occurred as a result of the discovery of oil.<sup>519</sup> Before examining this description, it is first useful to consider how al-Bisāṭī's shift in space speaks to particular changes within the Egyptian national context. While migration for educational purposes was encouraged in the 1960s during the time of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir, al-Sādāt's "Open Door" policy actively promoted labor migration as part of its development strategy, authorizing temporary and permanent migration in 1971 and lifting all restrictions on labor migration in 1974. While this included migration to the West, Arab countries such as Iraq, Libya and the oil-rich countries of the Gulf increasingly attracted growing numbers of Egyptians.<sup>520</sup> In discussing migration policies under the regimes of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt, Ralph Sells argues that pan-Arabism made labor migration socially acceptable, framing the process as one in which Egyptians were helping their Arab brothers. This remained the official position even after al-Sādāt re-directed Egypt's strategic orientation away from the Arab world.<sup>521</sup> Sells goes on to explain that whatever the impact of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir's pan-Arabism, these sentiments were largely overwhelmed by later developments: "In classic fashion capitalist development complemented demographic forces in the creation of surplus labor through the simultaneous creation of consumer desires and structural

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<sup>519</sup> Oil was discovered in the Gulf states at different times throughout the twentieth century; in Bahrain in 1933; Kuwait in 1946; Qatar in 1949, UAE in 1962; and Oman in 1967. For more see Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi, "Migrants' Strategies of Coping and Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE," 271-298.

<sup>520</sup> See Ralph Sells, "Egyptian International Migration and Social Processes: Toward Regional Integration," *International Migration Review* Vol. 22, No.3 (Autumn 1988): 87-108.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

under-employment.”<sup>522</sup> This caused the continued migration of Egyptian workers in the decades that followed, particularly given the fact that al-Sādāt’s successor, Mubārak, largely adopted a similar position as far as policies towards labor migration were concerned.<sup>523</sup>

Despite the recognition of the economic and demographic forces at play, Sells ends his article (published several decades before this novel) with the suggestion that perhaps “the Arab nationalist dream of oil capital and Egyptian people” would eventually lead to better working conditions and rights for the migrant population.<sup>524</sup> This is clearly not the case in al-Bisāṭī’s novel which questions this idea of political and economic solidarity and the pan-Arabism upon which it was based.

I return now to the opening of the novel. The Egyptian protagonist alludes to a moment in the past when the transformation of the Emirate began, driven by the oil boom. There is no mention however of the “real” time of the novel. Al-Bisāṭī thus describes a nameless Emirate that the reader cannot locate —with any certainty— in either time or space:

The discovery of oil here many years ago had changed everything overnight. Modern sky-scrappers shot up, sheathed in smoked-glass façades to repel the

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<sup>522</sup> Sells, “Egyptian International Migration and Social Processes: Toward Regional Integration,” 92. See also Robert La Towsky, “Egyptian Labor Abroad: Mass Participation and Modest Returns,” *MERIP (Middle East Report)* 14 (4): 11-18 and Ayman Zohry and Barbara Harrell-Bond “Contemporary Egyptian Migration: An Overview of Voluntary and Forced Migration,” *Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty* (December 2003): 1-72.

<sup>523</sup> For more on labor migration in the 1980s and 1990s in particular see Delwin A. Roy, “Egyptian Emigrant Labor: Domestic Consequences,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct., 1991): 551-582 and Gil Feiler, “Migration and Recession: Arab Labor Mobility in the Middle East, 1982-89,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 1991):134-155.

<sup>524</sup> Sells, “Egyptian International Migration and Social Processes,” 103.

scorching sun. Huge multistoried malls proliferated with their banks of gleaming escalators. So did amusement parks featuring the most state-of-the art rides. Water mains and drainage systems were installed, roads were dug and paved, bridges and flyovers climbed to two or three levels, and row after row of trees and shrubbery were laid out, even along the narrowest streets, and this greenery now stretches to the edge of the desert where it thins out into rings encircling the huge green houses that have been erected here and there for cultivating fruits and vegetables. As construction boomed and the city sprawled, suburbs were born: complexes of grand and ornately embellished villas, each with its own swimming pool and set in spacious gardens, every tree, bush, and flower of which had been nurtured from seedlings flown in from abroad.<sup>525</sup>

This opening description is noteworthy both for the fact that the transformation of the Emirate is made visible in the physical signs of the city, and for the details that add to the realism of al-Bisāṭī's picture.<sup>526</sup> However, this realism is undercut by the distance that al-Bisāṭī creates between this world and an actual sense of time and space. It is this intermediate position that allows for the acceptance, on the part of the reader, of the extraordinary situation that is created during the football tournament.

It is of course the discovery of oil mentioned in the opening of the novel that brings the workers from around the world. The separation between the locals and the migrant workers is manifest in the division between the old and new quarters of the city. The

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<sup>525</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 1.

<sup>526</sup> In reading the opening of al-Bisāṭī's novel one cannot help but be reminded of other, non-fictional, accounts of the history of the oil-rich Gulf countries and the changes that have taken place in the twentieth century. The description provided by Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi bears a compelling resemblance to that of al-Bisāṭī: "The accumulating oil revenues in the coffers of the small oil-States empowered them to embark on accelerated modernization processes. The developmental dynamics generated by oil wealth forced the once small, relatively homogeneous mud-walled sea towns to burst out of their old mud shells and intimate social forms into sprawling suburbs, where residents enjoy air-conditioned spacious new houses, expensive cars and a comfortable consumer existence. Old towns and villages have been transformed into expanding commercial capitals linked to the cosmopolitan cities of our present-day world." Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi, "Migrants' Strategies of Coping and Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE," 272.

upper echelons of the local population inhabit the new suburbs, with their lavish villas and swimming pools, as described in the passage above. Separated from these suburbs by large expanses of green “scrub bush” are the old neighborhoods with their mud houses, simple structures that have “weathered countless years since they first served to gather in the indigenous inhabitants from their far-flung tents in the desert.”<sup>527</sup> These buildings too have undergone changes with the “modernization” that has taken place; the houses are connected to the sewage system, fitted with new floors, air conditioning units, and fans.<sup>528</sup> These old neighborhoods thus come to occupy an indeterminate space between the “traditional” and the “modern.” We are told that with the expansion of the new suburbs there arose discussions about the removal of the older neighborhoods. It was decided however, that they should remain as symbols of the past, as “ancestral homes” which people might wish to visit from time to time. Care is taken to preserve “their historic character” through the antique lamp posts hanging in the streets, the palm trees in the court yards, and the pigeon towers on the roofs of the houses. It is in these old neighborhoods that the foreign workers take up residence, favoring the low rents, and the atmosphere that allows them to “live at ease amid their familiar din.”<sup>529</sup> Within this part of town each national group occupies its own quarters, with the other nationalities respecting this “communal urge.”<sup>530</sup> The older neighborhoods, preserved for their “historical” charm, are treated like tourist attractions by the local population. They bring

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<sup>527</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drum Beat*, 2.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

their foreign guests to dine there, enjoying the music and entertainment of these quarters.<sup>531</sup>

As Sulayman Khalaf explains in his study of the changes to the Gulf city:

That with the onset of oil wealth the old traditional neighborhood houses were deserted by their owners, since they generally lacked modern amenities and conveniences... Given the poor living conditions in these inner city “old quarters,” they are viewed by nationals as the foci of unwanted and unpleasant problems that distort their idealized image of their new cities. Newspapers publish letters bemoaning these old quarters and asking the authorities to remedy a worsening and embarrassing facet of otherwise elegant cities. Since the 1990s, the Gulf municipalities have renovated and preserved many traditional quarters as heritage monuments.<sup>532</sup>

It is upon this historical transformation that al-Bisāṭī draws in representing the spatial division of the Emirate of *Daqq al-ṭubūl*.

The division between local and foreigner, which is manifested in the division between the old and new sections of the city, is also mirrored in the homes of the Emiratis themselves. Not all the foreigners live in the old neighborhood —many reside in the homes in which they work. Within these homes they are required to operate with as little visibility as possible. The narrator explains for example that the Emiratis prefer to

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<sup>531</sup> The state of living conditions of migrant workers in the Gulf countries has been explored by scholars in a number of different fields. In fieldwork conducted by Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi in the United Arab Emirates, many of the details of living conditions of the workers resonate with the descriptions provided by al-Bisāṭī in his novel. So for example in discussing the housing of low-income workers in the UAE Khalaf and Alkobaisi state that most workers share accommodation: “The selection of co-residents follows criteria of nationality, ethnicity, religion, regional locality or origin in the same village or tribal kinship unity. Most often these houses are located in slum areas, or pockets of old residential neighborhoods in downtown areas that are now badly dilapidated.” See Khalaf and Alkobaisi, “Migrants’ Strategies of Coping and Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE,” 292. The old neighborhoods of al-Bisāṭī’s novel, while remaining separate from the upper-class suburbs, seem to have been renovated and preserved to allow them to fulfill a cultural function.

<sup>532</sup> Khalaf, “The Evolution of the Gulf City: Type, Oil, and Globalization,” in *Globalization and the Gulf*, ed. John W. Fox, Nada Mourtaḍa-Sabbahh and Mohammad al-Mutawa (New York: Routledge, 2006), 252.

employ workers from the Philippines because they are known for their hard work *and* because they are “small and compact and so do not take up much room.”<sup>533</sup> The novel’s narrator, an Egyptian who works as a driver, lives in the home of Abu Amer, a wealthy sheikh. He, along with the other workers of the household, live in “annex[es]” attached to the vast villa of Abu Amer.<sup>534</sup> While they clean and tend to the grounds of the villa, “trimming shrubbery and cleaning the swimming pool,” they of course do not inhabit or take pleasure in these spaces, rather their job is to maintain them for their employers.

As I have tried to show in the discussion thus far, the representation of the space of the nameless Emirate in *Daqq al-ṭubūl* reveals the separation of local and foreign communities —the division between the two is mirrored in the division between the old and new parts of the city. Much of al-Bisāṭī’s descriptions employ a realism that encourages the reader to consider the Emirate as, if not an “actual” place, then certainly a representation of one. Yet, in choosing not to specify an exact time and place for the events of the novel, the author prevents the reader from deciding that his Emirate exists in the real world. Furthermore, as I argue in the following section, the extraordinary circumstances that transform the Emirate —if only temporarily— serve to call into question the realism of al-Bisāṭī’s novel.

## VI: Fantasy Football: The Transformation of al-Bisāṭī’s Emirate

The divided world of al-Bisāṭī’s Emirate is temporarily turned on its head with the beginning of the World Cup tournament in France. The Emir of the Emirate asks all the

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<sup>533</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drum Beat*, 2.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

citizens to fly to France in support of the national team. What ensues as a result is a situation that is quite outside the realm of the ordinary; with all the nationals gone the country is temporarily in the hands of the foreign population of workers. I argue, that the exceptional situation created by the football tournament introduces an element of the fantastic to al-Bisāṭī's novel. What at first appears to be a regular Arab Emirate, is transformed as a result of the irregular circumstances that befall it. As Rosemary Jackson argues fantastic narratives “assert that what they are telling is real—relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so—and then they proceed to break the assumption of realism by introducing what—within those terms—is manifestly unreal.”<sup>535</sup> While this is not the introduction of an element of the marvelous or supernatural as one might expect—it is neither the magical impotency curse from al-Ghīṭānī's novel, nor is it the mythical impregnation of °Abdallah's novel. However, the situation is so improbable as to deserve the title of “unreal.” After all, the reader is quite aware that the situation described by al-Bisāṭī is basically impossible; in the realm of the real world the Emirate would not be emptied of its national citizens and left entirely in the hands of the foreign population. In fact, what al-Bisāṭī creates is in many ways the “dream” context for the migrant workers that populate the Emirate. And yet this dream serves to further highlight the inequality of the existing system.

This transformation of the Emirate into an exceptional space, removed from the rest of the world, can in many ways be connected to what al-Kharrāṭ describes as one of the markers of the “new sensibility” which defines the work of this generation. One of the main trends he identifies is that of magical realism, noting how writers use elements

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<sup>535</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 34.



of “fantasy and embellishment” in their work, as a means to undermine the division between the real and the imaginary.<sup>536</sup> While I would not go so far as to classify al-Bisāṭī’s novel as a work of magical realism, the author does however create a fantastical situation which blurs the boundaries in the way that al-Kharrāṭ suggests, bringing together the worlds of dreams and reality.

The narrator immediately notes that this unusual situation has created the opportunity for the subversion of the existing order.<sup>537</sup> After dropping off Abu Amer and his family at the airport, the narrator describes how:

The highway was deserted. As I approached the outskirts of the city a thought occurred to me that made me laugh. The whole country was now in the hands of the foreign workers. If they took over the Emirate, closed the ports, and broadcast an impassioned message to the world demanding recognition for their new regime, on the grounds that everything in the country was built with their toil and sweat, they could well receive some international recognition.<sup>538</sup>

He then proceeds to tell of an example that took place in the neighboring emirate, where the prince staged a coup against his father, when the latter left the country for medical treatment. While the workers in this novel do not stage an insurrection against their absent “fathers,” they nevertheless display some degree of resistance, encroaching on spaces ordinarily denied them.

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<sup>536</sup> Al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*, 19.

<sup>537</sup> The fantastic as a subversive or transformative strategy is explored by Rosemary Jackson. See Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 34.

<sup>538</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 15. The idea of the whole Emirate being in the hands of the foreign workers is clearly a play on the fact that as far as numbers go the nationals are vastly outnumbered. As Khalaf states “Only the Gulf oil city has up to 80% of its population as transient guest workers with few equal legal rights and privileges as compared to the nationals.” See Khalaf, “The Evolution of the Gulf City: Type, Oil, and Globalization,” 251.

This is particularly clear in the changes that take place at the house of Abu Amer. The first thing the workers do once Abu Amer's family has left is use the swimming pool. The narrator returns from the airport to find them in the garden in the midst of a pool party of sorts:

I pulled into the estate and brought the Land Rover to a stop in front of the garage. I got out and looked for the Filipino groundkeepers. They were nowhere to be found. I spotted the Pakistani women at the entrance to the garden trying to suppress their smiles. I asked them in English, where my colleagues were. They pointed toward the pool house at the far end of the garden and giggled as they fled into their quarters...The Filipinos were in their swimming suits, frolicking loudly in the pool, splashing water in all directions. They beckoned me to join them.

This scene reveals how the lavish pools are one of the defining markers of the difference between the houses of the wealthy Emiratis and those of the poorer foreign migrant workers. Furthermore, for workers like those who live in the annexes of Abu Amer's villa, their job is to clean and maintain the pool and grounds, never to enjoy them. Thus, this scene is, if only in a small way, an attempt on the part of the workers to claim a degree of authority and ownership over the houses they occupy but do not really inhabit. It is also an experience of the space of the villa and its gardens unlike any that the workers have known before. As their pool party continues, the workers cook dinner and eat in the garden. The narrator notes how the food was better than any he had tasted previously in the Emirate and that they all contemplated their surroundings as though they had "never seen them before."<sup>539</sup>

A similar assertion of presence and authority is behind the decision of one of the maids of the house to live with her husband in the bedroom of Abu Amer. Forced to lie

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<sup>539</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 20.

about her marital status to acquire and retain her employment, Rishim is unable to see or speak to her husband. With the absence of her employers, she is not only able to live with her husband, but chooses to do so in the bedroom of Abu Amer. The choice to temporarily occupy the bedroom of her employer is particularly significant, especially in light of the division and segregation of living space explored thus far.

Other examples of limited acts of rebellion take place within the larger context of the Emirate. The police officers let the prisoners out of their cells, provided they “report for roll call every morning and return to their cells the day before the Emiratis were due back.”<sup>540</sup> Acts such as these seem to suggest a limited and controlled display of subversion. They present to the reader the possibilities made available to the foreign workers, in the context of the exceptional situation that the football tournament has created. Yet, these small gestures of sedition remain within a restricted realm —the opportunity for an uprising is never completely realized, nor in fact really attempted. Ultimately, the existing system of hierarchy and control is not overturned; this is epitomized in the scene that takes place between the narrator and a customer in a store. With all the staff celebrating the success of the Emirate’s football team in its first match, the stores are left unattended. A sign is left asking customers to leave payment for their purchases: “Please help yourself and leave the money next to the cash register.”<sup>541</sup> Initially this act could be understood as a sign of a new social order, built upon a sense of trust amongst members of the community. Yet this is immediately called into question by a customer standing with the narrator in the store, who notes how “they have hidden

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 47.

cameras that can pick up a cockroach moving.”<sup>542</sup> This scene then reveals how the system based upon surveillance and control still seems to operate even in the absence of the Emiratis themselves.

The continuation of the old order can also be glimpsed in the fact that the workers themselves, despite limited acts of subversion, continue to carry out their jobs, even in the absence of their employers. While they enjoy the gardens and the swimming pools of the villas, and celebrate with their spouses in bedrooms which they temporarily claim as their own, they nevertheless continue to perform the tasks expected of them under normal circumstances. So for example, the narrator describes how “[t]he Filipinos and I threw ourselves into the task of sprucing up the grounds. We pruned the trees, trimmed the hedges, mowed the lawn, washed down the outside and inside stairways, emptied out the swimming pool and scrubbed down the walls and the deck area. We worked from noon, when we woke up, until sunset, when we went to the stadium for the evening. The women set about spring-cleaning the inside of the villa.”<sup>543</sup> Once again we see that the exceptional situation created by al-Bisāṭī does not lead to an overthrow of the existing system, but instead to limited acts of subversion, that take place within the context of the existing system of exploitation and inequality.

A similar moment of liberation, that it is not fully realized, seems to exist in the football stadium. The stadium is transformed into a space of celebration and festivity, a possible moment of release from the suffocating climate of the Emirate. Here the workers gather each night to watch the national team of the Emirate compete in the

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 89.

tournament. However, each group continues to display its individual national solidarity.

Each community sets up its own tent in the stadium, serving its national cuisine, and enjoying its own music and dance:

The stadium was so full that the overflow spread up the slopes around the outer walls. Everyone who was left in the Emirate must have been there...I wove through the babble of languages toward the stadium, inhaling the aromas of cuisines from around the world as I passed by one food stand after another surrounded by midnight snackers...Down in the arena, three dancing troupes performed alongside each other. I was drawn to the Indian dancers...The Pakistani troupe —next to the Indian one— consisted only of men, heads crowned with green skullcaps embroidered with white Arabic calligraphy...I moved to the Egyptian troupe which had attracted quite a crowd. It featured a buxom belly dancer in a shiny black gown covered with glittering sequins.<sup>544</sup>

There is a sense that the possibility exists here for the growth of a cosmopolitan existence, a coexistence of different ethnic and national identities, outside of the system of hierarchy. In some ways this is the idea of the Gulf city that Khalaf describes:

The urban culture of the Gulf city is rather a constellation of urban subcultures representing multiple ethnic groups and life ways. It can be argued here that it is indeed this cultural diversity that has become a distinguishing feature of the Gulf oil city culture, which manifests itself in the simultaneous performance of multiple ethnic characters. This generates a cultural kaleidoscope of urban lifeways and identities, all with their different nationalities, religions, physical types, dress, food, music, smells, and even localized suburban environment.<sup>545</sup>

Despite the idealism of Khalaf's description of the subcultures of the Gulf city, he is by no means unaware of the fact that these subcultures still exist under the shadow of the national culture —a point to which I will return to momentarily.

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>545</sup> Khalaf, "The Evolution of the Gulf City: Type, Oil, and Globalization," 259-260.

Within the context of the football stadium the hierarchy between the different workers is in fact maintained; we are told for example that the workers in the large villas refuse to mix with the other groups. The possible unity that the narrator envisions at the very start of the novel, a unity in which the different foreign groups band together as one in the face of the local elite, is once again undermined. I argue that given the exceptional circumstances that result in the Emirate being emptied of its nationals, the opportunity provided by the gathering of the different groups in the stadium, could have allowed for the displacement of national identity with a solidarity based upon their position as foreign migrant workers. Instead, what we see is the replication of the existing system of division and stratification.

To return to the issue of the dominance of the national culture, I draw attention here to the fact the gathering that takes place in the football stadium, is after all, in support of the national team of the Emirate, represented in the stadium by the “huge billboards carrying pictures of the Emirati soccer team.”<sup>546</sup> The allegiance of these different national and ethnic groups to the national football team, a symbol of the Emirate, reinforces for the reader the disparity and inequalities inherent in the social structure. The foreign workers support with a passion and ferocity the team of a nation of

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<sup>546</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 59. For more on the way in which national identity is reinforced through sports see for example Pablo Alabarces, Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young, “Argentina versus England at the France ‘98 World Cup: Narratives of Nation and the Mythologizing of the Popular,” *Media Culture Society* 23: 547 (2001), 547-566 and Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young, “Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Global Sports Event,” in *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, eds. Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 1-13.

which they can never hope to be nationals.<sup>547</sup> (It must be noted however that their support of the success of the Emirate's team is at least partly motivated by the desire to prolong the Emiratis absence, continuing the exceptional situation in which they have found themselves.) The reminder of the dominance of the national culture seems to undermine the possibility of the cosmopolitan collectivity suggested by the descriptions of the groups occupying the stadium. Rather, the reader comes to identify the situation more with what Diane Singerman and Paul Amar have termed "petro-cosmopolitanism," the system of exploitation that "dispenses with the concept of citizenship" while maintaining a system of "guest-worker apartheid."<sup>548</sup>

Of significance is the way the celebrations and street parades that follow the team's victories remind the reader of forms of political expression. The people take to the street in a public display of solidarity with the national team:

The sidewalks were packed with pedestrians who, like me, paused at the sound of a mounting roar. Within seconds the source came into view. A huge crowd jammed into the far end of the street. It was a medley of different nationalities —Pakistanis, Indians, Filipinos, Sudanese, Arabs— most in their native dress, carrying Emirati flags and pictures of the Emirati soccer team and waving and cheering...An Egyptian carried on others' shoulders was the most zealous cheerer in their segment of the parade. 'With our soul, with our blood we support you!' he bellowed, pausing to let the others echo the chant after him, fists punching the air.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> This is of course all too familiar in the case of migrant workers in the Arab world. Migrants to countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates do not gain any political rights by staying in these countries, and are not eligible for any kind of citizenship rights. See for example Ayman Zohry, "Egyptian Irregular Migration to Europe," *European Population Conference* (2006): 1-34.

<sup>548</sup> Diane Singerman and Paul Ammar, "Introduction" in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space, in the Globalized Middle East*, eds. Diane Singerman and Paul Ammar (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 30.

<sup>549</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 44.

The chant of “With our soul, with our blood we support you” (*bil ruh bil dam*) is reminiscent of slogans repeated during political protests. Its use here, in reference to the Emirati football team, seems to suggest that such international sports events are an opportunity for the assertion of national identity. This is particularly interesting within the context of al-Bisāṭī’s novel where the social structure is predicated upon a clear distinction between “national” and “foreigner.” The significance of these demonstrations is not lost on the protagonist who notes for example how “this had to have been the first time in the history of the Emirate that women ever appeared in a march.”<sup>550</sup>

With the defeat of the national team and the impending return of the Emiratis, the reestablishment of the status quo is all but entirely guaranteed. The potentially liberating situation created by the absence of the Emiratis cannot continue. The end of the novel tells of the preparations that are undertaken by the workers in anticipation of the nationals’ return:

The streets were decked with victory arches made of flowers. Each was crowned with a photo of one of the members of the national soccer team, intercepting the ball with the edge of his foot...The prisoners were back behind bars. Their arms reached through the windows waving miniature national flags...I stood with the throngs that packed the sides of the road leading from the airport to the capital. We were waiting to cheer the returning team. Songs in various languages were blaring from the tape recorders some of the spectators had brought with them.

#### VII: Abu Salem’s Villa and the Manifestation of Inequality

As I having been arguing thus far, al-Bisāṭī creates a situation in his novel in which the reader is allowed to momentarily imagine an instance of revolutionary possibility in the nameless Emirate. The idea that is articulated by the protagonist at the very start of the novel, and that suggests the overtaking of the Emirate by the foreign

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<sup>550</sup> Ibid., 72.



workers, frames the events that ensue. However, what becomes increasingly clear is that this libratory opportunity is not fully seized by the foreign population. The system of discrimination and inequality and its continuation seems to be best represented in the picture that is painted of Abu Salem's villa and the position of the Egyptian worker Zahiya. Beside Abu Amer's house is the home of Abu Salem and his wife; the latter, now bedridden because of her excessive weight, hires the Egyptian Zahiya to act as her helper and companion. In the absence of the owners of the house, Zahiya neither leaves the villa nor does she significantly alter her occupation of the house. Rather she remains much as she was before, almost a prisoner within the house of Abu Salem.

What is significant however as a result of the departure of the Emiratis is the fact that the narrator is able to enter Abu Salem's villa and get to know Zahiya at all.<sup>551</sup>

Passing by the house one evening the narrator is invited in by Zahiya who proceeds to tell her story. In the nights that follow the two characters reunite, their meetings based around Zahiya's unfolding tale. Structurally, the narrative of Zahiya's life and her experience in the house of Abu Salem runs parallel to the larger narrative of the Emirate and the exceptional circumstances of the football tournament. Zahiya begins her tale

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<sup>551</sup> The segregation of men and women is discussed at length in the novel. The male workers, fearful of any accusation of inappropriate behavior, which could lead to their deportation, avoid even looking at a woman —national or foreigner. The narrator tells us how this constant suppression of desire has led to a "condition" of impotency rife amongst the foreign workers. This is largely related to the "Drumbeat" of the novel's title; famous throughout the city is the "African," the one man who has escaped this cursed condition and who performs in a café by exposing himself to the sound of music. Here of course the reader is aware of the way al-Bisāṭī draws upon the existing racist stereotypes of "Africans" as virile, and sexually dominant. However, what is also suggested is the relationship between political, economic, and sexual forms of repression. The sexual impotency of the men is a manifestation of their lack of any form of political or economic agency given their status as foreign migrant workers in the Emirate. This also connects to the discussion of the sexual as the site of agency in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

with the conditions that brought her to the Emirate; an Egyptian like the narrator, she is forced to leave her family behind to find employment abroad:

She often dreamed of her family, she said, though she didn't dream often. Her husband was a decent and honest man. He was a good husband and had never harmed her in any way. She and her daughter were everything to him. As their daughter grew and her needs increased—for clothes and the like—he tried to find a job abroad, but without success. So he said to Zahiya, "Why don't you give it a try? You'll have a better chance." And she did.<sup>552</sup>

Both characters thus suffer the same fate; unable to provide for their families in Egypt, they must endure this separation in order to make ends meet. The narrator, despairing of his situation, reminds himself of what he has been able to achieve by working abroad, that he could not have gained by staying in Egypt: "Sometimes as I sat in front of the garage contemplating what I had become, I would reassure myself: in spite of everything, in the five years I've been here I managed to save up enough money to build a two-storey house in my village."<sup>553</sup> The position of these characters—the only two whose voices we really hear—represents al-Bisāṭī's implicit critique of the failure of the post-colonial Egyptian state to provide for its citizens.

Furthermore, given the reality of the system of inequality and discrimination under which Zahiya and the narrator find themselves living, I argue that the failure of the Arab nationalist dream of the past is laid bare. The allusion to the failure of Arab nationalism is of course not as explicit as in Ṭāhir's novel, but I read the system of exploitation in place in the Emirate as symptomatic of what has become of the unity and solidarity dreamt of by Ṭāhir's protagonist. A similar sense of failed unity is captured in

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<sup>552</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 34-35.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

a small incident that takes place between the protagonist and the other (non-Arab) workers of Abu Amer's villa. After the departure of the family to France, the workers look to the protagonist to take charge; the protagonist states "They must have assumed that as an Arab I stood as the head of the household in the absence of its masters."<sup>554</sup> Realizing this, the narrator is quick to dispel such ideas, replying that "I'm just one of you. Each of us should feel free to do as he or she likes."<sup>555</sup> On the one hand there is a suggestion here that in the absence of the "masters" there will be a system of equality instituted amongst the workers. On the other hand, this sense that in fact the narrator, regardless of being Arab or Egyptian, is just like everyone else by virtue of being a foreign migrant worker, speaks to the point I am making about the place of the Arab nationalist dream in the world of *Daqq al-tubūl*.

This idea that despite being Arab, the Egyptians are just like everyone else is I think further emphasized in the story of Zahiya's experience. Her nationality does not safeguard against the forms of exploitation endured by the foreign workers of the Emirate. Coming to the house of Abu Salem as his wife's companion, she spends her days listening to Umm Salem recount stories of her childhood. Zahiya's circumstances change for the worse, when Umm Salem—in a desperate attempt to limit her husband's sexual indiscretions—concocts a plan for Zahiya to become his mistress. Powerless to object to the situation, Zahiya is forced to comply with Umm Salem's wishes. Her circumstances continue to deteriorate when she discovers she is pregnant with Abu Salem's child, who, she is coerced into pretending, is not her child but that of Umm and

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

Abu Salem (themselves unable to conceive). As a result of this situation, Zahiya finds herself trapped both in Abu Salem's house and in the Emirate —any decision to return to Egypt would ultimately mean abandoning her child.

This episode shows that Zahiya's experience of the Salem's house, even in their absence, is built upon a form of imprisonment. While the rest of the Emirate celebrates, Zahiya remains in the house, never leaving the confines of the villa. Not only that, but unlike the workers in Abu Amer's villa, Zahiya does not take the opportunity to enjoy the spaces ordinarily off limits to her. Rather she remains in Umm Salem's bedroom, alone except for the nightly visits of the protagonist. During the protagonist's first visit Zahiya explains that she remains inside, as she has nowhere to go: "They've all gone out. I was about to, too, but then I thought, where would I go? My job is to sit and keep her company. That's what I've grown used to. I don't know anybody outside these grounds."<sup>556</sup>

This sense of imprisonment, as a result of the misery Zahiya has endured, is understood and relayed by the narrator. Alone, having left her after one of his nightly visits, he imagines her moving through the empty villa:

She could roam through its dozens of rooms, sit on whatever balcony suited her mood, or stroll among the trees in the garden, clutching her robe around her. There's a rocking chair in the garden. Even if she saw it, she'd probably pass by it without thinking to try it out. Nor would it occur to her to take a dip in the swimming pool which always lures the domestics when the masters of the house are away. Television? I doubt it; she's never mentioned it. She probably just

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<sup>556</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 30. This sense of isolation and seclusion can be read as a form of alienation. Scholars researching the experiences of migrant workers in the Gulf have argued that their experience can be understood as one of exile as far as social, economic, and emotional alienation are concerned. I would argue that given Zahiya's experience in the novel, one could read her situation in these terms. For more see Khalaf and Alkobaisi, "Migrants' Strategies of Coping and Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE," 296.

walks, pacing the garden paths until her feet wear out...All alone in the vacant house, she goes out of one room and into the next, passes through corridors, opens some doors and takes a peek, night after night, until she finally ends up in the room she's grown used to. She sits on the armchair next to the bed. The image of Umm Salem sprawled out on the bed appears to her.<sup>557</sup>

Zahiya's experience of the villa, in as far as it is captured by the narrator's imagination, does not change despite the "libratory" moment created by the absence of the Umm and Abu Salem. Rather, she continues to exist in her solitary world, remaining inside the villa walls, aimlessly wandering its rooms. In fact, her previous isolation seems to have found its full expression in the now completely empty house. The house of Abu Salem, as the continued site of confinement, seems to stand in opposition to the potential presented in the house of Abu Amer, in the streets of the city, and in the space of the football stadium. The limited acts of subversion that take place in each of these spaces are entirely absent from Abu Salem's villa. While Zahiya's narrative of her past runs parallel to the present narrative of the events taking place in the Emirate, given the way the novel ends the reader can be sure that Zahiya's experience will remain the same in the future.

### VIII: Conclusion

Bahā° Ṭāhir's *Al-Ḥubb fī-al-manfā* and Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī's *Daqq-al-ṭubūl* both register a movement outside of the space of the Egyptian nation-state, to a space beyond its borders, and in doing so alert us to the socio-economic and political changes of the post-colonial period. While the former seeks to represent the space of political exile, the latter depicts that of economic (and by extension political) dislocation. *Al-*

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<sup>557</sup> Al-Bisāṭī, *Drumbeat*, 86-87.

*Ḥubb fī al-manfā'*'s protagonist is the disillusioned Nāṣirist, alienated by the regime of al-Sādāt and compelled to leave Egypt to the nameless city of exile. I argue that it is this sense of estrangement that drives the protagonist to seek solace in a space beyond that of the homeland. This desire to escape is cast in the novel both in terms of his experience of the physical space of the city, and in his relationship to Brigitte. His attempt to hide from the world and his endeavor to end his political and intellectual engagement, proves futile however, once the events in Lebanon culminate in the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, forcing the protagonist to come to terms with the failure of the Nāṣirist project. Al-Bisāṭī's novel depicts a different form of dislocation, this time one caused by the experience of migration to the Gulf which signals to the reader the socio-economic and political changes of the post-colonial period in Egypt. The system of exploitation and discrimination is rendered in the physical descriptions of the nameless Emirate, where the locals and foreigners occupy separate spaces. The degree of exploitation is only made more acute by the momentary liberation that the workers experience with the departure of the Emiratis. Here too, as with Ṭāhir's novel, the move beyond the nation-state sheds light on the failure of both national and regional forms of belonging.

## Conclusion

The writers of the sixties generation, once the newcomers on the literary scene, have long since become established members of the cultural field in Egypt. While writers and critics questioned their significance as an emerging movement upon their appearance, it quickly became clear that this was not a group to be cursorily dismissed, but rather that the literary contribution of its members would have a profound impact upon cultural production in Egypt. Their experience of the political and social upheavals of the decade of the sixties incited literary innovation that transformed the aesthetic norms of narrative fiction, as far as both the short story and the novel were concerned, creating a wave of change that continued in the decades that followed.

While the majority of the writers of this generation began publishing their fiction in the second half of the sixties, many would continue producing literary works in the decades that followed, maintaining what Mattias Bolkeus Blom refers to as “a sustained publishing trajectory.”<sup>558</sup> This is certainly true for the seven members of the generation, whose work has been at the heart of the analysis undertaken in this dissertation. As a result one must consider their literary production in light of the changes that took place within Egypt in the decades that followed. This is not to undermine the importance of the historical moment of the group’s emergence, which can be registered in the anxiety over categorization which formed a large part of the discussion in Chapter One. This desire to understand and analyze the emerging group can be read both as an indication of the way in which power and authority is negotiated within the field of cultural production in Egypt, and as result of the drive to comprehend the significance of the appearance of a

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<sup>558</sup> Mattias Bolkeus Blom, “Tracing Literary Careers: Four Case Studies from the 1940 Cohort of Fiction Debut Writers in the United States,” *Poetics* 30, 5-6 (2002), 371.

new generation of writers and intellectuals during a particularly precarious moment in Egypt's contemporary history.

Much of what this generation was celebrated for was the move away from the realist tradition of their predecessors, and the introduction of new literary techniques that undermined the vision of reality associated with the post-colonial nation-state. Faced with the failures and disappointments of the post-colonial project in Egypt—beginning with the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir (but continuing under the regimes of al-Sādāt and Mubārak)—the writers of this generation attempted to find new ways to represent the changing socio-economic and political reality, a reality in which they found themselves increasingly marginalized.

This move away from the realist tradition is captured in Idwār al-Kharrāt's formulation of "*al-ḥassāsiyyah al-jadīdah*" in which he traces the various literary trends that came to be associated with the writers of this movement, though of course al-Kharrāt does not limit his label to the writers of the sixties generation. This dissertation has intended to read the innovations associated with this generation, and the conditions that precipitated such innovations, through the spatial representations that appear in the work of the writers. The focus upon the representation of rural, urban, and exilic space (and thus time) can not be detached from the social and political experiences of these writers, but can—and should—be read as a reflection of such experiences.

To consider the literary production of the sixties generation in this way, through the attention to the various spaces that are charted in the chapters of this dissertation, is to attend to the spatial shift asserted by Foucault and the critics whose work frames the concerns of this investigation. By doing so one recognizes the way in which the writers



of the sixties generation moved away from the depiction of space associated with the realist tradition as a means to challenge the vision of the nation-state with which it was connected. The representation of urban, rural, and exilic space in these novels is thus both a reflection of the changing socio-economic and political climate of post-colonial Egypt, as well as a means to trace the critiques launched against the regimes of power, beginning with the regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir. It is also a means to consider the contribution of the members of this generation in the years that followed their emergence onto the literary scene in Egypt and in light of transformations that took place in the decades that followed. It is this framework that allows for the consideration of novels by members of this generation that were produced during a period of more than fifty years; this dissertation thus begins with the 1966 novel *Tilka-l-rā'iḥa* and ends with the 2006 novel *Daqq al-ṭubūl*.

*Shifting Ground* has sought to expand the discussion of the writers of the sixties generation by focusing upon what the spatial representations in these novels can tell us about the contribution of this group. The works of Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm, Jamāl al Ghīṭānī, and Ibrāhīm Aṣlān all reveal the way the urban metropolis of Cairo is reimagined in the novel as a result of the changes that took place under the regimes of °Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt. The representations of down town Cairo, the fantastic *ḥāra* of Zafarani and the neighborhood of Imbaba each speak to these changes, and the attempt on the part of the writers in question to present the ongoing struggle between the individual and the state. While Ibrāhīm's novel shows the prison that Cairo has become under the watchful eye of the Nāṣirist regime, both al-Ghīṭānī and Aṣlān use the space of the novel to momentarily envision alternative possibilities of resistance and confrontation.

With the move away from the urban center of Cairo towards the rural periphery, the writers of this generation continue to move away from the realist tradition of their predecessors. The recognition of the difficulty and severity of life in the countryside does not result in narratives that envision the village as the space of political resistance and transformation. Rather, the novels of Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah and °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim incline the reader to consider the failures of the post-colonial regime of °Abd al-Nāṣir to improve the lives of the marginalized villagers, despite the policies that were instituted in the aftermath of the Revolution. The village here is represented as mystic or mythical space as a way to stress its ongoing marginalization vis-à-vis the rest of the country. °Abdallah's depiction of al-Karnak as a mythical space, suggests a reading of his novel as an example of magical realism. Qāsim draws upon the time and space of Sufi ritual to imagine alternative possibilities for the communities of the Delta, showing the way mystical practice is able to transform the very space of the village. It is impossible to ignore however the way both novels take the reader back to a revolutionary moment of change and possibility, only to call into question the likelihood of success.

In considering the move beyond the boundaries of Egypt, Bahā Ṭāhir and Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī transport the reader to Europe and the Gulf. Here the space of exile can be read as a space of political and economic dislocation. Ṭāhir's European city of exile is depicted as a city of salvation, an escape for the protagonist from the marginalization experienced under the regime of al-Sādāt. Here too the city seems to exist in its own time and space, a separation that however is short lived. Al-Bisāṭī's novel captures the economic and political transformations that have resulted in the migration of workers to the Gulf. The nameless Emirate is thus represented as a space of

exploitation connecting the experience of the Egyptian workers to the larger system of global capitalism. Implicit in al-Bisāṭī's work is the critique of both the Egyptian state for its failure to provide economic opportunities for its citizens, and the transformation of the Arab nationalist dream of the past into a reality of exploitation and abuse.

In focusing upon the representations of space in each of the novels *Shifting Ground* hopes to show what the “spatial shift” in critical studies can do for the examination of the novels of the writers of the sixties generation. The “shifting ground” chartered in this dissertation thus both encapsulates the social, political, economic, and cultural transformations that contributed to the identification of a new literary generation in the sixties, and the ways in which these transformations necessitated a change in the representation of rural, urban, and exilic space in the work of these writers.

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## Appendix A: Biographies of the Writers of the Sixties Generation

### Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah (1938-81)

°Abdallah was born in 1938 in al-Karnak, Luxor. He worked in the Ministry of Agriculture for a short period, moving to Qina in 1959, where he first met the poets °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī and Amal Dunqul. He wrote his first short story *Maḥbūb al-shams* (The Sun's Beloved) in 1961. In 1964 he moved to Cairo where he completed his first short story collection *Thalāth shajarāt kabīrah tuthmir burtuqālan* (1970, Three Big Trees that Bear Oranges)<sup>559</sup> which was published in 1970. After moving to Cairo he pursued no other profession but writing. He was imprisoned in October 1966 with other writers from his generation, during °Abd al-Nāṣir's crackdown on writers and intellectuals, and released the following April. He died suddenly in 1981 in a car crash. He was awarded the "State Encouragement Prize" that same year. His novel *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswīrah* (The Collar and the Bracelet)<sup>560</sup> was adapted to the big screen in 1986 by Khayrī Bishāra. He has perhaps not received the symbols of recognition due to his premature death, but is widely regarded as one of the key figures of the sixties generation.<sup>561</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, *Thalāth shajarāt kabīrah tuthmir burtuqālan* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-°Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1970). This collection has not been translated into English. However, a number of stories from it appear in the collection *The Mountain of Green Tea*, an English translation of a selection of °Abdallah's short stories. See °Abdallah, *The Mountain of Green Tea*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1991).

<sup>560</sup> *Al-Ṭawq wa-al-iswīrah* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-°Āmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1970); English translation: *The Collar and the Bracelet*, trans. Samah Selim (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

<sup>561</sup> See "Introduction" in Yaḥyā Ṭāhir °Abdallah, *Al-°amal al-kāmilah* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-°Arabī, 1983), 5.

### **Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī (1937-2012)**

Al-Bisāṭī was born in 1937 in the governorate of Sharqīyyah. He moved to Cairo where he attended Cairo University earning a degree in commerce in 1960. He then worked as an accountancy inspector for the state until his retirement. Like many writers in Egypt he pursued his literary career alongside his main profession. He published his first short story *Al-Hurūb* (The Escape) in 1962 after winning the “Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Prize for Literature.” His works include nine short story collections and thirteen novels many of which have been translated. He served as editor-in-chief of the literary series “*Aṣwāt Adabiyyah*” (Literary Voices) established by the Ministry of Culture, for a number of years, but resigned from his position in 2001 after disputes with the administration over issues of censorship.<sup>562</sup> Al-Bisāṭī was awarded the “Sultan Owais Prize” for his fiction in 2001 and the “Sawiris Prize” for his novel *Daqq al-Tubūl* in 2009.<sup>563</sup>

### **Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945-)**

Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī was born in the village of Juhaynā in Upper Egypt but moved to Cairo with his family a few years later, spending the first thirty years of his life in the

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<sup>562</sup> For more on these events, which caused quite an uproar within the literary sphere see Yousef Rakha, “Floating Bureaus,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 18-21 January 2001, accessed March 6 2012, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/517/cu1.htm>. See also Samia Mehrez, “Take Them Out of the Ballgame: Egypt’s Cultural Players in Crisis,” in *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009): 14-23.

<sup>563</sup> It is often noted by critics that al-Bisāṭī has not received the literary awards he deserves despite his prominence within the field. For more on al-Bisāṭī’s career see for example, Muḥammad Sha‘īr, “Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī: ḥikāyāt sīriyyah min al-sīrah al-dhātīyyah,” *Akhbār al-Adab*, 29 March 2009, accessed 13 May 2009, <http://akhbarelyom.org.eg:81/adab/articleDetail.php?x=adab20>.



neighborhood of Jamāliyyah. After completing school, he spent three years studying oriental carpet design; a fact that he insists influenced his literary style. Arrested in 1966 for his criticisms of °Abd al-Nāṣir and his involvement with the Communist Party, he was released in 1967. He worked as a war correspondent for many years, reporting from the front during the 1973 war. In 1985, he became head of the cultural section of the state-owned *Al-Akhbār* (The News) daily newspaper. He was founder and editor of the Egyptian literary magazine *Akhbār al-Adab* (Literary News) between 1993 and 2011. He published his first collection *Awrāq shābb °āsh mundhu alf °ām* (Papers of a Young Man Who Lived a Thousand Years Ago) in 1969 and has since published dozens of novels and short story collections, which have been translated into a number of languages. He was awarded the “State Encouragement Prize” in 1980, named “Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres” in 1987, won the “Sultan Oweis Prize” in 1997, the Italian “Grinzane Cavour Award” in 2006, the “State Merit Prize” in 2007, and the “Sheikh Zayyid Award” in 2009.<sup>564</sup>

### **Ibrāhīm Aṣlān (1935-2012)**

Born in 1935 in the city of Tanta, Aṣlān worked for the postal service for much of his life. He published his first short story in 1965 and has since published three novels and four short-story collections. Two of his novels have been adapted for the big screen; Dawūd °Abd al-Sayyid adapted the novel *Mālik al-ḥazīn* (1981, English translation: *The*

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<sup>564</sup> For more see “Tajalliyāt al-Ghīṭānī,” *Dār al-Shurūq*, accessed 15 May 2009, <http://alghitany.shorouk.com/Default.aspx>. This provides an indepth presentation of al-Ghīṭānī’s career and publications.

*Heron*, 1981),<sup>565</sup> and *Al-Kit Kāt*, which was released in 1991, became an instant success. *‘Aṣāfir al-Nīl* (1999, English translation: *Nile Sparrows*, 2004)<sup>566</sup> was made into a film, of the same name in 2010, and was directed by Majdī Aḥmad ‘Alī. He served as editor of the series “*Mukhtārāt Fuṣūl*” (From Fusul) between 1987 and 1995, and as editor of the cultural section of the London based *Al-Ḥayāt* (Life) newspaper from 1992. He also served as editor of the series “*Āfāq al-kitābah*” (Literary Horizons) between 1997 and 1999. He was awarded the “Tāhā Ḥusayn Prize for Literature” in 1989, the “State Grand Prize for Literature” in 2003, the “Cavafy International Prize” in 2005, and the “Sawiris Prize” in 2006.

### **Ṣun‘allah Ibrāhīm (b.1937)**

Ibrāhīm was born in 1937 in Cairo and is one of the only writers of his generation to fully dedicate himself to the profession of writing. Abandoning his legal studies he joined the Egyptian Communist Party in 1955 and was soon after arrested for his political activities. He was imprisoned between 1959 and 1964, publishing his first novel, *Tilka-l-rā‘iḥa* (1966; English translation: *The Smell of It*, 1971) after his release. He has since published ten novels many of which have been translated into French and English. He made headlines in October 2003, when during the “Second Cairo Conference on the Arab Novel,” he refused to accept the prize for the novel, delivering a scathing speech against the Egyptian government and its cultural establishment; in his well-known speech he

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<sup>565</sup> Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, *Mālik al-ḥazīn: riwāyah miṣriyyah* (Cairo: Maṭbū‘āt al-Qāhirah, 1983); English translation: *The Heron* trans. Elliott Colla (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

<sup>566</sup> Aṣlān, *‘Aṣāfir al-Nīl* (Beirut, Dār al-Ādāb, 1999); English translation: *Nile Sparrows*, trans. Mona el-Ghobashy (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

stated that he could not accept the prize from “a government, which in [his] opinion, did not have the credibility to grant it.”<sup>567</sup> His distance from the official cultural establishment is perhaps one of the reasons for the dearth of awards he has received. He was however the recipient of the German “Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought” in 2004.<sup>568</sup>

### °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim (1934-1990)

He was born in al-Mandara village, near Tanta in the Delta. He enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Alexandria, but was compelled by family obligations to leave his studies and begin work at the Post Office in Cairo. He was imprisoned between 1960-64 by the Nāṣirist regime for his participation in leftist political organizations. Increasingly marginalized by al-Sādāt, like many intellectuals of the time, he chose to leave Egypt for a number of years; invited to give a lecture at the Free University of Berlin in 1974, he remained there until 1985. He returned to Cairo where he worked in journalism and tried to enter the world of politics; running for Parliament on the list of the leftist party al-Tagammu° he did not succeed in getting elected. He wrote five novels, four novellas, and five story collections, which have been translated into a number of languages.

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<sup>567</sup> Ibrāhīm, Ṣun°allah, “Al-Kalimah alladhī alqāha Ṣun°allah Ibrāhīm fī khitām mu°ṭamar al-riwāyah wa-al-madīnah,” *Al-Badīl*, accessed 8 March 2012, <http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?article52>.

<sup>568</sup> See for example “Isti°ādat siyādat al-shu°ūb al-°arabiyyah,” Ibn Rushd Fund, accessed 30 March 2009, <http://www.ibn-rushd.org/arabic/PM-A-04.html>. See also ECM. De Moor, “Sonallah Ibrahim,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature 1*, eds. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London/New York, Routledge, 1998), 386-387.

Widely regarded as one of the most important members of his generation, his early death may also account for his lack of official recognition.<sup>569</sup>

### **Bahā Ṭāhir (1935-)**

Ṭāhir was born in 1935 in Upper Egypt. He received a degree in History and post-graduate diplomas in History and Mass Media from Cairo University. He worked as a theatre director, and later as a presenter on the state-run “*Al-Birnāmij al-thānī*” (The Second Program), the cultural radio station that he helped establish during the 1960s. It was there that he worked, producing drama for the radio, until 1975 when he was pushed out of his job during al-Sādāt’s purging of the cultural establishment. He also had difficulty publishing his fiction during the seventies, which led to his decision to leave Egypt for Switzerland in 1981. He lived and worked in Geneva as a translator for the United Nations, until 1995 when he returned to Egypt. He published his first short-story collection *Al-Khutūbah* (The Engagement)<sup>570</sup> in 1972, and has since published six novels, four short-story collections, and a number of non-fiction works, and translations, making him one of the most prolific writers of his generation. His fiction has been translated into a number of foreign languages. He was awarded the “State Grand Prize for Literature” in 1997 and in 2000 his novel *Khālatī Ṣāfiyyah wa-al-dayr* (1991; English translation: *Aunt*

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<sup>569</sup> For more see Samia Mehrez, “Introduction,” *Rites of Assent: Two Novellas*, by °Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, trans. Peter Theroux (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), vii-xx and Muḥammad Shi°ir, “°Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, “Kātib al-aḥlām wa-al-asā,” *Al-Akhbār*, 25 November 2012, accessed 8 March 2012, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/37763>.

<sup>570</sup> Ṭāhir, *Al-Khutūbah wa qiṣaṣ ukhrā* (Cairo: al-Hay°ah al-Miṣriyyah al-°Ammah l-il-Kitāb, 1972).

*Safīyya and the Monastery*, 1997)<sup>571</sup> was awarded the Italian “Giuseppe Acerbi Prize.” Finally, he was awarded the “International Prize for Arabic Fiction” (known as the Arabic Booker Prize) in its inaugural year in 2008, for his novel *Wāḥat al-ghurūb* (2007; English translation: *Sunset Oasis*, 2009).<sup>572</sup> His name was among those suggested for the position of Minister of Culture, after the resignation of Farūq Ḥusnī in January 2011, but he declined the position, maintaining his long-standing distance from the seats of power.<sup>573</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Ṭāhir, *Khālatī Ṣafīyyah wa-al-dayr* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1991); English translation: *Aunt Safīyya and the Monastery*, trans. Barbara Romaine (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). This novel, which explores the relationship between Muslims and Christians in an Upper Egyptian village, was also translated into Dutch, German, and French and is one of Ṭāhir’s most famous works.

<sup>572</sup> Ṭāhir, *Wāḥat al-ghurūb*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2007); English translation: *Sunset Oasis*, trans. Humphrey T. Davies (London: Sceptre, 2009), Sulaymān Fayāḍ, “Būrtrih mālik ḥazīn,” in *Ālam Bahā’ Ṭāhir: Dayf dār majdalāwī li-‘ām* 2005, ed. Muḥammad ‘Ubayd Allāh (Amman: Dār Majdalāwī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 2005), 15-25.

<sup>573</sup> See for example Muḥammad ‘Ubayd Allāh, “‘Ālam Bahā Ṭāhir,” *Dīwān al-‘Arab*, October 1, 2005, accessed May 23, 2009, <http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article2543>.