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Beyond the Nation:
The Literary Afterlife of the Damascus Spring in the 21st Century Syrian Novel

By

Linda Istanbuli

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Near Eastern Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Professor Chana Kronfeld
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Professor Anneka Lenssen

Spring 2020

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Abstract
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Through the lens of Syrian fiction published with the advent of the new millennium, this dissertation reflects on the crisis of nationhood in the Arab world and on the ways in which the novel as a genre created the conditions of possibility for the 2011 Syrian uprising. Tracing an aesthetic of destabilization, I explore the artistically performed emerging consciousness that carves out new spaces of intellectual and aesthetic inquiry for Syrian writers. These new spaces establish a new era because although the twentieth-century Syrian novel that preceded them professed disenchantment with authoritarianism, it continued to function within a dominant modernist, nationalist epistemological and political discourse that emphasized the nation's homogeneity and associated the project of modernity with humanism and secularism, conceiving of it as an opposition to tradition. In contrast, this dissertation argues, with the unfolding of the new millennium, as the country was going through an intense period of vocal opposition known as the Damascus Spring, a young generation of Syrian novelists turned their attention to investigating the paradigms that had hitherto governed the country's political and intellectual fields and its literary production, both reflecting and contributing to the general atmosphere that engendered the 2011 uprising in Syria. Their creative endeavors, which embodied demands for reform, freedom of speech, and an open civil society, manifested in new modes of literary expression through daring and controversial texts that openly explored what had long been treated as risky territories and taboo themes.

This investigation uncovers the remarkable and complex involvement of women novelists, who further interrogate both the nation and the novel as male-constructed spaces. My interviews with a diverse group of young writers who fled Syria in fear for their lives allow me to outline the emergence of a dialogical intellectual who aims to remap the nation's ethos, reconnect with a repressed cultural past, and reposition the role of literature in society. Crucially, I investigate the ways in which this emerging consciousness manifests itself in these avant-garde works and underscore how these reformulations transpire through the re-gendering of multilingual and multicultural spaces within the Syrian collective. Guided by close readings, I focus on two pre-uprising novels written by women authors: *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* (*As a River Should*, 2007) by Manhal al-Sarrāj and *Brūvā* (*First Draft*, 2011) by Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan. I tarry with these author's use of intertextuality, narrative fragmentation, metafiction, and temporal distortion. It is these innovative literary practices, I argue, that enable the new generation of Syrian writers to contest history, unearth repressed memory, undermine the notion of an unquestionable author(ity), and highlight the embodied practices rooted in multiplicity.

This dissertation tends to the formative role of the literary imagination in cultivating reading practices and contributing to social change. In addition to literary criticism, (post)nationalism, and gender and women's studies, this study engages with trauma theory as it investigates the literary performances of repressed traumatizing pasts and highlights the ways the works studied contest the universal narrative of secular modernity. Since the novels discussed are untranslated, this study introduces these works into western scholarly discussion, hoping to contribute to expanding the boundaries of Arabic literary studies beyond the limitations imposed by the paradigms and politics of translation and reception on our access to underrepresented literatures.

*To the memory of Ziad
and the future of
Hakam & Natalia*

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Introduction

Writing on the Margins

In an interview I conducted as a part of my research, the Syrian novelist Rūzā Yasīn Ḥasan told me, “my generation lives and writes on the margins: the margins of history and the margins of literature itself. We dwell in the shadows of others.”¹ Ḥasan’s words highlight a shared sentiment of her generation, but also the dominant paradigms that inform our approach to Arab and Arabic literatures, the power structures at play in the processes of canonization, and the politics of translation and reception. Taking insights from Ḥasan and her contemporaries and from a nascent body of scholarship that recognizes the limitations of approaches that attempt to write a single literary history for the Arabic novel, this dissertation focuses on the margins of Arabic literary studies, attending to Syrian literature, which has been, for many reasons, understudied. Until recently, the cultural and literary history of Egypt was the preferred model for the development of the novel in the Arab world, and the dominant research paradigms disregarded genres and sub-genres, regions and their cultural particularities and critical approaches. A new generation of scholars have turned their attention to previously overlooked regions and literatures in order to expand the scope of Arab/Arabic literary studies and redraw the literary map of “center-margin” relations not only between the west and the rest of the world, but also within marginalized literatures themselves. Wail Hassan argues that a reconsideration of the novel as an Arab phenomenon with tremendous geographic and linguistic diversity expands current patterns of comparison and the classic (post)-colonial paradigm that sees modern Arabic literature in relation to Europe. “The East-West dichotomy inherited from Orientalism and lying at the heart of this paradigm, both as a major theme and as an organizing principle, falls apart once we acknowledge the plurality of each pole of that duality.”²

Highlighting insights from interviews with Ḥasan and other recently published authors, considering this new body of scholarship, and thinking through continuities alongside ruptures, I turn my attention to Syrian literature, which is often described in terms of fear, silence, and ideological conformity. Excellent and seminal scholarship from Miriam Cooke sheds light on oppositional artistic voices and the contradictions that govern the cultural field in Syria,³ as do the works of Elisabeth Vauthier, Max Weiss and Anne-Marie McManus, who have turned their attention to contemporary Syrian literature,⁴ pointing out that literary production preceding the

¹ Rūzā Yasīn Ḥasan, interview by author, Skype, September 2018.

² Wail Hassan, “Introduction” in *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Wail Hassan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

³ See for example, Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Art Official* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); “Ghassan al-Jaba’i: Prison Literature in Syria after 1980,” *World Literature Today* Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring, 2001), 237-245; and “The Cell Story: Syrian Prison Stories after Hafiz Asad,” *Middle East Critique* Vol. 20, No. 2, summer 2011, 169-187.

⁴ See Elisabeth Vauthier, *La création romanesque contemporaine en Syrie de 1967 à nos jours* (Damascus: IFPO, 2007); Max Weiss, “Who Laughs Last: Literary Transformations of Syrian Authoritarianism,” in *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, eds. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 143-165; “What Lies Beneath: Political Criticism in Recent Syrian Fiction,” in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, Volume 2: Culture, Society, and Religion, eds. Christa

“Arab Spring” has not been thoroughly examined as an episode, or a link in a chain of developments within a discursive cultural field. Focused on the first decade of the twenty-first century, I focalize the Syrian novel, and specifically the pre-2011 novel, reading it against recent cultural, social, and political developments and transformations in the Arab world, including the crises of the project of Arab modernity, the crumbling of nationalist ideologies, and the subsequent emergence of visions of difference and multiplicity.

The ability of literary imagination to see into the present and to communicate and galvanize has always presented a threat for the ruling elite. Further, the rise of oppressed people and the toppling of dictators are often accompanied by literary works that imaginatively and intellectually reflect on the complexities that fuel such transformations. The Syrian uprising, and the Arab spring in general, may have taken politicians as well as political scientists and sociologists by surprise, but it did not take Syria’s young authors by surprise. The uprising did not come from nowhere; a new critical consciousness had been fomenting in many places, not least of which was on the pages of Syria’s new novel. Fādī ‘Azzām’s prophetic words in his 2011 novel *Sarmadah* clearly reflect what was bubbling under the surface:

من ينظر إلى هذا الغروب في هذا الصيف الحارق سيشعر برحم ضخمة بدأت تنقلص لتولد أجنة جديدة وسلالات أخرى لم تعرفها هذه الأرض من قبل وانفجاره بات وشيكاً. سهل حوران المشبع بالشحوب تتعكس عليه بقايا النباتات اليابسة والحقول المحصودة باصفرار مريض ممتد على وجه هذه البقعة الفقيرة الهائمة المنسية في الجنوب ... يكفي عود ثقاب واحد ليشعل كل شيء ... ونسمة واحدة لتجعل الغبار سيد المكان. الغبار يغطي الوجوه، الأسى ينضح من الأعين، والبشر مغموسين بنزق حاد. تكفي شرارة واحدة لتيقظ رغبتهم في الحياة، تكفي إشارة واحدة من جنوح المكان ليتغير إلى الأبد. ثمة مخاض صامت في هذه البلاد. يستنهض الدماء والأرواح والصخور.⁵

Anyone who watched the sun set during that fiery summer would feel a great womb contracting, getting ready to give birth to new creatures and lineages the earth had never seen before. You could tell it was on the verge of erupting. The Hauran plain and its spirits were reflected in the remnants of dried out plants and harvested fields, yellow as if sickly, stretching across the surface of this poor, confused, forgotten place in the south ... all it takes is one match to set everything alight... And all it takes is one breeze to make dust the ruler of the place. Dust covers faces, despair shows in their eyes, and the people are slaves to the most acute thoughtlessness. One spark is enough to revive their desire for life. One clue from the place is all it takes to change things forever. Silent labor pains echo through places, summoning up blood, and souls, and stones.⁶

Through the lens of pre-uprising Syrian fiction, this dissertation reflects on the capacity of literary practices to undo monophonic notions of self and nation, creating parallel discourses that, although

Salamandra and Leif Stenberg (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 16-35; “Sight, Sound, and Surveillance in Ba’thist Syria: The Fiction of Politics in Rūzā Yāsīn Hasan’s Rough Draft and Samar Yazbik’s *In Her Mirrors*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* Vol. 48, No. 3 (2017), 211-244; and Anne-Marie McManus, “Sentimental Terror Narratives: Gendering Violence, Dividing Sympathy,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies* Vol. 9, No. 2. (spring, 2013), 80–107.

⁵ Fādī ‘Azzām, *Sarmadah* (Beirut: Al-Dār al-‘Arabiyyah li’-‘Ulūm, 2011), 125.

⁶ Fādī ‘Azzām, *Sarmadah*, trans. Adam Talib (London: Arabic Books, 2012), 105.

they emerge and dwell on the margins of dominant narratives, make possible the reimagining of personal and national belonging. I engage with these questions through the literary techniques that Syrian novelists mobilize to (re)construct their national, gender, and religious identities, asking what configurations of self and subjectivity become possible when the “nation-state” can no longer remain the guiding framework for cultural and political projects; what effects are realized when political protest against oppression becomes a mode of aesthetic engagement; and how contemporary literary practices incorporate elements of activism and socio-historical reconstruction, providing new perspectives on notions such as truth, history, authorship, and narration. I argue that although the twentieth-century Syrian novel professed disenchantment with authoritarianism, it continued to function within a dominant modernist, nationalist epistemological and political discourse that emphasized the nation’s homogeneity and associated the project of modernity with humanism and secularism, conceiving of it as an opposition to tradition. In contrast, with the unfolding of the new millennium, a new generation of Syrian novelists turned their creative endeavors to dismantling the frameworks that had governed the country’s modern literary production, repositioning the place of the novel and the intellectual in society and both reflecting and contributing to the general atmosphere that engendered the 2011 Syrian uprising.

Nation, Novel, and Ideology

With his 1983 seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson began what has become a continuous debate on the idea of the nation by defining it as an “imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁷ Anderson argues that a transformation in three fundamental cultural conceptions was what made possible the imagining of the nation—the decline of the belief that a sacred text irrevocably embodies truth, that “society was naturally organized around and under high centers-monarchs who ... ruled under some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation,”⁸ and a transformation of our understanding of temporality as a space where cosmology and history were indistinguishable. Contrary to the medieval mind, we now conceive of history as an endless chain of cause and effect. An idea of a “homogeneous, empty time” has developed, in which “a sociological organism moving calendrically through [it] is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down or (up) history.”⁹

Since the nation is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign, the limited and independent aspects of the nation, then, are its most imagined/forged characteristics. The constructedness of the nation as such (limited and independent) becomes clear when juxtaposed with the nation’s subjects, whose identities are fluid and unfixed, and their temporalities do not necessarily comply with the secular time of the nation. Constructing and imagining the nation-state as fixed, independent, and secular entails a national discourse that shapes national identity and the national imaginary. This discourse emphasizes national uniqueness and intra-national uniformity, while largely ignoring intra-national differences. It also strives to construct a collective

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

past, and a collective present and future,¹⁰ a process that involves appropriating the nation's collective memory. Therefore, in countries with plural memories, a constant conflict exists between the official narrative constructed by the national discourse, and the living collective memories of the nation's subjects.

The novel, alongside newspapers, Anderson argues, is a powerful site on which the nation is imagined and constructed, because it provides the technical means for 're-presenting' the nation. The novel depicts "the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside."¹¹ Homi Bhabha has also drawn attention to the centrality of narrative in the construction of the nation. "Nations, like narratives," Bhabha asserts, "lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea."¹² Timothy Brennan further infers that

[i]t was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the "one, yet many" of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.¹³

Regardless of the debate on the origins of the genre, the Arabic novel, as Samah Selim points out in her work "The Narrative Craft: Realism and Fiction in the Arabic Canon," is closely connected to the nation-state, for "its structural and discursive features and its representation of time and place are all located within the new historical space of the emergent nation-state."¹⁴ Sabry Hafez makes the case in the *Genesis of the Arabic Novel* that the emergence of the concept of *waṭan* (nation), as opposed to that of *ummah* or *millah* (the community of Muslims), was a cornerstone in the development of a new worldview that helped produce new forms of literary, social, and political discourse. The advent of modernization and the destruction of traditional communities, Hafez argues, resulted in the emergence of a modern self that now belonged to a nation-state. "The genesis of narrative discourse in Arabic culture," he writes, "is ... synonymous with the genesis of a new way of rationalization and perception of both the self and the other. As a process, it is inseparable from the emergence of the new social and cultural experiences which gave rise to a new perception of national identity."¹⁵

¹⁰ Ruth Wodak, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, trans. Angelika Hersich (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 3-5.

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.

¹² Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

¹³ Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," in *Nation and Narration*, 49.

¹⁴ Samah Selim, "The Narrative Craft: Realism and Fiction in the Arabic Canon," *Edebiyat*, 2003, Vol. 14, No. 1 & 2, 113.

¹⁵ Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), 22.

As in nineteenth century Europe, the rise of modern narrative genres in the Arab world, as many critics have shown, is closely connected to changes within the social order and the rise of a new bourgeoisie enmeshed in nation-state ideologies. “In the same way that ‘society’ came to be understood as a distinct and abstract field of human knowledge constructed around a subject/object relationship,” Selim remarks, “so the act of narration itself came to reproduce the split implied in this new ontology.”¹⁶ In the Syrian case, the critic Fayṣal Sammāq also attributes the emergence of the novel to the rise of the petite bourgeoisie. Sammāq argues that when tracing the emergence and development of Syrian fiction, one notices that literature was developing in parallel with social, cultural, and economic awareness. The petite bourgeoisie led the struggle of people in urban areas, and established, between 1930 and 1936, many industrial projects. The masses began to develop awareness of who they were, and to realize how different they were from the West. People, who had read the principles of the French revolution, were disappointed by the performance of the French in Syria. The combination of this newly emerging awareness, and the disappointment in the French contributed to the rise of romanticism in literature.¹⁷

Accordingly, the Syrian, and the Arabic, novel as a modern genre became one of the key venues through which national imaginary was shaped, and precisely because of its ability to “mimic” the structure of the nation, it turned, over time, into a powerful site for competing narratives, ideologies, and actors. As in other parts in the postcolonial world, however, the short-lived optimism and hope that followed independence in Arabic speaking countries had all but disappeared by the following decades. Dreams of independence were crushed by the repression of police states that exposed the delusion of the promise of a democratic, independent, post-colonial nation-state. The repressive post-colonial realities also uncovered the structural paradoxes inherent in the modern nation-state and its secular project, for, as Saba Mahmood reminds us,

its claim to religious neutrality notwithstanding, the modern state has become involved in the regulation and management of religious life to an unprecedented degree, thereby embroiling the state in substantive issues of religious doctrine and practice. [Further], despite the commitment to level religious differences in the political sphere, modern secular governance transforms, and in some respects intensifies, pre-existing interfaith inequalities, allowing them to flourish in society, and hence for religion to striate national identity and public norms.¹⁸

Scholars of postcolonial African, Arabic and Latin American literatures have been occupied with the depiction of this disillusionment and trauma. Addressing the experience of African writers and nations, for example, Emmanuel Yewah, traces different subversive practices through which African writers attempt to de-center the nation and question established national discourses, pointing out that postcolonial writers, “disillusioned by the broken promises of ‘les soleils des indépendances,’ betrayed by postcolonial rulers who have appropriated national discourses, conscious of dictators’ human rights abuses within their imagined sovereign space,

¹⁶ Selim, “The Narrative Craft,” 112.

¹⁷ Fayṣal Sammāq, *al-Riwāyah al-sūriyyah: nash’atuhā taṭawwuruhā madhāhibuhā* (Damascus: Maṭābi‘ al-Idārah al-Siyāsiyah, 1984), 21

¹⁸ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2.

have turned their creative endeavors into weapons to challenge, indeed to deconstruct ... ‘any signified that could correspond to the nation.’”¹⁹

Squarely located within the colonial/postcolonial condition and experience, the Syrian novel which, during the first half of the twentieth century helped to forge the new national identity, gradually grew disillusioned with the nationalist discourse constructed and appropriated by the country’s authoritarian regime. This disillusionment reached its height with the *naksa*, the Arab military defeat by Israel, which inflicted a deep wound on Arab subjectivity.²⁰ The trauma caused by the *naksa* overlapped with an unprecedented consolidation of authoritarianism, and was followed by a series of political defeats. From the descent of Lebanon into civil war in 1975, and from Egypt becoming the first Arab state to recognize Israel by signing the Camp David Accords in 1978 to the Islamic uprising in Syria and the massacres that the regime committed to crush it, the Syrian intellectual’s operating paradigm was now in a state of crisis. Backdropped with this landscape, as Elizabeth Vauthier demonstrates in *La création romanesque contemporaine en Syrie de 1967 à nos jours*,

le roman syrien raconte sans relâche les innombrables défaits subis : collectives lors des différents conflits qui ont traversé la période et l’échec du nationalisme ; quotidiennes et individuelles, subis par la population ordinaire que domine un ordre social, politique et économique perçu comme aliénant. [Ces] ouvrages ... témoignent de cette permanence dans l’histoire syrienne et en font un thème primordial omniprésent dans le récit romanesque.²¹

the Syrian novel constantly tells of the innumerable defeats suffered—collective ones during the various conflicts that took place during the nationalism era and its failure, and daily and individual defeats suffered by the ordinary population dominated by a social, political and economic order perceived as alienating ... these works bear witness to this ever-present [defeat] in Syrian history and make of it an omnipresent and primordial theme in the story of the novel.

However, despite the ensuing emergence of disparate sensibilities among Syrian intellectuals and writers, the post-*naksa* 20th-century Syrian novel, as I show in this study, was confined by interconnected internal and external factors and frameworks. On the one hand, Syrian writers had to function within the demarcated, yet hazy, boundaries put in place by the authoritarian regime that strove to appropriate the country’s literary production— from co-opting and regulating the cultural field and silencing dissident voices to promoting conformist voices, it sought to leverage the novel, and all other literary genres, as tools for mobilizing the masses and promoting the state’s agendas and ideologies. On the other hand, the literary field continued, for the most part, to be governed from within by intellectual and political frameworks and discourses that, despite the prevalent disillusionment, favored grand, totalizing political ideologies and reflected the ethos of

¹⁹ Emmanuel Yewah, “The Nation as a Contested Construct,” *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 32, Number 3, Fall 2001, 45.

²⁰ On the political and intellectual response to the defeat of 1967 in the Arab world, see Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967*, updated 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). On the impact that the defeat had on Syrian literature, see Alexa Firat, “Post-67 discourse and the Syrian novel: The construction of an autonomous literary field,” PhD diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 2010.

²¹ Vauthier, 343

the *nahḍa* and the *ḥadātha* projects, emphasizing the nation's homogeneity and conceiving of the project of modernity as an opposition to tradition. In his work on the experimental novel in the Levant, Stephan Meyer reflects on the intense politicization of literature in Syria and the enduring use of the novel to draw a collective portrait of society. Though Meyer does not thoroughly examine the diverse and intricate key elements that contributed to shaping Syria's literary movements in the twentieth century, he rightly points to the role that the ideological affinity between the Ba'ṯh party and the Soviet Union played in informing the development of the Syrian novel, and identifies a close relationship between literary movements in Syria and three political movements: The Arab nationalist movement—that is the Nasserite movement, which espoused a pan-Arab philosophy, the Syrian nationalist movement, represented by the Ba'ṯh party, and the communist movement.

The 21st-Century Syrian Novel: New Trajectories

A new generation of intellectuals began to question the epistemological and political stances prevalent in 20th-century literary field in Syria. The internal investigation into the principles and premises that had framed the intellectual discourse slowly gained momentum in the late 1990s with sharp debates that took place on the pages of newspapers and literary journals. This cohort of intellectuals proposed that the *nahḍa* and the *ḥadātha* projects and the ideologies to which they had given rise were themselves responsible for the contemporary crisis in Arab intellectual culture, because, they reasoned, any cultural project that imposes an ideology, whether modernist or traditional, necessarily leads to dismantling culture as a source of self-creation and innovation. Such deliberations overlapped with the emergence of a new generation of writers, the majority of whom were born and raised under the rule of Hafez al-Asad. Unlike previous generations of modern Syrian intellectuals who participated to varying degrees in the political life of the country, this generation had no such political agency but rather experienced the full effects of failing ideologies, and social and economic exclusion. Their frustrations mounted, and in the year 2000, when Hafiz al-Asad died and his son, Bashar al-Asad, took power, they boiled over in a period of intense oppositional activity known as the Damascus Spring. This movement was led by novelists, poets, artists, journalists, and filmmakers, and over the following decade, new literary discourses and avant-garde novels emerged.

Unlike the Syrian intellectuals that preceded them, this generation of novelists ventures beyond exposing the repressive daily practices of the system in place and the effects of these practices on the individual. At its core, their work dismantles the political and intellectual discourses along the lines of which the 20th-century Syrian novel had developed and functioned and the image of the nation and modernity they had forged. What transpires on the pages of these works are nuanced identities that embody the fragmentation of the modern nationalist subject and to which the nation-state is not the only frame of reference. My interviews with a diverse group of young writers who fled Syria in fear for their lives allow me to outline the emergence of a dialogical intellectual who aims to remap the nation's ethos, reconnect with a repressed cultural past, and reposition the role of literature in society. Working against rigid and monolithic worldviews and ideologies, these writers turned their creative endeavors to dislocating the image of the prophet-like intellectual of the 1950s and 60s, who had created, as Kamal Abu Deeb argues, “a totalizing discourse that was utterly certain and confident in the absolute validity of its

premises,”²² and held an intellectually elitist stance that ended up entrenching paternalism as it called on the enlightened few to reject the prevailing culture and lead society onto a new path of progress.

Embodying a new consciousness, a new critical and aesthetic sensibility that meditates on the crisis of nationhood in Syria and in the Arab world, the 21st century novel interrogates the paradigms that had hitherto governed the intellectual field. Both reflecting and contributing to the general atmosphere that engendered the 2011 uprising, these new literary discourses were spearheaded by a new generation of novelists who published for the first time in the 2000s, and are characterized by an unprecedented contribution of women novelists, whose involvement was remarkable not only in terms of numbers, but also in light of the gender sensibility that informs their works as they also contest both the nation and the novel as male-constructed spaces. In order to place this emerging discourse into perspective, and to understand the paradigm it shifted away from, I first investigate the intellectual and political frameworks within which the 20th-century Syrian novel developed, and the discursive processes through which the country’s literary canon was organized. I then examine how this emerging consciousness manifests itself in two novels written by women novelists, carving out new spaces of intellectual and aesthetic investigation. As I explore their use of intertextuality, narrative fragmentation, metafiction, and temporal distortion, I argue that these innovative literary practices enable these authors to contest history, unearth repressed memory and cultural heritage, and highlight the complex temporalities of embodied practices rooted in multiplicity.

Organization

The first chapter of this dissertation, titled, “The Nation, the Cultural Field, and the Ruling Party,” addresses the intricate relationship between the state and the cultural field in Syria. It first unpacks the totalizing discourse of the ruling Ba‘th Party and the image it projected of the nation, and explores the complex mechanisms by which the state, during the second half of the twentieth century, attempted to appropriate literary production in the country to conform with its vision of the nation. Building on the work of André Lefevere, I suggest that the state formed an undifferentiated patronage system, through which it strove to confine the country’s literary production and maintain the dominance of its own discourse. As I contend that the cultural field continued to be a site of contestation and dynamism, I also demonstrate that Syrian writers developed a precise sense of which lines were not to be crossed. I finally turn to the new millennium and the diverse local, global, and regional gravities that occasioned the displacement of the country’s undifferentiated patronage system, allowing new, critical voices to gain readership and momentum.

Titled, “The Syrian Intellectual: Mapping and Remapping the Nation,” the second chapter takes the work of Pierre Bourdieu on fields as an organizing principle, examining the ways in which Syrian intellectuals—their ideological and epistemological stances and agendas— have defined and legitimized the twentieth-century Syrian novel within a complex process of literary

²² Kamal Abu-Deeb, “The Collapse of Totalizing Discourse and the Rise of Marginalized/Minority Discourses,” in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa F. Boullatta*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 347.

canonization that constructs a cultural discourse through which power is deliberately allocated in the social world. Alternating between close reading of literary texts and the critical discourse around them, the chapter outlines key discursive changes in the interconnections between the Syrian intellectuals' positions and the project of nation-building. It first unpacks the genealogy that post-independence Syrian intellectuals fashioned for Arab modernity and the ways in which this genealogy informed the organization of the modern literary canon. The chapter then contends that instead of questioning the validity of the model they had proposed, many of the modernist, progressive Syrian intellectuals blamed the failure of modern Arab culture on the authoritarian political systems, which never allowed the modernization project to come to fruition. I finally turn to the new millennium to investigate the emergence of a new consciousness among Syrian writers, and an ensuing transformation in the way they perceived themselves and their relationship to both society and the field of power. Sharing insights and opinions from a group of Syrian writers, the chapter highlights their critique of the revolutionary, all-knowing, prophet-like intellectual of the fifties and sixties and their complete loss of faith in any grand unifying narrative.

Chapter three focuses on *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* (*As a River Should*), a 2007 novel by female writer Manhal al-Sarrāj. *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* is one of the first Syrian novels to openly break the silence on the “1982 Hama massacre,” during which the Syrian regime launched a military campaign that put an end to a five-year armed insurgency led by Sunni Muslim groups, destroyed the city, and killed thousands of its people. Before delving into the novel, the chapter examines the various mechanisms by which the Syrian regime established a public discourse marked by collective silence and conformity, as well as the role that Syrian intellectuals played in solidifying that silence. With an interdisciplinary approach, the chapter then explores the ways in which al-Sarrāj's novel textually investigates denied collective and individual memory. Building on works of scholars such as Cathy Caruth in trauma theory and Pierre Nora on *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), I argue that by embracing a trauma aesthetic, the novel identifies and textually performs a wounded subjectivity at the heart of national memory, engendering its own narrative of a traumatic past that has been denied through forced public amnesia. Placing *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* within the discursive space of the Arabic literary heritage, I demonstrate how the narrative engages in a complex dialogue with the traditional poetic genre of *rithā'* (elegy) to reconstruct Hama upon the remnants of earlier losses, and reproduces the intricate relationship between mourning, violence, and gender, dislocating the binary lines around which official narratives of armed conflicts are typically constructed.

The fourth chapter, “Reclaiming the Narrative,” discusses Rōzā Yāsīn Ḥasan's 2011 novel, *Brūvā* (*First Draft*), which, through innovative literary techniques challenges the notion of authorship as well as the legitimacy of the authority it metonymically represents. Relying on allusions and cross-genre, intertextual practices, *Brūvā* delivers a critique of the project of *ḥadātha* as a rupture with the nation's past. It announces the metaphorical death of the savior, prophet-like writer and with him, the rejection of the worldviews he held, enabling the emergence of multiple humanized and individualized images of intellectuals who are characterized by uncertainty. Reflecting an emerging feminist literary discourse in Syria and the Arab world, Ḥasan's text exposes the ways the nation has been narrated into modern self-consciousness by male writers who more often than not cast women as symbols, rather than as literal national subjects. Following the stories of two main female characters, I highlight how the masculine-feminine binary that had governed the imagining of the nation is subverted from within, and how agency and desire are intertwined in the narrative, allowing for new articulations of female sexuality and subjectivity. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of the relations between power, the body, and sexuality,

this chapter further underlines how Hasan exposes the gendered dynamics of power in place and the gender politics of nationalism in times of crisis.

Chapter One

The Nation, the Cultural Field, and the Ruling Party

Overview

In order to place the new Syrian novel into perspective and understand the epistemological break it embodies, this chapter outlines the dominant intellectual and political frameworks that had governed the literary field in Syria. In the first section of this chapter, “Forging a Nation,” I explore the image of the nation created and promoted by the ruling party, suggesting that this image was not static—it constantly changed, albeit to serve the changing realities, ideologies, and interests of the party and its leader. The second section of this chapter, “Monopolizing the Cultural Field,” explores the complex mechanisms by which the ruling Ba‘th Party attempted to appropriate literary production in the country to comply with the party’s vision of the nation-state it was forging. From co-opting and regulating the cultural field and silencing dissident voices to promoting conformist discourse, the state created, I argue, an undifferentiated patronage system through which it attempted to curtail the literary imagination and maintain the dominance of its own discourse. Certainly, despite all the efforts made to monitor and censor the cultural field in Syria, it remained a site of contestation and dynamism. However, both the regime and those who criticized it developed a precise sense of which lines were not to be crossed. The third and final section, “The New Millennium: Cracks in the System,” turns to the new millennium and the diverse local, global, and regional pressures that opened cracks in the country’s undifferentiated patronage system, allowing for new, critical voices to gain readership and momentum.

Forging a Nation

The ideology of the Ba‘th Party²³ is rooted in Arab nationalism, a movement driven by many formative forces, including, as Israel Gershoni explains, “the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the recognition that only a new communal identity based on Arabic language, culture, and history would be viable in the post-Ottoman world.”²⁴ Determined to drastically change the country’s social hierarchy, the party’s founders introduced an alternative to the nationalism of the urban notables, which was bound to the Syrian territories and whose leaders, as the party’s founders believed, could not see beyond their economic and family interests.²⁵ In contrast to

²³ Originally named *Ḥarakat al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabī* (The Arab Resurrection Movement), the party was founded in 1943 by two Damascene school teachers, Mīshel ‘Aflaq and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār, the former Christian and the latter Muslim. In 1947, the party amended its constitution and merged with Dhakī al-Arsūzī’s *Ḥizb al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabī* (The Arab Resurrection Party), and in 1953 it merged again with *al-Ḥizb al-Ishtirākī al-Sūrī* (The Syrian Socialist Party) to become what is known today as *Ḥizb al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabī al-Ishtirākī* (The Arab Socialist Resurrection Party).

²⁴ Israel Gershoni, “Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, 1920–1945: Old and New Narratives,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, eds. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University press, 1997), 16.

²⁵ Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 228.

materialist western socialism, their vision blended Arab nationalism with moderate and spiritual socialism and was driven by an anti-imperialist, Arab nationalist ideology. Conceiving of the physical boundaries between the Arab countries as artificial and imposed by foreign powers, Ba'athists proposed that Arabs must rise up and abolish these boundaries, so that Arab civilization could flourish and renew itself.

The notion of Arab unity was also the Ba'ath's answer to local needs and conditions. Like other political parties in the country, the Ba'ath developed as a reaction to a number of local challenges that faced post-independence Syria. In addition to a weak economy, and political upheaval and instability,²⁶ the Ba'ath, and other parties, led by a new generation of intellectuals, faced a very critical challenge: their country was in many respects a state without being a homogeneous nation-state. During that time, Syrian society consisted of several tribes, religions, and ethnic groups that were fragmented into a number of closed communities with conflicting loyalties, and the country lacked an all-encompassing national identity. As Albert H Hourani describes these communities under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, "each was a 'world,' sufficient to its members and exacting the ultimate loyalty. The worlds touched but did not mingle with each other; each looked at the rest with suspicion and even hatred."²⁷ Furthermore, these loyalties were later fostered by colonial powers in an attempt to suppress the rising notion of Arab nationalism. Nikolas Van Dam explains that under the French mandate, "the separatism and particularism of religious and national minorities were encouraged by the granting of autonomous status to areas where such minorities formed a local majority."²⁸

On another level, the Ba'ath Party found in secularism the perfect means through which a sense of national unity could be created. Because of its ability to supersede ethnic and religious particularities by emphasizing an inclusive political identity and creating modern, political subjects, secularism was perceived by Ba'athists as an essential way to unite the Arab nation.²⁹ From its early days, the Ba'ath pressed for a state and a public space free from religious discourse and practices. It called on people to fight against reactionary ideologies (*al-mu'taqadāt al-raǧ'iyyah*) and to embrace scientific facts (*al-ḥaqā'iq al-'ilmiyyah*). The article on education in Syria's 1969 constitution exemplifies the secular and modern language of the state's official discourse:

The education and cultural system aims at creating an Arab, nationalist, socialist generation, scientific in its thought, tied to its history, seized of its heritage, imbued with the spirit of the struggle to achieve the goals of its nation in unity and freedom and socialism, and in the service of humanity and its progress.³⁰

This image of the nation, for which Arabic language and Arab history were two of the most important forming elements, certainly entailed a systematic restructuring of history and, consequently, of the status and role of Islam in Arab culture. Historical figures, events, and

²⁶ Between 1946 and 1956, Syria had twenty different cabinets and drafted four separate constitutions.

²⁷ Albert H. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 22.

²⁸ Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁰ Quoted and translated in Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'athist Secularism* (Milton Park; New York: Routledge, 2011), 20.

symbols, as well as pre-Islamic traditions and civilizations were all reorganized to create one unified past. The secondary status given to religion in the Ba‘th Party’s thinking was also associated with its focus on socialism, which reached its peak after merging with the Syrian Socialist Party in 1953. Religion was now “judged according to the principles of socialism and the evolutionary transformation of society, in which it was to wither away and give space to the scientific understanding of society and nature.”³¹

The Ba‘th party’s vision of Arab unity evolved and changed after a long conflict over policies and visions within the party itself.³² The old guard was still attached to notions of pan-Arabism, while a younger generation of Ba‘thists with rural, and often minoritarian origins introduced a more radical socialist ideology, and most importantly, regionalist views that saw Ba‘th policies in terms of Syria itself. The notion of territorial nationalism intensified in the aftermath of the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR), the political union between Syria and Egypt that lasted from 1958 until Syria seceded in 1961. Although Syrians were open to building a shared UAR identity, the state’s systematic attempts to obliterate Syria’s own symbols of identity while maintaining the centrality of the Egyptian identity ultimately led to strengthening their national identity. Once Syrians’ individuality was threatened, they realized that they did indeed possess a different identity from the Egyptians, and that being an Arab and a Syrian at the same time was not necessarily a contradiction in terms.³³ In October 1963, the Ba‘th held its Sixth National Congress, in which it announced a set of points of departure (*muntalqāt hizbiyyah*) that introduced the party’s views on the critical and pressing issues of the time. For the party at that juncture, as Itamar Rabinovich remarks, “[i]t is socialism that the *points of departure* present as the central goal, while Arab unity is reduced to an instrumental role—Arab unity is an indispensable basis for the construction of a socialist economy. For the majority of the sixth National Congress, the immediate goal appeared to be the establishment of a socialist society, while Arab unity became a sacred slogan still deserving of proper respect.”³⁴

Although Arab unity continues to this day to be celebrated in the Ba‘th party’s rhetoric, in reality, the focus on pan-Arabism weakened over time, especially when the regionalist officers entirely consolidated power after the coup of 1966.³⁵ At that point, the party concentrated its attention on uniting Syrian society from within. Its unity plan entailed constructing the nation as a homogeneous community connected by citizenship. This discourse was further amplified with the ascendance of the first non-Sunni (‘Alawite) president, Hafiz al-Asad, to power in 1970, which

³¹ Moaddel, 231.

³² For a detailed account of the intraparty struggle, see Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 86-104.

³³ For an informative analysis of the impact that the raise and collapse of the United Arab Republic had on the evolution of Arab politics, see Elie Podeh, *The Decline of Arab Unity: The Rise and Fall of the United Arab Republic* (Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 195.

³⁴ Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria under Ba‘th 1963-1966: The Army-party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1972), 88.

³⁵ On its current website, the Ba‘th Party’s National Leadership explains Arab unity as a political *partnership* between Arab countries, one that is gradually realized through economic, cultural, and security collaboration. “*Al-Mawqif min qaḍiyyat al-waḥdah*” ([The Party’s] Position on the Issue of [Arab] Unity), *Ba‘th Arab Socialist Party*,

http://www.baath-party.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=129:129&catid=37&lang=ar

was met with general discontent by the Sunni majority. The constitution of the Ba‘th party paints a clear image of how the nation is imagined. “The national bond,” the constitution states, “will be the only bond existing in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among the citizens by melting them in the crucible of a single nation and combats all other forms of factional solidarity such as religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionalism.”³⁶

The Arab and secular characters of the nation as imagined by the Ba‘th Party attracted members of Arabic-speaking religious minorities. Conceiving of Islam as an aspect of Arab national heritage and of which Arabs of all religions are equal heirs was particularly appealing to religious minorities. Heterodox Islamic communities, such as ‘Alawites, Druzes, and Isma‘ilis hoped that such reconfiguration of the nation would free them of their minority and sectarian status and put an end to the political and socio-economic discrimination against them. Furthermore, in a country where the Sunni majority had for a long time dominated the socio-economic scene, the socialist agenda of the party gained massive popularity in poor rural areas where religious minorities were concentrated. Undoubtedly, this same image of the nation was poorly received by both the Sunni majority and the non-Arabic speaking minorities, including the Kurds. Although officially recognized by the party, non-Arabic speaking minorities were considered not equal to Arabs in the nationalist sense and were completely excluded from the country’s political scene.³⁷ On the other hand, the Sunni majority believed that the party’s views and ideologies did not only threaten their political and socio-economic status, but also attempted to undermine the role and function of Islam in society.

Clearly, the Ba‘th’s radical conceptualization of and approach to the notion of Arabism did not help create the hoped-for national equality and cohesive identity. Instead, it played a significant role in producing new forms of polarization that led, over time, to violent upheavals. However, it must be noted that, as recent literature on religion and secularism demonstrates, this polarization is also rooted in the structural paradoxes of the secular project. As Saba Mahmood points out, the issue of minorities is intrinsically tied to the establishment of the nation-state. Since the nation-state seeks to represent “the people,” united by shared history, culture, and territory, the concept of national minority naturally creates a fundamental tension.

On the one hand, it signifies the membership of a minority group in a national polity; on the other hand, the minority group also represents an incipient threat to national unity, by virtue of its differences from the majority. This threat is intrinsic to the ideology of nationalism because the modern concept of nationhood regards linguistic, ethnic, and cultural characteristics as a legitimate basis for people’s claims to self-determination and independent statehood.³⁸

Therefore, constructing a homogenous image of Syria necessarily entailed suppressing differences, memories, in addition to religious, ethnic, and tribal ties. A set of modern social institutions, syndicates, and collective organizations was established with the aim to discourage “reactionary”

³⁶ Quoted and translated in Van Dam, 15.

³⁷ After Hafiz al-Asad became president in 1970, the Ba‘th Party opened its membership to all Syrians including non-Arabs. However, non-Arab ethnic minority members had to accept Arabization (i.e. they officially had to give up their original ethnic identity in favor of the Arab identity) and they could not advance politically the way members of Arab religious minorities did. Van Dam, 18.

³⁸ Mahmood, 52-53.

ideologies and promote the establishment of a “progressive” culture, rallied around no other affiliation but citizenship. Although minorities and people from poor, rural areas rose to power under the rule of the Ba‘th party and gained representation in the country’s newly emerging powerful institutions, in exchange, they lost their own particularities within the cultural space. The measures launched by the state were so radical that even geographical names with ethnic or religious indications were changed—Jabal al-Durūz (Mountain of Druzes), for example, was changed to Jabal al-‘Arab (Mountain of Arabs) in the government’s Statistical Abstract, Jibāl al-‘Alawiyyīn (Mountains of ‘Alawites) to al-Jibāl al-Saḥiliyyah (Coastal Mountains), and Wādī al-Naṣārā (Valley of Christians) to Wādī al-Naḍārā (Blooming Valley).³⁹

The deep tension between peripheral particularisms and the Ba‘th’s conceptualization of both the nation-state and Arabism required various formulas of conflict-resolution. Not only did the nature of these formulas depend on the particular history of each minority, but it also shaped the role and the image of these minorities within the project of nation-building. Arabic-speaking and non-territorial minorities such as the Druze and the ‘Alawites went through a multi-faceted process of integration into the national narrative and were projected as active forces in building the nation-state.⁴⁰ On the other hand, they lost in the process their particularity within the Syrian cultural space. In her study of Druze identity in the Middle East, Bernadette Schenk argues that the project of nation-building, backed by a radical and subjective process of secularization, reduced the Druze religion to a mere realization of a common history, and threatened to break down traditional communal structures and strip the community of its distinctive identity.⁴¹ Patrick Seale also suggests a similar process within the ‘Alawite community itself.

The names, values and tribal organization of the ‘Alawis derive both from their distant nomadic background and from the experience of life in the mountains over the last few centuries. Today’s ‘Alawi tribal structures reflect what is left of this heritage ... ‘Alawis today are not always comfortable with the subject of tribal affiliations as the Ba‘thist state has striven to replace such categories with the modern notion of citizenship, but if pressed every village boy could tell you to which tribe his family belongs. Asked to name the leading tribes and families of Qurdaha, the head of the municipality replied, “we have no tribes or families here. We are all members of the Ba‘th family under the leadership of Hafiz al-Asad.”⁴²

By contrast, the Kurdish community in Syria, a territorial minority that aspires to its own homeland, represented a particularly poignant threat to the sovereignty and identity of the nation.

³⁹ Van Dam, 7.

⁴⁰ These minorities were not only integrated into the Arab nation, but also into the world of Islam. In 1959, an Azhar *fatwa* backed by the pan-Arab Egyptian president Nasser admitted Shi‘ī Muslims, ‘Alawites, and Druzes, who had been considered heretics and idolaters for hundreds of years, into mainstream Islam. Some scholars argue that whether the Druzes and ‘Alawites actually believed in the Islamism of their religion was rather doubtful and that perhaps they congenially employed the accommodating rule of *taqiyyah*, the precautionary dissimulation of religious belief and practice in the face of persecution. See for example, Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self Expression* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc, 2002).

⁴¹ Bernadette Schenk, “Druze Identity in the Middle East: Tendencies and Developments in Modern Druze Communities Since the 1960s,” in *The Druze: Realities and Perceptions*, ed. Kamal Salibi (London: The Druze Heritage Foundation, 2005), 79-94.

⁴² Seale, 9.

The anti-Kurdish attitude of the Ba‘th is well exemplified in *Dirāsah ‘an muḥāfazat al-jazīrah min al-nāḥiyah al-qawmiyyah wa’l-ijtimā’iyyah wa’l-siyāsiyyah* (A Study about al-Jazeera Province in Terms of Arabism, Society and Politics), a secret report submitted to the party in 1963 by Muḥammad Ṭālib Hilāl, the Head of the Secret Services in the Kurd-majority city of al-Ḥasakah in Eastern Syria. Discussing the Kurdish threat Hilāl states, “we must regard the Kurds as a people putting their efforts and everything they possess into creating their imaginary homeland. They are therefore our enemies, and religious ties notwithstanding, there is no difference between them and Israel, for “Judastan” and “Kurdistan,” so to speak are the same species.”⁴³

Seeing the Kurds as a threat, the Ba‘th party implemented many repressive policies that aimed to eradicate the Kurdish presence from Syrian life. These policies not only violated the Kurdish people’s cultural and linguistic rights, but even stripped many Kurds of their civil rights as citizens, since the Syrian government refused to grant them citizenship.⁴⁴ The names of Kurdish villages and towns were all Arabized after the 1977 decree of Arabization of toponyms; celebrating Kurdish national and cultural holidays was banned; and teaching or even using the Kurdish language was prohibited. Additionally, Kurdish cultural symbols were reinterpreted and appropriated. The most striking example of such practices was the appropriation of Nūrūz (New Year’s Day), which after the 1960s became somewhat of a ritual of Kurdish nationalism celebrated through songs and dancing. In addition to imposing an official ban on celebrating Nūrūz, in 1988 the Syrian authorities attempted to eclipse it by issuing a decree announcing the day as a holiday honoring Syrian mothers.⁴⁵

The ascendance of Hafiz al-Asad to power in 1970, after a bloodless coup d’état, changed the face of the country for decades to come. Drained by years of political instability and lack of economic improvement, and traumatized by the 1967 war, most Syrians welcomed the advent of a new government. Asad immediately launched what he termed *al-Ḥarakah al-Taṣḥīhiyyah* (The Corrective Movement), a campaign of political and economic reforms, which had positive impacts on people’s lives, and many people soon had reasons to be thankful for Asad’s accession.⁴⁶ However, as Patrick Seale remarks, “[Asad] wanted to restore national unity but, his temperament being authoritarian rather than democratic, without taking undue risks. He seems to have had no

⁴³ Quoted and Translated in Ismet Cheriff Vanly, “The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon,” in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 122.

⁴⁴ According to a special report published in 2009 by The United States Institute of Peace, “since 1962, the Syrian state has divided Kurds in Syria into three major demographic categories: Syrian Kurds, foreign Kurds, and ‘concealed’ Kurds. Syrian Kurds have retained their Syrian nationality. Foreign Kurds were stripped of citizenship and registered in official archives as foreigners; in 2008, there were about 200,000 of them. Concealed Kurds are denationalized Kurds who have not been registered in official records at all and whom Syrian authorities characterize as concealed. Nearly 80,000 people belong to this category ... In addition, there are about 280,000 undocumented Kurds who reside in Syria but have no citizenship, according to Kurdish sources. No government statistics are available on this group.” Radwan Ziadeh, “The Kurds in Syria Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?” U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 220, April 2009, 2.

⁴⁵ For further information, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, trans. Emily Welle and Jane Welle (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁶ Seale reports that, “the price of basic foods was cut by 15 per cent. The hated security police were purged and curbed, while responsibility for dealing with a number of crimes was transferred from the army to the police. Detention orders and many confiscation orders of property were revoked. Restrictions on travel and trade with Lebanon were lifted, restoring to Syrians their natural space. Assurances were given to the private sector, and exiles and immigrants were encouraged to bring home their money and their skills.” Seale, 171.

ambition to create a pluralist society or to return to the chaotic democracy of 1955-8 which had brought Syria to the brink of disintegration. Rather he wished to mobilize Syrian energies for the battles ahead, seeking a national consensus cemented in his leadership.”⁴⁷

Although Asad continued to rule in the name of the Ba‘th party, he built in the following years a cult of personality in which he was projected as the country’s idealized, heroic president. In other words, the nation was now constructed around an omnipresent and omniscient leader. The state’s official discourse, backed, as will be demonstrated later, by extreme corporatism, presented Asad as the “father,” the “combatant,” the “first teacher,” the “eternal leader,” and the “hero of the people.” Photographs, religious iconography, and historical events and figures were all mobilized in order to place the leader at the very center of the national narrative. Every Syrian had to serve Asad’s cult with whatever talent they had. Poets, university professors, novelists, dramatists and artists were required to help maintain the cult by producing and reproducing its rhetoric. The state completely controlled the symbolic world in order to manage systems of signification, and every Syrian, even children, became fluent in the symbolic vocabulary of the Syrian state.

In Asad’s Syria (*sūriyyah al-Asad*), as the country was often referred to in the official discourse, the *eternal leader* became the center of the national narrative, and the cornerstone in the process of nation building. It was to him that citizens were loyal, and through him that they bonded, for he now embodied and represented the nation-state. In her study of Asad’s cult, Lisa Wedeen emphasizes the crucial role that cults of personality play in the process of nation building:

In the postcolonial context, where regimes are often forced to build an effective state and enforce their dominance *while* cultivating a sense of national identification, political cults, in particular, may serve to redefine the terms of national membership by both occasioning the enforcement of compliance and also generating the shared experience of that compliance ... Cults may also contribute to nation-state building by helping to territorialize official politics. It is generally within the boundaries of the nation-state that people from the Syrian capital and its hinterlands, for example, are exposed to countless photographs of Asad and are expected to chant the slogans and listen to the panegyrics lauding the president’s accomplishments. National membership is expressed through people’s facility with the vocabulary and the regime’s ability to reproduce the symbolism of Asad’s rule. The nation-state, in this sense, extends as far as the cult does.⁴⁸

Following the work of contemporary scholars of political science who have adapted Freud’s conception of the “family romance” to suggest that political rhetoric can be inspired by familial structures, Wedeen further suggests that Asad’s cult personifies power by situating it within the gendered and generational constructions of patriarchal family life. “Asad’s role as national patriarch,” Wedeen explains, “positions him symbolically as the dominant figure in the hierarchical national community; citizen-children owe him their obedience.”⁴⁹

Constructing a secular, and homogeneous Syria in which the eternal leader was of central importance also involved controlling and molding the different interpretations of the country’s contemporary history and politics. Some contemporary historical moments were glorified and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁸ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 157.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

groomed to boost the image of a nation built around its leader, while others were suppressed to virtual nonexistence. Following the 1973 War with Israel, the official Syrian narrative rendered Asad as modern day Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī⁵⁰ and as the national father who substituted for biological fathers killed in battle. As for literary production, novels, stories, and plays celebrating the victory flooded the market, while many others with the slightest reference to casualties were granted neither publishing nor distribution rights. For example, the censorship department rejected two novels by Nabīl Sulaymān; *Jaramātī* (Proper Name, 1977) and *al-Misallah* (*The Obelisk*, 1978), because they mentioned the impact that the war left on people's lives. Although Sulaymān managed to publish his novels in other countries, the Syrian government banned their distribution within the Syrian market.⁵¹ The bloody conflict between the Syrian regime and the Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps the most striking example of the regime's suppressing of memory. As will be discussed in detail in the next chapters, despite the intensity of the traumatic events and the massacres that the country witnessed, the public and literary discourses were engulfed in sheer silence, and the Syrian regime allowed one and only narrative, insisting that no massacres against civilians had taken place, but rather that a few terrorists had been eliminated.

Monopolizing the Cultural Field

Journalists, intellectuals, and broadcasters have fought against the reactionary imperialist campaign. They never hesitated and constantly exposed its goals. For that, they deserve our appreciation.⁵²

Hafiz al-Asad

The decades-long endurance of the authoritarian Ba'ṯhist regime and of Hafiz al-Asad himself was striking to many of the country's observers. Many scholars of contemporary Syria have paid much attention to how the populist authoritarian regime of Asad achieved and maintained its power, not only in the face of local challenges but also during a period of history in which populism had declined and similar authoritarian regimes had yielded to more popular systems of rule. In addition to the regime's systematic coercive practices, adaptive capacities,⁵³

⁵⁰ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, who led the Muslim military campaign against the Crusades, is an example of how Asad and the Ba'ṯh party appropriated history in service of Asad's cult. As Wedeen reports, in Asad's 1991 referendum campaign, a poster with the caption "*min Ḥiṭṭīn ilā Tishrīn*" (From the *Ḥiṭṭīn* Battle to October Battle) was widely distributed. The poster identifies Asad's October 1973 War with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's legendary military victory in the battle of *Ḥiṭṭīn*. Interestingly, although Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was elevated to the level of a national symbol, no mention was ever made of his Kurdish origin. Wedeen, 3.

⁵¹ For more details and examples, see "*Malaf 'an al-raqābah fī Sūriyyah*," *al-Ādāb*, vol. 50, n. 7-8, 2002.

⁵² Muṣṭafā Ṭlās, ed. *Kadhālika qāla al-Asad* (*Thus Spoke al-Asad*) (Damascus: Dār Ṭlās, 2001), 346. *Kadhālika qāla al-Asad*, whose title invokes Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and which compiles a collection of Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's sayings, was published by Muṣṭafā Ṭlās, Syria's Minister of Defense from 1972 to 2004 and the owner of a Dār Ṭlās publishing house, an important patron of Syrian literature.

⁵³ Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders define the regime in Syria in terms of what they call recombinant authoritarianism, that is systems of rule that possess the capacities to re-order and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive, and regulatory arrangements in order to create recognizable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configurations of challenges. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, "Authoritarian Governance in Syria and Iran: Challenged, Reconfiguring and

and sectarian character, which provided it with a high degree of internal coherence and stability, scholars have emphasized the role of authoritarian corporatism in producing compliance and obedience.⁵⁴

Authoritarian corporatism was established through both coercion as well as inclusionary and exclusionary strategies, introducing an authority that extended to every sphere in Syria, both public and private, and both social and personal. As Annette Büchs explains, the Syrian regime attained obedience and conformity through what she terms a “tacit pact.”

With regard to “material” forms of power, this pact is a political pact in which political voice is traded for economic rewards, that is, in which the weaker party is economically included but politically excluded. With regard to “ideational” forms of power, this pact is a “frame” that is internalized through interpellation and a specific process constituted of fear, cynicism, and disciplinary effects and is mediated through a transformed concept of patriarchy. In both instances, however, the “tacit pact” is between unequal parties, and the weaker party is under constant threat of exclusion and/or violence in the case of noncompliance.⁵⁵

Aspects of the “tacit pact” were reflected in the cultural field through the creation of an undifferentiated patronage system that was not only concerned with repressing dissident voices and alternative cultures, but also with promoting a national discourse and a national identity of its own. André Lefevere, the Russian formalist theorist, defines literature as “one of the systems that constitute the complex ‘system of systems’ known as culture.”⁵⁶ It is a “contrived” system, Lefevere writes, “because it consists both of texts (objects) and human agents who read, write, and rewrite texts.”⁵⁷ The borders between these systems are porous, allowing them to interact and influence each other within the logic of the culture to which they belong. Literature as a system, Lefevere further explains, is controlled by two factors: “the first belongs squarely within the literary system and controls it from the inside within the parameters set by the second factor.”⁵⁸ The former is what Lefevere calls “the professionals.” Those are critics, reviewers, teachers, and translators, who define what literature is, or what it is allowed to be, and play a major role in the process of inclusion and exclusion of the canon formation. While they repress some literary works, they rewrite others until they are deemed acceptable.

The second factor, “patronage,” operates from outside the literary field. Lefevere understands patronage as “the powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading,

Resilient,” in *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, ed. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 7.

⁵⁴ See Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996); and Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ Annette Büchs, “The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria Under Hafez and Bashar al-Asad,” *GIGA Working Papers*, no 97 March 2009, 33.

⁵⁶ André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

writing, and rewriting of literature.”⁵⁹ In that light, patronage can be categorized as differentiated or undifferentiated.

Patronage is undifferentiated when its three components, the ideological, the economic, and the status components, are all dispensed by one and the same patron ... Patronage is differentiated, on the other hand, when economic success is relatively independent of ideological factors ... In systems with undifferentiated patronage, the patron’s efforts will primarily be directed at preserving the stability of the social system as a whole, and the literary production that is accepted and actively promoted within the social system will have to further that aim or, at the very least, not actively oppose ‘the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation.’⁶⁰

Since undifferentiated patronage attempts to monopolize all different cultural spheres and to promote only system-preserving activities, any novelty is considered to be suspicious. Additionally, as Theo Hermans points out, “the relationship between a system and its environment is asymmetrical if only because a system, however complex, is always less complex than its environment.”⁶¹ Thus, undifferentiated patronage attempts to maintain its power through the preservation of intra-systemic identity, controlling the production and importation of dissident elements, or at least reinterpreting them in terms of the system’s dominant norms. It aims to maintain the canon as stable and hierarchically structured, and the main function of norms in this mechanism is to reduce the complexity of the system.

For the ruling Ba‘th party, culture was a fundamental concern. The constitution, which the party adopted in 1947, stated that in order to create a progressive and humanist national Arab culture, it was the responsibility of the state to protect and encourage intellectuals in a climate of freedom of speech, publication, and gathering. These major principles were solidified in the sixties with proactive policies in favor of education and culture, and many measures were taken to fight illiteracy, and promote education and cultural production. However, the party had a very particular view of what trajectory cultural production should take. In order to shape the country’s cultural production in line with its own vision and agenda, the ruling party assigned itself as the only power authorized to lead the cultural field. This power, as Michel Foucault suggests, is not only repressive, but also productive, for “[w]hat makes power hold good, what makes it accepted is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasures, forms knowledge, produces discourse.”⁶²

In order to control the cultural field, the Ba‘th implemented many complex mechanisms including monopolizing and regulating the cultural field, silencing dissident voices, and promoting conformist voices that would reproduce its discourse. It launched an extreme form of state corporatism in which all institutions involved in cultural production, including publishing and broadcast, were state-owned and run. State corporatism did not only integrate workers into the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁶¹ Theo Hermans, “Translational Norms and Correct Translations,” in *Translation Studies: The State of the Art*, ed. Kitty M van Leuven-Zwart and Ton Naaijken (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991), 159.

⁶² Foucault Michel and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other writings 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 119; Quoted in Lefevere, 15.

larger society, but also subordinated and harnessed them to the ambitions of the party and the state. The state monopoly also included broadcasting and film production—private broadcasting was forbidden, and according to Syrian law, the objectives of the state broadcasting organization were to contribute to public guidance, raise cultural, social and moral standards, and strengthen national emotions and social cohesion, among other things.⁶³

As for printed material, two major ministries in Syria combined the roles of publisher and censor, the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. The Ministry of Information was in control, for example, of the country's press, which under Hafiz al-Asad included three daily newspapers and their weekly issues in addition to the Syrian Arab News Agency, whose board of directors was chaired by the Minister of Information or his deputy. In its 1998 report on media and censorship in Syria, the International Center against Censorship remarks that the purpose of the Ministry of Information was to publish newspapers, magazines, books and other items that would promote national socialist awareness among the masses and to absorb most writers and workers in the fields of journalism, literature, authorship and translation.⁶⁴ Aspiring publishers were required to apply for a permit from the General Administration for News and Publicity within the Ministry of Information. Further, Article 13 of the General Law on Printed Matter obliges any trader importing regular foreign publications to deposit two copies of each issue with the General Administration. Article 14 entitles the Prime Minister, at the suggestion of either the Minister of the Interior or of Information, to prevent the circulation of foreign publications if they are deemed to be detrimental to national autonomy or security, or to contravene public morals.⁶⁵

Controlling the cultural field in Syria also included silencing opposing voices. The Penal Code and the General Law on Printed Matter list violations that can be committed through either speaking or publishing, and "some articles in these laws are worded in such a way that references to 'conspiracy' and 'incomplete acts' could even be construed to cover thinking out loud or reading banned materials."⁶⁶ On top of these laws, the State of Emergency Law imposed blanket censorship on communication of all kinds. The law, which had been activated in 1962 by the authorities under threat of war with Israel, was reinforced in 1963 by Legislative Decree No.6,⁶⁷ which criminalized any expression that would threaten the country's national security and any opposition to the aims of the Ba'th's March revolution (*ahdāf al-thawrah*).⁶⁸ This blanket ban on

⁶³ Naomi Saqr, *Walls of Silence: Media and Censorship in Syria* (London: Article 19 the International Centre Against Censorship, 1998), 35.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁷ Legislative Decree No. 6 of 1965 prohibits opinions that are deemed contrary to the aims of the revolution. Article 3(a) refers to acts that are considered contrary to the implementation of the socialist system in the state, whether they take place by action, speaking, or writing or by any other means of expression or publication.

⁶⁸ In the party's rhetoric, the March 8th Revolution refers to the Ba'th's 1963 coup d'état. The distinction between coup and revolution in the lexicon of military politics hinges upon the presence or absence of mass participation when new regimes come to power. However, since the 1960s the word *thawrah* (revolution) in the Arab world has been used by political regimes to imply the depth of political and social change they bring. For a detailed discussion of the evolution of the term in the Arab and Muslim world, see Ami Ayalon, "From *Fitna* to *Thawra*,"

opposing the aims of the revolution closed the door in the face of any attempt, not only to criticize the party's actions and ideologies, but also to imagine a Syrian history, identity, or community in terms different from those set by the official discourse.

In order to keep the cultural field in check, a complex culture of censorship was created. All printed material, published locally or imported for distribution, had to be approved by the Ministry of Information or the Ministry of Culture before being released to the public. Additionally, all state-affiliated publishing venues, such as the Arab Writers' Union, had their own reviewing processes, which played by the state's rules.⁶⁹ Censorship bodies did not always reject works, but they also took the liberty to rewrite them. In many cases, works would be approved, but after changes were made, or whole parts were omitted.

In 2002, the well-respected Lebanese literary magazine *al-Ādāb*, published a special issue entirely dedicated to censorship in Syria. The timing and the circumstances surrounding the publishing of the issue are important because they expose the many mechanisms that govern the cultural field, not only in Syria but in the Arab world in general. In his introductory piece, the Lebanese literary critic and the magazine's Editor-in-Chief, Samāḥ Idrīs revealed that *al-Ādāb* magazine had been struggling financially and announced that this was the last issue to be published as a hard copy. He also announced that the reporting on censorship in Syria was to be followed by new reportings on different Arab countries in the forthcoming online-only version of the magazine, hinting to the power that the advent of the internet had given to dissident voices.

The brave move by the magazine to tackle the critical question of censorship and, therefore, to risk that the issue would most likely be banned in many Arab countries came when the magazine had nothing more to lose. In his sarcastic and bitter note as Editor-in-Chief, titled *ʿAz̤ī al-sayyid al-raqīb* (Dear Mr. Censor), Idrīs exposes the power dynamics that govern the content of literary magazines all around the Arab world. Although the censoring bodies in an individual Arab country cannot directly impact the content of a magazine published somewhere else, these bodies leverage the power of the market to teach any magazine that crosses the lines a lesson by simply prohibiting the magazine from entering the country, thereby harming its sales and jeopardizing its future.

نحن مجلة مستقلة، وخاسرة، ونصرخ منذ عامين، ولا من يُجيب. العدد الماضي أُلّف في أحد البلدان. أتعرف أي بلد؟ كان فيه ملف عن التظاهرات العربية انتصاراً لشعب فلسطين. سمحوا بالتظاهرات، التي تعكس حيوية الشعب المتظاهر وعروبتة النابضة، ولكنهم منعوا العدد، ورموا بخمسمئة نسخة يا غافل إلك الله! جمعنا ثمنها دولاراً دولاراً، لو تعلم. والعدد الذي قبله أُلّفه في بلد آخر، ورموا بخمسمئة نسخة أخرى مع انه لا يذكر هذا البلد بكلمة لا من قريب ولا من بعيد. وفاطمة البصارة، حين سألتها عن السبب، سكّنت برهة ثم قالت: "والله، يا ابني، بطّلت أفهم شي من شي."⁷⁰

We are a failing independent magazine. We have been screaming for two years, but it has all been in vain. Our last issue was destroyed in an Arab country. Do you know which one? The issue contained a report on the demonstrations that took place in that country in support of the Palestinian people. The regime allowed the

Studia Islamica No. 66 (1987), 145-174; and Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁶⁹ For a detailed discussion about the emergence and development of the Union, see Alexa Firat, "Cultural Battles on the Literary Field: From the Syrian's Writers' Collective to the Last Days of Socialist Realism in Syria," *Middle Eastern Literatures*, May 2015, 153-176.

⁷⁰ Samāḥ Idrīs, "ʿAz̤ī al-sayyid al-raqīb," *al-Ādāb*, vol. 50, n. 7-8, 2002, 2.

demonstrations, because they reflected the vitality of the people and their vibrant pan-Arabism, but banned our issue and discarded 500 copies, the cost of which we had collected with great effort. The previous issue was also destroyed in another country. Another 500 copies were thrown away then too, although the issue did not mention that country at all. When I asked Fāṭimah, the fortune teller, about the reason, she went silent for a little while and then said: “Oh, son. I’ve stopped trying to make sense of it all.”

The timing of the issue is also very significant when read within the political and cultural atmosphere in Syria at the time, as Hafiz al-Asad had died and his young son Bashar had succeeded him. In addition to excerpts from banned literary works, the issue included testimonies by twenty Syrian novelists, poets, and dramatists on how censorship had affected their works and their lives. Their experiences ranged from the censor rejecting or altering their works to reporting them to the authorities, which was frequently followed by interrogation and sometimes imprisonment. The fearlessness of the twenty authors, most of whom resided in Syria at the time, testifies to the changes that took place in the country around the unfolding of the twenty-first century and to the empowerment felt by many within the Syrian cultural field.⁷¹ In his Note from the Editor-in-Chief, Idrīs also hints to Bashar al-Asad’s then recent promises of a comprehensive reform movement and his vision for a new, inclusive Syria that invites participation by all. He writes: “what will you do with this issue? Will you throw the work of the best of Syria’s writers in the garbage? Or will you be strong and decide that letting this issue into the county will prove to everybody that Syria is tolerant enough to embrace all her children?”⁷²

In 1990, a Human Rights Watch report pointed out that censors in Syria typically work with an ‘understanding,’ as there were rarely any written guidelines.⁷³ The personal stories and experiences published in the issue showed that nothing changed in the following decade and that the extremely strict culture of censorship continued to lack any organizing logic and to follow no clearly defined standards. The issue included an interview with the Syrian intellectual and politician, Anṭūn Maqdisī, who, between 1965 and 2000, served as the Director of the Office of Writing and Translation Affairs in the Ministry of Culture, one of the bodies to whom all printed works are submitted in order to obtain publishing permits. In this interview, Maqdisī painted a picture of how censorship operated in Syria.⁷⁴

⁷¹ As Mundhir al-Maṣrī reports, the issue was very popular in Syria. The demand was much higher than the number of the copies available in the market, and many book stores sold xeroxed copies for the same price as the original magazine. Many Syrian writers, including some of those who contributed to the dossier, later criticized the issue. The Syrian poet Mundhir al-Maṣrī, for example, found Idrīs’s note very apologetic. However, al-Maṣrī admitted that Idrīs’s approach worked, and the Syrian authorities allowed the distribution of the issue in the country in an attempt to prove that the new Syria under its new leader was different from the one that had existed under his father’s rule. The Lebanese poet Bilāl Khubayz also pointed out that the testimonies were personal and that the dossier lacked studies that objectively unpacked the logic behind the system of censorship in Syria. Ironically, as Mundhir al-Maṣrī claims, his poem that had been banned in Syria and was supposed to be published in the issue did not make it to the final draft because of its overtly sexual references. See Mundhir al-Maṣrī, “*Raqābah fī malaff majallat al-Ādāb ‘an al-raqābah*” (Censorship in the al-Ādāb Magazine’s Dossier on Censorship), *al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin*, 4/12/2003 <http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=12253&r=0>

⁷² Idrīs, 2.

⁷³ *Human Rights in Syria*, Human Rights Watch Report 1990, 112.

⁷⁴ In August 2000, Anṭūn Maqdisī published in the *al-Ḥayāh* newspaper an open letter to Bashar al-Asad. Reflecting the growing calls for democratization that swept the country at the time, Maqdisī demanded comprehensive

وزارة الثقافة هي التي تراقب كل إنتاجها، سواء في السينما أو في الفنون التشكيلية أو في الكتب. وقواعد الرقابة شبه معروفة. لقد كانت لنا في المديرية خطة معينة وضعت بصورة خاصة بعد أن استلمت الوزارة الدكتور نجاح العطار، فقد اتفقنا معها على بعض مبادئ نسير على هديها في التأليف أو في الترجمة. ووضعنا خطة تعالج الأسئلة التالية: ما المطلوب من مديرية التأليف والترجمة؟ كيف نستجيب لهذه المرحلة التاريخية؟ ما الذي يطلبه القارئ العربي؟ من هو القارئ العربي؟⁷⁵

The Ministry of Culture monitors all of our department's production. This applied to books, cinema, and fine arts. The rules of censorship were sort-of known. After the Minister of Culture, Najāh al-‘Attār, was appointed, we agreed with her on some guiding principles. Those principles answered the following questions: What is required and expected from the Office of Writing and Translation Affairs? How do we respond to the historical moment in which we live? What is the Arab reader looking for? Who is the Arab reader?

Although Maqdisī revealed in his interview some of the inconsistencies and the contradictions within the system of censorship in Syria, his responses showed a strong belief that the role he had played as censor was extremely critical to the destiny of the nation. He even went further to paint censorship as a heroic act:

أنا عندي قواعد لا يتجاوزها المؤلف أو المترجم. هناك مخطوط مثلاً أعيده إلى صاحبه فوراً، وهناك آخر يقرأه ثلاثة قراء أو أربعة لتؤكد منه وبعد أن توافق اللجنة عليه، فذلك يعني أنه لا غبار عليه أيديولوجياً. فأنا أعرف ماذا يريد حزب البعث وماذا لا يريد. إضافة إلى أنني أعرف مصلحة بلدي واشتغلت بالأحزاب. فهناك ما تدركه بالتجربة ويصير "باللحم والدم".⁷⁶

For me, there are some lines that no writer or translator should cross. Some manuscripts, for example, I would reject without thinking twice. Others I would have three or four readers go over. When the whole committee approves a work, it means that it is absolutely ideologically appropriate. I know what what the Ba‘th party wants and what it does not want. Additionally, I know what is best for my country and I served for a long time in politics. There are things that one learns by experience, and they eventually become intuitive.

The State of Emergency Law put all other laws in the country on hold, and resulted in the evaporation of any standard for what was permitted or prohibited. The standard became the personal mood of the publishing authority. The only choice for writers, the Syrian critic Ḥassān ‘Abbās points out, was to experiment in order to figure out what the red lines were, which by itself was a serious and dangerous practice.⁷⁷ The absence of clear guidelines meant that even the most careful writer could get in trouble for unintentionally crossing a line that only existed in the minds of the regime's strong figures. Many works would pass the filters of the censors, only to be pulled out of the market later because some official found it inappropriate.

reform. Maqdisī suggested that the status of the Syrian people should be changed from one of subjects (*ra‘iyyah*) to one of citizens (*muwāḥiḍīn*). The official response was firm, and Maqdisī's contract with the Ministry of Culture was immediately terminated. See Allan George, *Syria neither Bread nor Freedom* (London and New York: Zed Book, 2003), 36. For the original text of the letter see *al-Ḥayāh*, August 14, 2000.

⁷⁵ Anṭūn Maqdisī, “Muqābalah ma‘ Anṭūn Maqdisī ‘an al-raqābah,” *al-Ādāb*, vol. 50, n. 7-8, 2002, 71.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁷ Ḥassān ‘Abbās, “*Al-Ṣaḥāfah wa’l-raqābah fī sūriyyah*,” *al-Ādāb*, vol. 50, n. 7-8, 2002, 58.

This vague but strict system led Syrian writers to become their own harshest censors. In his testimony, Ḥassān ‘Abbās speaks of three different types of censorship: preventative, punitive, and self-censorship. ‘Abbās suggests that self-censorship is the most dangerous type, as it blurs the line between freedom and limitations and between agency and impotence, since “in this case, censorship does not come from a coercive, external, organizing power, but rather from the writer’s super-ego. It is as if the writer conducts [self-censorship] in complete free will.”⁷⁸ However, the boundary between direct censorship and self-censorship in Syria is very fuzzy. It is even questionable whether this process should be called self-censorship or just plain censorship, taking into consideration that crossing a red line might lead to the arrest or exile of the writer. The writer and translator Mīshel Kīlū sarcastically addresses the allusion of agency that “self-censorship” carries:

يستطيع أن يكون حذراً في تبني أفكار ليست له، يدافع عنها من دون أن يكون مقتنعاً بها ومن دون أن يطالبه أحد بذلك ... كما يقدر أن يكون حراً في الدفاع عن فكرتين متناقضتين يعرف أنهما كذلك، "وافق" على إحداها لأنه سمعها من جهة نافذة ما، ثم وافق على الأخرى، المعاكسة لها، لأنه سمعها من جهة نافذة أعلى من الأولى. وهو حر كذلك في أن يكذب على نفسه تمهيداً للكذب على قرائه، كأن يرى وضعاً تعاف نفسه عيوبه ... لكنه يكتب عن هذا كله بلغة متزلفة مداحية ... قافراً عن الحقائق إلى عالم وهمي هو نقيضها.⁷⁹

[The Writer] freely adopts the views of [the authorities]. He defends those views without believing in them, but also without anyone asking him to do so. He freely and knowingly defends two contradicting views, as he adopts the view of one high official, only to change his mind when a higher official suggests another view. He also freely lies to himself so he can lie to his readers. He sees disgusting reality ... but freely praises it, creating an illusory world that is the exact opposite of reality.

Building on the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, scholars find self-censorship more significant than overt, formal repression. They emphasize that in systems where self-censorship dominates, what can and cannot be said is intentionally not made clear. In repressive states, uncertainty is deliberately cultivated to keep writers alert and to give the authorities maximum latitude to intervene whenever they want. In an article on New Censorship Theory, Matthew Bunn suggests that self-censorship is repressive states’ preferred mode of control, while direct censorship is their back-up contingency plan. That is because repressive states work primarily on “the production of speech, not its distribution.”⁸⁰ Bunn further suggests that constant intervention of external censors to curtail speech “reflects a failure of censorship in a broader sense, the failure to induce the kind of self-censorship that constitutes a more effective system.”⁸¹ Additionally, as studies of censorship under repressive regimes remind us, the line between self-censorship and conformism is very thin. In their study of censorship in Russian media, Elisabeth Schimpfoss and Ilya Yablokov suggest that habitual self-censorship slips into conformism, which “can mean both opportunism and routinized willingness to accept unquestioningly the usual practices or standards, which were originally imposed through coercion. The latter case was typical for the Soviet Union;

⁷⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁹ Mīshel Kīlū, “*Taktubūn mā turīdūn wa nanshur mā nashā*,” *al-Ādāb*, vol. 50, n. 7-8, 2002, 89.

⁸⁰ Matthew Bunn, “Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After,” *History and Theory* 54 (February 2015), 38.

⁸¹ Ibid.

first, coercion forced reporters and public activists to suppress their thoughts, which, later, became the silently accepted norm of behavior to get by without trouble.”⁸²

In Syria, self-censorship was neither an easy nor a clear process, as its parameters had to frequently change in accordance with the state’s changing policies. Artists and writers had to constantly follow, understand, and internalize the state’s changing vision and agenda in order to protect themselves from severe consequences. Sex, religion, and politics, or the forbidden trinity (*al-thālūth al-muḥarram*) as Syrian intellectuals call them, have always been the ultimate taboos, not only in Syria but across the Arab world. However, the authorities’ rigorism in regard to these taboos was constantly changing. As the movie director and critic Fāḍil al-Kawākibī points out,

مرت رقابة السينما في سوريا عموماً بمراحل تشدد وتخفف. فالمرحلة من ١٩٧١ إلى ١٩٧٤ شهدت انفتاحاً نسبياً على مستويات الثلاث، وخاصة الجنس. أما المرحلة من ١٩٧٥ إلى ١٩٧٧ فقد شهدت تشدداً فيما يخص المضمون الفكري الأيديولوجي - خاصة ما يوحى باليسارية منه- مع استمرار الانفتاح في ما يخص الجنس. ولكن، ويا للمفارقة، بدأ منذ عام ١٩٧٧ تسامح نسبي في قضايا التوجه الفكري مقابل تشدد متصاعد وصل إلى ذروته في منتصف الثمانينيات وأوائل التسعينيات في قضايا الجنس. ويعود هذا التشدد إلى محاولة واضحة لمجاراة واستمالة المزاج الأصولي المنتشر اجتماعياً وفكرياً.⁸³

the cultural field witnessed a relative openness between 1971 and 1974, especially in regard to sex and sensual scenes. While tolerating sex continued for a while, censorship was very strict between 1975 and 1977 in regard to ideological and political content, especially leftist views. Ironically, beginning in 1977, the authorities showed increasing stringency towards sensual content that reached a peak in the mid-eighties and early nineties, in a clear attempt to contain and please the traditionalist mode that was spreading in society.

To control the cultural field, the party did not only rely on silencing opposing voices and visions, but also on building a conformist literary establishment that promoted its agendas. As a general rule, Human Rights Watch reported in 1991, “no private organization can exist without an important, if not dominant, Ba‘th presence.”⁸⁴ All popular organizations (*munazzamāt sha‘biyyah*) and professional associations (*niqābāt mihaniyyah*) such as unions, associations, clubs, and syndicates were tied to the government with members of the Ba‘th party in leading positions. These popular organizations, whose membership by the early 1970s included as much as one third of the population, aimed to mobilize the masses, build a Ba‘thist society, and unite the people with the leadership.

The state’s sponsorship of publication, distribution, translation, and literary prizes provided conformist voices with both status and financial stability. As early as 1966 the Ministry of Culture organized its first national literary competition, and the first prize for a Syrian novel was granted to Fāris Zarzūr for his novel titled *Lan tasquṭ al-madīnah* (*The City Will Not Fall*). The novel, which had been published in episodes in 1960 in regional newspapers, is a perfect example of the principles of socialist realism promoted by the ruling party. Set between 1918 and 1920, the novel

⁸² Elisabeth Schimpfoss and Ilya Yablokov, “Coercion or Conformism? Censorship and Self- Censorship among Russian Media Personalities and Reporters in the 2010s,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Jan 2014, 297.

⁸³ Fāḍil al-Kawākibī, “*al-Raqābah al-sūriyyah ‘alā al-sīnamā wa’l-drāmā al-tilfiziūniyyah*,” *al-Ādāb*, vol. 50, n. 7-8, 2002, 63.

⁸⁴ *Human Rights in Syria*, Human Rights Watch Report 1990, 80.

chronicles the Battle of *Maysalūn* fought between the forces of the Arab Kingdom of Syria and the French army. In addition to defining a national self against the colonial other, the novel uncovers the “reactionary” role played by the bourgeoisie and highlights the successful struggle of the masses against imperialist foreign powers. Since then, every year the country witnesses dozens of literary festivals and competitions, through which state-friendly voices climb to the top of the power hierarchy.

The Syrian Arab Writers’ Union,⁸⁵ with its publishing arm, and its journals and magazines is a major channel through which the literary field is controlled and shaped. In addition to the fact that the union is state-subsidized, its executive committee is headed by a Ba’thist, and all of its twenty-five elected members are screened and approved by the party. The Union, which was established in 1969, sponsors writing and translation across all intellectual fields, and publishes a variety of books as well as widely-read, weekly magazines that cover different cultural subjects.⁸⁶ The legislative decree according to which the Union was established can serve here as fertile ground to understand the state of Syrian literary discourse. The Union’s membership is open to any Syrian writer who has published one book, “believes in the goals of the Union, and publicly declares (*yu’lin*) his or her approval of and commitment to the Union’s policies, including all of its foundations and principles.”⁸⁷ Among the goals and principles of the Union is to mobilize literary energies in Syria; discover and sponsor literary talents; reaffirm freedom of speech that carries Arab-nationalist and progressive message; create a cultural climate that allows creative talent to bloom and grow in an atmosphere of responsible freedom; work on making writing a career for writers; establish institutions that provide writers with housing, social security, healthcare and pensions; raise the spirit of resistance and steadfastness among Arab citizens in the face of dangers that threaten Arab presence and attempt to isolate and eliminate its fundamental role in the global struggle against colonialism and imperialism; and battle colonialism, imperialism, Zionism, and reactionary ideas on cultural, national and political levels.⁸⁸

The Union, like all other state educational and intellectual institutions, was, and still is, a major employment venue for writers and critics in Syria. The financial dependence of intellectuals on the state certainly contributes to keeping them in check, and even turning them into active participants in the regime’s propaganda machine. Many icons of Syrian intellectualism were employed by the Syrian regime: Ḥannā Mīnah worked at the Ministry of Culture; Walīd Ikhlaṣī was a member of the People’s Assembly; Mamdūh ‘Udwān worked for the Ministry of Information; Colette Khūrī was a consultant for the Ministry of Defense, ‘Abd al-Salām al-‘Ujaylī worked for the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Mass Media, and there are many other examples. Additionally, institutions such as the Union are major venues for novelists, poets, and critics to earn a living by working as readers for the censorship committees, since the reader/censor is supposed to have the ability to evaluate literary works not

⁸⁵ The evolution of the Arab Writers’ Union and the role it played in structuring the modern Syrian literary canon will be discussed in detail in chapter II, “The Nation, the Novel, and the Intellectual.”

⁸⁶ Today the union publishes the following periodicals: *al-Usbū‘ al-Adabī* (Literary Week), *al-Mawqif al-Adabī* (Literary Position), *al-Fikr al-Siyāsī* (Political Thought), *al-Turāth al-‘Arabī* (Arab Heritage), *al-Ādāb al-‘Ālamiyyah* (World Literatures), in addition to novels, poetry collections, stories, plays, and all kinds of studies in the field of humanities. The union also sponsors the Damascus Award for the Arabic Novel.

⁸⁷ Legislative Decree No. (72), Article 5. The Arab Writers’ Union website: <http://www.awu.sy>.

⁸⁸ Ibid., Article 2.

only ideologically and ethically, but also aesthetically. Consequently, “the literary field became a site of competition over who could prove to be the ultimate protector of the state’s sovereignty and social unity.”⁸⁹ The use of creative writers in the process of censorship turned it into a closed loop system and guaranteed the state that coding techniques, such as symbolism and intertextuality were, in many cases, rendered unsuccessful.

Certainly, despite all the attempts made by authorities to keep the literary field in check, it remained a site of contestation and dynamism. However, under Hafiz al-Asad’s rule, the intellectuals’ critical position was limited to cautious transgressions that operated within the boundaries demarcated by the official rhetoric and did not aim to overturn the whole system. While authors and artists used various techniques to pass through the censors’ nets, both the regime and those who criticized it had a sense of which lines were not to be crossed.⁹⁰ Over time writers developed a sense of the grey areas where slightly pushing the boundaries was not too dangerous and, certainly, of the red lines, the crossing of which had serious consequences. While experimenting with topics like sex could lead to censoring some parts of a work but would not necessarily stop the final altered version from being published, touching the political system could lead to prison or sometimes worse.

Published transgressions actually found in the Syrian novel did not always simply slip through the cracks of censorship. In reality, the state tolerated a certain level of criticism as another way through which it aimed to control the public. Some political scientists argue that tolerated criticism under totalitarian regimes preserves their dominance by allowing people to vent their frustration, providing just enough release to prevent that frustration from mounting into political action.⁹¹ This kind of criticism, which is referred to in Arabic as *tanfīs* (venting), provides people with a sense of community, built around a shared experience of injustice. Through these cautious transgressions, people are allowed a moment to connect, to feel a part of a group, to enjoy a collective decoding of charged texts, and to blow off steam. They then return to living the injustice of their daily reality without taking action. Furthermore, since these transgressions follow the unspoken guidelines for criticism set forth by the regime itself, they lose their force, and become a form of submission to its authority. Wedeen points out, for example, how Syrians under Asad-the-father were engaged in what she terms a culture of “as if”—they recognized the gap between their experiences and the empty claims and promises of the cult, but they continued to act *as if* they believed them.⁹² In this context, within permitted moments of transgression, people recognize and acknowledge their own complicity in the regime’s system, and thus even their protest reinforces their own obedience.

Miriam Cooke, on the other hand, identifies another form of tolerated criticism, one that she terms commissioned criticism. Commissioned criticism, Cooke argues, serves the state’s efforts to create a democratic façade. “[Commissioned criticism] is not merely the toleration of transgressive practices that bridge the cognitive gap between the lies of government pronouncements and the reality of everyday life. Rather, it is the regime’s Machiavellian

⁸⁹ Fawwāz Ḥaddād, “*Wijhat naẓar fī raqābat al-kuttāb ‘alā al-kuttāb*,” *al-Ādāb*, 50, n. 7-8, 2002, 95.

⁹⁰ For a detailed discussion and examples of these techniques, see chapter II, “The Nation, the Novel, and the Intellectual.”

⁹¹ For a detailed discussion see Wedeen, 32-67.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 67-87.

manipulation of dissidence.”⁹³ Cooke points out that the Ministry of Culture, for example, has published socially and politically sensitive works and produced critical films and plays, but it always reserved the right to decide when and in which way to use them. Works such as Ghassān al-Jabā’ī’s critical short story collection, *Aṣābi’ al-mawz* (*Banana Fingers*, 1995), which was written during the nine years he spent in a cell as a political prisoner, was published by the Ministry of Culture, but not distributed in the market—“[these works] were sent to remote regional cultural centers or Arab book fairs, where they fashioned for foreign consumption the façade of Syrian democracy and civil rights.”⁹⁴

The New Millennium: Cracks in the System

Despite its efforts to isolate the country from the outside world and to keep the cultural field in check, local, global, and regional developments in late 1990s and early 2000s forced the Syrian regime to slightly shift its ideals and policies, and applied pressure to the established order, causing cracks in the country’s literary undifferentiated patronage system. A new generation of Syrian writers and intellectuals capitalized on these new changes, as cosmetic as they were. By the early 2000s controversial novels and other writings began to surface, openly and directly tackling many of the country’s previously considered taboo themes. In the following section, I trace four of the developments that, I suggest, enabled critical literary voices in Syria to gain readership and momentum. These are the death of Asad-the-father, the rise of his young son to power, the advent of technology and the internet, and the emergence of new cultural centers in the Arab world.

From Father to Son

The winds of change began to reach the state in the early nineties. In addition to the stagnant economy and the gradual seclusion of the strong leader due to health issues, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its socialist allies in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the ensuing international and regional reverberations had a great impact on the Syrian public, and on the regime itself.⁹⁵ Moreover, globalization began to encroach upon the isolation that the Syrian regime had long viewed as a guarantee of its survival. The global economic, political, and cultural changes evoked serious concerns about the sustainability of the Syrian regime, and the discreet political critique, which had been limited to the private space within the boundaries of family and close friends, began to break into the public sphere.⁹⁶ It was clear to the regime that change was critically needed.

⁹³ Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 73.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹⁵ As Eyal Zisser reports, in the early 1990s, graffiti appeared on Damascus walls with messages such as “Asadșescu” and “kul Ceaușescu bijī Yūmah” (Ceaușescu’s day will come”), hinting at the fate of Romania’s ruler, Nicolae Ceaușescu, who was deposed and then executed in December 1989. These street sentiments were further evidence of the challenge posed to the Syrian regime by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Eyal Zisser. *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 13.

⁹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the culture of political jokes in Syria, see Wedeen, 87-142.

In order to create a sense of political openness the Syrian regime, Miriam Cooke remarks, “launched into a contradictory project: fashioning a façade of freedom and democracy even while tightening its hold over the public sphere, particularly over cultural production.”⁹⁷ Over the first half of the 1990s, cosmetic changes were implemented—though very limited, and though it did not reflect a comprehensive reformist vision, a policy of tentative economic and political openness was adopted.⁹⁸ While the cornerstones of the system continued to be a red line, the new economic policies and some of the system’s defects became open areas for discussion and debate.⁹⁹ Additionally, as David W. Lesch reports, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf war and Syria’s involvement in the Madrid peace process with Israel, the country’s human rights record relatively improved. “The end of the Cold War, combined with serious participation in war and peace on the side of the west, meant that Syria’s judicial and human rights records needed to be cleaned up in order to attract the type of foreign investment and international Goodwill that Hafez was seeking.”¹⁰⁰ Despite these moves, and despite the hopes for more effective changes, “a glance at Syria at the end of Asad-the-father’s era,” Zisser asserts, “reveals a state at an impasse, having lost its direction and facing growing social strains that threatened to bring about the collapse of the socioeconomic order and possibly the political one as well.”¹⁰¹

Whereas Hafiz al-Asad’s presence helped, to an extent, maintain the stability of his regime, his death in June 2000 resulted in a significant disruption of the status quo. On the one hand, it created a wave of uncertainty within the country’s powerful circles over the future of the Syrian regime. On the other hand, the death of the country’s *eternal leader* disrupted the notion of *forever*, which was strongly imbedded in the consciousness of the Syrian people, marking the first crack in the culture of fear that had controlled them for decades. As the Syrian critic Ṣubhī Ḥadīdī puts it, “People felt: The strong man is dead. Now we have a chance.”¹⁰² In an article published on the tenth anniversary of Asad’s death, the Syrian novelist Fādī ‘Azzām reflected on the shock, confusion, and excitement that engulfed people with Asad’s death:

ثلاثة شباب تسَمَّروا بوجوه تعنصر حامض الليمون. زميلتان انخرطتا في موجة بكاء هستيري وأنا أنتظر صديقي الكردي لينتهي من مقابله، فهو الموثوق الوحيد لأعلن له فرحي. قال صديقي الكردي وأنا أبلغه إن حافظ أسد مات بعد أن أخذ شهيقين متواصلين: أنت متأكد؟ قلت أذاع الخبر التلفزيون السوري ... صرخ وتعانقنا فرحاً. قال لي: إهدأ لقد جاءت "اللحظة التاريخية". نعم قالها صديقي الكردي حرفياً. انفجرت ضاحكاً

⁹⁷ Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 68.

⁹⁸ For example, the regime allowed a number of independent candidates who were not members of the Ba‘th Party or its satellite parties to run for election; it broadened the authority of the People’s Assembly, and released thousands of political prisoners. Economically, the regime allowed some sort of limited liberalization aimed at stimulating the Syrian economy and creating new sources of income and employment. For more examples and a detailed discussion, see Zisser, 13-16.

⁹⁹ George, 31.

¹⁰⁰ David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 84.

¹⁰¹ Zisser, 150.

¹⁰² Ṣubhī Ḥadīdī is a Syrian critic, political commentator, and translator who lives and works in Paris. Quoted in George, 33.

... تفقدت الشام لم تذهب معه، بقيت صامتة متجهة بضحكات تهتز من خلف الجدران بخوف بارد ينتظر جملة واحدة أو صرخة واحدة.¹⁰³

[At work], three young men froze with extremely pale faces; two female colleagues were hysterically crying; and I was waiting for my Kurdish friend to finish his interview—he was the only one that I trusted enough to share my happiness with. When I informed him that Hafiz al-Asad had died, he took two long breaths, before asking: “Are you positive?” “The Syrian TV announced it,” I said ... He screamed and we hugged happily. “This is a historical moment,” he said. Yes, he literally said so, as I exploded with laughter ... Damascus did not die with [Asad]. It was there, silent and gloomy on the surface, but the laughs were vibrating behind the walls. The cold fear was waiting for only one sentence or one cry to crumble.

In July of 2000, one month after Hafiz al-Asad’s death, president Bashar al-Asad inherited his father’s regime.¹⁰⁴ Widely considered an advocate of modernization and technology, and the driving force behind much of the changes that took place in the late 1990s, the new president was met with genuine enthusiasm among those intellectuals who had longed for change in Syria, especially because he had also cultivated a collaborative relationship with reformist intellectuals when he, under his father’s rule, served as chairman of the Syrian Computer Society. Aware of the many hardships the country was facing, which had given rise to fears for the stability of the political regime, Bashar presented upon his arrival to power a set of reforms. Additionally, keen on improving the image of the Syrian regime abroad and at home, and on presenting himself as the progressive reformer and the cultural vanguard that would lead Syria into the twenty-first century, he did not limit himself to the social and economic spheres, but also made it clear that he was unhappy with the political repression of the opposition.

His inaugural speech to the nation on July 17, 2000, bolstered people’s hopes, as he presented a vision for a new, inclusive Syria that invites participation by all. He made broad promises about reform, transparency, and accountability, and called for creative input in the political process.

علينا من أجل الوصول إلى ما نبتغيه أن نتحرك بالتوازي وبنفس الوقت على ثلاثة محاور أساسية. المحور الأول ويتضمن طرح أفكار جديدة في المجالات كافة، سواء بهدف حل مشكلتنا ومصاعبنا الراهنة أو بهدف تطوير الواقع الحالي. المحور الثاني يتضمن تجديد أفكار قديمة لا تناسب واقعنا، مع إمكانية الاستغناء عن أفكار قديمة لا يمكن أن نجدها ولم يعد ممكن الاستفادة منها بل أصبحت معيقة لأدائنا. المحور الثالث ويتضمن تطوير أفكار قديمة، تم تجديدها لكي تتناسب مع الأهداف الحاضرة والمستقبلية ... للقيام بالتحرك المطلوب ونحن واثقون من بلوغ النجاح لابد من أن تتوافر لدينا مجموعة من الأدوات أهمها الفكر المتجدد وأعني به

¹⁰³ Fadī ‘Azzām, “Mawt Ḥāfiẓ wa ḍayā‘ al-laḥẓah al-tārīkhiyyah,” *Dahṇūn*, 06/10/2010.

<https://dahnon.org/archives/7364>

¹⁰⁴ When Asad-the-father died in June 2000, he had been preparing his son Bashar to succeed him, but the constitution stipulated a minimum age of 40 for the president. In order to make Bashar’s succession formally legal, the people’s Assembly amended the constitution, reducing the mandatory minimum age of the president to 34, precisely Bashar’s age at the time. A referendum was held in July in which Bashar garnered, according to Syrian Government statistics, 97.29% of the country’s vote.

الفكر المبدع الذي لا يتوقف عند حد معين ولا يحصر نفسه في قالب واحد جامد. وكم نحن بحاجة إليه اليوم وغداً لدفع عملية التطوير قدماً إلى الأمام.¹⁰⁵

In order to achieve what we aspire, we have to move on three basic fronts at one and the same time: First: to suggest new ideas in all domains, whether in order to solve our current problems and difficulties, or in order to improve the current situation; Second: to renew old ideas which are no longer appropriate to our reality with the possibility of discarding outdated ideas which can neither be renewed nor could they be beneficial; rather they have become an obstacle in the way of our performance; Third: to improve old ideas and renew them in order to be suitable to the current and future purposes ... in order to make the required move, and with confidence that we shall succeed, we have to have a certain set of means, the most important among which is the inexhaustible mind. By that I mean the creative mind that cannot be stopped at any limit and does not confine itself to any fixed framework. Today and tomorrow we are in desperate need of [creative minds] in order to push the development process forward.

Bashar's words and promises were soon translated into some tangible actions. In addition to more progressive economic laws and initiatives, Bashar toned down the rhetoric of the cult of personality which had characterized his father's rule, allowed greater freedom of expression in the press, pardoned and released a significant number of political prisoners, and went further to close the Mezzeh prison, which had become a symbol of the Syrian regime's brutality. The months following his rise to power also witnessed the emergence of previously repressed civil society organizations, such as *al-Lajnah al-sūriyyah li-ḥuqūq al-insān* (The Syrian Human Rights Committee), and "some important press freedom gains characterized by the emergence of private and party-run newspapers as well as a more rambunctious state-run press after some shake ups in the state-controlled media apparatus and ministry of information."¹⁰⁶

The noticeable political liberalization that took place during Bashar's first year in office, or what is known as the Damascus Spring, allowed the demands for change to rise again. Political forums and salons proliferated where new ideas circulated and gained momentum, creating a dynamic atmosphere of activism.¹⁰⁷ The Damascus Spring was characterized by the rise of the civil society movement, which, as the prominent Syrian thinker Sādiq Jalāl al-ʿAzm explains in an interview with Alan George, takes a specific meaning in the context of the Syrian political system. "Given the atomization of current capitalist society in the West," al-ʿAzm said, "the meaning of civil society there concentrates on things like clubs and NGOs that bring people together. In Syria, by contrast, there was no shortage of such traditional clubs and associations. What Syria lacked were other aspects of what in the West would be called civil society: civil liberties, independence

¹⁰⁵ Bashar al-Asad. "*Kalimat al-raʾīs Bashar al-Asad ʿamām majlis al-shaʿb bi-munāsabat al-qasam al-dustūrī li-riʾāsat al-jumhūriyyah*," *Rabīʿ dimashq: qadāyā, ittijāhāt, nihāyāt*, ed. Raḍwān Zīādah (Cairo: Markaz al-Qāhirah li-Dirāsāt Ḥuqūq al-Insān, 2007) 221-222.

¹⁰⁶ Lesch, 89.

¹⁰⁷ The role that the Syrian intellectuals played in the Damascus Spring and the emerging political consciousness they expressed is discussed in detail in chapter II, "The Nation, the Novel, and the Intellectual."

of the judiciary; some measure of democratic process, some autonomy for the individual, and the idea of equality before the law.”¹⁰⁸

The remarkably swift growth of the civil society movement and the extent and sophistication of its demands gave rise to a sense of losing control within the Syrian regime. Seen as an existential threat, the Damascus Spring was quickly shut down and most of the activities associated with it were suppressed as the regime reasserted its power—the political salons were closed and activists were arrested and some sentenced to years in prison. Some reforms were soon withdrawn and the opposition movement was crushed. As quickly as it had arrived, the Damascus Spring came to an end. However, despite the quick shutdown of the Damascus Spring and the shift in the regime’s attitude towards opposition activities, the political atmosphere in Syria remained relaxed in comparison to that which had existed under Asad-the-father. As he continued to promote himself as a progressive leader, Bashar tried to justify his attempts to dismantle the Damascus Spring, suggesting that democracy is a process best accomplished in incremental evolution and that, despite their slow pace, the country’s steps towards democracy would persist. Some intellectuals appreciated the regime’s somewhat lenient approach, deeming that although he was not implementing reform as fast as they had aspired, Bashar was the country’s only hope to finally move forward. Others, on the other hand, found the relaxed atmosphere to be no different from the *tanfīs* mechanisms implemented under his father’s rule.

In that context, the regime’s attention turned to the flourishing Syrian *musalsalāt* (television series) to promote and maintain its imagining of a new, modern nation-state and to, concurrently, implement its *tanfīs* strategies. As Donatella Della Ratta rightly points out, evident through the 2000s in a new wave of *musalsalāt*, an affinity between Syrian drama and the regime resulted in a new project of *tanwīr* (enlightenment), which aligned with Bashar al-Asad’s vision of political reform as an engineered and managed gradual process. In conjunction with regime officials, a minority of cultural producers aimed to enable the majority’s advancement through a process of secularizing, modernizing enlightenment and to “rule over an allegedly backward society, to help the latter overcome its own ‘backwardness,’ and eventually to achieve political reform.”¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, many intellectuals in the country viewed the flourishing of Syrian *musalsalāt*, which was for the most part supported and funded by entrepreneurs and businessmen connected to the regime, as another attempt to flatten cultural activity in Syria. On one level, a celebrity culture dominated, replacing the figure of the writer/intellectual as an effective participant in the movement of society with the television celebrity. On another level, providing an income of which Syrian writers had never dreamed, screenwriting and scriptwriting attracted many novelists and poets, and redirected their creative writing gifts into forms of entertainment driven and shaped, not only by the regime’s vision, but more importantly, by market calculations. “The regime initiated a new phase in Syrian cultural production,” the Syrian poet, playwright and screenwriter, ‘Adnān al-‘Awdah, asserts. “Although we tried to write enlightening scripts (*nuṣūṣ tanwīriyyah*), creativity was now in service of a massive industry. The street was seen and addressed solely as a market, not as a sphere with potentiality.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ George, 37-38.

¹⁰⁹ Donatella Della Ratta, “The ‘Whisper Strategy’: How Syrian Drama Makers Shape Television Fiction in the Context of Authoritarianism and Commodification,” in *Middle East Authoritarianisms*, ed. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, 55.

¹¹⁰ ‘Adnān al-‘Awdah, interview by author, Beirut, June 2013.

New Age, New Means

Satellite TV, the internet, mobile phone technology, and social media have long fueled a debate on the role of new media and technology in the process of change and democratization. While many scholars viewed these new means and technologies as potential agents of democratization, a newly growing literature voices skepticism, and argues that they do not necessarily contribute to political liberation, further warning that the role of new media and technology should not obscure the importance of more traditional means of mobilization. Whatever the case, these newly emerging means play a fundamental role, if not in inspiring change, at least in facilitating it.¹¹¹

For Syria, the advent of Arabic-language satellite news channels, such as Al Jazeera, which was launched in 1996, eroded the state's decades-long monopoly on information. After years of relying on newspapers and journals based outside the country, which were easy to ban by the authorities, many Syrian oppositional voices were now provided with a viable platform to directly reach and mobilize Syrian people of all classes.

The so called Al Jazeera effect indicated an appetite among citizens of the Arab world for information untainted by state propaganda and, in turn, affected how ordinary Arabs perceived international politics and how they related to the information that their own governments were providing, since the new channels did not shy away from hosting opposition figures and views railing against authoritarian rulers in their respective country.¹¹²

The state's attempts to ban TV receiver dishes proved difficult to enforce,¹¹³ and by the late 1990s Al Jazeera had become a major source of news for Syrians. While the state-controlled media largely ignored the cultural and political movement of the Damascus Spring, for example, Al Jazeera extensively covered the movement, and hosted many of the intellectuals involved, which, many argue, accelerated the movement's rapid spread from Damascus to the rest of the country.

The advent of the internet had much more serious repercussions on the Syrian regime's monopoly on information. As a part of its efforts to revive the economy in the late 1990s, the Syrian government provided a state-run internet service to a limited circle of subscribers that first included only ministries and state organizations, and later expanded to public and private businesses, along with professionals before it was finally opened to the public. Opening the country to the outside world in the early 2000s was also a part of a comprehensive campaign that intended to fashion Syria's young leader as a champion of modernity. Additionally, by providing state-run Internet service, the Syrian authorities aimed to control and monitor people's online

¹¹¹ Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr and Francesco Cavatorta. "The Internet and Civil Activism in Syria," in *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013) The internet civil society, 119-122.

¹¹² Ibid., 119.

¹¹³ Addressing the People's Assembly in 1994, the Prime Minister warned those installing satellite equipment without a license that there would be "no future" for them. Satellite dishes, however, spread rapidly, even among those on modest incomes. Many reports suggest that the authorities tolerated the spread of satellite dishes because well-connected individuals profited from the sale of satellite equipment, which was a booming business at the time. Saqr, 31.

activities, since, despite being very expensive, large numbers of Syrians had already been accessing the web through providers in neighboring countries.

The authorities attempted to regulate access, monitor users, and ban sites through many administrative and technological procedures. However, controlling people's activities on the web proved to be much harder than the authorities had anticipated. Activists used multiple email addresses, changed their passwords regularly, and when the security services blocked websites, people used proxies and accessed these websites through other servers. An interesting dynamic developed "whereby activists and authorities [were] continually 'testing' each other in the cyber sphere in order to explore the limits of what could be said and accessed. In the process, the Internet [became] another arena where many Syrians push[ed] the infamous red lines and test[ed] the boundaries ... [T]hrough trial and error, new ways of transgressing boundaries were created."¹¹⁴

For many Syrian writers, cyberspace provided them with means to circumvent the state's publishing process. They found in social networks and blogs a new platform for their voices to be heard, and a venue through which they attempted to disrupt the country's unipolar patronage system and undo decades of disconnect and even mistrust between themselves and their readers. Many Syrian poets and novelists began to publish poems, and chapters of their novels directly on Facebook or on their blogs without fear. As the poet Rashā 'Umrān recalls, "Posting my work on Facebook made me realize that poetry still had its connoisseurs. Through likes, shares, and comments, this space provided me with an opportunity to witness the impact of my words on people. There was no need for a mediator anymore. For the first time, I experienced a direct relationship in which the reader herself was my new critic."¹¹⁵ These new platforms contributed to democratizing the cultural field itself as well, by giving new voices an opportunity to rise and gain readership. While these new texts undermined the monopoly of famous names on literary production and distribution, they clouded the criteria upon which literature had been defined and evaluated. "Many of us were wary of literary works published online," says the playwright 'Adnān al-'Awdah, "but the phenomenon and the momentum it gained forced well-established writers to revisit their traditional definitions of different fields of literature."¹¹⁶

Despite the lack of a centralized system that monitors book sales in the Arab world, and the scarcity of statistically valid data on readership, many scholars, writers, and publishers suggest that the Arab world has been suffering from a publishing and readership crisis. While some blame the so called "book crisis" (*azmat al-kitāb*) on the challenges that the publishing and distribution processes face, others blame it on the lack of a reading culture.¹¹⁷ In the last two decades, however, a new factor has developed only to complicate the issue even further, namely, electronic piracy. Due to the lack of clear laws to regulate copyrights and distribution, especially in electronic form, in the Arab world, scanned books and journals of all sorts have been flooding the web. The issue of book piracy has generated diverse reactions. In April 2015, the *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper published an article titled *Qarāṣinat al-kutub: fā'ilū khayr am luṣūṣ?* (Book Pirates: Philanthropists or Thieves?). The article, which surveys the opinions of Arab publishers and

¹¹⁴ Shaery-Eisenlohr and Cavatorta, 127.

¹¹⁵ Rashā 'Umrān, interview by author, Cairo, May 2013.

¹¹⁶ Al-'Awdah, interview by author, Beirut, June 2013.

¹¹⁷ For a detailed discussion see, Lowell Schwartz, Tod Helmus, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Nadia Oweidat, *Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2009), 3-16.

writers, and discusses the effects of book piracy on the Arab publishing market, highlights that since newly published books are distributed on a very limited scale and old books are scarce at best, online piracy has benefited the Arab reader by providing her with new ways to access the corpus of Arabic writings.¹¹⁸

Regardless of the phenomenon's financial impact on the publishing market, it has revolutionized the circulation process for Syrian literary works and undermined the state's control over what people can or cannot read. With the advent of the Internet, many individuals and groups have embarked on scanning and publishing books online for free as a part of a general cultural project. The on-line blog, *Abū 'Abdū al-Baghl* (Abū 'Abdū the Mule), for example, has thousands of followers. With the slogan “*‘Ulā khuṭuwāt al-ḥurriyyah ikhtifā’ al-jahl*” (the first step towards freedom lies in the disappearance of ignorance), the blog constantly scans and publishes new, old, and banned books and journals, and even provides its followers with an on-demand service.

Other blogs, such as *al-Adab al-Sūrī* (Syrian Literature), aim to build an all-inclusive, online library for Syrian literature. Many Syrian writers, especially the young ones, do not mind having their books scanned and published by these blogs and pages, and some of them even advertise it when their books become available on one of these groups. “We do not profit from our works anyway,” the young Syrian poet Aḥmad Bāshā says, “but at least, [due to online groups] we are reaching people, and our works are read.”¹¹⁹ For other Syrian writers, those who relied on Arab publishing houses to publish works that had been rejected by the Syrian censor, blogs helped them reach the Syrian reader after years of separation, since the Syrian authorities had banned their works from being imported into or distributed within the country.

New Market, New Competition

For a long time, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad were the hubs of culture and education. However, over the last couple of decades, new cities emerged, establishing themselves as the new cultural centers in the contemporary Arab world. The rise of the Gulf States with their tremendous wealth as new promoters of culture and literature has further contributed to undermining the state's monopoly on the cultural field in many countries, including Syria. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, publishing abroad was a regular practice for Syrian writers whose texts were rejected by the official Syrian publishing bodies.¹²⁰ However, the rise of Gulf States has provided these writers with much more than publishing channels. The growing interest of the Gulf States in patronizing the cultural field in the Arab world is embodied in an upsurge of universities, educational and cultural foundations, book fairs and literary awards that open their doors to writers from across the Arab world. As for literature, the novel, compared to other literary genres produced in Arabic, has received the lion's share of prizes— the majority of gulf-sponsored awards go to the novel, with very little dedicated to poetry, short stories, or plays, and awards for novels have a much higher profile than other awards as well.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ “*Qarāṣinat al-kutub: fā’ilū khair am luṣūṣ?*” *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ Newspaper*, April 27, 2015.

¹¹⁹ Aḥmad Bāshā, interview by author, Beirut, May 2013.

¹²⁰ Most Syrian writers published their works in Lebanon, which enjoyed tremendous freedom of publishing compared to its neighboring Syria.

¹²¹ Abdu Wazen, “Arab Awards: The Novel in the Lead,” *Banipal*, 58, spring 2017, 69.

For Syria, not only did these awards marginalize the local awards sponsored by the Syrian government, but they also provided Syrian and other Arab novelists with an opportunity to generate income, readership, and fame far away from the constraints and the propagandist machine of the state. Well-funded awards, such as the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, known as the Arab Booker, the Katara Prize for the Arabic Novel, and the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Literature,¹²² have lent much-needed support to Arab writers, most of whom are financially distressed, and have lessened their dependence on the state as the sole source of income.¹²³ Furthermore, most of these awards provide novelists with much more than money. The award-sponsoring foundations publish winning manuscripts, advertise and distribute novels in book fairs and cultural festivals, and even sponsor translating them into other languages.

The awards as well as the new opportunities and channels they offer have expanded the novel's readership and given authors invaluable international exposure. Some critics also argue that they have profoundly contributed to reviving the literary scene in the Arab world, not only by increasing readership, but by "[creating] a cultural milieu and an excitement for novels even before they hit the market. The awards themselves are a popular topic on social media, especially Facebook. There are also several Facebook groups sponsored by literary associations dedicated to introducing readers to novels."¹²⁴ The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), is a prominent example of the ways in which these new awards have impacted the literary scene. Run with the support, as its mentor, of the Booker Prize Foundation in London, the IPAF has a significant publicity machine that has succeeded in attracting significant readership. As Abdu Wazen asserts, "[The IPAF] is a promotional award *par excellence*. Its true value lies in its ability to promote winners to a sometimes unwarranted stardom. A novel that would normally have occupied the shelves for a long time will be sold out in a few days, and will even go into multiple prints."¹²⁵

Fame, financial stability, readership, and international exposure challenge the state's authority by granting authors a certain level of immunity. They make it harder for authoritarian regimes, like the one in Syria, to violently punish those who raise their voices with criticism, especially when it is promoting itself regionally and internationally as the vanguard of modernity and liberalization. A good example is the case of the Syrian novelist Khālid Khalīfah, whose novel, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah* (*In Praise of Hatred*, 2006), brought him international recognition. *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah* is one of the very first Syrian novels to unequivocally address one of the country's most deep-seated taboos, the massacres in Hama and Aleppo in the early 1980s. Through the story of a young, religious, Sunni woman from the city of Aleppo, the novel reconstructs Syria's marginalized recent history, unearths buried memories, and exposes the hatred, humiliation, and violence within which Syrians live. Published in Beirut in 2006, the novel gained Khālid Khalīfah

¹²² Administrated by Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, the cumulative awards of the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, for example, total \$1.9 million, with more than \$200,000 per winner. Based in Qatar, the Katara Prize for the Arabic Novel honors ten winners in two major categories annually: published and unpublished novels. For published novels, the five winners each receive \$60,000, and the five winners in the unpublished category are each awarded \$30,000. The International Prize for Arabic Fiction is funded by Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, and it grants each of the shortlisted authors \$10,000, and the winning author goes on to receive a further \$50,000.

¹²³ According to the Central Bureau of Statistics in Damascus, in 2005 the average monthly salary for a government employee was 7,727 Syrian Pounds (around \$160), and increased in 2010 to 11,344 Syrian Pound (around \$237).

¹²⁴ Ibrahim Farghali. "Reviving the Arab Literary Scene," *Banipal*, 58, spring 2017, 79.

¹²⁵ Wazen, 72.

regional and international recognition. *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah* was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2008, translated into several languages, and longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2013. The novel is banned in Syria, however, Khalīfah is one of the very few Syrian writers to cross such a serious line and continue to live relatively freely in Syria and to produce novels critical of the Syrian regime.

It must be noted however that while this dynamic has destabilized the state's monopoly on and hegemony in the literary field in Syria, the growing role of the Gulf States in patronizing the Arab cultural scene has introduced new rules to the game of patronage. The newly emerging awards have been under the fire of many literary critics for a variety of reasons, including favoring political and social themes over literary merit and commercializing literature by turning literary creativity into a commodity. In an article titled, *Ayyatuha-l-jawā'iz madhā fa 'alti bi'l-riwāyah al-'arabiyyah?* (Awards, What Have You Done to the Arabic Novel?), the Syrian novelist and literary critic Khalīl Ṣuwaylīḥ, for example, criticizes the newly emerging culture of awards for creating a gold rush amongst Arab novelists. Over time, novelists, he argues, have developed an understanding of what the judges look for, and many Arab novels these days are being crafted to win prizes.¹²⁶

The fact that the funding of the awards, book fairs, and cultural festivals and activities comes from the Gulf States, most of which are known for violating freedom of expression within their own boundaries, has also prompted a wide debate in the Arab world on the agendas behind this support and the new standards they establish. Some critics suggest that this cultural movement aims to obscure the local, oppressive practices of Gulf States and to build a circle of loyal intellectuals that would back these states' regional and political agendas. Others, on the other hand, argue that, while politically critical texts are allowed, it is only when they serve the regional policies of the Gulf States. The Syrian novelist Khalīl al-Nu'aymī, one of the awards' harshest critics, has called for a movement against this phenomenon.

نحن لا نجهل كيف تُروّض الجوائز المخيلة. ولا كيف تُحيل الأحاسيس الملتهية إلى رماذ. ويدفعنا، من جديد، إلى التذكير، بدعوتنا الملحة للمساهمة في «حركة أدب بلا جوائز». فالجوائز، في معظمها، جوائز سلطات ثرية، محافظة، تريد أن "تختصن الإبداع"، ولكن لتخنقه. وإن كانت مؤسساتها تزعم أنها تساهم، هكذا، في نشر المعرفة، و"مساعدة المبدعين"، فهي "تساعدهم"، فعلاً، ولكن على الخضوع لمفهوماتها.¹²⁷

We understand how awards domesticate imagination and transform the writers' flaming passions into ashes. This is why we renew our call for a 'movement for literature without awards.' Awards, for the most part, are sponsored by rich and conservative authorities that aim to 'embrace creativity' only to suffocate it. These institutions claim to contribute to disseminating knowledge and to 'helping creative minds,' while, in reality, they only 'help' these minds to succumb to their agendas.

In addition, the new gate to translation has further complicated the literary scene by introducing new politics and filtering measures. When translated into English, *Madīḥ al-*

¹²⁶ Khalīl Ṣuwaylīḥ. "Awards, What Have You Done to the Arabic Novel!" translated and published in *Banipal*, 58, spring 2017, 85-87. For original text in Arabic, see *al-Akhbār*, April 24, 2015, <http://al-akhbar.com/node/231241>.

¹²⁷ Khalīl al-Nu'aymī, "*al-Adab bayna-l-ibdā' wa'l-shahādah*," *al-Quds al-'Arabī*, November 16, 2015, www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%BB%BFالشهادةوالإبداع-%EF%BB%BF

karāhiyyah, for example, was altered, and even deprived of its concluding chapter. The published translation was so different from the original that the translator, Leri Price, felt the need to address the issue in her afterward and note that it was not her doing. The standards that governed the changes, as Khalīfah himself explains, cater to the Anglophone market that does not treat the Arabic novel as fiction, but rather reduces it to a “social sample,” a window through which the Western reader can peak into the Arab society.¹²⁸ This attitude toward works produced by Arab and/or Muslim authors has been discussed and questioned by many scholars and translators. Taking her translation of the Saudi novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (*Girls of Riyadh*, 2007) as a case study, Marilyn Booth discusses the strong bias in the West toward translations of Arabic literature that unveil sociological content and reinforce audience expectations that are shaped by political discourse and an Orientalist ethnographicism.

Given the alleged transparency of translation (that is, the notion that a translated text can simply reproduce all facets and effects of its source text) and the inclination to consider works of what used to be called “third-world literature” as windows on the world, native informant texts for an informationally eager Western readership operate with particular political force in this historical moment when genuine public concern in Europe and North America to “understand Islam,” as well as targeted political agendas, have generated a frenzied post-9/11 information marketplace.¹²⁹

Many Arab novelists and critics have voiced their concerns about the impact of the politics of translation on the future of the Arabic novel. Writing with one eye on being translated, they argue, those who have figured out what appeals to the West, now focus on a certain kind of novel or narrative— one that caters to the tastes, assumptions, and stereotypes of a Western readership.

Conclusion

The developments that came along with the new millennium did not completely disentangle the cultural field in Syria from the field of power. Nonetheless, these developments contributed to unsettling the state’s control over the country’s cultural production, causing an undifferentiated patronage system to crack, and allowing for new configurations of aesthetic and political engagements to materialize. This dynamic coincided with the rise of a generation of writers who shared a new vision of the intellectual and her role in society. Envisaging a bottom-up cultural project, these intellectuals embody an emerging political and cultural consciousness, one that responds to discourses of difference and practices of differentiation within the contexts of race, religion, class, gender, sexuality and language.

¹²⁸ Khālīd Khalīfah. “In Praise of Hatred: A Conversation with Khalid Khalifa,” interviewed for John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University by Renée Ragin. Youtube.com, 25:55,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUAM6I8I4RM&t=936s>

¹²⁹ Marilyn Booth, “The Muslim Woman as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Study* Vol. 6, No.3 (Fall 2010). 154.

Chapter Two

The Syrian Intellectual: Mapping and Remapping the Nation

Overview

Thinking of culture as a “system of systems,” in which the field of power and the field of literature are interconnected, the previous chapter explored how, by creating an “undifferentiated patronage system,” the state during the second half of the twentieth century sought to appropriate the country’s literary production to comply with its vision and ideology. It further traced the local and regional changes and pressures that accumulated over time, challenging the state’s strategies of control and domination over the literary field. Nonetheless, since, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, each social field is “relatively autonomous but structurally homologous with the other [fields],”¹³⁰ the construction and organization of the literary field remains in the hands of agents within the field itself, the change of whose position “necessarily entails a change in the field’s structure.”¹³¹ Taking Bourdieu’s work on “fields” as an organizing principle, this chapter turns to the Syrian intellectual and the role this intellectual played, and continues to play, in defining and legitimizing not only the Syrian novel, but literary practice at large. Focusing on the late 1990s and early 2000s, I investigate the emergence of a new consciousness among Syrian writers, and an ensuing change in the way they perceived themselves and their relationship to both society and the field of power. These changes materialized through new literary discourses and practices that endeavored to carve out new spaces of negotiations. Sharing insights from Syrian novelists and poets whom I interviewed, I also trace their critique of the revolutionary, all-knowing, prophet-like intellectual of the fifties and sixties and the associated secular, modernizing, nationalist project that governed the majority of the country’s literary discourse at that time.

The works that emerged around the turn of the new millennium are not a fundamental breakaway from the efforts and experiences of previous generations of Syrian novelists, and can be fruitfully approached as an episode, or a link, in a chain of developments within a discursive cultural field that had always been engaged in a process of ideological, intellectual, and artistic negotiations. To position this emerging consciousness within its historical context, I first return to the second half of the twentieth century. Tracing key discursive changes in the interconnections between the Syrian intellectual’s dispositions and the project of nation-building, the first section of this chapter unpacks the genealogy that the post-independence intellectual constructed for Arab modernity and the ways in which this genealogy shaped the country’s modern literary canon and defined what the Syrian novel was.

I further observe how, disillusioned by the collapse of their dreams, the series of defeats they experienced, and the static authoritarianism under which they lived, a generation of post-independence Syrian novelists turned their attention to denouncing oppressive structures, painting, in the following decades, a dystopian image of a reality in which people were trapped, incapable of changing their destinies. However, operating under an authoritarian system was not an easy task. Looking at two post-*naksah* novels, I examine some of the techniques that Syrian novelists

¹³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Colombia University Press, 1993), 6

¹³¹ Ibid.

leveraged to “safely” criticize the repressive systems under which they lived. I show that despite their sophisticated and nuanced political awareness, the majority of the 1950s and 60s generation continued to reproduce the underlying visions and frameworks that had hitherto framed the country’s literary discourse.

The Intellectual and the Modern Literary Canon

Thinking of genre not only through stylistic and formal components, but rather through the social, political, disciplinary, and institutional interplays that give a genre its meaning, a look back at the early years that followed Syria’s independence in 1946 helps us trace the rise of a new strata of literary agents who were instrumental in shaping the country’s cultural field and organizing its modern literary history. Since, as Michael Allen reminds us, “literary institutions bespeak not only a relationship to texts, but the creation of conditions whereby literature (and *adab*) comes to imply a literary world of a particular sort,”¹³² the Syrian University in Damascus, the country’s most influential institution in the first half of the twentieth century, is an important space where reading practices and modes of literary history and textual analysis were cultivated.

Explaining the choice of Arabic as the language of instruction, the university mission statement, published in 1970, reflects the institution’s commitment to pan-Arab nationalist views and emphasizes that the university has always aimed “to revive the cultural heritage of the Arabs to help in the renaissance and the organization of present day Arab conjunction.”¹³³ The university’s commitment to the pan-Arab nationalist stance materialized, as Sami Moubayed contends, in “[v]ery intentionally [inspiring] A-class scholarship, firebrand nationalism, and good citizenship.”¹³⁴ The reopening of the College of Letters in 1946 after its closure in 1931 at the hands of the French Mandate, along with the establishment of the Teachers’ Higher College had a significant impact on the organization of the country’s cultural field, as they graduated new generations of young, post-independence literary agents, including writers, translators, journalists, and literary editors and critics, who contributed throughout the following decades to constructing a post-independence narrative not only of the novel as a genre, but also of modern Syrian literature.¹³⁵

Despite political instability, the 1950s were marked, for the first time in the country’s history, by an energetic liberal and democratic atmosphere, where social, political, and literary

¹³² Michael Allen, “How *Adab* Became Literary: Formalism, Orientalism, and the Institutions of World Literature,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012), 181.

¹³³ *All about the University of Damascus from its Foundation (1918-1919) until Today (1969-170)* (Damascus: Syrian Documentation Papers, 1970), 3.

¹³⁴ Sami Moubayed, “The Founding of Damascus University 1903-1936: An Essay in Praise of the Pioneers,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 18 (2018), 180.

¹³⁵ The number of students attending the Syrian University increased dramatically in the years that followed the country’s independence in 1946. While in 1944-1945 academic year, the university had a total of 797 students with only 72 female students, in 1950-1951 the number grew to 2,470, including 470 female students, and by the 1955-1956 academic year, the number reached 5,390 including 935 female students. In 1946-1947, the year of its reopening, the College of Letters, later renamed as the Faculty of Art, had 97 enrolled students, including 49 female students. In 1955-1956, the college had 1,501 students, including 445 female students and a graduate student body of 69 students, 22 of whom were female students. For detailed statistics, see *All about the University of Damascus*.

activities flourished.¹³⁶ New political parties emerged, attracting a young, educated generation of followers, who found in newspapers and periodicals the perfect space to express their views on political, social, cultural, and literary issues. Sharing an ideological basis, both the political and the literary fields reflected the post-independence spirit of the time, a growing awareness of an identification with nationalism as the path to progress. Preoccupied by social emancipation and informed by the epistemological frameworks of the *nahḍa* and the ethos of political commitment (*iltizām*),¹³⁷ Syrian intellectuals headed a secular, nationalist literary discourse that strongly connected literature to social liberation and assigned writers a critical responsibility to their societies.

Embodying the totalizing discourse of the *ḥadāthī* project, which, as Kamal Abu-Deeb asserts, “sought to interpret the world in terms of identity, modernity, secularism and nationalism ... and was utterly certain and confident in the absolute validity of its premises,”¹³⁸ Syrian intellectuals perceived of themselves as cultural and social guides. Their strategies emerged from a literary *habitus*, a socialized subjectivity that they embodied both individually and collectively through the interrelationships they established in their social space.¹³⁹ Through a strong translation movement,¹⁴⁰ a large number of newspapers and literary magazines and periodicals,¹⁴¹ and a network of influential literary groups, literary agents facilitated an energetic literary atmosphere

¹³⁶ See Kevin W. Martin, *Syria's Democratic Years: Citizens, Experts, and Media in the 1950s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

¹³⁷ The two major ideologies that contributed to shaping the cultural field at the time were Marxist ideology and pan-Arab nationalist ideology. While Marxist writers translated commitment towards society as a class struggle, pan-Arab intellectuals found in existentialist ideas a possible approach to channel their pan-Arab commitment. However, as pan-Arab writers struggled to reconcile the committed, optimistic, and purposeful Pan-Arab approach with existentialist philosophy, which was characterized by a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world, they adopted an eclectic approach, retaining a heterogeneous mixture of philosophies. On the differences between the two approaches, see Samar Rūḥī al-Fayṣal, *al-Taṭawwur al-fannī li-'l-'ittijāh al-waḳī'ī fī al-riwāyah al-'arabiyyah al-sūriyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1996), 60-65. For an informative discussion of the development of *adab al-iltizām* in Syria and Lebanon, 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 Literature*, 3:1 (2000), 51-62.

¹³⁸ Abu-Deeb, 347.

¹³⁹ Christina Costa and Mark Murphy, “Bourdieu and the Application of Habitus,” in *Bourdieu, Habitus and Social Research: The Art of Application*, ed. Christina Costa and Mark Murphy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.

¹⁴⁰ Both publishing houses and literary magazines primarily focused on translating European works, including French, English, and Soviet novels, stories, and poetry. Between 1953 and 1955, for example, more than twenty-five novels and several poetry collections were translated, and every issue of the *al-Nuqqād* and *al-Thaqāfah*, the two most dominant literary journals at the time, included articles about or translations of Russian and Eastern European literary works. For a detailed discussion of the translation movement during the fifties, see Jamīl Ṣalībā, *Muḥāḍarāt fī al-ittijāhāt al-fikriyyah fī bilād al-shām wa-'āthāruhā fī al-adab al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Ma'had al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiyyah al-'Āliyah, 1958), 68-73; and Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, *Subul al-mu'aththirāt al-ajnabiyyah wa-ashkālūhā fī al-qīṣṣah al-sūriyyah: dirāsah taṭbīqiyyah fī al-adab al-muqāran* (Cairo: Ma'had al-Buḥūth wa'l-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiyyah, 1979), 42-52.

¹⁴¹ Samar Rūḥī al-Fayṣal reports that in addition to weekly and monthly literary journals, there were, in the mid-1950s, forty-one newspapers published in Damascus and Aleppo alone. Al-Fayṣal further reports that literary magazines and periodicals, such as *al-Nuqqād* and *al-Thaqāfah* were highly interested in publishing literary criticism works and that they encouraged literary debates and organized regular literary and essay competitions. Al-Fayṣal, *al-Taṭawwur al-fannī*, 62-67.

in which the literary and the political were intertwined. In that context, the novel was used to draw the contours of society and was measured by its capacity to reflect, and construct, “national reality,” a term that, as Samah Selim suggests in her work on the evolution of the Egyptian novel, “raises the specter of a whole set of specific historical and social issues such as colonialism and the anti-colonial struggle, the rise and hegemony of national bourgeoisies as well as the real and imagined social composition of the national community.”¹⁴²

The literary groups, clubs, and collectives, which were formed based on ideological commonality, granted writers a remarkable support, playing a significant role in setting the tone of the cultural scene at the time.¹⁴³ One of the most influential of these groups was the *Rābiṭat al-Kuttāb al-Sūriyyīn* (Syrian Writers’ Collective), which, as Shawqī Baghdādī, one of the collective’s founders asserts, “aimed to form an ideationally homogeneous literary school under the framework that literature should serve a socialist and scientific functional purpose.”¹⁴⁴ The *rābiṭah*, which noticeably grew over time, eventually evolving into *Rābiṭat al-Kuttāb al-‘Arab* (Arab Writers’ Collective), consisted of prominent leftist novelists, poets, translators, and literary critics, who, in their first manifesto published in *al-Nuqqād* magazine in 1951, introduced themselves as progressive, socialist, committed to people’s issues, and supportive of the struggles of the working class.¹⁴⁵

The *rābiṭah*’s multi-national conference, held in Damascus in 1954, manifested a particular understanding of literature as both a body of texts and a disciplined manner of reading and representation, sketching a framework for both literature and literary criticism. True literature was defined as “an intense social experience in a talented writer who represents his environment from within himself and participates in the life of his people and its advancement for the sake of a better society.”¹⁴⁶ This conceptualization of literature, which accentuates the relationship between subject and exterior environment and emphasizes a realization of the individual’s identity and experience within a particular place and historical moment is the basis upon which the realist novel was legitimized, as it constructs the basic elements of narrative fiction—time, place, character, plot—in a way that “mirrors” the particular social, cultural and political reality (*wāqi‘*) of the nation.

What is remarkable in these undertakings is that they not only aimed to define what the contemporary literary moment was, but they also sought to shape the paradigms of literary history

¹⁴² Selim, 110.

¹⁴³ Although during the 1920s and 1930s, the country witnessed the formation of some literary groups, such as *al-Rābiṭah al-Adabiyyah* (The Literary Collective) in 1921 and *al-Majma‘ al-Adabī* (The Literary Academy) in 1934, these early groups, Nabīl Sulaymān reports, did not share the ideological and literary sensibilities that marked the groups formed in the fifties. See Nabīl Sulaymān, *al-Naqd al-adabī fī Sūriyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1980). Other literary groups that emerged during the 1950s include *Rābiṭat Ahl al-Arḍ*, *Rābiṭat al-kuttāb al-Shabāb*, and *Rābiṭat Wahy al-Qalam* in Damascus; *Usrat al-Kawākibī* in Deir Ezzor, *Rābiṭat al-Adab al-Sūrī al-Jadīd* in Latakia; and *Usrat al-Aṣḍiqā’* in Aleppo.

¹⁴⁴ Shawqī Baghdādī, “*al-Hayāh nafsuhā dafa‘atnī ilā hādihā al-nahr*,” *Dirāsāt Ishtirākiyyah al-Adad al-Adabī*, 1988. Quoted in Sayf al-Dīn al-Qintār, *al-Adab al-‘arabī al-sūrī ba‘da-l-istiqlāl* (Damascus: Wazārat al-Thaqāfah, 1997), 42.

¹⁴⁵ The *Rābiṭah* was founded by Ḥannā Mīnah, Shawqī Bāghdādī, Sa‘īd Hūrāniyyah, ‘Abd al-Mu‘īn al-Mulūhī, Murād al-Sibā‘ī, Ṣalāh Dihnī, Muṣṭafā al-Ḥallāj, ‘Abd al-Salām ‘Uyūn al-Sūd, and Shihādah al-Khūrī.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted and translated in Firat, “Cultural Battles,” 157.

and literary criticism to reflect, and indeed to comply with, the post-independence, nationalist discourse. The statement of the Committee of New Literature, established during the *rābiṭah*'s conference, proclaims that

إن النظر إلى أثر أدبي يجب أن يراعي أبداً الفترة التاريخية التي ظهر فيها، كي نحسن الحكم على الآثار الماضية والحاضرة، ونرسم طريق المستقبل. وفي الأدب لا ينفصل المضمون عن الشكل، فهما كل واحد، والمضمون المتطور إلى أحسن هو الذي يبدع بطبيعته شكله الجديد. والأدب يستقي قبل كل شيء من واقعه الحي، لأن الأدب الصحيح هو أبداً ضد الافتعال في سبيل رسم نماذج وأحداث مسبقة عن الواقع.¹⁴⁷

In order to properly evaluate past and present literary works and to plan the future, [critics] should always take into consideration the work's historical context. Form and content cannot be separated. Together, they make one whole. Progressive content naturally creates its new form. Literature should, first and foremost, draw from the lived reality, because proper literature is always against fabrication that aims to form models and events far from reality.

The belief that literature has the potential to move society on a path of progress and that it should reflect the contemporary national moment involves a certain attitude towards both the present and the past, an attitude that is not hard to miss in the literary history scholarship published at the time. Writing in 1959, for example, the literary critic Sāmī Kayyālī describes the state of Arabic literature before WWI as an "ailing literature," in critical need of a dexterous physician who, in order to help this literature heal and move forward, should steer away from traditional methods.¹⁴⁸ In his work *Muḥāḍarāt 'an al-qīṣṣah fī sūriyyah ḥatta al-ḥarb al-ālamīyyah al-thāniyah* (Lectures on Literature in Syria until WWII), published in 1958, the Syrian literary historian Shākīr Muṣṭafā further underscores a rupture between the fiction produced in Syria before and after WWI, declaring that the Syrian novel was born in the period between WWI and WWII. Muṣṭafā emphasizes the word "born" because, as he argues, there was virtually no link between the attempts that took place before WWI, and the fiction produced after.

الواقع أن هناك انقطاعاً أو ما يشبه الانقطاع، بين القصة العربية الحديثة، وبين هذا التراث العريق التقليدي. القصة الحديثة ولدت مع ولادة المجتمع السوري الحديث وتأثرت قدر تأثره بالحضارة الغربية ومثلها الفكرية والاجتماعية. إنها في القلب الفني وفي المحتوى، وفي الدلالة الاجتماعية على السواء شيء جديد. ولم يكن بإمكان التراث القديم، على ما فيه من روعة وطرافة وأصالة، أن يرضي حاجات البرجوازية الجديدة النامية أو يتلاءم معها. إنه يعبر عن مجتمع العصور الوسطى، وعن مثل في الحياة متصلة بأنماط من الحكم وعلاقات في الاقتصاد والمجتمع ... ولهذا فبالرغم من حركة "الإحياء" في القصص التقليدي ... فإنه لم يستطع أن يكسب نسغاً جديداً، فانسحب شيئاً فشيئاً انسحاب المجتمع الذي كان يمثل تاركاً مكانه للقصص الحديث.¹⁴⁹

There is a rupture between modern Arab fiction and the traditional literary heritage. Modern fiction in Syria was born when the modern Syrian society emerged. Just like society itself, fiction was influenced by Western culture, thought, and society. This influence was embodied in content, social signification, and form. The Arab literary heritage, despite its magnificence and authenticity, could not satisfy the needs of the emerging bourgeoisie anymore, because it exemplified medieval society, including its modes of governance and social and economic relations ...

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Nābil Sulaymān, *al-Naqd al-adabī*, 132.

¹⁴⁸ Sāmī Kayyālī, *al-Adab al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir fī sūriyyah, 1850-1950* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1959), 32.

¹⁴⁹ Shākīr Muṣṭafā, *Muḥāḍarāt 'an al-qīṣṣah fī sūriyyah ḥatta al-ḥarb al-ālamīyyah al-thāniyah* (Cairo: Jāmi'at al-Duwal al-'Arabīyah, Ma'had al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabīyah al-Āliyah, 1958), 44-45.

Despite the attempts to revive traditional prose ... it did not gain new life, and it slowly withdrew along with the society it represented, giving its place to modern narratives.

Within this context, Shakīb al-Jābirī's novel, *Naham* (*Greed*, 1937) was marked as the beginning of the "artistic Syrian novel." Often termed the "Syrian *Zaynab*,"¹⁵⁰ *Naham* was celebrated as the first Syrian novel to express "modern sensibilities" and to address itself to the contemporary national moment and the issues of the day.¹⁵¹ Thematically and structurally closer to European models of the 19th century novel, *Naham* is preoccupied by the question of the contact with the west and the tradition/modernity nexus that had concerned Arab intellectuals since the *nahḍa*. Literary critics' commentaries on the novel further attest to the process that laid the contours of the modern Syrian subject. Finding in the protagonist, Ivān Kūzārūf, a disguise for al-Jābirī himself, Muṣṭafa writes:

اختار هذا الاسم ليعطي روايته طابع القصص الأوروبية العظيمة، على أنه، حتى وراء هذا الاسم التكرري، لم يستطع أن يخفي ملامحه الواضحة. فكوزاروف الروسي (الشرقي) ... هو لحد ما، ابن عائلة الجابري، الشرقية ووريث الطبقة الأرستقراطية القديمة الذي يريد "بالعلم" والأدب، أن يجاري الطبقة البرجوازية النامية، ويقودها. وهو في الوقت نفسه، الطالب الشرقي، النهم: الذي أرهقه الحرمان أجيالاً طويلة ثم وجد نفسه، على الشاطئ الآخر، دون حدود أو قيود ... ولعله يعكس أماله أيضاً حين يبعث بطله (كوزاروف) إلى النضال لإعلاء كلمة الحق.¹⁵²

[al-Jābirī] chose this name to emulate the great European novel. However, despite the mask, that is the foreign name, he was not able to hide himself. The Russian Kūzārūf represents the Eastern man for Europe. Kūzārūf is, to a certain extent, al-Jābirī himself, who is the son of the old aristocracy, and who hopes, by means of science and literature, to join the growing bourgeoisie and even lead it. He is also the hungry Eastern student who suffered from deprivation for generations and finally finds himself on the other shore, where there are neither limitations nor shackles. Kūzārūf also reflects al-Jābirī's dreams and hopes, so al-Jābirī makes him struggle to achieve justice.

Representative of al-Jābirī, the image of the protagonist echoes what Hoda Elsadda identifies as the figure of the "*nahḍa* hero." A product of the liberal nationalist discourse, Kūzārūf is the fictional embodiment of the intellectual elite or the reformist who imagines the nation and defines its parameters in his own image. He is literate, modern, and ambivalent about his relationship with the colonizer.¹⁵³ The choice of 1937, one year after the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence was signed, as a historical point of reference and the birthdate of the Syrian novel is in itself of great

¹⁵⁰ Until the last decade of the 20th century, the 1914 novel *Zaynab*, by Egyptian writer Muḥammad Husayn Haykal, was considered by literary historians to be the first Arabic novel. This is despite the fact that many Arabic novels were published and read before its appearance.

¹⁵¹ For discussions in Arabic language of *Naham* and other works of al-Jābirī, see Muṣṭafa, *Muḥāḍarāt 'an al-qīṣṣah fī Sūriyyah*, 395-450; and Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, *Riwāyah taḥta-l-mijhar* (Damascus: Manshūrāt Ittīḥād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1983) 38-73. For an English language account of al-Jābirī's works, see Walid Hamarneh, "Shakīb al-Jābirī," in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography 1850-1950*, ed. Roger Allen (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2010), 160-165.

¹⁵² Muṣṭafa, 416.

¹⁵³ Hoda Elsadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel Egypt 1892-2008* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 38-58.

significance, for it strongly connects the birth of the novel to the emergence of the nation-state as a new framework for identity formation.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, the philosophical and historical novels produced before *Naham* are briefly mentioned in the literary historiography of the time or quickly dismissed as a series of preliminary experiments in an evolving process of adaptation and assimilation of an imported genre. The philosophical novels of Fransīs al-Marrāsh, for example, are compared to those of al-Muwayliḥī's in Egypt, which are generically based on the classical Arabic narrative form of the *maqāmah*.¹⁵⁵ Works, like al-Marrāsh's are seen as pioneering, experimental attempts, that, while they paved the way for future works, are not the origin from which the "artistic novel" emerged.¹⁵⁶

Syrian intellectuals' molding of the country's modern literary canon in the early post-independence years was not limited to reassessing earlier texts. It also extended to drawing the organizing outlines for the contemporary novel. In 1954, Ḥannah Mīnah, one of the founders of the *rābiṭah*, published his work *al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq* (*The Blue Lanterns*). Sharing many formal similarities with Najib Mahfouz's novel *Zuqāq al-midaq* (*The Midaq Alley*, 1947),¹⁵⁷ the novel was highly celebrated as the first Syrian realist novel to truly approach reality and reproduce it in an artistic form. During the same period, Egypt witnessed the publication of *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣriyyah* by Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīm Anīs, which was the first comprehensive study to valorize and ultimately legitimize the program of socialist realism in Arabic literature. The publication of *al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq* in Syria initiated a long discussion in various periodicals between Syrian and Egyptian critics, which contributed to the eventual consolidation of the socialist realist novel as the country's predominant literary discourse.¹⁵⁸

In his introduction to *al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq*, Shawqī Baghdādī praises the novel for depicting the connection between people's personal concerns and those of the nation as a whole and emphasizing their revolutionary struggle (*al-niḍāl al-thawrī*) within a specific historical

¹⁵⁴ Signed in September 1936, the Franco-Syrian treaty recognized the principle of Syria's independence and satisfied nationalist demands for the reinstatement of Druze and ʿAlawite districts in Syria proper. The Syrian government immediately ratified the treaty and the national bloc assumed ministerial control.

¹⁵⁵ *Maqāmah* is an Arabic rhythmic prose genre, in which entertaining anecdotes written in an elegant, rhymed prose (*sajʿ*), are presented in a narrative context. The *maqāmah* consists mainly of picaresque stories in alternating prose and verse woven round two imaginary characters. Its most famous practitioners were Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) and Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122). In the late 19th century, Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī imitated the *maqāmah* genre in his Ḥadīth ʿIsā Ibn Hishām.

¹⁵⁶ In *Muḥāḍarāt ʿan al-qīṣṣah fī Sūriyyah*, Mustafā does pay some attention to the works of Fransīs al-Marrāsh and Maʿrūf al-Arnaʿūt. However, Mustafā infers that these works are not to be considered the roots from which the modern Syrian novel has originated. 146-168.

¹⁵⁷ Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, Najib Mahfouz (1911-2006) is one of the most prominent novelists in the Arab world. His monumental works, particularly those published between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s, employ realist idiom to chronicle the shaping of the Egyptian nation. His 1945 *Zuqāq al-midaq* vividly depicts the inhabitants of an alley in one of Cairo's older, lower-middle-class neighborhoods during World War II, providing a commentary on the social transformations that took place in Egypt under British occupation. In his work titled *Dirāsāt naqdīyyah fī al-riwāyah al-sūriyyah*, Muḥammad Abū Khaddūr traces the influence of Mahfouz's novel *Zuqāq al-midaq* on *al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq*, highlighting many similarities in setting, language, style, and the use of time and place. See Muḥammad Abū Khaddūr, *Dirāsāt naqdīyyah fī al-riwāyah al-sūriyyah* (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab, 1981).

¹⁵⁸ For a detailed account of the interaction between the Syrian and Egyptian critics, see Nabīl Sulaymān, *al-Naqd al-adabī fī sūriyyah*, 135-137.

moment.¹⁵⁹ Embodying the formal intersections between representation and ideology, the novel is set in the coastal city of Latakia at the end of WWII and portrays the national fight against the oppressive practices of the French Mandate. As it traces in keen detail the lives and struggles of the city's inhabitants, including the tyranny, poverty, unemployment and lack of education from which they suffer, the narrative anchors both characters and environment in the national collectivity and the particular Syrian experience, suggesting that only through unity and revolution do people achieve social justice. The characters, who belong to different religions—Christianity and Islam in this case—are brought together by shared human experiences and a collective national struggle against the occupier, which accentuates citizenship as a basis of belonging and defines the national subject against a foreign other.

Al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq exposes and attacks what the intellectual of the fifties considered fundamental issues that hindered the development of society. Class struggle and the poor's fight for a better life are at the heart of the novel. Feudalism, for example, is represented through 'Abd al-Maqṣūd, a rich man who lives on a higher floor, while the rest of the characters live in the basements of the neighborhood's buildings. The wealthy 'Abd al-Maqṣūd is isolated from the rest of the novel's characters, incapable of understanding their struggle for freedom and a better life. Revolutionary thinking, the novel suggests, is the only way forward while traditional forms of knowledge and expression are depicted as signs of stagnation and malaise. As the protests against the oppressive rule of the French take to the streets, al-Ṣafatī, the neighborhood's *ḥakawātī*, a storyteller whose stories are based mainly upon ancient folk tales and legends, adheres to submissiveness. Representative of traditional thought structures, the illiterate *ḥakawātī* even associates discontentment and rebellion with blasphemy (*kufṛ*). Contrary to the realist narrative of the novel itself, the *ḥakawātī*'s popular narrative practice is built on deception and falsehood, as he intensely argues for the veracity of the warriors' unrealistic actions depicted in the epic cycles (*sīrah*) he recites. With the death of the *ḥakawātī*, the author announces the beginning of a new era, both socially and in literature. As one of the characters declares, "al-Ṣafatī died because of the dark and dank grave-like basement in which he lived."¹⁶⁰

The Literary Field: Cracks of Anxiety

The dynamic and formative role that the intellectual had played during the 1950s took a dramatic shift in the following years, as the once promising post-independence regimes atrophied into static authoritarianisms. From the policing and the silencing of oppositional voices under Nasser's centralized regime to the collapse of the union between Egypt and Syria, and with the rise of the Ba'ṯh Party to power in Syria in 1963 and the subsequent expansion of the state's control over society, the intellectual experienced many shockwaves that resulted in an intense sense of confusion and anxiety. As early as the sixties, Syrian intellectuals began to flirt with existentialism, and a new wave of novels sketched an existence deprived of meaning and depicted a confused and helpless generation of intellectuals. Novels such as Walīd Madfa'ī's *Mudhakkārāt manḥūs afandī* (*The Memoirs of Mr. Unlucky*, 1959), Muṭā' Ṣafadī's *Jīl al-qadar* (*Generation of Fate*, 1960), Hanī

¹⁵⁹ Shawqī Baghdādī, "Qabla an nabda'," *al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Āmmah li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfah, 2002), 8-9.

¹⁶⁰ Hannah Mīnah, *al-Maṣābīḥ al-zurq*, 299

al-Rāhib's *al-Mahzūmūn* (*The Defeated*, 1961), and Jūrj Sālim's *Fī al-manfā* (*In Exile*, 1962), all presented a young, educated generation living a series of personal and collective failures and disappointments.

Although these works embody the Syrian intellectual's early engagement in a process of examination that aims to unearth the causes of the collective defeat, they continue to reflect an ingrained secular, progressive posture. In *al-Mahzūmūn*, for example, the protagonist, Bishr, is a progressive university student and disillusioned intellectual who is rejected by every woman he falls in love with. The one exception to that is Wāḥah, a young Christian woman who silently loves Bishr. She struggles from a liver disease and eventually dies without finding the courage to express her feelings, only because Bishr belongs to a different religion. From the women Bishr loves to his friends and family members, most of the novel's young characters are lost and destined for failure. The novel, however, suggests that the failure of the intellectual is caused by external factors that prevent him or her from leading society in a process of enlightened transformation. Maintaining a secular, modernist vision, al-Rāhib locates the roots of his characters' defeat in traditional modes of thinking, including social, cultural and religious structures—ignorance and apathy characterize societies in both the city and the countryside, and people maintain a static life in “everlasting shells of isolation.”¹⁶¹ Religious characters are presented as shallow, detestable and even disgusting. However, the novel does not criticize superstitious and irrational religious practices as a call for religious reform. Religion, whether Islam or Christianity, as the young female character, Saḥāb, proclaims in an academic symposium, is a solidified value system that does not have the capacity to lead society into positive change.¹⁶²

The disillusionment that characterized the Syrian novel during the sixties intensified with the *naksa*, the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel, which had nearly been unimaginable in the pan-Arab paradigm, and as many scholars have pointed out, inflicted injury on Arab subjectivity and generated a profound process of reexamination. For nationalist Syrian writers and intellectuals, many possessed of sophisticated levels of political consciousness, the period that followed the *naksa* was particularly perplexing, as they were grappling not only with the effects of the defeat, but also with a growing authoritarian political system striving to coopt their voices. The reaction to the defeat in Syria materialized in a range of modes of thought and expression, and marked the beginning of a rupture within the cultural field.

For the intellectual, all facets of Arab life were now subject to investigation, and political reform was coupled with a comprehensive re-evaluation that spanned the self, as well as social and cultural structures. For many progressive nationalist intellectuals, Fouad Ajami observes, the defeat engendered a new radical sensibility manifested in a consensus that “the heroes of yesterday had given in to that frustrating, hopeless body of attitudes and habits, that immutable thing called tradition.”¹⁶³ In 1968, the Syrian thinker Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm published *al-Naqd al-dhātī ba‘da-l-hazīmah* (*Self-criticism After the Defeat*), in which he proposed a theoretical framework to analyze all reasons, both cultural and political, that had facilitated the defeat. Al-‘Aẓm's views on culture reflect the general stand of the leftist, nationalist intellectual at the time, who continued to value the secular, nationalist project but criticized the mechanisms that had prevented this project from

¹⁶¹ Hanī al-Rāhib, *al-Mahzūmūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1961), 189.

¹⁶² Ibid., 151.

¹⁶³ Ajami, 32.

reaching its goals.¹⁶⁴ When turning to the question of culture and society, al-‘Azm suggests that the primary problem in Arab society is the fact that its revolutionary drive is limited to the political. “The revolutionary Arab subject today is revolutionary in a political sense. However, he/she continues to be socially, religiously, intellectually, morally, and economically conservative.”¹⁶⁵ Society as a whole, al-‘Azm further argues, still holds on to age-old traditions and suffers from ignorance, tribalism, dependency, and superstitious and transcendental beliefs.¹⁶⁶ The prominent poet and thinker, Adonis, an icon of the *ḥadāthī* project, also declared, as Ajami reports, that “henceforth there would be nothing sacred and beyond discussion, and that ... it was no longer enough to interpret the world but to change it.”¹⁶⁷

The post-*naksa* Syrian novel reflects this comprehensive investigation. The disillusionment that had informed the works of the sixties now gained a new dimension, a critical reflection on the role that the writer had played in this collective crisis. Walīd Ikhlāṣī in *Aḥḍān al-sayyidah al-jamīlah* (*The Arms of the Beautiful Lady*, 1969), for example, continues to depict the alienation and failure of the intellectual, but now holds this intellectual accountable for his actions. The novel paints a bitter portrait of Ismā‘īl, a philosophy teacher, who is struggling with an intellectual crisis. Ismā‘īl is trapped between searching for a way to disseminate his views on the human condition and a desire to immerse himself in corporal pleasures. In an attempt to reconcile these two competing forces, Ismā‘īl marries a rich woman and pours his ideas into a book. But, as the novel suggests, combining the two aspirations is impossible and the intellectual’s abstract discourse that keeps him distant from the masses only leads to his death. The wife eventually has an affair and, despite his belief that his writings would bring radical transformation to society, Ismā‘īl’s book does not generate any reaction from people, leading him to take his own life.

The trauma caused by the *naksa* overlapped with an unprecedented consolidation and growth of state power, manifested in systematic practices that aimed to organize and co-opt cultural production across all sectors of society. Syrian littérateurs, who were, in theory, searching for ways to revive literature’s role in educating the masses, were, in reality, helplessly watching themselves losing power under the weight of a hegemonic state, and were left without an open civil society where their voices might have an impact. From dictatorship in Syria and in other Arab countries, to the descent of Lebanon into civil war in 1975, and from Egypt becoming the first Arab state to recognize Israel by signing the Camp David Accords in 1978 to the Islamic uprising in Syria and the massacres that the regime committed to crush it, the Syrian intellectual’s operating paradigm was in a state of crisis. The dynamic and influential intellectual, who was able to organize and shape the world around him was now completely crushed by a dark reality. In a 1988 interview, the Saudi novelist ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, who had been residing in Syria, described his generation as follows:

¹⁶⁴ Fundamentalist and conservative political thinkers, on the other hand, blamed radical nationalism and revolutionary socialist regimes for the defeat. See, for example, Ṣalāḥ al-dīn al-Munajjid, *A midat al-nakbah: bahth ‘ilmī fī asbāb ḥazīmat khamsah ḥuṣayrān*, (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-jadīd, 1967). For a detailed account of the diverse reactions and proposals that emerged after the 1967 defeat, see Ajami, 29-74.

¹⁶⁵ Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Azm, *al-Naqd al-dhātī ba ‘da-l-hazīmah*, new edition (Damascus: Dār Mamdūh ‘Udwān li’l-nashr, 2007), 49.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 86

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Ajami, 32.

[W]e as a generation only lived defeats until now, and our disappointments are almost enough for generations, or so I fear. Or maybe every generation laments the luck of having been born in such a time. But on the whole if you compare the generation that was born between the two wars, and lived big dreams which soon were crushed, meaning that nothing was accomplished, you may find generations that were more satisfied than us, more understanding and accepting of their realities, better at coping with them. But we got filled too soon with dreams and then with the collapse of these dreams. Too big a gap developed between what we wanted to accomplish and what actually did get accomplished. Here you see a kind of inner devastation and bitterness that we did not expect; these [feelings] are always vivid in us and they express themselves in different forms.¹⁶⁸

Against the backdrop of this landscape, alienation, exile, and denunciation of oppressive powers became essential themes that ran through Syria's novelistic discourse. Through characters that are divorced from the surrounding world, the novel became a site on which systems of power were exposed, and modern reality was portrayed as nothing but lies, violence and enslavement. As Elisabeth Vauthier observes in her reading of the twentieth-century Syrian novel, "[t]he denunciation of hierarchies, of an oppressive and corrupt power, the evocation of calcified relations between the sexes and incomprehension between generations, each reminds us of the devils of a distorted society trapped in the past."¹⁶⁹

On the other end, hardline, committed writers who believed that a part of literature's function was to underline people's inherent potential for change and progress, produced a critical but hopeful and positive discourse, in which the intellectual was assigned the responsibility to maintain hope and faith in revolutionary practices. This positive tone was endorsed and promoted by the state and the literary establishment, which structured the *naksa* as a generative moment in order to reinforce a homogeneous Syrian self against a foreign other and to shift people's attention from the oppressive reality in which they lived.¹⁷⁰ In the years following the *naksa*, the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance published a large number of novels that celebrated positive heroes who persevere against all odds and handicaps.¹⁷¹ Fayyād, the writer, political activist, and protagonist of *al-Thalj ya 'tī mina-l-nāfidhah* (*Snow Comes from the Window*, 1969) exemplifies the image of the intellectual that was promoted at the time. As the novel follows his political activism against the separatist government that had supported the break-up of the United Arab

¹⁶⁸ 'Abd al-Rahmān Munīf, *Al-Kātib wa 'l-manfā* (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2001), 221—22. Quoted and translated in Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, "Summoning the Spirit of Enlightenment: On the Nahda Revival in *Qadaya wa-Shahadat*," in *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 315.

¹⁶⁹ Vauthier, 343.

¹⁷⁰ Alexa Firat reports that "the state's official cultural journal, *al-Ma 'rifah*, conspicuously avoids using any terminology that refers to *al-naksa* as a defeat, rather emphasizing the aggression and transgression of the Zionist state and the colonialist empires. All of the editorial prologues published after June 1967 refer only to the battle of June 5th and the urgency of continued Arab solidarity against these kinds of aggressions" Firat, "Post-67 Discourse and the Syrian Novel," 64-65.

¹⁷¹ Examples of novels published right after the *naksa* by the Ministry of Culture that maintained a positive tone include *Hasan Jabal* (Proper Name, 1969) and *al-Ashqiyā' al-sādah* (*Poor Gentlemen*, 1971) by Fāris Zarzūr, *al-Fahd* (*The Leopard*, 1969) by Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, and *al-Thalj ya 'tī mina-l-nāfidhah* (*Snow Comes from the Window*, 1969) by Ḥannā Mīnah.

Republic, we see Fayyād suffering from imprisonment, failure, and alienation, which eventually lead him to self-exile. However, Fayyād's struggle only enriches his journey towards intellectual maturity, which culminates in his decision to return home and lead his people in their national struggle. "I will never run away again! I will never run away again,"¹⁷² Fayyād announces in the ending sentence of the novel.

The literary establishment's endorsement of progressive and positive ideologies of commitment was not limited to promoting realist works devoted to supporting the struggle of the toiling masses and highlighting idealized heroes and events. The establishment efforts extended to marginalizing and criticizing works that went against the grain of the state's sentiments and narratives. Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, who was at the time the Head of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature in Damascus University, to give one example, wrote extensively on the development of the Syrian novel. His post-*naksa* works celebrated the socialist realist novel and strongly criticized the prevailing novels characterized by anxiety and disillusionment. Investigating what he calls *adab al-ḡayā'* (literature of destruction), al-Khaṭīb empties this literature of any aesthetic value and criticizes it for lacking authenticity and even being forced and fabricated, for the Syrian experience, he claims, was not in a state of crisis that would produce the lost and confused subject represented in these novels. Reflecting a nationalist discourse that ascribes a fundamental moral and cultural value to the nation, al-Khaṭīb further criticizes the leading voices within this discourse and places them outside the margins of society itself. "The writers of this type of literature belong to a generation that has lost the basic relationship with life. They revolt against everything, but for the sake of nothing. They do not believe in family, society or the establishment. They, perhaps, believe in one thing only, and that is themselves."¹⁷³

The disparate sensibilities that were developing among Syrian intellectuals and the consequent critical conflict within the literary field are clearly manifested in the publication of *Adab wa 'l-aydyūlūjyyah fī sūriyyah 1967-1973 (Literature and Ideology in Syria)* in 1974, and the sharp reactions and rigorous debates this work generated. Embodying Marxist criticism in its ideological underpinnings, the authors of the work, Nabīl Sulaymān and Bū 'Alī Yāsīn, endeavored to reaffirm the dominance of committed literature after years of decline.¹⁷⁴ In an attempt to battle against what they described as prevalent literary, intellectual, and political stagnation that had dominated the country between 1967 and 1973, the authors analyzed and

¹⁷² Mīnah, *al-Thalj ya 'tī mina-l-nāfidhah*, 2nd edition (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1977), 371.

¹⁷³ Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, *Subul*, 94. The literary establishment's endorsement of socialist realism continued throughout the eighties. The first academic thesis on the Syrian novel, titled "*al-Wāqī 'iyyah fī al-riwāyah al-sūriyyah*" and presented by Fayṣal Sammāq in 1979, which earned him a master's degree from the Faculty of Literatures at the University of Damascus, represents the literary establishment's position. Sammāq's thesis committee included three of the most prominent literary critics at the time, Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Ashtar, and Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad. In his introduction, Sammāq states that the field is in a critical need for studies that reinforce the presence of the realist novel and suggests that his work aims to fight against styles and practices that have infiltrated the Syrian novel. "Literature in the seventies," he claims, "has witnessed the introduction of imported practices. Those who imported such practices adopted them under the name of modernity and believed that they were progressive. These practices, however, steer the writer and the reader away from their reality and place them in odd mazes. This is why, it is necessary ... to emphasize the progressiveness of our literature through adopting realism, and especially socialist realism." Fayṣal Sammāq, *al-Wāqī 'iyyah fī al-riwāyah al-sūriyyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Ba'ṭh al-Jadīdah, 1979), 12-13.

¹⁷⁴ Other critics that adopted Marxist criticism in their work on the contemporary Syrian novel include 'Abd al-Mu'īn al-Malūhī, Jalāl Farūq al-Sharīf, Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb, and 'Abd al-Razzāq 'Īd.

evaluated contemporary Syrian literary works from a socialist, scientific stand, aiming to provide an outline for future works.¹⁷⁵ Sulaymān and Yāsīn advocated the revival of ideologically based, functional literary modalities that focus on content, claiming that the emphasis on form above content is a reactionary trend and a malicious attempt to steer attention away from the substantial struggle against imperialism and class inequality.¹⁷⁶ *Al-Adab wa'l-aydyūlūjyyah* triggered heated debates that took place on the pages of newspapers and literary journals and were later collected in a book titled *Ma'ārik thaqāfiyyah fī sūriyyah 1975-1977 (Cultural Battles in Syria, 1979)*. Alexa Firat pays close attention to the meanings and effects of both works, suggesting that the complex reactions to the publication of *al-Adab wa'l-aydyūlūjyyah* point to an emerging rupture in the Syrian literary field. What is most evident in the reactions to *Al-Adab wa'l-aydyūlūjyyah*, Firat observes, “is a rejection of the notions of positivism and dogmatism (totalitarianism) ... While all the writers agree on the need for social transformation in their society, the dissenters argue that it would not arrive by way of compulsion, but rather through processes and developments both inside and outside literature.”¹⁷⁷

Ma'ārik thaqāfiyyah reveals that the post-*naksa* Syrian novel was not immune to what Edward al-Kharrāṭ named, “*al-ḥasāsiyyah al-jadīdah*” (new sensibility) in Arabic fiction. Despite the literary establishment’s endorsement of socialist realism, or committed realism as some critics called it, writers continued to explore new directions and depict their gloomy reality, drifting away from earlier models of realism. Maintaining a politically aware attitude and a belief that literature, as the Syrian novelist Ḥalīm Barakāt states, “can subordinate politics to creative and reflective thinking, and undertake the task of promoting new consciousness,”¹⁷⁸ they were now preoccupied by a search for new forms capable of sublimating meaning through creative literary practices.¹⁷⁹ Irrespective of the styles and literary strategies they mobilized, their “stand here is always a rejection of traditional authorities and [their] vision is essentially grounded in questioning the prevailing value system.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ Nabīl Sulaymān and Bū ‘Alī Yāsīn, *al-Adab wa'l-aydyūlūjyyah fī sūriyyah 1967-1973* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Khaldūn, 1974), 5.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 8. Reducing the merits of literary works to an examination of class representation, the authors of *al-Adab wa'l-aydyūlūjyyah* criticized some of the most prominent Syrian writers for their failure to establish a concrete connection between the nationalist hero and the working class and for focusing on the individual instead of the masses. The novelists that came under Sulaymān’s and Yāsīn’s attack include Colette Khūrī, Ghādah al-Sammān, Hanī al-Rāhib, Zakariyyā Tāmīr, and Walīd Ikhlāṣī.

¹⁷⁷ Firat, “Cultural Battles,” 168.

¹⁷⁸ Quoted and translated in Fabio Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

¹⁷⁹ Echoing al-Kharrāṭ’s identification of “new realism” (*al-tayyār al-wāqī ‘ī al-jadīd*) as a post-*naksa* literary trend in Arabic fiction, the critic Samar Rūḥī al-Fayṣal suggests in his study of the Syrian novel between 1980 and 1990 that, except for some individual voices, literary production in this period continued to hold respect for the early model, but was now nuanced by the adoption of modern methods, producing what al-Fayṣal calls an “amended traditional model” (*al-riwāyah al-taqlīdiyyah al-mu‘addalah*). Samar Rūḥī al-Fayṣal, *Binā’ al-riwāyah al-‘arabiyyah al-sūriyyah 1980-1990* (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-‘Arab, 1995), 61.

¹⁸⁰ Edward al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥasāsiyyah al-jadīdah: maqālāt fī al-zāhirah al-qīṣāsiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993), 1920.

Dynamics of Criticism

Operating within the confines demarcated by the official rhetoric, whether within the grey areas where slightly pushing the boundaries was not too dangerous or within the narrow margins of officially tolerated criticism, was a difficult process that eventually eroded the capacity of Syrian intellectuals to believe in their role as the conscience of the nation. “Fear was our daily reality. The writer was constantly maneuvering in relentless search for non-hazardous vocabulary, both in creative expression and in everyday utterance. It was an exhausting practice,”¹⁸¹ the writer Fu‘ād Muḥammad Fu‘ād recalls. Writing in 1980, the novelist ‘Abd al-Nabī Ḥijāzī emphasized that the three old taboos—sex, religion, and politics—continued to haunt the literary imagination in Syria, and writers were trapped between a deep-seated, internalized repression and an oppressive political power.¹⁸² The restraints on the cultural field did not seem to change much during the decades after Ḥijāzī wrote his words. In an interview that he gave in 1995, Hanī al-Rāhib also exposed the prison within which the writing process continued to be contained.

قبل أربعين عاما كنا لا نزال ننعيم بمساحة واسعة من الحرية، وهي مساحة اكتسحتها حركة النهضة العربية التي اندحرت الآن. لقد تسلمت الأنظمة واقتصاد السوق على الحرية. أعني أنه حتى لو سمحت لأبطالي بالتفكير بصوت مسموع، فلن يقبل الناشر بطباعة كتاب يتصدى بصدق وعمق لهذه المحرمات الثلاثة. فإن العنف، بمختلف تجسّداته، سيمارس ضدي وضده.¹⁸³

Forty years ago, we enjoyed a greater space of freedom, a space snatched-up by the *nahḍa* movement, now gone. Institutions and the market economy now govern freedom. What I mean is that even if I allowed my characters to reflect aloud, no editor would agree to print a book that dealt with these three taboos sincerely and in-depth. Violence, in all its forms, would be brought against him and against me.

Within this context, writers found themselves with limited choices: they had to either embrace the goals of a tyrannical regime, to openly battle authoritarianism and risk one’s livelihood, freedom, safety, and, perhaps life, or to write within the margins allowed by the state, utilizing the means available to aesthetically engage with the world and preserve their place in society, minimal as it was. The latter was the path that many writers followed, producing works that, although they functioned within the boundaries permitted by the state, bore witness to the ever-present defeat in Syrian history.¹⁸⁴ Al-Rāhib and other novelists who attempted to transgress boundaries and break taboos paid a high price, and many ended up in exile, whether forced or self-imposed.¹⁸⁵ Mirroring the writers’ real-life experiences, the Syrian novel under the rule of Hafiz al-Asad was largely shaped by themes of exile and disorientation. Displaced characters dominated the Syrian novel,

¹⁸¹ Fu‘ād Muḥammad Fu‘ād, interview by author, Beirut, May 2013.

¹⁸² ‘Abd al-Nabī Ḥijāzī, “*Anmāṭ ru’yat al-‘ālam fī riwāyat al-sab’īnāt*,” *al-Ādāb*, n. 2-3, 1980, 54.

¹⁸³ Hanī al-Rāhib, “*Wajhan li-wajh: Hanī al-Rāhib wa-Ṭālib al-Rifā’ī*,” *al-‘Arabī*, N.443, Oct 1995, 69.

¹⁸⁴ For a detailed and informative study of the relationship between the regime and Syria’s writers, artists, and filmmakers under the rule of Hafiz al-Asad, see Cooke, *Dissident Syria*.

¹⁸⁵ Many prominent Syrian writers lived in forced or self-imposed exile, including Ghādah al-Sammān, Salīm Barakāt, Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, Hanī al-Rāhib, Adūnīs, Zakariyyā Tāmīr and Nizār Qabbānī.

embodying a prevalent state of interior exile, the feeling of being divorced from one's own home, world, or history, a trope that was certainly frowned upon by the literary establishment.¹⁸⁶

The perspective of a world where an individual controls his/her destiny withered, and the novel's inward reflections revealed perplexed and alienated subjects, imprisoned in a cruel reality. Embodying the *tanfis* literature, Syrian novelists focused on the daily mechanisms of oppression and its effects on the present life of the individual, but, unlike the following generation, they did not offer alternative frameworks that would allow for change. Skillfully detaching themselves from openly denouncing political oppression, they painted a dystopian image of a reality, in which people were trapped, incapable of changing their destinies. Khalil al-Nu'aymī, to give one example, reflected intensively in his works on the effects of power and domination, attacking tyranny in all its manifestations. In *al-Khula'ā* (*The Libertines*, 1983), al-Nu'aymī follows two lovers through a one-night car trip. The man and the woman are running away from the oppressive powers of the city to the sea, a symbol of openness and freedom. However, it is unclear whether in the sea lies their salvation or their end. Throughout the first-person narrative, we encounter no other voice but that of the man, who angrily reveals his frustration not only with an intense love-hate relationship between himself and the woman who is supposedly in the car with him, but also with the whole world around him. Emblematic of those who live under tyrannical systems of power, the unnamed protagonist/narrator is "a mass of frustration, failure, and deterioration,"¹⁸⁷ but despite his constant and relentless verbal complaints and criticism, he is "all talk," and does not take any concrete steps towards change, for he believes that "defeat is inevitable."¹⁸⁸ Al-Nu'aymī's protagonist, like his reader, is the product of oppressive structures, "the model child of authoritarian power,"¹⁸⁹ who constantly complains but is not concerned with actively opposing or challenging the power structures in place.

Al-Khula'ā repeatedly returns to *fitnah*, the first civil war in Islamic history. Direct quotations from historical accounts and anecdotes about the violent persecution of the *Khawārij* (Kharijites) at the hands of the *al-Umawiyyūn* (Umayyads) are randomly interspersed within the novel's emotionally charged monologue:

أحسست بالسيارة تبتلع الهواء العاصف تكاد أن تغص به وتموت وعرفت أنت بذلك ورأيتك تنظرين إلي
نظرات ذات معنى وانت تنهدين وقال له أما لو مثلنا بك قال له اختر لنفسك من القصاص ما شئت فأمر به
فقطعوا يديه ورجليه ثم قال له كيف ترى قال أفسدت علي دنيائي وأفسدت عليك آخرتك ثم أمر به فقتل ثم
صلب على باب داره ومع ازدياد السرعة المجنونة ازدادت تنهداتك الكظيمة شدة بشكل عفوي سألتك إن كان
كل شيء على ما يرام ودون أن تجيبي استدرت عني بعيداً.¹⁹⁰

I felt the car swallowing the storming air. It was about to choke and die. You knew that. I saw you looking at me and sighing. And he said: I am going to torture you. Choose a punishment for yourself! And he ordered his men to cut off his hands and feet. "What do you think?" he asked. "You have ruined my present life and your afterlife," he replied. So, he ordered his men to kill him and then crucify him at the

¹⁸⁶ Vauthier, 364.

¹⁸⁷ Khalil al-Nu'aymī, *al-Khula'ā*, special edition (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1990), 145.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 148.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 20-21.

door of his house. Your sighs intensified with the increase of the crazy speed. I spontaneously asked if everything was alright. You turned your face the other way without answering me.

Referencing the fate of the *Khawārij*, who, unlike other Muslims, rejected heredity succession outright and held that believers were obliged to depose the imam if he erred, places the author's present time tyranny within a historic and violent power struggle wherein challenging the powerful always ended with painful death.¹⁹¹

Lacking punctuation and flowing relentlessly like an extremely long sentence uttered in one breath, the univocal narrative of *al-Khula'ā'* suggests the structure of a confessional letter, or a monologue in a therapy session, as it constantly switches between, memories, visions, confessions, and disclosures, providing the narrator, as well as the reader, with room for catharsis. Although the very first sentence calls for speaking out: "We were getting closer to the sea when you angrily said to me: don't stay silent,"¹⁹² this call dies out by the end of the novel. As the protagonist/narrator vents his frustration, he turns to complete silence, "as if we secretly agreed to stay silent forever, while surrounded from all sides by an ambiguous and majestic sorrow."¹⁹³ Highlighting their ultimate ineffectiveness, the narrative strips both the man and the woman of all sorts of agency—the night in which they are driving never ends, the awaited dawn never comes, and it was not they who did not reach the sea, but rather "the sea never came to them."¹⁹⁴ The only successful task of this catharsis trip, we are told, "was taming the self and the other."¹⁹⁵

"Criticizing oppression as a universal concept was not forbidden," the poet and playwright 'Adnān al-'Awdah states. "The hard part was to leave no trace in our works that would point at the political realities in Syria."¹⁹⁶ Within this small space of "freedom," Syrian novelists focused their criticism on the mechanics of power and its effects on society. Having to manipulate the firm but vague system of censorship, they relied on indirect routes to reflect their disillusionment with present reality, including the use of symbol, irony and temporal or spatial displacement. In 2014, Khayrī al-Dhahabī reflected on what he called years of *taqiyyah*,¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ On the *Khawārij*'s position on governance, political theory, rebellion, and radical egalitarianism, see Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2004), 54-65.

¹⁹² Al-Nu'aimī, 5.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 164.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Al-'Awdah, interview by author, Beirut, May 28, 2013.

¹⁹⁷ *Taqiyyah*, in Islam, refers to the precautionary dissimulation of religious belief and practice in the face of persecution. Thus, it may be used for either the protection of an individual or the protection of a community. *Taqiyyah* was first employed by Shi'i Muslims, who from the death of the Prophet onward considered themselves subject to persistent religious persecution by the Sunni majority and the holders of political power. Although the necessity of *taqiyyah* has diminished in more modern times, especially after the Ṣafavids made Twelver Shi'ism the state religion of Iran, many Muslim minorities, such as the 'Alawite, the Isma'ili, and the Druze sects in Syria, have borrowed the concept in times of fear for their safety. For a detailed discussion of *taqiyyah*, see Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī. "Taqiyyah or Dissimulation," *Shi'ite Islam*. Trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2010) 207-210.

لو ارتدّ بي العمر، وعدتُ إلى ما ابتدأت به، لكنك قلت كل ما أشتهي كتابته ونكرته مرة باسم بيروت، وأعني دمشق في رواية "الليال العربية"، وكتبت عن الفترة التيمورية وأعني البعثية في رواية "فخ الأسماء" .. كنت أتمنى لو لم أضع الكثير من الوقت في البحث عن حلول لا تؤدي بي إلى المعتقل.¹⁹⁸

If I had a chance now to go back in time to my first writings, I would have said all that I wanted to say directly and without disguise. In *Layālī 'arabiyyah* (*Arabian Nights*) I would have called the city by its true name of Damascus, instead of calling it Beirut. I would not have called an era the Timurid period when what I really meant was the Ba'hist period in *Fakhkh al-asmā'* (*The Trap of Names*). I wish I had not spent much time cleverly obfuscating my work just to avoid prison.

Walīmah li-a'shāb al-baḥr (*A Banquet for Seaweed*, 1984) by Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, exemplifies such techniques. Marking a major thematic and stylistic break in his work, Ḥaydar moves away from the local Syrian scene, offering, through a close critique of the immediate past, a broad panorama of the failure of Arab revolutionary movements. Through language that masterfully interplays between myth, religion, and history, the novel fuses together the emergence of an evil, mythic creature, a Lotan,¹⁹⁹ and that of dictatorship, while following the lives of two Iraqi teachers, Maḥdī and Miḥyār, who have escaped to Algeria after the communist uprising in southern Iraq in 1968 was crushed by the Iraqi Ba'ḥ party. By interweaving the stories of their daily lives in two countries and two timeframes, the novel portrays how the characters forge their paths amidst the horrors of authoritarian regimes. Setting the novel in Iraq, Syria's arch enemy at the time, and exposing its regime as an example of dictatorship makes the perfect setting for a Syrian writer to offer a verdict on, not only the nationalist movements, but also the Ba'ḥ party under which he himself lived.²⁰⁰ Though the novel traces the rise of an unnamed totalitarian regime, the similarities with the rise of Ḥafīz al-Asad to power are hard to miss for a sophisticated reader. Published in 1983, when the massacre of Hama was still vividly present in the minds of the Syrian people, the novel's graphic descriptions of the Ba'ḥ's brutality against the communists in Iraq can be read as a proxy for the Ba'ḥ's brutality against the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria itself. Throughout the novel, subtle but significant indicators remind a Syrian reader of the Lotan at home. Named Abū 'Ubayd al-Lāh al-Kalbī, the Lotan's human name, for example, conjures the Kalbiyyah tribe, to which the Asad family belongs. Also, the novel's emphasis that the Lotan, or the dictator, has been in power for twelve years, building a cult of personality around himself—"twelve years after its divine appointment, people will believe that on the day of [the leader's] birth, all kingdoms on

¹⁹⁸ Khayrī al-Dhahabī, "Khayrī al-Dhahabī yufakkik fakhkh al-istibdād," *al-Mudun*, April 5, 2014.

<http://www.almodon.com/culture/2014/4/5/الاستبداد-فخ-يفكك-الذهبي-خير-ي>.

¹⁹⁹ In Ugaritic literature, Lotan, a seven-headed sea serpent or dragon, was defeated by the storm god Ba'al. It also appears in the Hebrew Bible under the name Leviathan as a multi-headed sea serpent killed by Yahweh.

²⁰⁰ Hostility between Syria and Iraq started in 1966 when both countries were under Ba'hist rule. The conflict escalated in late 1970s after the alleged discovery of a Syrian plot to overthrow Saddam Hussein, which led Iraq, in 1980, to expel the Syrian ambassador from Baghdad. Syrian-Iraqi relations sank to their lowest ebb with the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war, as Damascus sided with Tehran against Baghdad. Consequently, in 1982, the borders between the two countries were closed and all trade and movement by citizens were stopped. For a detailed account of Syrian-Iraqi relations, see Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Asad Regional Strategy," in *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), 54-97.

earth lowered their flags.”²⁰¹— can be read as an indication of Asad’s rise to power in 1971, exactly twelve years before the novel was published.

Representative of the post-independence generation of intellectuals, who had found in Arab nationalism the hope for a better future, liberated from structural modes of oppression, Ḥaydar portrays a deceived nationalist intellectual and his text, unlike the 21st-century Syrian novel, continues to embody the principles of the *ḥadāthī* project. His belief in and depiction of the hero intellectual as a force of change, and his understanding of progress as a rupture with the past persist, blaming the failure of the nationalist project on the very regimes that claimed to represent the Arab world and its desires, only to betray their promises. Ḥaydar reads the failure of the present as a result of it being trapped in an obsolete past, exemplified in dominating collective values and social and cultural frameworks that sustain oppressive powers.²⁰² The chapter titled *Zuhūr al-lūyathān* (The Emergence of Lotan) graphically depicts the rise of the dictator in the Arab world and details the emergence and rise of a pure evil monster who

بعد أن يخرج من غبار الصحراء زاحفاً نحو المدن سيغير أطوراً من التحولات العضوية ... ومع مرور الوقت، بعد أن يعتلي العرش ويوطد ملكه بالقتل والنفي والتجويع ... سينسى أصله وشكله اللابشري.²⁰³

as it emerges from the dust of the desert, crawling into the cities, goes through phases of biological transformations ... With the passage of time, as it ascends to the throne and strengthens its sovereignty by means of murder, exile, and starvation until the land is under its control and that of its informants, everyone will have forgotten its origin and its non-human form.

Through dense, mythological allusions, the novel provides a detailed description of the doom and destruction brought by the Lotan and of the process through which the monster is transformed in the minds of the people into a divine leader. Regarded as integral to modernity, myth, which as Talal Asad argues, was seen by the *ḥadāthī* poets of the 1950s and 60s as “a necessary product of the secular mind”²⁰⁴ and a “part of a response to the perceived failure of Muslim societies to secularize,”²⁰⁵ continues to operate in Ḥaydar’s novel as a space within which settled feelings and sensibilities are dislocated and sacred tradition is disrupted. It is through the reincarnation of transcendental religions that the myth of Abū ‘Ubayd al-Lāh al-Kalbī crystalizes and endures through time until he becomes an unquestioned truth.

²⁰¹ Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, *Walīmah li-a‘shāb al-baḥr: nashīd al-mawt*, 6th edition (Damascus: Ward li’l-Ṭibā‘ah wa’l-Nashr, 1998), 226-227.

²⁰² Looking back at the past was a prevalent theme in Syrian novels published in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly after the *naksa*. The majority of these novels presented a calcified past, trapped in outdated and enslaving collective values. As Vauthier points out “the past was made perpetual in the present, as though installed there once and for all. This present-past rested on a fixed universe, folded in on itself, without any creativity, doing nothing but reproducing the old models.” Vauthier, 345.

²⁰³ Ḥaydar, 226.

²⁰⁴ Talal Asad, *Formation of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 55.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

سيتمجد اسمه كما كانت تتمجد أسماء الأنبياء في العصور الساقطة. كما يروي الخلف عن السلف معجزات أولئك الرسل وتجلياتهم سيروى عنه رؤى غريبة خارقة.²⁰⁶

Like the prophets of the distant past, his name will be glorified. The way prophets' miracles and manifestations were transmitted from one generation to another, extraordinary and supernatural visions will be told about him.

As we see in the following excerpt, narratives that surround the birth of Prophet Muhammad with an aura of the supernatural are merged with those of the monstrous divine leader. Integrating an excerpt from Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī's work *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah* (*Signs and Proofs of Prophethood*), which provides the most authoritative and prevalent account of the birth of prophet Muhammad from the point of view of the normative tradition with full *isnād* to Ibn 'Abbās, the novel identifies the unquestionable at the heart of the religious experience as the cultural tenet that allows oppressive political practices to persist.

ستتحدث أمه في الليالي السحرية الغامضة عن يوم مولده. كيف رأت جناح طائر أبيض مسح فؤادها فأشاح الرعب عنها والوجع، ثم التفتت فإذا بشراب أبيض يشبه اللبن وكانت عطشى، فشربته فأضاء منها نور عال، ثم رأت نسوة كالنخل الطوال كأنهن من بنات عبد مناف يحدقن بها فصاحت: واغوثاه، من أين علمن هؤلاء بي؟ ثم يشتد الأمر عليها وهي تسمع الوجيب في كل دقيقة أعظم وأهول، فإذا بديباج أبيض يمد بين السماء والأرض، فإذا برعد يأتي من أعماق السماء ليقول: خذوه بعيداً عن أعين الناس. وترى الأم، وهي تحت المطر الحار وهذيانات ما بعد المخاض، رجالاً يقفون في الهواء يحملون أباريق من فضة ترشح عرقاً يشبه الجمان والندى، لها رائحة أطيب من المسك الأردف والعنبر المعصفر. تحت هذا البخار اللطيف ترف أجنحة من الطير مناقيرها من زمرد وأجنتها من ياقوت، تغطي سماء الحجرة. في تلك اللحظة السرمدية سيكشف الله عن بصرها وبصيرتها فتري مشارق الأرض ومغاريها، وثلاثة أعلام: علم في المشرق وعلم في المغرب وثالث على طهر الكعبة.²⁰⁷

His mother, during the magical and mysterious nights, will tell about the day he was born—how she saw a vision as if the wing of a white bird stroked her heart, taking away all her panic and suffering. Then she turned, and there was a white drink; she thought that it was milk. she was thirsty, so she drank it, and a bright light radiated from her. She then saw women like lofty palm-trees, resembling the daughters of 'Abdi Manāf, staring at her. As she was wondering [over this] and asking herself, “woe is me, how did these women know about me?” her labor became intense ... Suddenly she saw a piece of white brocade stretched between the heavens and the earth. A thunder-like voice coming from the depth of the skies said: “take him where no one can see him” ... She then saw men standing in the air, holding silver ewers covered with pearl-like droplets, sweeter smelling than fragrant mask and honey-yellow amber. Under this graceful vapor, a flock of birds covered her chamber. Their beaks were made of emerald and their wings of rubies. At that eternal moment, God would lift the veil off her sight, so she saw the eastern

²⁰⁶ Haydar, 226.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 227. The original text is in Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah* 2nd edition (Aleppo: Dār al-Wa'ī, 1986), 611. The original narrative is recounted in the voice of Prophet Muhammad's mother, Amīnah. For a translation of the original narrative and for a detailed discussion of this version, and other narratives surrounding the birth of the prophet, see Marion Holms Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 6-61.

and western regions of the earth. She saw three banners raised, a banner in the east, a banner in the west, and a banner on the top of the *Ka'bah*.

Against the image of the Lotan, which invokes a fallen world in need of redemption, there is Mahdī and Mihyār. Presented as disseminators of knowledge and a continuation of earlier revolutions against oppression, Mahdī and Mihyār are affirmative national heroes, whose quest manifests through a fight for change and progress—they escape from prison in Iraq and make for Algeria in the hopes of serving a more effective revolution. Their disillusionment stems from the rise of authoritarian political systems that strive to strip them of their agency to shape history and reorganize the world around them. Despite their desire and zeal, we are told, history was slipping away from their reach to be shaped by the hands of other potters: by police, execution squares, generals, clerics, and informants. Despite that reality, they continued to be preoccupied with a promethean call. The names of the novel's heroes further conjure the beginning and the fulfillment of a becoming, an inauguration of a new way of being in a world that is associated with the anticipation of the end of days—Mihyār's name alludes to the figure of the modern (*ḥadāthī*) revolutionary Arab poet, who, thanks to the poetry of Adūnīs, has come to exemplify the myth of rebirth by recreating the world around him,²⁰⁸ and Mahdī's evokes the awaited imam, who will establish justice before the Day of Judgment. Despite the crushing reality in which the characters live, despite living under the rule of the Lotan, the novel's ending maintains the possibility of salvation through sacrifice and redemption. Mihyār's ultimate arrest and Mahdī's disappearance is not the end. It rather points to the willingness of the hero intellectual to sacrifice himself in times of suffocating tyranny as a reincarnation of the sacrifice of the ancient Mesopotamian god Tammuz, which is meant to revitalize the barren earth.

A New Consciousness, a New Discourse

Syrian intellectuals' profound sense of disappointment began to materialize as early as the 1990s in an inward investigation into the principles and premises that had framed literary and intellectual discourse in the twentieth century. Many began to grapple not with the mechanisms of the oppressive political powers in place, but with such notions and questions as the religious, the secular, and the failure of the intellectual and the nation-state. Within Syria, the views of writers and thinkers such as the sociologist Burhān Ghalyūn and the historian Muḥammad Jamal Barūt began to gain momentum. This cohort of intellectuals proposed that in the *nahḍa* and the *ḥadātha* projects and the ideologies to which they had given rise one can find the roots behind the contemporary crisis in Arab intellectual culture. In his *Ightiyāl al-ʿaql* (*The Assassination of the Mind*), Ghalyūn, for example, provides a reading of the cultural field in Syria and the Arab world at the time, explaining the failure of the *nahḍa* and the *ḥadātha* projects, both of which he argues, were partial and premature. On the one end, there are those who have fallen into ultimate despair, for they view the current crisis “as a natural manifestation of a presupposed essential Arab quality, characterized by irrationality, negativity, partition and therefore inferiority,” linking the failure of the present to “the Arab mind, Arab subjectivity, Arab culture, or even Arab heritage as a

²⁰⁸ On the use of the mask of Mihyār in Adūnīs' work, see Khaled Mattawa, “Introduction” *Adonis Selected Poems*, trans. Khaled Mattawa, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), i-Xvi; and Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity, and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 3-32.

manifestation of this subjectivity.”²⁰⁹ On the other end, there are those who obscure the depth of the crisis by emphasizing the validity of the social and intellectual systems in place and ascribing the crisis to the failing political powers in place.

Ghalyūn suggests that the roots of the contemporary crisis should be traced back to the exclusionary principles of both the *nahḍa* and the *ḥadātha* projects, and that the disillusioning futility of the intellectual stems from his elitist attitude toward the people and the frameworks that had informed their world. Rethinking the *nahḍa*, Ghalyūn finds the emphasis of the *nahḍawi* intellectuals, both the secular modernists and the Muslim reformists, on notions of change and transformation problematic, since they held within them, he explains, a contempt toward the past and a call for a revolution against an existing consciousness.²¹⁰ Ghalyūn also criticizes the *ḥadātha* project for finding the roots of the current failure in the nation’s heritage and for assigning the modernist elite the task of transforming what they believed to be “reactionary” frameworks and structures of Arab thought and reality.²¹¹ Any cultural project that imposes an ideology, whether modernist or traditional, Ghalyūn asserts, necessarily leads to dismantling culture as a source of self-creation and innovation. Rather than returning to old attempts of reconciling the presupposed dichotomies of the past and the present, the modern and the traditional, Ghalyūn suggests that a way forward lies in “uncovering disparities,” for dualities and contradictions at the heart of modern Arab culture should be both problematized and celebrated as a dynamic force. “We must move beyond seeing contradiction as a rupture or a split in the self and beyond experiencing it as a tragic tension that would lead, like in epics, to a new history, for [contradiction] is the origin and essence of history. We have to accept that contradiction is the basis of unity, and conflict is the source of freedom and progress,”²¹² Ghalyūn contends.

Views like Ghalyūn’s gave rise to rigorous discussions and debates. *Qaḍāyā wa-shahādāt* (*Issues and Testimonies*), a cultural journal published in Damascus between 1992 and 1993, samples the state of the cultural field at the time. Preoccupied by the prevalent state of disappointment, the journal turned to the legacy of the *nahḍa*, aiming not only to reconnect with and reclaim the openness and plurality it represented, but also to give insights into the present. The opening editorials of the journal’s six issues reflect the dismay and ambivalence within the Syrian literary field, particularly within the post-independence generation, whose discourse had been informed by the *nahḍa*’s principles. The literary critic Fayṣal Darrāj fiercely rejected the claims that the *nahḍa* and the modernity it advocated are responsible for the failure of the modern Arab intellectual culture. Darrāj argued instead, as Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab shows in her analysis of the journal’s opening editorials, that the *nahḍa* project “was aborted by the very regimes that claimed to represent the Arab world and its desires. The real problem, he claimed, was that those regimes never allowed the *nahḍa* project to come to fruition in the first place, that the *nahḍa* modernization project had been thwarted.”²¹³ The playwright Sa’dallah Wannūs, on the other hand, takes a step further in his investigation, emphasizing that two factors should be taken into consideration when rethinking the *nahḍa*: colonialism and the post-independence state, which

²⁰⁹ Burhān Ghalyūn, *Ighthiyāl al-‘aql*, 4th edition (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2006), 11.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 166.

²¹¹ Ibid., 173.

²¹² Ibid., 304.

²¹³ Kassab, “Summoning the Spirit of Enlightenment,” 329.

“betrayed its modernization promises as well as its promises of building a unified nation that enters the age with power and establishes itself.” Although he finds in the *nahḍa* “the most promising and liveliest period of modern Arab history, in which change was promoted and undertaken with creativity, confidence and optimism,”²¹⁴ Wannūs, unlike Darrāj, recognizes the epistemological fragility of the *nahḍa* thinkers and questions premising their project on cultural incompatibility.

Investigations and negotiations like these accumulated over time and reached their height with the unfolding of the new millennium, actualizing within the political and cultural spheres of the “Damascus Spring,” when large numbers of authors, artists, and intellectuals launched a comprehensive movement that promoted the concept of civil society as an introduction to democratic reform. What distinguished the “Damascus Spring” from previous oppositional movements in Syria was the fact that “it emerged from below, for the majority of the activists were intellectuals and not politicians.”²¹⁵ Syrian intellectuals envisaged a bottom-up cultural project in which the intellectual would finally recover her long-lost symbolic role and authority in the collective imagination. Their aim was to reach and empower the middle class, which they envisioned to be the only social force with the ability to implement a reformist project. As the writer, translator, and human rights activist Mīshel Kīlō puts it, “we had two choices Either we could work as an elite and found a new political party, or we could work in a different way, offering knowledge, ideas, experiences, reflections and emotions to [that part of] society which is now outside politics: to help society restore itself politically through a cultural project that we offered. This was the project with which the civil society movement started.”²¹⁶

Held in the homes of intellectuals, where activists, writers, and artists of all backgrounds met and discussed social, cultural, and political matters, *muntadayāt al-ḥiwār al-waṭanī* (forums or salons for national dialogue) played a significant cultural and political role during the Damascus Spring. The *muntadayāt*, which first appeared in Damascus, and then mushroomed all over the country, aimed to “establish a movement led by Syrian intellectuals that participates in public affairs, but, at the same time, distances itself from the political that is usually constrained by interest and power balance.”²¹⁷ As a result of the meetings and discussions that took place within the *muntadayāt*, many more formal projects emerged, including *Jam‘iyyat aṣḍiqā’ al-mujtama‘ al-madanī* (Friends of Civil Society Association), and *Lijān iḥyā’ al-mujtama‘ al-madanī* (Committees for Reviving Civil Society). Although they did not necessarily reflect a cohesive vision, the concepts addressed within the *muntadayāt* later found their way to the public, and inspired long and informative debates that occupied many newspapers and journals, both in Syria and across the Arab world. From Hegel to Marx, Ferguson, and Gramsci, Syrian intellectuals launched an investigation into political and social theories, and some of them publicly called for rethinking many of the frameworks that had governed the Syrian intellectual sphere for a long time. Their debates covered topics such as the nature of the relationship between civil society and

²¹⁴ Ibid., 320.

²¹⁵ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 73.

²¹⁶ Quoted in George, 33.

²¹⁷ Muḥammad Najātī Ṭayyārāh, “*al-Muthaqqafūn al-sūriyyūn adwār wa-as‘ilah*,” *al-Ādāb Magazine*, vol. 48, n. 3-4, 2001, 62.

the state, the place of secularism and liberalism in the newly emerging cultural project in Syria, and how to prevent the movement from falling into an exclusively leftist and elitist discourse.²¹⁸

In September 2000, the London-based newspaper *al-Hayāh* published a statement signed by ninety-nine Syrian intellectuals, including thinkers, novelists, poets, artists, journalists, and cinematographers, calling on the Syrian government to end the state of emergency, pardon all political detainees and exiles, establish a ‘state of law’ that would end all forms of constraints and censorship, recognize political and intellectual pluralism, and guarantee freedom of expression.²¹⁹ The “statement of the 99” was followed by many more, the most recognized of which is *al-wathīqah al-asāsiyyah li-lijān ihyā’ al-mujtama’ al-madanī* (The Basic Document of the Committees for Reviving the Civil Society), known as the Manifesto of the 1,000, as it carried the signatures of 1,000 Syrian intellectuals. Published in many Arab newspapers, the statement voiced courageous demands—it expressed the intellectuals’ vision of a pluralist nation with equal rights, duties, and representations for all people; called for a comprehensive social, political and constitutional reform; and explicitly questioned the rule of the Ba‘th party, demanding a multi-party political system.

This new intellectual, social, and politically aspiring vitality was threatening for many of the regime’s hardliners, who had been cautiously watching. And, as some scholars argue, the movement’s step toward direct involvement in the political sphere proved to be the final straw.²²⁰ In 2001, the regime reasserted its power, launching an intense campaign against the cultural and political movement—the *muntadayāt* were first stifled by strict regulations, and then shut down completely. Influential activists were arrested and put on trial with fabricated charges, such as communicating with foreign governments, weakening national sentiment, awakening sectarian conflicts, challenging the constitution, and undermining the authority of the head of state. As quickly as it arrived, the Damascus Spring was shut down. But, despite its short duration, its effects persisted, manifesting in new modes of engagement within the cultural field. On one level, intellectuals continued to hold demonstrations and voice their demands and visions, and on another level, which is the primary focus of this study, they reconstructed their nation, history, and society by means of their art.

Despite the quick shutdown of the Damascus Spring, for a period, the cultural atmosphere in Syria remained more relaxed than that which had existed under Asad-the-father.²²¹ In terms of novelistic writing, Fawwāz Ḥaddād pointed out that in 2009, while some of his then recent novels were banned in Syria, in the recent past those same novels would have landed him in prison.²²² Max Weiss, who makes a similar observation, suggests that the “benign neglect, or at least [the adherence] to a relatively laissez-faire position, vis-à-vis novelists and other writers in recent years

²¹⁸ For more details on the different topics and opinions that occupied the intellectual sphere at the time, see *al-Adāb magazine*, vol. 48, n. 3-4 2001, 57-110, and vol. 49, n. 5-6, 2001, 20-35.

²¹⁹ For the original statement in Arabic, see *al-Hayāh*, 27 September 2000; Ziādah Raḍwān, “*Zāhirat al-muntadyāt fī sūriyyah bayna matāhat al-qānūn wa-jadwā al-siyāsah*,” in *Rabī’ Dimashq*, 290-291. For English translation see George, Appendix 1, 178-181.

²²⁰ George, 46.

²²¹ For examples of some taboo themes that were lifted under Asad-the-son, see Cooke, “The Cell Story,” 169-187.

²²² Quoted in Susanne Schanda, “From Syrian Writers to Lebanese Publishers.”

... might be attributed to the minor and marginal role literature plays in contemporary Syria.”²²³ Weiss’ suggestion aligns with what many Syrian writers felt at the time. The poet Muḥammad Rashshū bitterly recalls, “by the late nineties, it seemed that the authorities were confident that we had completely lost our effectiveness, that we had become severely isolated and disconnected from the people on the streets. We were treated like a nonentity, as if we did not exist.”²²⁴

The somewhat tempered atmosphere and the regime’s “benign neglect” of the country’s literary production allowed Syrian writers a margin of freedom to openly explore previously forbidden territories. The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed many attempts that aimed to generate a new order within the country’s literary field. Taking into consideration that at the time president Bashar al-Asad was promoting his image as a modern democratic leader, different from his father, some of these activities can be read under commissioned criticism.²²⁵ However, irrespective of the regime’s intentions, these independent cultural activities reflect the vitality of young writers and their determination to revive their role within Syrian society. Some projects and ideas, such as the founding of an independent collective of Syrian writers, did not come to fruition. Despite the work put into the project by Samar Yazbik and a handful of other Syrian intellectuals, it was aborted by both the old guard in the literary field who found it threatening, and their counterparts in the older generation of intellectuals who trivialized the idea and refused to support it, because they had lost any belief that a change could be achieved.²²⁶ Other projects, however, did succeed.

The experience of *al-Dūmarī* (The Lamplighter), the first privately owned newspaper since the 1963 Ba‘thist coup, demonstrates not only the type of efforts the Syrian intellectuals were pursuing, but also the public keenness for a new, independent discourse. Founded by the prominent political cartoonist ‘Alī Farzāt and first published in 2001, *al-Dūmarī* was a weekly satirical newspaper that leveraged humorous articles and drawings to shed light on the incompetence and corruption of the government. The newspaper was impatiently awaited by people and the entire print run of the first issue—over 75,000 copies—was sold out from Damascus newsstands in less than four hours. Although, as a sign of government approval, the newspaper was initially not required to submit its material to censorship prior to publication, a few months later, as *al-Dūmarī* published a stinging critique of government corruption and sweeping calls for reform, the pre-publication censorship was reinstated and Farzāt was forced to circulate his newspaper through the government distribution apparatus. In 2003, after many clashes with censors and high officials in the government, the state-run *Tishrīn* newspaper accused Farzāt of cooperating with foreign governments, which led him later that year to close the newspaper.

Bayt al-Qaṣīd,²²⁷ a weekly literary gathering, is another manifestation of opposition that

²²³ Max Weiss, “Who Laughs Last,” 146.

²²⁴ Muḥammad Rashshū, interview by author, Iraq, May 2013.

²²⁵ For a detailed discussion of commissioned criticism, refer to Chapter-I.

²²⁶ Samar Yazbik, “*Naḥnu al-sūriyyūn ma-l-ladī sanaktubuhu*,” *al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin*, 1240 6-26-2005, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=40000&r=0>. In January 2012, nine months after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, 110 Syrian intellectuals, who had openly voiced their support of the uprising, announced the establishment of *Rābiṭat al-Kuttāb al-Sūriyyīn* (Syrian Writers Collective) as an alternative to the state-run *Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-‘Arab* (The Arab Writers Union).

²²⁷ In classical Arabic poetry, the term *bayt al-qaṣīd* refers to the line that is the generative impetus of the *qaṣīda* and on which it is built. In contemporary everyday speech the term refers to one’s end goal.

was able to survive the government's campaign against political activism because it did not openly cross the red lines of the political sphere. *Bayt al-Qaṣīd* was founded by the poet, journalist, and short story writer Luqmān Derkī in 2006 and met at the *Firdaws* hotel in Damascus. Derkī, who belongs to the Kurdish minority and has embraced the image of the *ṣu 'lūk* poet,²²⁸ aimed to displace the processes and structures that had governed the literary field in the country by creating a platform for new, conventionally marginalized voices to assert themselves and their views. Unlike other literary platforms in Syria at the time, *Bayt al-Qaṣīd*, as Derkī describes it, was an open and diverse space for literature and music, whose existence was fundamentally defined by freedom and plurality.²²⁹

As important as these explorations, both successful and aborted, may have been, it is within literature itself that writers artistically performed a new consciousness and carved out new spaces of negotiation. These efforts fully materialized when a large number of writers, who published for the first time in the late 1990s and early 2000s, introduced avant-garde novels, different from their predecessors of the mid twentieth-century. Daring and controversial, these novels explored what had long been treated as risky territories and taboo themes, forming what was referred to within the country's literary field as "the new Syrian novel" or, sometimes, "the young Syrian novels."²³⁰ Although the majority of these novels were written by a young generation of Syrian novelists, they do not necessarily represent a simple generational divide, and the names grouped under the new or the young Syrian novel belong to slightly different generations. The notion of youth, some novelists insist, signifies novelty rather than age, a new consciousness or a new sensibility that corresponds to the contemporary moment. It manifests itself, as Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan, one of the noted writers of the 2000s puts it, in a "narrative that establishes its own new territory by working against predetermined frameworks and standard clichés, revolting against ideology, and rejecting what has been before."²³¹

Nonetheless, the large cohort of young writers who form the driving force behind this new novelistic writing have certainly helped reshape the literary field in Syria. Overwhelmed by the effects of a crisis of nationhood, disillusioned with the validity of the grand narratives that had governed the cultural and literary field for the majority of the twentieth century, and empowered by the diverse pressures that opened cracks in the country's undifferentiated patronage system, these young writers were preoccupied with questions of identity, the complexity of the national space, and difference and differentiation. Unlike previous generations of modern Syrians who participated to varying degrees in the social and political life of the country, this generation was born and raised under the repressive rule of the Ba'th Party and experienced nothing but political disenfranchisement and social and economic exclusion. While the post-independence intellectuals

²²⁸ In pre-Islamic Arabia, the *ṣu 'lūk* poet (pl. *ṣa 'ālīk*), is a brigand poet who rejects social norms and is living a life of an outcast in the desert. Instead of boasting over the excellence of his tribe, the *ṣu 'lūk* poet would only express pride in his self-ordained independence from the tribal order. Among the most famous pre-Islamic *ṣa 'ālīk* are al-Shanfarā (d. c.540), Ta'abbata Sharran (d. c.550), and 'Urwah ibn al-Ward (d. c.615).

²²⁹ Luqmān Derkī, "Ma'an li-tashwīḥ sum'at al-kuttāb," interviewed by 'Abd al-Ḥajj, March 30, 2014, <https://alarab.co.uk/لقمان-ديركي-مع-التشويه-سمعة-الكتاب>.

²³⁰ In her study of Khālīd Khalīfah's *Madīḥ al-Karāhiyyah*, Anne-Marie McManus suggests that these novels could be grouped under what she terms "the pre-2011 opposition novel." Anne-Marie McManus, "The Contemporary Syrian Novel in Translation," *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (Spring 2014), 323.

²³¹ Ḥasan, "al-Riwāyah al-Sūriyyah al-shābbah: shabāb al-kuttāb am shabāb al-ibdā'?" *al-Awān*, 12/08/2013. www.alawan.org/2013/12/08/الرواية-السورية-الشابة-شباب-الكتاب-أ/.

are still disillusioned by the collapse of the dreams they had sought, the new generation, Ḥasan told me,

ولد ونشأ تحت الخوف والقهر والعقوبات الاقتصادية والتهميش المطلق. أجبرنا منذ طفولتنا على أن نكون جزءاً من هالة القائد ابتداء من طلائع البعث وشبيبة الثورة وانتهاء باتحاد الطلاب. جيلي هو جيل الانكسارات. وصلنا إلى المسرح بعد انتهاء العرض. ككتاب، لم يكن لدينا مشهد ثقافي قوي ليدعمنا. المتقف السوري مثله مثل المشهد الثقافي إما متعاون أو مهمش ومبعد. في واقع كهذا نحن في بحث دائم عن معان خاصة بنا مختلفة عما تم تأسيسه.²³²

was born into and grew up under fear, repression, economic sanctions, and complete disenfranchisement. We were forced to be a part of the leader's cult from a very young age—from *Ṭalā'i' al-Ba'th* and *Shabībat al-Thawrah* to *Ittīhād al-Ṭalabah*.²³³ My generation can be defined as the broken generation. We arrived at the theatre after the show had already ended. As authors, we did not have an empowered cultural field to support us. The Syrian intellectual, as much as the cultural field itself, is either co-opted or discarded, marginalized, and isolated. In such a reality, we are constantly searching for our own meanings, different from what is already established.

Another key characteristic of the novelistic writing published as early as the late 1990s is the unprecedented contribution of women, whose involvement was remarkable not only in terms of numbers,²³⁴ but also in light of the gender sensibility they reflect. Focused on agency, desire, femininity, subjectivity, and plurality, their investigations were concerned with exposing the gendered dynamics of power and the binary dualities that had governed both the nation and the novel. The women's literary discourse that emerged around the advent of the new millennium in Syria corresponds to a new phase of Arab feminist movements, "The Third-Phase," as some scholars label it,²³⁵ which "seek to transform gender relations in the public and private spheres simultaneously, and to redefine the meaning and practice of citizenship beyond gender hierarchies."²³⁶ A distinguishing feature of this phase is the visibility and centrality of women's

²³² Ḥasan, interview by author, Skype, September 2018.

²³³ Already in 1963-70, but more consistently thereafter, the Syrian regime endeavored to organize the active and politically important segments of the population into corporatist and regime dependent, streamlined associations. These associations, which, as Volker Perthes points out, come closer to being an instrument of repression and control more than anything else, include *Munazzamat Ṭalā'i' al-ba'th* (The Ba'th Vanguard Organization), *Ittīhād Shabībat al-Thawrah* (Revolutionary Youth Union), quasi-compulsory organizations for primary school students and preparatory and high school students, and *Ittīhād al-Ṭalabah*, which, though not compulsory, represents all Syria's university students. See Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad*, 161-179.

²³⁴ According to a survey conducted by the critic and literary historian Samar Rūhī al-Fayṣal, 39 novels written by women were published between 1950 and 1990 (5 in the 1950s, 12 in 1960s, 11 in the 1970s, and 11 in the 1980s). This number grew dramatically in the following decades. My research shows that a minimum of 41 novels written by Syrian women were published during the first decade of the 21st century alone, 29 of which were by women writers who published their novels for the first time in the 2000s.

²³⁵ See Sahar Khamis and Amel Mili, eds, *Arab Women's Activism and Socio-Political Transformation: Unfinished Gendered Revolution*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Pernille Arenfeldt and Nawar al-Hasan Golley, eds. *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformation from Within* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012); and Deniz Kandiyoti, ed. *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (London: Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996).

²³⁶ Sahar Khamis and Amel Mili, "Introductory Themes," *Arab Women's Activism*, 18.

voices and experiences. It is marked, as Khamis and Mili state, by a “shift in gender politics from a top-down approach, where progress is driven by state actors, to a bottom-up approach, where gender activists take matters into their own hands and drive the evolution of gender standards, according to their own needs, demands, interests, and agendas.”²³⁷

In that context, women novelists such as Manhal al-Sarrāj, Samar Yazbik, Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan, ‘Abīr Isber, Dīmāh Wannūs, and Shahlah al-‘Ujaylī, some of whose works are discussed in this study, “reject any general definition of the feminine as an introduction to approaching the plural and colored reality.”²³⁸ They embrace a discourse that “stresses the plurality of women and introduces the feminine as a large spectrum of many shades.”²³⁹ Unlike earlier generations of Syrian and Arab feminist discourses, these new voices do not aspire to subject the male voice to feminist paradigms, but rather, as Yazbik puts it, “to fight against a hegemonic mindset. [Feminism] is an act of political liberation, in which all individuals in society are given their rights equally and lawfully, men and women, without distinction.”²⁴⁰ Ḥasan further defines feminist writing as “any writing that works against the powerful, the static, and the exclusive. It is a writing that endorses the marginal, the undomesticated, and the inclusive, regardless of the gender of the writer.”²⁴¹

The inquiries and efforts of these young writers should not be read only within the historical context of the literary field in Syria, but should also be placed within the larger picture of literary production in the Arab world at the time. Globalization, the Internet, social media, and the rise of new cultural centers in the contemporary Arab world all contributed to expanding the world of Syrian writers and to creating new platforms, tools, and channels of communication, placing this emerging consciousness within a larger context of aesthetic and intellectual negotiations. Many scholars have paid attention to changes and transformations in the novelistic discourse that began to dominate the literary scene as early as the nineties in many places in the Arab world. In his examination of the novelistic discourse in Egypt during the nineties, Sabry Hafez, for example, emphasizes the presence of a new generation of writers who generated their own textual strategies and aesthetic characteristics in response to the radical economic, political, and cultural changes in their reality.²⁴² Building on Hafez’s remarks that these new literary voices were born from “the impossibility of becoming what you want,”²⁴³ Samia Mehrez further argues that “[it] is perhaps their awareness of this dismal reality, at both personal and national level, that prompts them to

²³⁷ Ibid., 17.

²³⁸ Nāhid Badawiyyah, “*al-Nasawiyyah al-thālithah: al-ta’addudiyyah wa’l-ikhtilāf wa-taghyr al-‘ālam*,” *Syrian Women Observatory*, 06/08/2010, nesasy.org/~syriapre/index.php//العنف-والتمييز/womens-issues/9052-7040.

²³⁹ Ḥasan, interview by author, September 2018.

²⁴⁰ Yazbik, “The Political and the Cultural: A Conversation with Samar Yazbek,” Interviewed by Nayla Mansour and translated by Alice Guthrie, *al-Jumhūriyyah* June 16, 2016, www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/political-and-cultural-conversation-samar-yazbek.

²⁴¹ Ḥasan, “*Tadwīr al-zawāyā al-ḥāddah: fī madīh al-ikhtilāf*,” *al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin* 1835, February 23, 2007, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=89439>.

²⁴² Sabry Hafez, “*Jamāliyyāt al-riwāyah al-jadīdah: al-qaṭ‘ah al-ma’rifīyyah wa’l-naz‘ah al-muḍāddah li’l-ghinā’iyyah*,” *Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001), 184-208.

²⁴³ Ibid., 186.

write what they want.”²⁴⁴ It is the notion of *writing what they want* that characterize the literary discourse in pre-2011 uprising Syria. “The shutdown of the Damascus Spring did not stop us,” the poet Rashā ‘Umrān told me. “We continued with our fight. We constructed the Syria we imagined on the pages of our works.”²⁴⁵

Although the Syrian regime did not necessarily retaliate against all writers who published critical or controversial works, it did not celebrate them either. The new directions that Syrian novelists were pursuing did not receive sufficient scholarly attention within Syria, and were largely ignored, at least at the beginning, by the literary establishment.²⁴⁶ In 2009, the Lebanese literary magazine *al-Ādāb* published a dossier on the new writing in Syria, which included two articles on the novel, one by the Syrian literary critic Ḥassān ‘Abbās and the other by the Syrian novelist ‘Umar Qaddūr.²⁴⁷ The different readings and reactions of the two articles shed light on how the new Syrian novel was received within the literary field in Syria. Whereas the two authors acknowledge that a change in the country’s novelistic production was taking place, they disagree on whether this change embodied the emergence of a “new” Syrian novel. Ḥassān ‘Abbās identifies “writing against forgetfulness” as the driving force behind the new novelistic project that emerged in Syria during the first decade of the 21st century. ‘Abbās defines “writing against forgetfulness” as the aspiration to evoke a history that a literary, epistemological or political authority aims to repress or reshape in accordance with its own perspective. He further associates the rise of new modes of literary expression in Syria with an emerging cultural and political consciousness, locating these counter-narratives (*ḥikāyah muḍāddah*) within the context of a wider inquiry that aims to reposition the *littérateur* as an influential figure, a resisting intellectual (*muthaqqaf muqāwim*), who plays an active role in the public field.²⁴⁸

‘Umar Qaddūr, on the other hand, warns against an arbitrary celebration (*al-ḥafāwah al-‘ashwā’iyyah*) of the new literary voices in Syria, emphasizing the lack of methodological studies of these novels and deriding the fact that those who have been discussing the qualities of the ‘new novel’ are the novelists themselves, which opens the door, he claims, to empty claims of innovation and transgression. Qaddūr’s comments, while patronizing in tone, are nevertheless insightful. Qaddūr suggests that the new novels are characterized by a preoccupation with the contemporary (*al-rāhin*) and a new sense of courage (*al-jur’ah*), which he finds problematic, for this courage tackles the social and the political at the expense of the artistic. On the other hand, Qaddūr links the recent developments in the Syrian novel to a change in its relationship to the field of power and associates the momentum that these works gained to an intense public longing for social and

²⁴⁴ Samia Mehrez, “Where Have All the Families Gone: Egyptian Literary Texts of the Nineties,” *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 9/10, No. 2/1 (Fall 2001/Spring 2002), 33.

²⁴⁵ Rashā ‘Umrān, interview by author, Cairo, May 2013.

²⁴⁶ Many novelists complained in the articles they published and in the interviews they gave in the early 2000s about the scarcity of academic and methodological studies of their work within Syria. Most of the literature on the 21st-century Syrian novel was in the form of short articles spread through various Arab newspapers, websites, and blogs. According to ‘Umar Qaddūr, most of the articles published within Syria about the new novel were due to the fact that the novelist Khalīl Ṣuwaylīh, who himself wrote under the umbrella of the new novel, happened to be the Editor in Chief of the culture section in the *Tishrīn* newspaper.

²⁴⁷ Within a week of its publishing, the Syrian government banned this issue of *al-Ādāb* magazine.

²⁴⁸ Ḥassān ‘Abbās, “*Ḥikāyāt dīd al-nisyan: qirā’ah fī ba’ḍ al-nitāj al-riwā’ī al-mu’āṣir fī sūriyyah*,” *al-Ādāb* (9-10, 2009), <https://www.alawan.org/2013/12/08/الحكايات-ضد-النسيان-قراءة-في-بعض-النتائج-الروائية-المعاصرة-في-سوريا/>.

political freedom, unintentionally pointing at the emerging relationship between the writer and the people that had been lost in previous iterations of the Syrian novel.²⁴⁹

Since the majority of the new generation of Syrian writers are active contributors to Arab newspapers and literary magazines, a survey of their articles and interviews helps reveal how they conceived of themselves and their work, and how they essentially distinguished their writing from the country's earlier literary discourse. In their various deliberations, they located the "newness" of their writing primarily in its preoccupation with the contemporary, the specific, and a rejection of ideology, while simultaneously linking these concerns to a newly emerging image of the intellectual. Writing against a history of fear and a subsequent tradition of literary concealment and displacement, the new writers mobilized the power embodied in the notion of specificity, producing texts that, as Yazbik contends, "starkly point at the environment from within which they emerge."²⁵⁰ Unlike earlier writers who were preoccupied with grand narratives and relied on history to comment on the present, these writers intentionally ground their themes and characters in the contemporary moment (*al-rāhin*), speaking directly to the daily anxieties, struggles, and dreams of the ordinary Syrian. As Miriam Cooke rightly remarks "[w]hereas cultural production during Hafiz Asad's regime was highly allegorical and carefully historical, today it is generally direct and less formally experimental."²⁵¹

Many of these writers identified "shifting away from ideology as an epistemological and aesthetic framework" as a major characteristic of the new Syrian novel, one that, as Khalīfah, for example, contends, "widened [the novel's] horizons (*manahāhā faḍā'an awsa*) and brought it closer to the contemporary moment."²⁵² The term ideology, however, was generally used loosely by these authors, and was neither formally defined, nor contextualized. Despite such claims, many of the novels published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, intensely investigated the grand narratives that had governed the political and cultural field for the majority of the twentieth century, proposing new frameworks that allow a reimagining of national identity and national belonging. *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* (*As a River Should*, 2007), for example, unearths repressed memories of the Hama massacre to reconstruct the nation's (hi)story; *Arḍ al-kalām* (*Land of Words*, 2005) by Mamdūh 'Azzām dismantles officially exalted historical moments around which the nation is imagined; and *Banāt na'sh* (*The Great Bear Constellation*, 2005) by Līna Huwayyān al-Ḥasan and *Sarmadah* (*Sarmada*, 2011) by Fādī 'Azzām engage the mythic past and non-secular temporalities, challenging the concept of historical (or secular) time and emphasizing the complexity of the cultural space by highlighting the intersecting boundaries of diverse traditions inhabiting a secular setting. These examples shed light on what Syrian writers mean when they speak of a shift from ideology—they stand in opposition to homogenous ideology, i.e. the grand narratives and slogans of the Ba'th party and the institutionalized literary professionals.

The greatest common factor that unites the body of writers who have contributed to the new Syrian novel, it seems, is a preoccupation with being oppositional, with separating themselves

²⁴⁹ 'Umar Qaddūr, "al-riwāyah al-sūriyyah al-jadīdah: zāhirah ibdā' iyyah am zāhirah i' lāmiyyah?" *al-Ādāb* (9-10, 2009), <https://www.alawan.org/2013/12/08/الرواية-السورية-الجديدة-ظاهرة-ابدا-ام-ظاهرة-لامية/>.

²⁵⁰ Yazbik, quoted in Ḥasan, "al-Riwāyah al-sūriyyah al-shābbah."

²⁵¹ Cooke, "The Cell Story," 179.

²⁵² Khalīfah, quoted in Ḥasan, "al-Riwāyah al-sūriyyah al-shābbah."

from the establishment's literary discourse as well as its intellectual. Some writers draw connections between their position in relation to the established literary and political systems and that of the pre-Islamic *ṣu'lūk* poet who identified with a sense of rebellion against the dominant formation of the tribe and its social and cultural codes. Operating from the margins of settled systems, the modern *ṣu'lūk* writer continuously interrogates the center by reinforcing her own marginality. She is conscious of the dark reality that surrounds her, but does not believe that literature or art can change the world. What she does is reveal or manifest, Yazbik explains.²⁵³

Not surprisingly, the ensuing question of literary (dis)inheritance preoccupied the intellectual and literary investigations of these novelists, reflecting a range of views and positions. While they maintained that their literary experiences were necessarily a part of a discursive literary space, for innovation is a cumulative process where every succeeding manifestation was determined by the preceding one, they also accentuated that their creative practices were immersed in a process of rewriting. Since uncertainty lies at the heart of the new writing, Şuwaylih asserts, erasure and reworking are essential parts of the writing process. Early texts, he further explains, always provoke subsequent and counter writing.²⁵⁴ Other voices reflect a more radical position. During the final session of the Forum on the Arabic Novel, held in Damascus in 2008 and focused on transformations within the contemporary Arabic novel, Khālīd Khalīfah, for example, took a radical stand. Expressing deep frustration with the politics of the modern Arab literary space, Khalīfah called for a complete break with earlier generations of modern Syrian and Arab novelists. Alluding to the canonization of particular names and literary styles, and the subsequent dismissal of new experiences, Khalīfah rejected the notion of literary fatherhood in modern Arabic literature. "Have we ever had fathers or are we simply, as a generation, illegitimate children? And why would we connect with alleged fathers who have never acknowledged us,"²⁵⁵ he asked.

Resonances of Khalīfah's frustration, though not as radical as his, with an earlier generation of Syrian and Arab intellectuals ran through the deliberations and the novels of the young Syrian writers. Challenging the prevalent view that the creative act's current lack of efficacy stems merely from external factors epitomized by repressive authorities, the new writers turned their attention to interrogating the image of the revolutionary, all-knowing, prophet-like intellectual of the fifties and sixties who struggled with broken dreams and eventually fell into despair. The writers whom I interviewed expressed deep disappointment, and even perplexity, with older intellectuals, who, despite their profound opposition to repressive powers and structures and despite the fact that they had acquired, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, "symbolic power" based on "symbolic capital" of recognition, reputation, and influence, did not act as representatives of the people. They did not use that symbolic power to openly challenge the authoritarian regimes at home nor did they actively work to reconnect with broader segments of society. "Even after gaining a solid symbolic immunity," the poet Fu'ād Muḥammad Fu'ād told me, "names such as al-Māghūt and Adūnīs, for

²⁵³ See, Yazbik, "*Naḥnu al-sūriyyūn ma-l-ladhī sanaktubuhu*," and "*al-Qaṭī'ah bayna-l-ajyāl al-riwā'īyyah*," a report on the 2008 Forum of Arabic Novel in *Sahafi*, 09-01-2008, <http://www.sahafi.jo/arc/art1.php?id=2191ac735fd74a0e091c048c1064174b489be889>.

²⁵⁴ Şuwaylih, "*Uḥāwil hadm mu'ādalat Najīb Maḥfūz*."

²⁵⁵ Khalīfah's claims were strongly rebuffed by an older generation of attendants and participants, such as the novelist Nabīl Sulaymān, who accused young writers of ignorance and warned them not to fall for what he called "the new novel lie." See "*al-Qaṭī'ah bayna-l-ajyāl al-riwā'īyyah*"; and "*al-Dhātīyyah al-mutaḍakkhimah fī awsāt al-udabā' al-shabāb*," a report on the forum prepared by Khalīl al-Hamlū for *al-Yawm* newspaper, 08-12-2008. www.alyaum.com/articles/605565/شليبي-الذاتية-المتضخمة-في-أوساط-الأدباء-الشباب-تشكل-تهديدا-الفن-الرواية.

example, continued to use the same literary mechanisms—their language continued to be highly coded and inaccessible for the people on the streets, and they continued to criticize injustice and tyranny as absolute concepts, while the number of opinion arrests in their home country was much higher than many other places in the region.”²⁵⁶

The new Syrian novel engaged in what Zeina Halabi identifies as the unmaking of the prophet intellectual, a process that aims to “elicit a counter-discourse of criticism that questions intellectuals as knowledge producers and disseminators” by “burning an effigy of the modern, secular, nationalist and exilic intellectual.”²⁵⁷ As my reading of *Brūvā* (First Draft, 2011) by Ḥasan suggests, for example, the new novel questions the notion of authorship as well as the legitimacy of the authority it metonymically represents and contests the figure of the monolithic prophet-like intellectual. As Khalīl Ṣuwaylīh sarcastically asserts, “it does not make sense to think of Palestine twenty-four hours per day and not think of sex, for example, which is the secret of life and a key part of its natural context.”²⁵⁸ Focusing on everyday experiences, foolish mistakes, and minute dreams, victories, and losses, these works introduce humanized and individualized intellectuals—they are characterized by uncertainty, exploration, and experimentation and deliberately engage in a dialogic relationship with the world around them.

Writing in 2011, few months after the protests took to the streets in many Syrian cities, the writer and political dissident Yasīn al-Ḥājj Ṣālīh reflected on the state of the contemporary cultural field in Syria. In his article titled “Intellectuals and the Syrian Revolution,” al-Ḥājj Ṣālīh goes beyond the simple, conventional generational divides and examines instead the divergence between what he calls the conventional Syrian intellectual and the new Syrian intellectual. Al-Ḥājj Ṣālīh suggests that the new intellectual embodies the variability of life itself. Not only is she free from pseudo-rationality, but her tools are closer to contemporary sensibility and imagination. Al-Ḥājj Ṣālīh finds in the words of the artist Fadwā Sulaymān, who led many protests against the Syrian regime, the perfect definition of the new intellectual:

لست صنماً.. وإن الشعب السوري على حد معرفتي يسقط الأصنام في بلده ... فليسقط الرمز ولتحيا الحرية .. حريتي ... وأن يكون الناس أحراراً فيما يعتقدونه ويؤمنون به ويحبونه.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Fu’ād Muḥammad Fu’ād, interview by author, May 2013. When reflecting on the older generation of Syrian and Arab intellectuals, many of the young Syrian writers whom I interviewed brought up the German Nobel Prize Laureate, Günter Grass, who, during a visit he paid to Yemen in 2002 for a cultural conference, intervened on behalf of Yemeni novelist Wajdī al-Ahdal who had fled the country due to criminal charges brought against him by the Yemeni Ministry of Culture because of one of his novels. When the president was about to bestow the Republic of Yemen’s highest honor on Grass, the writer, I was told, violated all rules of protocol and interrupted the president to plea for al-Ahdal, asking the president to allow al-Ahdal back and protect him from any further persecution. The president honored the request. When telling the story, the writers whom I met contrasted Grass’ actions to Adūnīs’ silence, who, they claimed, was also attending the same conference. The story of Grass’ plea was published in many news websites and was confirmed by al-Ahdal in an article he published on *al-Qantara* Cultural Project’s website. See Wajdi al-Ahdal, “The Intervention of a Nobel Laureate,” trans. Katy Derbyshire, 01/28/2016. <https://en.qantara.de/content/yemen-freedom-of-expression-the-intervention-of-a-nobel-laureate>.

²⁵⁷ Halabi, Zeina. *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile and the Nation* (Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature), Kindle edition, location 274.

²⁵⁸ Khalīl Ṣuwaylīh, “Uḥāwil hadm mu’ādat Najīb Maḥfūz wa-intihāk nuṣūsihi,” interviewed by Sayyid Maḥmūd and ‘Ulā al-Sākit, *al-Kitābah* 12/14/2009. <http://alketaba.com/old/index.php/2013-10-30-09-56-23/item/211-خليل-صويلح-أحاول-هدم-معادلة-نجيب-محفوظ-وانتهاك-نصوصه>.

²⁵⁹ Yasin al-Haj Saleh, “The Intellectuals and the Revolution in Syria,” trans. Max Weiss, in *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weis

I'm not an idol. As far as I can tell, the Syrian people bring down idols in their country ... Down with symbols and long live liberty ... my liberty and the liberty for people to be free to believe in whatever they want, to worship however they please, to love however they wish.

Conclusion

The rupture that emerged in the Syrian literary field during the aftermath of the *naksa* marked the beginning of a long process of negotiations. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, notions of unity, cohesion, and singularity shattered, and in their place emerged a new consciousness characterized by diversity and in which identity and subjectivity are multiply defined and experienced, and uncertainty is embraced as an essential quality of the intellectual.²⁶⁰ Interestingly, as young Syrians took to the streets during the 2011 uprising, the question of the role of the intellectual surfaced again. Many young activists and writers were angered by the positions that high-profile Syrian and Arab intellectuals took on their uprising. While some, like Ghādah al-Sammān and Ḥaydar Ḥaydar remained silent, others shocked the young protesters with their reactions. For example, a few months after the revolution began, the prominent poet and thinker Adūnīs wrote an open letter to the president published in *al-Safīr* newspaper in which he maintained his old views. He ignored the demands that people had been shouting from the streets, and replaced them with his old rhetoric, the grand narrative that only through state secularism can the project of democratization succeed. The poet Nazīh Abū 'Afash took a more radical position, fiercely attacking the uprising and taking the side of the Syrian regime. These reactions conjure, as Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen point out, “the ‘betrayal of the intellectuals’ narrative, the abandonment of the people or popular movements with a substantial social base by elite writers and thinkers who fail to act as organic representatives of the people, who seem to be out of touch with the collective mood.”²⁶¹

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 377. For the original article in the Arabic language, see the online journal *al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin*, January 19, 2012: www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=292101.

²⁶⁰ I am borrowing here from Kamal Abu Deeb, who connects the rise of new literary discourses in the Arab world to the collapse of the project of Arab modernity and therefore the epistemological consensus it had generated. See “The Collapse of Totalizing Discourse.”

²⁶¹ Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen, “Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial,” *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age: Towards Intellectual History of the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 28.

Chapter Three

Liberating Memory: The Poetics of Traumatic Space

Overview

In early 1982 the al-Asad regime put an end to a five-year armed insurgency, led by Sunni Muslim groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The struggle between the Syrian regime and the insurgents concluded in a twenty-seven-day long military campaign, during which the city of Hama, located on the banks of the Orontes River in west-central Syria, endured fierce collective punishment, leading to what has become known world-wide as the “Massacre of Hama.” Despite the intensity of the events, the public discourse in Syria was for decades marked by collective silence. Due to legal, political, and socio-psychological reasons, memories of the violence that the country witnessed were both problematic and subject to strict censorship. Between the systemic attempts of the government to erase any traces of the massacres, and a perplexity driven by the fact that the mass violence was committed by Syrians against fellow Syrians, the bloody events of the eighties became a blind spot in Syria’s modern history and literature.

Against this background, many of the novels published during the first decade of the 21st-century openly shattered the silence on the violence that the country had endured, turning it into a central theme that symbolized decades of oppression and hidden national fractures. Squarely located within the context of “writing against forgetfulness,” these novels resurrected the bloody events and their aftermath, reincorporating them into the historical and literary maps of modern Syria. Whereas the violence casts its shadow on the characters and events in novels such as *Bāb al-ḥīra* (*A Door to Uncertainty*, 2002) by Anīsa ‘Abbūd, or *Abanūs* (*Ebony*, 2004) and *Brūvā* (*First Draft*, 2011) by Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan, it takes central stage in others, including *Salamūn īrlandī* (*Irish Salmon*, 2004) by Khalīl al-Ruzz, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah* (*In Praise of Hatred*, 2007) by Khālid Khalīfah, and *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* (*As a River Should*, 2007) by Manhal al-Sarrāj.

Taking into consideration the political and cultural context within which these novels were written, this chapter focuses on *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* by Manhal al-Sarrāj, who herself is from the city of Hama, to illustrate how Syrian novelists sought to dismantle the monopoly over interpreting the past by mapping the subjective experience of individuals in society. In 2002, two years after she was officially denied the right to publish her novel in Syria, al-Sarrāj won the Sharjah Award for Arab Creativity, and *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* finally found its way to the public realm when it was published by the Sharjah Department of Culture and Information. Although it was written decades after the massacre and printed out of the country, the publishing of the novel still troubled Syrian authorities, and al-Sarrāj paid a high price for her courage. She was frequently harassed and summoned for interrogation by the secret police, denied admission to graduate school, and prohibited from employment by any public entity. The harassment continued until al-Sarrāj finally left the country and found refuge in Sweden in 2006.²⁶²

Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr follows the daily life of Faṭmah, a divorced and childless middle-aged woman who, in addition to living with cancer, is haunted by her city’s traumatic past. The novel opens on a normal Friday morning, when Faṭmah, as she often does, opens an old wooden

²⁶² Manhal al-Sarrāj, interview by the author, Skype, September 2018.

box and goes through its seemingly random contents—a half-melted candle; her father’s identification card; her grandmother’s prayer beads; keys to the house’s roof and basement; worn-out envelopes; a washing paddle; and, most importantly, an old paper bag filled with family pictures. The contents of the box trigger a chain of memories, dislodging Faṭmah from the present and placing her in the past. From there, the novel constantly oscillates between the past and the present, tracing the origins and the effects of a bloody conflict that took place between the people of Faṭmah’s city, led by her uncle Nadhīr, who represents the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the men of Abū Shāmāh, who represent Hafiz al-Asad and his army. Faṭmah falls sick and eventually dies of thyroid cancer, nonetheless the true core of the novel is not the story of her life and death, but rather the story of the city of Hama, whose history is revealed through a mix of memories, dreams, and hallucinations that are accessed from across three phases of the protagonist’s life: her childhood in pre-conflict Hama, her horrifying experience of the conflict as a teenager, and her present life in the post-conflict city.

The novel’s textual investigation of denied collective and individual memory recovers a past, the effects of which continue to reverberate in the present, deeming it usable both for understanding the present and for constructing the future. If, as George Santayana suggests, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,”²⁶³ then by confronting and articulating the past, *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* pushes the nation to question itself, pointing to the necessity of remembering in order to move forward in the future. The first section of this chapter highlights the ways in which the novel embodies the politics and poetics of remembrance, turning the city itself into a protagonist whose trauma is central to the existence of both the nation’s and the novel’s narrative. In a system where the state controls the definitions and representations of traumatic experience, liberating memory becomes a major tool for contesting the legacy of authoritarianism, since reconstructing history directly challenges the dominant political discourses and realities. Building on the work of Cathy Caruth who understands trauma as a crisis of experience and temporality, I argue that the narrative in *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* functions as a performative space that conveys individual and collective meanings and informs our reading of trauma remembrance. It embraces a trauma aesthetic, manifested in dissociation, formal and temporal disruption, and uncertainty, all combining to point to a wounded subjectivity at the heart of national memory and to complicate our relationship to history. I also find Pierre Nora’s idea of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), places or entities that evoke memory, particularly useful when tracing how the novel generates its own narrative of a traumatic past and contests the forced public amnesia.

The second section of this chapter turns to the novel’s reworking of spaces of loss and nostalgia in the Arabic poetic tradition. Placing *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* within the discursive space of the Arabic literary heritage, I examine the effects made possible when traditional poetic tropes are mobilized as a form of activism and socio-historical reconstruction. To begin, I trace a cross-genre intertextual play through which the poetic literary tradition is revived within the narrative, turning the novel into a space where the pre-modern and the modern meet. Reading the novel as an elegy for a lost city and a lost community, I show how it engages in a complex dialogue with the traditional poetic genre of *rithā’* (elegy) and the subgenre of *rithā’ al-mudun* (city elegy), allowing the reconstruction of Hama upon the remnants of earlier losses while concurrently making new dimensions and meanings possible.

²⁶³ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense*, ed. Marianne S. Wokeck and Martin A. Colman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 172.

Following Michelle Hartman's insights on the intersection of gender and genre, I then highlight the dialogue created in the novel between the protagonist's response to a modern collective trauma and the legacy of the pre-Islamic female elegist.²⁶⁴ I ask what it means when gender, mourning, and literary tradition interconnect in a modern text addressing national trauma and how such a junction helps inform our reading of the novel as a gendered aesthetic response to violence. Since wars and armed conflicts are spaces where gender meanings are constantly produced and reproduced, I highlight how by conjuring reflective nostalgia, al-Sarrāj sheds light on the intricate relationship between violence and gender and the ways this relationship confirms/interrupts the binary lines around which official narratives of armed conflicts are typically constructed. Ritual mourning in the novel confronts and exposes the different forces and histories that engendered the violence, unfolding, as Ken Seigneurie contends in his work on Lebanese war fiction, "a growing consciousness of both victimization and responsibility."²⁶⁵

Repressed Memory

A detailed examination of the struggle between the ruling party and the Muslim Brotherhood is beyond the scope of this study. However, a brief review will contextualize my reading of the novel. The conflict between the secular political regimes and Syria's religious Sunni Muslims, which can be traced to the early years of the twentieth century and the construction of the modern state,²⁶⁶ only widened with the ascendance of the authoritarian secularist Ba'ath party to power in 1963, which pushed for the westernization, secularization, and modernization of Syrian society. The party's oppressive practices, pro-rural bias, socialist policies, and sectarian make-up, in addition to a growing sense that some regions were privileged over others all fueled a rapidly growing popular resentment, with wide-spread calls for democratic reform of the corrupt government.²⁶⁷ The most active opposition to the regime came from the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been founded by clerics and followed by young urban, Sunni middle classes, who were for the most part either alienated or economically hurt by the state's policies. By the late 1970s, most urban centers were restive. Mass demonstrations took place in the cities of Aleppo and Hama,

²⁶⁴ Analyzing the translation of the legacy and poetry of al-Khansā' in contemporary English language production, Hartman highlights the crucial importance of genre in understanding al-Khansā''s literary production. Locating genre within the literary, social, and institutional networks and expectations that give it meaning, Hartman proposes that a contextualized reading of classical Arabic poetry that locates it within its social landscape, especially within its gender dynamics, helps us gain a deeper appreciation of this heritage and provides us with new ways to approach and understand the present. Michelle Hartman, "An Arab Woman Poet as a Crossover Artist? Reconsidering the Ambivalent Legacy of Al-Khansa'," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 15–36.

²⁶⁵ Focusing on contemporary Lebanese fiction, film, and popular culture, Ken Seigneurie explores how Lebanese writers and artists have reappropriated the *aṭlāl* topos (standing by the ruins) within a dialogue with commitment literature, generating a new "elegiac humanism" that transcends the telos of sectarian war. Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 19.

²⁶⁶ For an informative discussion of the origins and evolution of the struggle between political parties with secular ideologies and the 'ulamā' (Sunni religious clerics), see Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁶⁷ See Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

and the regime responded with mass arrests and a series of summary executions. The situation escalated even further when the Muslim Brotherhood and various other Islamist factions launched a series of bomb attacks in many cities and targeted government officials and supporters.²⁶⁸ Thereafter, the pace of attacks and counter-attacks accelerated, and at the Ba‘th party’s Seventh Regional Congress (December 1979-January 1980), free hand was given to al-Asad’s brother, Rif‘at, to wage all-out war and crush the Islamist groups. Under the command of Rif‘at, the authorities used military units equipped with heavy weapons to root out the urban guerillas. Helicopter-borne troops and whole military divisions were sent to different cities, whole quarters were sealed off, and thousands of people were tortured, arrested, or killed.²⁶⁹

The Syrian authorities’ military campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood reached a climax in February 1982, during which the city of Hama endured a fierce collective punishment leading to what has become well-known world-wide as the “Massacre of Hama,” which effectively ended the uprising in the country. Exact details of what happened that February are incomplete, as no reporters were allowed to enter the city during the massacre. Accounts pieced together from different sources paint a horrific picture. Select army units besieged the city of Hama for twenty-seven days before invading it. In addition to tanks and attack helicopters, the army engaged in artillery bombardment, completely destroying one third or more of the city’s residential housing and treating all its citizens as responsible for the uprising. There is no consensus on one figure for the final death toll, and the various sources estimate the number of deaths at between five thousand and thirty thousand. According to a Human Rights Watch report published in 1990, between five and ten thousand people died and between sixty and seventy thousand civilians were left homeless.²⁷⁰

While the regime’s iron-fist methods saved it from collapsing, they also dramatically changed the face of the whole country. Thomas Pierret remarks that the manufacturing of al-Asad’s personality cult reached unprecedented levels. “The president was now said to rule ‘for eternity’... [and] society was no longer expected to transform itself in a ‘progressive’ fashion, but to obey.”²⁷¹ Seale also points out that “Asad was by nature solitary and authoritarian. These aspects of his temperament now grew more pronounced. In 1970 he was popular, by 1982 he was feared.”²⁷² The fear that the regime’s brutality instilled in Syrians allowed for its own narrative of the events to dominate the public sphere and provide it with the guidelines for proper public articulation and conduct. Preserving its monopoly on historical interpretation, the government maintained that what had taken place in Hama was an operation that eliminated a few armed criminals, terrorists, and

²⁶⁸ The first major operation and the starting point of the mass violence was in June 1979 when thirty-two ‘Alawite cadets were gunned down at Aleppo Artillery School by a group of assassins whom the state identified later as a terrorist gang of the Muslim Brotherhood. According to the official report, thirty-two young men were killed and another fifty-four were injured, but other sources suggest that the death toll was as high as eighty-three. The leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood denied any knowledge or involvement in the incident and blamed the attacks on the Syrian regime who, as they claimed, had been working on damaging the reputation of the opposition. For further details, see Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*; and Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*.

²⁶⁹ Seale, 327.

²⁷⁰ Despite the considerable rebuilding, the destruction that the city witnessed in 1982 was such that its effects were still visible in 1989, when Middle East Watch visited the city. According to their report, people still lived in the broken remains of their houses. See *A Middle East Watch Report, Human Rights in Syria*. 1990.

²⁷¹ Pierret, 70.

²⁷² Seale, 338.

agents of foreign governments, a narrative that aimed to “establish both the authority of the Ba‘th and its victimization at the hands of the enemy.”²⁷³ Constructing its own narrative, one that rendered the conflict nonproblematic, the regime not only adopted its usual rhetoric, labeling the Muslim Brotherhood as agents of Western imperialism, but actively included its citizens in reproducing that narrative. As Wedeen explains, reports, letters, and oaths from various sources and organizations were published and broadcast. They all offered coherent accounts and interpretations that helped validate the regime’s narrative of what had happened.²⁷⁴ As for the international community, the Syrian government dismissed reports of fighting as invented. Iskandar Ahmad, then Information Minister, charged that Syria was the target of an American disinformation campaign because of its decisive role in the Arab world. “Syria is more quiet and stable and secure than a number of American cities,”²⁷⁵ Ahmed said. That rhetoric went hand in hand with extensive reconstruction of the city. Al-Asad spent extravagantly to rebuild the city he had turned into ruins.²⁷⁶ However, rebuilding the city did not only aim to bury Hama’s painful recent past and erase the conflict’s traces, but, more importantly, to forcefully “modernize” the city and change its “reactionary” mindset.²⁷⁷

For a long time after the events, Syrians were trapped between private memory on the one hand, and censorship and enforced public forgetfulness on the other. The fear that the regime’s brutality instilled in Syrians turned the massacre into a taboo subject. Any mention of Hama’s trauma was banned from public discussion, and even in private conversations, the bloodbaths of the 1980s were only whispered about and referred to as simply as *al-aḥdāth* (the incidents). Subsequently, the silence of late twentieth-century Syrian literature on the massacre was deafening.²⁷⁸ Although not hard to understand, the otherwise sophisticated levels of political consciousness present among Syrian writers, as Muhja Kahf points out, made this silence

²⁷³ Wedeen, 47.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁷⁵ John Kifner, “Syrian Troops are Said to Battle Rebels Encircled in Central City,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1982.

²⁷⁶ As Seale reports, “the whole city of Hama was reshaped on a grand scale, with ring roads and roundabouts serving entirely new quarters furnished with schools, clinics, playgrounds and shopping malls. Among major public buildings put up after the rising were a 230-bed hospital, a cultural center, a girls sports institute and a teacher training college, central market of oriental design, headquarter buildings for the Peasants Union and the Federations of Teachers and Engineers, and a sports center of outrageously ambitious proportions complete with Olympic size swimming pool. On al-Asad’s orders, the state funded the construction of two large mosques to make up for those destroyed in the fighting as well as a Catholic church as large as a cathedral.” Seale, 334.

²⁷⁷ For example, the state instituted co-ed swimming pools in 1983 and inaugurated the first co-ed college dormitory. See Judith Miller, *God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 298.

²⁷⁸ Muhja Kahf has noted the absence of Hama’s trauma in Syrian literature, saying, “a book or two on the Palmyra prison massacre and the Hama massacre, of the pulp-fiction sort, were spotted briefly in Iraqi and Jordanian bookstores during the 1980s. But in the literary journals, in the publishing houses, in the novels, short stories, screenplays, and poems of Syria’s many writers, the Hama massacre is markedly absent.” Muhja Kahf, “The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature,” *World Literature Today*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (spring, 2001), 229. While the written literary silence was indeed markedly absent, Miriam Cooke, in her work on oppositional writing in Syria, highlights the 1992 film *al-Layl (The Night)* by the Syrian director Muhammad Malas, which links the destruction of Quneitra in 1967 by the Israeli government to the destruction of Hama in 1982 by the Syrian government. Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 109–116.

particularly significant.²⁷⁹ More recently, and particularly after the 2011 Syrian uprising, many Syrian writers and intellectuals have revisited and reflected on their silence at the time. The novelist ‘Abd al-Nāṣir al-Āyid, for example, suggests that the silence of Syrian writers was a product of fear and that the recent focus of the Syrian novel on the trauma of Hama is partly an act of expiation, since, although they had no other choice at the time, many Syrian writers and intellectuals felt that their silence had turned them into accomplices.²⁸⁰ On the other hand, the Damascus native novelist Fawwāz Ḥaddād, offers, in an interview he gave in 2016, a different take. Similar to al-Āyid, Ḥaddād ascribes the silence of the literary field to fear, but he also exposes how the radical secularist position of many writers and intellectuals in Syria contributed to their silence.

في الثمانينات كنا جاهلين بما يجري في حماة وتدمر وأقيية المخابرات، نظن أنها مجرد اشاعات من مبالغات المعارضين الإسلاميين وغيرهم، الى أن ظهرت بعد سنوات طويلة شهادات متفرقة لبعض هؤلاء الذين خرجوا من السجون ... ثم جاءت رواية “القوقعة” الشهادة التوثيقية للكاتب مصطفى خليفة، وهبطت كما الصاعقة فوق رؤوسنا، لتقطع الشك باليقين، بتأكيدا على شهادات معتقلي الاخوان المسلمين وما لاقوه في سجن تدمر. شكلت أزمة ضمير ورعب.²⁸¹

During the eighties, we [the writers] were not fully aware of what was going on in Hama, Tadmur, and the dungeons of the secret police. We thought that what we had heard was fake and exaggerated stories created and circulated by the Islamists. Years later, the testimonies of some of those who were released from prisons began to surface Then *The Shell*, a documentary novel by Mustafā Khlifāh was published. The novel hit us like lightning, as it confirmed the horrifying testimonies that we had heard from the members of the Muslim Brotherhood who were detained in Tadmur Prison. We were horrified and we had a crisis of consciousness.

Ḥaddād’s words reveal the confirmation bias of many Syrian writers, those who chose to ignore the horrific accounts they had heard about the state’s brutality only because these accounts came from religious parties. The “crisis of consciousness,” as Ḥaddād calls it, emerged only when the same horrific accounts came from Mustafā Khlifāh, a secular left-wing writer.²⁸² In his interview, Ḥaddād further exposes the liberal, secularist intellectuals’ dehumanization of the Islamist fighters, transforming them into either non-human objects that have no rights, deserve no sympathy, and feel no pain, or to lesser forms of life that count less than those who are seen as fully human.

في "السوريون الأعداء" انتقدني موالون للنظام أنني من الاخوان المسلمين لأنني اعتمدت على مصادرهم ... الذين انتقدوني كانوا متقنين يعتبرون ان تعذيب الاخوان المسلمين وحتى قتلهم اجراءً طبيعياً، وربما عملاً وطنياً ... إذا كان المعتقلون من الاخوان المسلمين أليسوا بشرًا؟

When my novel, *Enemy Syrians*, was published [in 2014] ... many intellectuals criticized me and accused me of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood

²⁷⁹ Kahf, 229.

²⁸⁰ Muni‘a mina-l-nashr, “*al-Sūriyyūn al-a‘dā’*,” aired on Nov 4, 2017, on Orient TV. www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtdT87_IDWs&t=466s.

²⁸¹ Fawwāz Ḥaddād, “*Hiwār ma‘ al-riwā’ī Fawwāz Ḥaddād*” Interview by Jamāl Khalīl Ṣubḥ. *Dahṇūn Magazine*, 12/23/2016. <https://dahnon.org/archives/9895>.

²⁸² As Cooke reports, Khalifāh was arrested in January 1982 by the *Mukhābarāt al-‘Askariyya* (Military Intelligence Services) for suspected involvement in the prohibited Party for Communist Action. Cooke, “The Cell Story.”

because I consulted their sources [on the accounts of the massacre] ... Those Syrian intellectuals who criticized me believed that torturing members of the Muslim Brotherhood or even killing them was a normal, perhaps a patriotic, act.... Should we forget that the detainees were human beings, simply because they were members of the Muslim Brotherhood?!"²⁸³

While partially driven by the state's discourse, the dehumanization of members of the Muslim Brotherhood was also rooted in a general view within modernist, secularist intellectuals that the conflict at the time was between a modern world view that envisioned the future of the nation within the framework of the modern, liberal nation-state and a traditional, outdated vision that sought to drag the nation "backwards" by maintaining the concept of the *Ummah*. As far as many Syrian intellectuals were concerned, the Islamists-led uprising threatened the sovereign, modern nation-state, which, despite its heavy investment in violence, was the only framework that guaranteed equality to all members of the community regardless of their primary communal affiliations. In his interview, Ḥaddād further draws parallels between the opposition of many intellectuals to the 2011 uprising and to the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising that took place in the early 1980s:

عندما قامت الاحتجاجات في آذار 2011 لم يتقدموا صفوفه، أو يشاركوا فيه، المظاهرات التي عمت سورية قدمت لهم ثورة ضد الاستبداد على طبق من الاحتجاجات الحقيقية ... وبدلاً من أن يبادر اليساريون في الداخل والساحل إلى الدعوة إلى التظاهر والالتحاق بالانتفاضة، التحقوا بالنظام تحت التعلات نفسها التي ساقها تنظيم معاد للإسلام بزعم أنه إرهابي ومتخلف، وأخذوا جانب القناصة والدبابات والطائرات التقدمة. أما الحجة، فخروجها من المساجد، وتجاهلوا أن الشعب السوري شعب متدين، هل إذا كان الشعب متديناً يجوز حرمانه من الحرية والعدالة؟²⁸⁴

When the uprising began in March 2011, the leftist voices did not lead or even join the protests that swept the country and provided them with a real opportunity to revolt against tyranny ... Instead of joining the uprising and calling for protests, the leftists all around the country supported the regime under the same excuses [they used in the 1980s]. These excuses are informed by a model that is antagonistic to Islam, for it sees Islam as a generator of terrorism and backwardness. They took the side of the "progressive" snipers, tanks, and fighter jets only because the protests started out from mosques. They completely ignored the will of the Syrian people, the majority of whom are religious. Don't religious people deserve freedom and justice as well?!

Agency over the Past: Recreating Trauma

Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr exemplifies how literary narratives have the potential to illuminate the complexities of trauma by textually performing it.²⁸⁵ The repressed trauma of the city is made

²⁸³ Ḥaddād, "*Hiwār*."

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Here, I follow the work of critics such as Laurie Vickroy, Deborah Horvitz, and Anne Whitehead who employ Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that resists comprehension, remembrance, and representation to suggest that trauma narratives become a space where the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of

visible not through a well-plotted story, but rather through trauma's effects, which manifest themselves both in the novel's characters and structure. Trauma, as Cathy Caruth suggests in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, is a crisis of historical experience, since "the traumatized carry an impossible history within them. Or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess."²⁸⁶ The narrative in *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* embodies this crisis. While it traces the present life of the protagonist, the past repeatedly pierces the present in a fraught call for recognition. Relying on disrupted and disjointed narrative that mimics trauma memory, al-Sarrāj creates a temporal disarray and nonlinear (dis)order that exemplify trauma's resistance to conventional narrative formulations.²⁸⁷ Fragmented episodes of flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations that constantly interrupt the narrative blur the line between the past and the present. The protagonist's attempts to revive happy, pre-violence memories always draw her back to the dreadful images and impacts of the massacre. As time passes, she completely loses control of the process of remembrance. Epitomizing the haunting quality of trauma, memories of the past grow all-powerful: "they seize her without invitation, merging with her present in a foggy, enigmatic, and complex fashion."²⁸⁸

The crisis of history, manifested through the fragmented quality of the narrative, demands new configurations of reading and reception, complicating the ways historical experiences can be retrieved. History is not accessed here as static, verifiable knowledge, but rather as a fragmented and elusive concept that cannot be grasped because it is always in flux. As the novel constructs an overwhelming and repressed past that is outside the margins of traditional historical understanding, it points at another way of thinking of history, one that "recognize[s] the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential."²⁸⁹ The narrative's constant shifting of past and present reveals a complex relationship between loss and recollection, between then and now, and between what was but is no longer. It involves the novel in what Caruth calls a process of "double telling," which carries the tension "between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival."²⁹⁰ As a survivor and a witness to her city's and nation's suppressed history, Faṭmah embodies the nation whose consciousness is trapped in a state of betweenness and whose survival is marked by death and forced silence.

While the city of Hama is at the center of the narrative, al-Sarrāj does not name the place, setting her novel instead in an unnamed city. As every reader practices some sort of divination, attempting to foretell ends from beginnings, the unnamings of the city denies the reader a crucial

trauma manifest themselves. See Deborah Horvitz, *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); and Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

²⁸⁶ Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

²⁸⁷ On the disjointed and fragmentary character of traumatic memory, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 71–73.

²⁸⁸ Manhal al-Sarrāj, *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* (Algeria: Manshūrāt al-Ikhtilāf, 2007), 210.

²⁸⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

interpretive tool. It blocks assumptions and preexisting perspectives, allowing Hama and its trauma to be reborn and to gradually emerge on the pages of the novel. Although concealed by the practice of unnamings, the actual city of Hama increasingly develops an undeniable presence, not only through a detailed account of the massacre, but also through vivid images and descriptions of space, local dishes, colloquial expressions, nursery rhymes, and traditional children's games. The antithesis between revealing and concealing that runs throughout the novel becomes a literary tool, a form of intertextual practice. It parodies and re-appropriates the government's tactics of removal and denial, embodying the public discourse that surrounded the massacre, and exemplifies the unresolved space that Hama has occupied in the national imaginary. This antithesis further places the city on the border between the specific and the general, the historical and the atemporal, and between history and literature. The tension created between the specificity of Hama as a particular experience in Syrian history and the pliable existence of the novel's unnamed city evokes the universality of tyranny and allows the city to perform a symbolic role, to travel across time and different historical and cultural contexts. Hama's experience becomes both an irreducibly specific event and a paradigmatic case for traumatic history that shatters both earlier and later frames of reference to become a general figure for trauma.

Shifting between the present and a multilayered past, the novel reveals how the city has changed over time, exposing the workings of a systematic process of physical, social, and cultural obliteration. The protagonist's past trauma is intensified by the violence of the organized forgetting of the present (the early 2000s in the novel), a time when the country had recently entered a new phase under the rule of Asad-the-son, who chose the slogan "development and modernization" to brand his reign. The slogan, which began to circulate during the "Damascus Spring" as an explicit rejection of the demands for political reform, mainly related to administrative and economic aspects, and was criticized for aiming to "develop existing systems by updating their appearance to present the regime in a more modern light."²⁹¹ When asked in 2001 whether transformation was on the way, Asad emphasized the "development and modernization" project as a progress from already existing foundations, by which he referred to the structures of the system he had inherited from his father.²⁹²

The novel delivers a bitter critique of the state's mediocre modernization project, through Faṭmah's experience of the world around her. It exposes its inherent paradoxes and shows that despite the trappings of modernity, the new system continues to perpetuate the oppressive practices of the old one. Post-conflict Hama is a place engulfed in bitter surrender and driven by heightened consumerism. Using short, simple sentences and an objective, fact-based third-person narrative that mirrors the characteristics of journalistic writing, al-Sarrāj exposes a dilapidated city—dirty streets, broken windows, potholed roads, and lopped-off trees and a whole generation of young street vendors whose faces reveal fear and hunger. The new system, the novel further suggests, is built on the ruins of the old city and the dead bodies of its people. An internet center (*khaliyyah dhakiyyah*) now stands in place of the neighborhood that was leveled during Abū Shāmah's attack,

²⁹¹ Yasin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, trans. Ibtihal Mahmood (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017). 110.

²⁹² Carmen Becker, "Strategies of Power Consolidation in Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Modernizing Control Over Resources," *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 13/14, No. 2/1 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006), 83.

and right in front of it, on high poles, stands a massive advertising billboard whose lights take over (*taḥtallu*) the waters of the river, constantly reminding Faṭmah of the destruction it is meant to disguise. Not only does the state's modernization project aim to distract people from their present reality, but it also attempts to bury their past and erase their memory.

Fear, trauma, and loss continue to shape people's lives and behaviors until the present day. While Faṭmah is obsessed with preserving the past, many people in the city immerse themselves in the present to break free from the past's trauma. Using satire to expose an inverted social logic and a prevalent culture of silence and submission, the novel details the founding of a new association by the men of the city. Abū Salīm, one of the city's citizens who came with the idea, called the association *ḥimār wa-lā'l-ār* (better to be a donkey than to be humiliated), happily identifying the men of the city, including himself, as donkeys, an animal associated in popular Arab culture with obedience and stupidity.²⁹³ "If you see someone receiving *tayyārāt* (slaps on the neck) without defending himself. What would you call him? A donkey, everyone answered without exception. Then we all are donkeys, Abū Salīm announced."²⁹⁴ The name of the association, *ḥimār wa-lā'l-ār*, accentuates the radical deviation that traditionally cherished cultural and social values have endured, as it appropriates and overturns the well-known proverbial phrase, *al-mawt wa-lā'l-madhallah* (better dead than humiliated), which valorizes human dignity and heroism and was commonly chanted in protests against foreign occupiers.²⁹⁵ Others, however, are immersed in forgetfulness because, in their city, remembrance is dangerous. Getting carried away while answering students' questions, 'Āṣim, a school teacher, crosses the red line, reviving some of the city's buried memories. Blindfolded, he was taken away from amongst his students to have "a little conversation with the big boss."²⁹⁶ He disappeared for days, during which he was tortured and humiliated. Against the odds, he returned alive, but he promised himself, and the big boss, to quit remembering. "He will pay no attention anymore to the sparkle in his students' eyes and he will stop thinking of all that is happening around him,"²⁹⁷ we are told.

For the protagonist, whose perception is largely shaped by the past, the changes in the outside world are alienating, and the "new" city pulls her toward a place of malaise. Unable to reorganize herself in relation to the new reality, she rejects the outside world, finding shelter in her own house. Her contact with the city is planned, intentional, and lacks any human interaction, revealing a sense of estrangement and alienation. Throughout the novel, which spans the last few months of Faṭmah's life, she makes only a few trips out of her neighborhood, almost all of which are associated with illness or death. Her first trip to the outside world is to the cemetery. After years of refusing to accept the past, Faṭmah finally visits the graves of her loved ones. Her visit marks the beginning of her own physical and symbolic death, as it signifies her ultimate fall into despair, losing any hope that the past could be revived or redeemed. On the same day that she

²⁹³ See Richard Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Traditions and Muslim Cultures* (London: One World Publications, 2014).

²⁹⁴ Al-Sarrāj, 169.

²⁹⁵ The slogan, *al-mawt wa-lā'l-madhallah*, was used regularly during the 2011-uprising. When Fridays emerged as the days for mass protests all around the country and each of these Fridays was given a theme, September 2, 2011 was named by the protestors as the "*al-mawt wa-lā'l-madhallah* Friday."

²⁹⁶ Al-Sarrāj, 178.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 184.

visits the graveyard, ultimately acknowledging the losses of her city, her health suddenly deteriorates and she is diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

Estranged from the world around her, the protagonist finds shelter in her family's house where she creates a world of her own. The house, which, as Gaston Bachelard asserts in his work on the poetics of space, "constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability,"²⁹⁸ allows the protagonist to "make distant voyages into a world that is no more."²⁹⁹ Imbued with images that inform her comprehension and articulation of identity, the house is the only place where she engages in a process of piecing the past together, bringing coherence to her world. Within the boundaries of her house, Faṭmah contests the forgetfulness enforced by the state and generates a competing national narrative, constructing a memorial to the destruction of her city. Decades after the massacre, Faṭmah still holds on to the belongings of the massacre's victims. From sheets and pillows to textbooks, notebooks, and clothes, the victims' personal items are all stored and displayed in the basement, the visit to which is one of Faṭmah's daily rituals. In other words, Faṭmah turns the basement into a museum-like *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), which the French historian Pierre Nora defines as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."³⁰⁰ Nora further distinguishes between *lieux d'histoire* (sites of history) which are organized around the preservation of traces and relics, and *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) which, with the working of remembrance, are suffused with meaning and symbolic significance and function in lieu of the literal traces of history. As the novel unfolds, Faṭmah's visit to the basement opens a window into the massacre itself. The material objects trigger recollection, retrieving not only flickers of the victim's lived experiences, but also a detailed account of Abū Shāmāh's attack on the city, and the violence and horror that its people endured.

Memorials, monuments, and other forms of sites of memory are crucial to the project of nation building, as they "create common loci around which national identity is forged."³⁰¹ Aware of their significance, the state manipulates these sites so that they reflect its own forms of remembrance. Regardless of the ends to which they are used, official memorials signify the state's acknowledgment of particular events and reflect the ways in which they are appropriated in the public sphere. For example, the absence of a memorial for the victims of Hama represents the state's denial of their tragedy, and consequently its attempt to deny that tragedy a presence in the national consciousness. In that context, Faṭmah's personal memorial of the victims, as much as the novel itself, refutes the forced amnesia and re-incorporates Hama's tragedy into the way the nation remembers itself, contributing to the making and remaking of national identity.

The relics themselves, James Young points out in his work on Holocaust memorials, commemorate not the lives of victims, but their absence.

²⁹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Place*, trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 17.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 143.

³⁰⁰ Pierre Nora, "From Lieux de Mémoire to Realms of Memory," in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, vol. i, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Colombia University Press, 1996), xvii.

³⁰¹ James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives that once animated them, so much as of the brokenness of lives. For when the memory of a people and its past are reduced to the bits and rags of their belongings, memory of life itself is lost.³⁰²

As evident in the excerpt below, the novel goes beyond the relics themselves to involve the reader in the intricate relationship between presence and absence. It attempts to defy the absence to which the relics gesture, by inviting us into the “play of memory and history”³⁰³ that imbues the remnants with meaning and significance, for it is only with the “will to remember”³⁰⁴ that *lieux d’histoire* become *lieux de mémoire*. Although the fragments collected in the room cannot fully represent the whole that has been lost, they are given life and personality by unearthing the lived experiences that once animated them and made the victims people. Faṭmah’s house, like the novel, is a performative space in which each of the victims’ belongings encapsulates their lives, retaining after their disappearance “faces that shared a look filled with dreams and hopes.”³⁰⁵

تظل وسادة أخيها أحمد المزهرة بلون السماء والياسمين، مثل وجهه: "كم كان صغيراً". رفض النوم ليلة الهجوم، وظل ساهراً حتى ساعة متأخرة منتظراً أن يجف غطاء مخدته. أخضعهم لإرادته، فألبسوا مخدته الخاصة غطاءها الأزرق المزهري بالياسمين، رغم أن الغسيل لم يكن قد جف بعد. ... ذلك البساط ... لعبوا عليه "عدى برخش".³⁰⁶ تذكرت صعود أصابعهم الكثيرة في الهواء وهبوطها على البساط فوق بعضها، ثم يصرخون بالكف الكسولة التي لم يبق لها إلا سطح الأيدي المتكدسة، يبعدون صاحبها عن البساط، فينقص العدد واحداً. تتذكر كيف قطعوا لعبهم ليلتها وتربعوا مستمعين بخشوع لحكاية الجدة.³⁰⁷

The pillow of her brother Ahmad peeked out [of the linen closet]. Just like his face, its floral pattern combines the colors of sky and jasmine: “How young he was!” On the night of the attack, he stayed up late, refusing to go to bed until his pillow had dried. Adamant as he was, they eventually succumbed to his wish and placed the jasmine-patterned blue cover on his pillow, although it was not yet dry.... [On] that mat ... they played ‘*adda barkhash*. She remembered [the children’s] hands going up in the air and then falling all at once back to the ground, and how they called on the one whose lazy hand ended up on top of the pile to leave the mat, decreasing the number of players by one. She remembers how they stopped playing that night and sat, cross-legged, closely listening to the grandmother’s story.

In spite of her attempts, Faṭmah is no longer able to protect her home from the vicissitudes of public space. The social, political, and cultural degradation that prevails upon the city finds its way into the most private of spheres: the protagonist’s house and her own body. Throughout the novel, Faṭmah is fighting both a cancer that is consuming her body and a rat that has occupied her

³⁰² Ibid., 132.

³⁰³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 19.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 14.

³⁰⁵ Al-Sarrāj, 9.

³⁰⁶ As al-Sarrāj explains in a footnote, ‘*adda barkhash* is a traditional game played with hands and fingers while kids are sitting on the ground.

³⁰⁷ Al-Sarrāj, 85–86.

house. Notwithstanding all her efforts, she loses her fight against the rat, which, a symbol of decay and disease, represents the toxicity of the outside world. Faṭmah's ultimate fight turns to protecting the wooden box and the basement where the victims' items are stored. She desperately needs to keep them safe, she keeps telling herself. However, the more the cancer spreads and the weaker she is, the more powerful the rat's presence becomes in her life and in the novel. It is in the bathroom, the kitchen, the garden, and her own bedroom. It even occupies her dreams and hallucinations, which convey both her fears and the rat's growing power.

أغفت أو لم تغف، رأت أنها أمام شلال ماء ... رأت الرؤوس بل الجماجم، التي تراها دائماً، تتساقط عبر الشلال. لم تخف، اقتربت ووقفت بينهم، مدت يدها إلى الماء المتساقط بقوة وشربت، لم تكد تبتلع ما شربته حتى استيقظت على ضحك مكبوت هازئ، رأت الجربوع ماسكاً سبحة جدتها، يلوح بها في الهواء كمن يرقص الدبكة. قال: "شربت ماء عكراً ملوثاً بدم أهلك، متى تكفين عن أحلامك؟ أبو شامة يحبني وسيؤمّن لي مبرراً قانونياً لأخذ القبو." قال جملته ضاحكاً هازئاً، وتركها رامياً السبحة على أرض غرفة نومها فانفردت. كان انفرافاً حزيناً في عصر حزين.³⁰⁸

Asleep or not, she saw herself standing at a waterfall ... she saw the heads, rather the skulls, that she always sees, tumbling down the waterfall. She was not afraid. She moved closer and stood amongst them. She stretched out her hand and drank from the falling water. She had not swallowed the water yet, when she woke up to a muffled, scornful laugh. She saw the rat carrying off her grandmother's prayer beads, waving them as if he were doing the *dabkah*.³⁰⁹ It said: "You drank murky water, polluted by the blood of your people. When will you quit dreaming? Abū Shāmah loves me and will find me a legal excuse to occupy the basement." He said this as he laughed derisively and turned to leave her, throwing the prayer beads on her bedroom floor so that they scattered. They scattered sadly on that sad afternoon.

A Marthiyyah to a Lost City

Not only does *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr*, through a process of remembrance, make present an absent past, but the protagonist's contemporary experiences are produced and continually mediated through a discourse and an aesthetic of loss and absence. The city's traumatic experience is further intertwined with and revealed through the memory of the place itself. "[P]ositioned between the loss of tangible space in the present and the memory of a nostalgic connection of that place as a symbolic reflection of the past,"³¹⁰ the novel evokes the traditional poetic genre of *rithā' al-mudun*, which reached its height with the numerous military defeats experienced in al-Andalus between the eleventh and the fifteen centuries. A hybrid form that fuses elements of the *marthiyyah* (elegiac poem) and elements of the *qaṣīdah* (polythematic ode), the Andalusī *rithā' al-mudun*, as Alexander Elinson emphasizes, "allows for a new method of altering and blending such themes as

³⁰⁸ Al-Sarrāj, 189.

³⁰⁹ *Dabkah* is an Arab folk-dance native to the Levant.

³¹⁰ Tamr M. Boyadjian, *The City Lament: Jerusalem across the Medieval Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 60.

al-atlal (the abandoned campsite), geographic description, ruminations of the vicissitudes of fate, the inevitability of death, and so on.”³¹¹

Beyond the thematic parallel, the narrative in *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* echoes many of the *rithā’ al-mudun*’s characteristics, including excessive repetition, water imagery, and detailed descriptions of space. From its very beginning the novel invokes the generative notion of loss and longing by conjuring the poetic topos of *al-wuqūf ‘alā al-aṭlāl*, which represents, as Hillary Kilpatrick reminds us, “a quintessentially Arabian bedouin manifestation of the universal theme of return and remembering.”³¹² A close look at the opening scene of the novel helps us identify the ways in which the topos of the *aṭlāl* is reworked within modern narrative prose:

رفعت فطمة غطاء الصندوق الخشبي وأسندته إلى الجدار الشرقي. جلست "ركبة ونصف" على حصيرة صغيرة موجودة، منذ دهر، بجانب الصندوق. تطاولت بعنقها كي تحتوي قلب صندوقها ببصرها الفضولي. عبثت بأصابع نحيلة بين أشياء مختلفة وكثيرة ... طوت ورقة تقويم وأخرجت كيساً ورقياً تنبعث منه رائحة عتيقة، ألصقته بصدرها واستندت بظهرها إلى الصندوق الخشبي. غداً تعود فطمة طفلة تحمل الخبز والخبز في الصرة البيضاء المزهرة باللون الأسود. تقطع الجسر الصغير بين الضفتين حتى تصل إلى البرية. تختبئ بين الشق شقيق³¹³ مستنشقة رائحته غير العطرية، وتركض بين سنابل أرض صاحب الفرن القديم. تعود إلى البيت مع بنات عمها اللواتي ينصرفن لعرايسهن القماشية المحشوة ببقايا ثياب بالية، وهي تمضي إلى كيس القنب حيث قصص ألف ليلة وليلة.³¹⁴

Faṭmah removed the lid of the wooden box and rested it against the eastern wall. She kneeled on one knee on a small mat that had been, since forever, next to the box. She stretched her neck to contain all that was in the box with her curious gaze. With skinny fingers, she fiddled with the many different things [inside the box]. She put aside a half-burned candle. She took out her father’s scissors and his ID card, her grandmother’s prayer beads, her head scarf, and her cloak ... She folded a page from an old calendar and took out a paper bag that gave off an old smell. She held it tight to her chest and leaned her back against the wooden box. Tomorrow Faṭmah will become a little girl carrying bread and cheese in the black and white flowery bundle. She crosses the little bridge between the two banks until she reaches open land. She hides among the red anemones, breathing in their non-aromatic smell and runs through the ears of wheat in the old bakery owner’s land ... She returns home with her female cousins, who head off to play with their rag dolls, while she goes for the hemp bag where the *Thousand and One Nights* stories are.

Like the pre-Islamic poet, Faṭmah stops her daily life to examine the traces (*aṭlāl*) of her loved ones. Her curious gaze, which carefully watches out for their remnants, recalls the ‘pasturing gaze’

³¹¹ Alexander E. Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Anadalu: The Poetics of Loss and Nostalgia in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literatures* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 84. On the main characteristics of the Andalusī *rithā’ al-mudun*, see also Muḥja Amīn Bāshā, *Rithā’ al-mudun wa’l-mamālik fī al-shi’r al-andalusī: ittijāhātuḥu, khaṣā’ishuḥu al-fanniyyah* (Damascus: Shirā’ li’l-Dirāsāt wa’l-Nashr, 2003).

³¹² Hillary, Kilpatrick, “Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The *Aṭlāl* in Modern Arabic Fiction,” in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa F. Boullatta*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 29.

³¹³ *Al-Shaq shaqīq* is the name used in Syrian colloquial to refer to the *shaqā’iq al-nu’ mān* (red anemones).

³¹⁴ Al-Sarrāj, 7.

in both the *nasīb* section of the *qaṣīda* where the poet gazes over the departing womenfolk and the *rithā'* (elegy) when the sleepless poet gazes at the stars and compares them to flocks. The poetics of loss and nostalgia embedded in the *nasīb* and established through references to places emerges in the novel through the workings of a memory that is grounded in a fixed place, a locale with clear topography: a river, a bridge, and fields of wheat and red anemones. The conjuring of the poetic tradition and the power that references to places hold in that tradition endows the contemporary place with elegiac qualities and turns it into a literary entity with its own evocative, symbolic power.

Furthermore, the unfolding of the process of remembrance, which begins in the opening scene and continues throughout the introductory pages of the novel, reproduces the poetic time found in the *nasīb*. In *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*, Jaroslav Stetkevych describes the notion of time within the *nasīb* as

a curve that begins in the radical past, rises to the plane of the subjective past, and from there continues rising steeply to the psychological present of memory as reverie, only to drop from there precipitously to the original level of the past as radical loss. If poetic time at the vertex of the curve thus seems to take us out of the past into its own realm of present, that realm is nevertheless irredeemably swallowed up by the ultimate-and-original reality of loss, whose realm is the past.³¹⁵

The process of remembrance that unfolds within the introductory pages of the novel evokes Stetkevych's observation of the poetic time found in the *nasīb*. The emphasis on the oldness of these *aṭlāl* highlights, as in the *nasīb*, a distant time of loss that is rendered as "an unarticulated wish, a fragment of the transpersonal, the ancestral, and the pre-ancestral, and always an understanding of lost time as lost happiness."³¹⁶ The wooden box, which stands as the anchoring point of the protagonist's recollection, establishes the narrative's "archetypal point of regression,"³¹⁷ while the relics that the box contains lend the process of remembrance its sense of subjectivity. From there, the narrative abruptly steps out of the protagonist's past into a state of a false present, where, through the use of the present tense, her memories are recreated with vivid, though imagined, immediacy. Faṭmah's reverie is interrupted by the revulsions of her present reality, the noise of a rat creeping under her grandmother's chair.

The complexity of Faṭmah's experience demands an intricate process of remembering, one that expands and rewrites the pre-Islamic poetic heritage. Evoking the tradition of nostalgic recollection of the past, the topos of the *aṭlāl* is appropriated within the novel, embracing the heritage but without being limited or defined by it. Unlike the pre-Islamic protagonist who breaks away from the *nasīb* as "he awakens to the reality of the *pastness* of his state of happiness"³¹⁸ and acknowledges the impossibility of return, the protagonist in the novel refuses to break with the past, traumatically bound to repeat it. She dwells in a complex, cyclical time, in which different pasts contribute to shaping the present. The insistent return to the *aṭlāl* becomes, as Kilpatrick

³¹⁵ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 25.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 28.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

suggests in her reading of the *aṭlāl* in modern Arabic fiction, “a device for structuring experience.”³¹⁹ It recreates the past, engaging new levels of consciousness and allowing Hama’s traumatic experience to be reconstructed after decades of forced silence and forgetfulness. Representative of the consciousness of her city, the protagonist cannot move forward and is trapped between many forces pulling her in different directions. She repeatedly returns to the *aṭlāl* of her loved ones, to a happy past that nonetheless organizes her present around the notion of loss, while this same present is concurrently haunted by another violent and traumatic past.

The *rithā’ al-mudun* is further reproduced in the novel through a geographical, architectural, cultural, and literary recreation of the city of Hama, a process that immortalizes the city and allows the narrative to function as a counter-site where a memory under threat would be literarily preserved. Following the massacre and the bombardment of Hama, the Syrian regime spearheaded a systematic process of memory erasure/creation. As it had now become the one and only power of domination, the regime was in full charge of the inclusion and exclusion of memories. It spent extravagantly, rebuilding and reshaping the city on a grand scale, and space was now reconstructed to reflect how the regime perceived of and presented itself: the new Hama was modern, secular, and progressive.³²⁰ As the following excerpt demonstrates, through strikingly detailed descriptions of the homes, streets and natural landscape of the neighborhoods destroyed, the novel reflects the “intersection between nostalgic representations of territory and descriptions of the urban built environment,”³²¹ manifested in the *rithā’ al-mudun*.

كان أبوها يسلك طريقاً يبدأ بدرج ... يبلغ عرض كل درجة من درجاته مترين ... تصطف البيوت على الجانبين فقيرة، عتباتها مشتركة مع البيت المقابل. مساحة أي من هذه البيوت من الداخل لا تتجاوز كثيراً مساحة الدرجة الواحدة. قد تطلّ منها ياسمينية أو دالية صغيرة، فأحواض الحديقة الضيقة لا تتسع لأكثر من نوع واحد. قد يشاهد صحن معدني صغير فيه فتات طعام للقطّة، بجانبه وعاء ماء تشرب منه القطّة والعصفور ... يقطن [البيوت] امرأة عجوز، أو عانس وحيدة، أو أرملة تقوم في الصباح لترسل ابنها لشأنه ... يسكن أيضاً حارة الدرج هذه رجل خائف ورجل خائف ورجل خائف و ... حكاية خائفة.³²²

Her father chose his path, beginning with the stairs ... each step of which was two meters wide ... Houses were lined up humbly on both sides of the stairs, each one sharing a doorstep with the house facing it. The insides of the houses were not much bigger than the staircase steps. A jasmine tree or a small vine might peek out, as the small flower pots could not contain more than one kind of plant. A small metal plate with crumbs of cat food might be seen, and next to it a water bowl for cats and birds to drink ... In these houses lived an old lady, a lonely maiden, or a widow who would get up early in the morning to send her son on his way ... In that quarter there also lived a frightened man, and another frightened man, and another frightened man ... and a frightened story.

But as much as the novel documents the city, it is also constitutive of it, at least in the imagination, for the process of textualization reproduces the meanings embedded in the space itself. As we see

³¹⁹ Kilpatrick, 42.

³²⁰ For example, the state instituted co-ed swimming pools in 1983 and inaugurated the first co-ed college dormitory. See Miller, 298.

³²¹ Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 75.

³²² Al-Sarrāj, 49.

in the excerpt, the city is imbued with feelings, experiences, and values, which transform it from an undifferentiated space into a place charged with meanings.³²³ The mapping of physical spaces establishes a strong connection between the city and its people. The city's community is projected onto the physical sphere, giving it a soul that embodies the characteristics of its inhabitants. The result is a feminizing personification that intensifies the city's tragedy: the houses on the two banks of the river, for example, are described as tight-knit (*mutarābiṭah*), transparent (*shaffāfah*), and graceful (*rashīqah*), with intimate and shy balconies (*qarībah wa-khajūlah*) that reach out to the river asking for its forgiveness (*'afw al-nahr*).

Manifested in various ways, repetition dominates the novel, turning the literary space into a ritualistic performance of symbolic immortality and acting as a focal point in the making of continuing bonds and belonging. The protagonist's daily life is organized around obsessive, repetitive actions. All of Faṭmah's activities are marked with habitual determiners, showing how her days, weeks, and years repeat themselves, forming a ritual calendar: Every morning, we are told, she goes out into her backyard to check for fallen fruit. Every Friday, she cooks a traditional meal and sends a plate to the muezzin at the nearby mosque. Every Saturday morning, she carries the same shopping bag, the same copper milk bucket, and her little purse, and heads towards the bakery to buy five kilograms of bread. Since Faṭmah's life was disrupted by sudden and violent death, her ritualized actions embody her psychological attempt to defy death. Like the poet in the *rithā'*, she maintains stability to "counter the extreme rupture that comes with death, and ultimately attempt to control it."³²⁴

Commemorating a lost city and a lost community, the novel further relies on repetitious references to some of the city's defining landscape features, most distinguished of which are the river that flows through the city and the historical bridge that connects its two parts. As the city's physical body is gone, the repetitious invocations of before-and-after images of these places allow the literary to replace the real, transcending death and bearing the ongoing power of the city's identity. The literary preserves the meaning of the city's life and becomes a liminality that emphasizes the city's significance for the ongoing lives of those in the present. The arch bridge that before the city's destruction connected the economically disparate neighborhoods located on the two banks of the river, was a porous space, the crossing of which was an everyday practice through which the city's citizens reinvented social meanings and fostered communal bonds, casting economic differences as irrelevant. Lamyā, a woman who lived in the poor neighborhoods of the city and has later gone mad due to losing her children during the massacre, is one example of that every day practice. Despite her poverty, Lamyā was never treated as an other, but rather as a family member by the city's upper and middle classes. She crossed the bridge many times every day. She entered the city's houses without permission and treated children on the streets as her own, taking care of them when hurt and spanking them lovingly when they needed discipline.³²⁵ The same arch bridge now connects what is left of the city's dismembered body to the internet center. Lamyā, who still spends her days crossing the bridge, now spits on people, the billboards,

³²³ Yi-Fu Tuan, on whose work upon which I am building here, understands "space" and "place" in terms of human experience, pointing out that "'space' is more abstract of than 'place.'" What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value." Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6.

³²⁴ Elinson, 25.

³²⁵ Al-Sarrāj, 93-95.

and the internet center. Referred to by Faṭmah's grandfather as "our flesh and blood,"³²⁶ the river further embodies a form of consciousness within. Like the water imagery manipulated in the *rithā' al-mudun*, the river encapsulates the city's experience and stands as a symbol of its trauma, perpetually mediating and generating ongoing connections and associations.³²⁷ As the novel alternates between two time frames, the reader traces how the river has been stripped of its power. What had for centuries provided people with prosperity, shelter, and protection becomes feeble and polluted. Loaded with the blood of those who were murdered, its water now reeks with foul odors and obsequiously reflects the lights of advertising billboards.

Placed against a background of forced forgetting, repetition becomes a space within which repression is challenged. The ritualistic reiteration of memorialization creates a continuity between the past and the present and allows the repressed and forcefully forgotten culture to return over and over again in an infinite quest for identity. Faṭmah, who looks like her grandmother and was named after her, clings to the stability of the old ways that have been threatened by the government's violence. She, for example, continues to make her coffee exactly as her father loved it. She follows the exact hundred-year old recipes that the old nanny Umm al-Ḥubb left behind, and ensures, as Umm al-Ḥubb once instructed, that food is prepared with love and generosity. The lunch that she sends to the muezzin on Fridays is a sixty-year-old family tradition that is only maintained because Faṭmah tends to it. Repeating patterns of past cultural order renders the protagonist an extension of a past generation and an embodiment of traditional structures. Only through her can the city's lost culture be summoned time and again. Similar to Faṭmah, the novel itself is a space where the repressed cultural memory is constantly sought. As much as the evocation of the poetic tradition renders the author's voice familiar and conjures in the modern Arab reader deep-rooted memories and emotions of loss and nostalgia, it also recalls continuity and emphasizes cultural survival.

Gendered Reflections on the Past

The protagonist's ritualized lament of her loved ones evokes the reflection on loss embedded in the *rithā'*, constantly conjuring the traditional *marthiyyah* and the image of the classical female elegist. Despite the constant shifts between past moments and Faṭmah's present life, a careful tracking of this movement allows us to divide the novel into three major parts that correspond to the major sections of the traditional *marthiyyah*.³²⁸ In the first part of the novel, which spans around eighty-five pages, the timeframe oscillates between the present and Faṭmah's life in pre-conflict Hama. Echoing the *ta'bīn* section of the *marthiyyah*, where the deceased's

³²⁶ This is a rendering of the Syrian colloquial expression, *minnā wa-fīnā*.

³²⁷ For an informative reading of the use of water imagery in the Andalusī *rithā' al-mudun*, see Elinson, 15–49. On the use of natural imagery in Andalusī poetry in general, see Iḥsān 'Abbās, *Tārīkh al-adab al-andalusī: 'aṣr al-ṭawā'if wa'l-murābiṭīn*, 2nd ed (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq li'l-Nashr, 1997), 15.

³²⁸ Marlé Hammond reports that although some scholars describe what can be termed sections of the *marthiyyah*, its polythematic nature has been, for the most part, ignored. Those sections include announcement of the kinsman's death, a description of the death scene, a call for revenge (*tahrīd*), and the section where the poet enumerates the deceased's praiseworthy characteristics (*ta'bīn*). Marlé Hammond, "Qasida, Marthiya, and Différance," in *Transforming Loss into Beauty*, ed. Marlé Hammond and Dana Sajdi (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 147.

praiseworthy characteristics are enumerated, this part praises a city and a community that no longer exist. The second section, which spans around fifty pages, shifts between the present and the time of the attack itself, evoking the death or the destruction scenes in the traditional *marthiyyah* where the atrocities of the enemy and the slaughter of people are detailed. Carrying elements from the shaming/instigation motif (*tahrīd*), the third part focuses on the present, highlighting Faṭmah's embitterment with a city drowning in forgetfulness.

In addition to the predominant images of female characters mourning their husbands, brothers, and sons, the formal recreation of the traditional *marthiyyah* is further accentuated by creating a connection between the protagonist herself and al-Khansā', the *mukhaḍrama* poet who is known for her *marāthī* (elegiac poems) of her brother, and who represents in the Arab imagination the ultimate poetic expression of loss and mourning. While the novel typically refers in the collective to those whom Faṭmah has lost in the massacre, her brother Aḥmad in particular is singled out as a major source of her grief. Aḥmad was a small child when the men of Abū Shāmah dragged him out of the house, and for years no one knew where he was, or if he was alive or dead. For decades after his disappearance, the echoes of his wailing, we learn, continued to inhabit every room in the house. This association can be extended further to the author herself—in addition to the fact that the novel addresses and details real historical events, and that the author is from the city of Hama and was of the same age as her protagonist when the massacre took place, the novel's dedication expands the boundaries of this fraternal relationship: "Do not ask: When will he return? To my two brothers: Muṣṭafā and Mukhlis."

These complex connections implicate the role of women in mourning and the relationship between the novel and the classical *rithā'* as a gendered literary space. Examining this relationship through the intersection of gender and genre allows us to unpack the novel's aesthetic response to violence, for, as Hartman suggests in her work on the translation and reception of al-Khansā's legacy, "[g]enre is always a key to understanding the interplay of literary works in their social, institutional, and other contexts."³²⁹ The fact that the corpus of women's poetry from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods is dominated by *marāthī* prompted many scholars to investigate women's *rithā'* in terms of its purpose and meaning within the public life of the tribe. Terri DeYoung, for example, highlights the role of literature as a social institution that aims to maintain the cohesion of the social fabric in channeling women's voices in certain directions.³³⁰ Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych links *rithā'* to ritualized mourning and argues that women's *rithā'* must be examined as a performance of ritual obligation, through which women's literary expression serves to strengthen and reinforce the collective message.³³¹ Inasmuch as women's *rithā'* laments the loss of loved ones, it celebrates male heroism and collective victory. Considering its role and meaning, it is not surprising, as Suzanne Stetkevych suggests, that women's *rithā'* reflects exclusively male concerns, since "[t]he major occupations and preoccupations of women were not considered matters of tribal record to be encoded in verse and preserved for the posterity of the tribe."³³²

³²⁹ Hartman, 27.

³³⁰ Terri DeYoung, "Love, Death, and the Ghost of al-Khansā'," in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 45–75.

³³¹ Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 162.

³³² *Ibid.*, 166.

Like a traditional *marthiyyah*, the novel laments those who disappeared, or were killed or imprisoned during the attack, and like al-Khansā', the protagonist laments her brother. However, *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* goes further, mobilizing *rithā'*'s ability to regulate which losses are worthy of literary mourning to counter the regime's denial of Hama's tragedy. The institutionally silenced tragedy is now culturally ratified through the authority inhabited within literature and the city's repressed trauma is divulged through ritually embodied signification. Inasmuch as the traditional *rithā'* fulfilled women's obligation to the tribe and "reinforced the collective message," the mobilization of this literary space against an authoritatively sanctioned silence dislocates the officially constructed meanings of the collective and signifies how the Syrian novel positions itself in society. This dynamic is particularly subversive in a country where the rhetoric surrounding national losses is constantly appropriated to reaffirm the cult of the leader and the state's strategies for dominating the national narrative.

Through gendered narrative strategies, the novel dwells on the poetics of nostalgia embedded in the traditional *rithā'* to look critically at the past, reflecting Svetlana Boym's distinction between "restorative nostalgia," which perceives of itself as the absolute truth and is "at the core of recent national and religious revivals,"³³³ and "reflective nostalgia," which calls absolute truth into doubt and "explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones."³³⁴ Al-Sarrāj engages in reflective nostalgia by exposing the patriarchal logic woven into strategies for domination and maintenance of power that govern the armed conflict between the regime and the city's insurgents. Summoning reflective nostalgia, the novel critiques the position of finding absolute truth and is concerned with historical and individual time. While reviving the memory of Hama, al-Sarrāj does not reduce the lost city to an idealized, Edenic site. She looks critically at the past and does not shy from addressing the contradictions at the heart of the nation.

Remembering the past, *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* exposes a history of sectarian tension and discrimination, underscoring the role they played in instigating and escalating the violence that afflicted the country. Through Faṭmah's memories, the reader is introduced to Umm al-Ṣāfī, a woman from the community of Abū Shāmah, who led the attack on the city and who represents Hafīz al-Asad, and by extension, the 'Alawī (Nuṣayrī) community in the country.³³⁵ Coming from an extremely poor background, Umm al-Ṣāfī was brought into the family as a little girl to serve Faṭmah's developmentally disabled uncle, and her story exposes a history of injustice, coercion and violence practiced by the Sunni elite against the nation's minorities. Referred to by Faṭmah's uncle as "a brutish servant," Umm al-Ṣāfī was ridiculed, looked down on as a member of an inferior community, and even forced to adopt the family's Sunni religious practices. The violence that the city endured at the hands of Abū Shāmah's men is akin to that they had faced themselves

³³³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), XVIII.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Scholars have devoted significant attention to the violent conflict between the Syrian regime and the Muslim Brotherhood in late 1970s and early 1980s. Among many other complex and interrelated factors and contexts, they discussed the role of sectarian tensions and loyalties, which rose to the surface by the rise to political power of many members of the 'Alawite (Nuṣayrī) community and intensified with the inauguration of Hafīz al-Asad as Syrian president in 1971. On the role that sectarianism, regionalism, and tribalism have played in the struggle for political power in Syria, see Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*. For a detailed discussion of the history of the 'Alawite sect in Syria and their relationship to the Syrian regime, see Leon Goldsmith, *Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace* (London: C. Hurst & CO, 2015).

before their rise to power. When bulldozing one of the city's houses, the soldiers discover the remains of five bodies, which were "perhaps of Abū Shāmah's people: farmers or servants who dared to rebel."³³⁶ The bodies were buried in an upright position, a final insult that exceeded the killing and went beyond death itself. For some of Abū Shāmah's men, defeating the Sunni Islamist fighters was a confirmation of regaining their identity and reclaiming their history. Their belief in collective culprits only intensifies their group identity and pushes them into severe violence and ruthlessness. The soldiers are not satisfied by demolishing that one house, but take their anger out on the whole city, leveling many of its neighborhoods. In a scene that details how Abū Shāmah's men destroy the platforms on which the servants and guards used to sit, one of them yells "spit on the rocks! Kick them! It was perhaps my grandfather or yours who sat there."³³⁷

The complex history of rejection that contributed to intensifying the violence is encapsulated in the novel through a surreal scene that describes Faṭmah's secret meetings as a teenager with a young man related to Abū Shāmah, with whom she fell in love. Meeting behind the city's hospital, the image of the two young, passionate lovers is set against piles of plaster casts, which "had the shapes of different human body parts: legs, arms, thighs, and necks. Like real severed limbs, they enveloped the unheeding couple."³³⁸ The bloody history was indeed much stronger than the young couple's dream of a new beginning, the novel suggests, as we, and Faṭmah witness the young man being shot by Abū Shāmah's men. "She saw his body rolling down the same stairs that she had climbed many times to meet him."³³⁹ Similar to the situation in the country at the time, "his dead body was rolling downhill rapidly and intensely."³⁴⁰

Violence is represented as the logic of patriarchy pushed to its extreme, of absolute power and truth, enforced hierarchy, and one final, unquestionable solution to the national question. Evoked within a modern context of intranational violence, *rithā'*, as a gendered literary space that celebrates men's heroism, becomes a site on which the conflict is complicated and its redemptive masculine logic is contested. Through a gendered critique of the past, al-Sarrāj makes a sharp distinction between fundamentalist political Islamic movements that aim to capture the state and the Islamic tradition as a form of piety, belief, and ritual. From the Quran lessons that Faṭmah devotedly attended as a young woman and the collective prayers she performed with her female cousins to the cultural traditions surrounding breaking the fast in the holy month of Ramadan, al-Sarrāj dedicates pages of the novel to detailed descriptions of religious practices. Within women's private world, Islam is rendered a familiar, open, and even colloquial space.

عند العصر تتزاحم الفتيات: فطمة وبنات أعمامها عند البحرة، يتوضأن للصلاة بوجوه بيضاء وابتسامات خفية، فالضحك مع العبادات وبحضور المعلمة شيء غير مستحب ... يتراصصن على السجادات الممدودة، المجهزة لتأدية الفرض والسنة والأدعية اللازمة. لكن الأعمار المختلفة للفتيات تجعل هذا الطقس اليومي حافلاً بالمفارقات، فقد تخز إحداهن ابنة عمها بخاصرتها فتضحكها فتدفعها للتكبير وبدء صلاة جديدة وربما للمرة

³³⁶ Al-Sarrāj, 104.

³³⁷ Ibid., 99.

³³⁸ Ibid., 35.

³³⁹ Ibid., 40.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

الثالثة. قد تضحك إحداهن حتى تفسد وضوءها أثناء الركوع بإفلات ضرطة مرحة، فتركض كي تعيد وضوءها.³⁴¹

At 'aṣr prayer,³⁴² the girls, Faṭmah and her cousins, run to the fountain [in the courtyard]. They perform ablution with radiant faces and hidden smiles, for laughing while performing acts of worship and in the presence of the teacher is not encouraged... They line up on the mats that are placed for them to perform the compulsory and the optional prayers in addition to supplications. Of different ages, the girls fill this daily ritual with humorous moments. One girl might repeatedly poke her cousin, provoking a laugh and forcing her to redo her prayer, for the third time in a row. Another one might laugh so hard that she ends up invalidating her ablution while performing *rukū*³⁴³ by releasing a funny fart, and then running to redo her ablution.

In juxtaposition to that intimate and informal space, there is Faṭmah's uncle, Nadhīr, who incited the city's fight against Abū Shāmah, only to escape during the attacks.³⁴⁴ Powerful, uncompromising and cruel, Nadhīr represents patriarchal structures that are built on loyalty and in which men's domination is both shaped and expressed through embodied physical power and exploitation. While Nadhīr's patriarchal patterns of power and hierarchy are continuously negotiated by the family's women, including the protagonist herself, they are also sustained by a generation of older women, represented by the grandmother, who acts as a guardian of Nadhīr's rule. Through graphic images of corporal punishment, we follow how Nadhīr instilled fear and submission not only in the family's women, but also children and young men, only to later use them to terrorize anyone in the city who would diverge from his doctrine by actions or beliefs. With the rise of Abū Shāmah to power, Nadhīr, followed by the young men of the family, closed the city's doors to the outside world. Perceiving any attempt to disturb the well-established order as some sort of contamination, he destroyed the front balcony of the big house, and covered the windows with thick blinds, sealed with plastic, so that no dust would find its way in. "His room was now empty and clean, but a very dark and cold place."³⁴⁵

On the night before the city's young men revolt against Abū Shāmah, the grandmother tells a story that captures their minds: three hundred years ago, the voices of the muezzins occupied the skies at dawn, sharing the news that a young man from the al-Māyil family had raped the neighborhood's most beautiful woman. "Armed with truncheons and daggers, [our] men gathered at the entrance of the al-Māyil's neighborhood, roaring like the river's water. Only one woman of the al-Māyil's family survived,"³⁴⁶ the grandmother said slowly, emphasizing each word. The grandmother's story endows Nadhīr's struggle with a mythic, gendered logic that casts the nation as a raped woman, her honor violated and awaiting restoration by men. But as the fighting rages

³⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

³⁴² The 'aṣr (afternoon prayer) is the third of the five daily prayers performed by practicing Muslims.

³⁴³ Literally "the act of bowing," *rukū* is a step in Islamic prayers, when one bows down while placing the hands on the knees.

³⁴⁴ The name Nadhīr alludes to the Muslim Brotherhood's clandestine periodical *al-Nadhīr* (The Warner), which was issued in Syria throughout the seventies and the early eighties.

³⁴⁵ Al-Sarrāj, 100.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 88.

on the next day, Nadhīr flees the city, dismantling his image as male protector. Further disintegrating the myth of the male protector is a scene where Nadhīr is gently wrapping his son in a shawl of wool at dawn, preparing to escape, while the children and young men who believed in him charge out under the cold February rains to meet the bullets of Abū Shāmāh's fully armored men. Like the protagonist's brother, the children and young men who were left behind to face the brutal punishment of the state are not heroes but rather victims of deception and hypocrisy. Heroism was ascribed to them by force (*ulṣiqat bihi*), we are told. By rendering the conflict a complex space where the lines between guardian and enemy, oppressor and oppressed, and heroes and victims are hazy and entangled, al-Sarrāj dislocates the binary frames of reference that mark, as Miriam Cooke suggests, the "War Story,"³⁴⁷ allowing the novel to mourn loss while condemning the violence that had engendered it.

Embittered by the culture of silence and forgetting, the female protagonist is controlled by a desire for vengeance, reproducing the same patriarchal logic of violence that the city has endured. Falling squarely within the *tahrīd* notion of traditional mourning, Faṭmah constantly shames the men of her city. "You are all useless, willing to survive on the flesh of your own children (*ta'kulūna laḥma awlādikum*),"³⁴⁸ she tells them. Indeed, the horrifying image of parental cannibalism serves as a the most violent and disturbing symbol of a society whose values turned upside down and a state willing to consume its own citizens in order to preserve power.³⁴⁹ The line encountered in the novel's dedication appears again within the novel, only to underscore the gendered notion of *tahrīd*. Reading in a poetry book that has long rested next to her bed, she reaches a particular section that arouses her distress: "Do not ask: When will he return? Ask instead: When will men rise?"³⁵⁰ The lines are a direct quote from "*Wa 'āda fī kafan*" (And He Returned in a Shroud), by the Palestinian poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh, in which he elegizes a resistance fighter. In addition to accentuating Faṭmah's rejection of the predominant culture of silence and surrender, the reference establishes a connection between the struggle of Syrians and that of Palestinians. It equates the rule of the Ba'th party with that of an occupier, stripping the Ba'th of any legitimacy and justifying a popular uprising against it.

While, through engaging the reader in the protagonist's agonized inner world, the novel produces a locus of understanding of her distress in the face of others' responses, it also underscores the problematic nature of Faṭmah's response to her and her city's trauma. Faṭmah's immersive experience, embodied in traumatic reenactment and repetition, a pursuit of revenge, and a failure to reengage in the here and now, represents a harmful relation to the past that begets further suffering and hinders the individual's ability to negotiate through her traumatic experience. In the novel's concluding pages, al-Sarrāj draws a parallel between the forced forgetfulness of the outside world and the protagonist's complete entrapment in the past, emphasizing that both responses are damaging. On one level, Faṭmah's cancer grows in

³⁴⁷ Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6.

³⁴⁸ Al-Sarrāj, 69.

³⁴⁹ The connection between parental cannibalism and a wider breakdown of society can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 137, for example), in addition to several Mesopotamian texts. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between parental cannibalism and other forms of social violence in biblical and Assyrian texts, see Stuart Lasine, "Jehoram and the Cannibal Mothers (2 Kings 6.24–33): Solomon's Judgment in an Inverted World" *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament*, (50, 1991), 27–53.

³⁵⁰ Al-Sarrāj, 102.

conjunction with her anger until the two forces take full control of her body and her mind. As her disease spreads, turning in her nightmares into black insects that viciously feast on her body, her anger also grows, transforming into uncontrolled outbursts of rage and frustration that she takes out on everyone and everything around her. On another level, the protagonist's final hallucinations fuse the rat with her cancer, her embedded anger, and her desire for revenge. Everything is toxic—not only the forgetting world around her, but also the retraumatizing remembrance in which she imprisons herself. In a gothic turn, the rat now inhabits Faṭmah's body, its voice reverberating within her head: "I am here, inside your swollen organs. I hear you and monitor your dreams and nightmares. I shape your nightmares."³⁵¹

As an alternative to Faṭmah's response to trauma, the novel proposes, through a new generation of women represented by her niece, Lamīs, a different model of mourning and remembrance, one that allows, by retaining critical distance, a process of working through trauma.³⁵² Although she did not actually witness the horrors of the conflict, the young woman grew up with overwhelming inherited memories. Aware of the ghosts of violence that inhabit her surroundings and the effects that this violence has on her present and future, Lamīs seeks to find a balance between preserving her family's legacy and discovering her own path of life, unimpeded by the city's trauma. Lamīs embodies what Marianne Hirsch has termed postmemory, which describes

the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before ... But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.³⁵³

While Faṭmah and her generation of women are consumed by an immersive process of remembering that leads to "self-wounding and retraumatization,"³⁵⁴ Lamīs identifies with the memory of loss and trauma but retains critical distance from it. Although she looks like her aunt and maintains many of the cultural values that Faṭmah symbolizes, Lamīs is not imprisoned in the trauma of the past. Conscious of the oppressive modes that had incubated the violence, she is focused on equality and independence. While Faṭmah spends her life waiting for men to avenge the death of other men, Lamīs refuses patriarchal structures and insists that women are better leaders and politicians than men. In contrast to her aunt, Lamīs is not interested in revenge, but rather in leveraging usable knowledge of the past. The internet center, which summons terrifying and haunting memories for Faṭmah, is used by Lamīs as a tool for a better future. "Abū Shāmah

³⁵¹ Ibid., 217.

³⁵² In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra holds that there are two fundamental forms of remembering traumatic events: "acting out" and "working through." In acting out, the person compulsively relives the traumatic events of the past in the present. Working through, on the other hand, is a process in which a person seeks to gain critical distance on a problem. According to LaCapra, working through requires work, as it does not prescribe easy answers, but instead involves self-examination and critical engagement. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

³⁵³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2012).

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 86.

does not matter to me. I want to know everything, and this center is my tool,”³⁵⁵ she tells her aunt. The final scene juxtaposes Faṭmah’s dead body with that of vibrant and strong Lamīs, who has spent her life contemplating her aunt’s suffering. “Every morning, with her head held high, Lamīs crosses the bridge that connects the two banks, taking in all that is happening around her. In her beautiful eyes, one can see Faṭmah, who now lies next to the city’s citadel, as a river should.”³⁵⁶

Conclusion

In his famous remark to Frank Budgen, James Joyce stated that in *Ulysses* he had aimed “to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day disappeared from the earth, it could be reconstructed out of [this] book.”³⁵⁷ Like Joyce, al-Sarrāj imagines her novel as a narrative map that fights against obliteration and forgetfulness. Merging space and historical storytelling, she imagines the city as a relational construct, one that is shaped by and simultaneously contributes to shaping the experiences of its inhabitants. Clearly, as in any other literary work, the Hama represented in *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* is not, and cannot be, the same as the “real” Hama, for as Robert Tally asserts, “[t]he mapping project of narrative is necessarily incomplete, provisional, and tentative.”³⁵⁸ However, the novel does successfully capture and preserve the pulse of the city by turning it into a literary construct.

Through an interplay between gender, trauma memory, and poetics of loss and nostalgia rooted in the Arabic poetic tradition, *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* becomes a productive space where the fixed logic of repressive systems is challenged and self-reflective alternatives are constructed. By creating a narrative map of a traumatized city, the novel defies strategies of forced forgetting, which aim to distance the nation from responsibility towards its past. As it unearths repressed memories to reconstruct the nation’s story and subvert dominant historical readings, al-Sarrāj’s work proposes a productive model of remembering and mourning in which trauma is acknowledged, reflected on, and understood in all its historically situated complexity. Critical remembering and reflective nostalgia allow the emergence of new forms of reconciliation with the past through an understanding of those structures and practices that facilitate violence. In a system where the state controls the definitions and representations of traumatic experience, liberating memory becomes a major tool for contesting the legacy of authoritarianism, since reconstructing history directly challenges the dominant political discourses and realities. Like other Syrian novels that emerged around the unfolding of the new millennium, *Kamā yanbaghī li-nahr* pauses at the violence and destruction, breaks the silence, and then invites readers to look the past in the eye, reflect on it, and contest it in order to reimagine the future.

³⁵⁵ Al-Sarrāj, 75.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 232.

³⁵⁷ Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 69.

³⁵⁸ Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 53.

Chapter Four

Reclaiming the Narrative

Overview

This chapter focuses on *Brūvā* (*First Draft*), a 2011 novel by feminist novelist, essayist, and political activist Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan, who in 2006 co-founded *Nisā' min ajl al-dīmuqrāṭiyyah* (Women for Democracy), which was soon thereafter shut down by the Syrian government. Born in 1974 into an 'Alawite family, Ḥasan is a vocal critic of the Syrian regime. While her first novel, *Abanūs* (*Ebony*, 2004), received the Ḥannā Mīnah Award for Young Writers in Syria, which is sponsored by the Syrian Ministry of Culture, her second novel, *Nigatīf* (*A Negative*, 2007), put her in direct confrontation with the Syrian authorities. A documentary novel, as she labels it, *Nigatīf* is based on interviews with female political prisoners and exposes their horrifying experiences in Syrian prisons. In 2010, and due to her sharp criticism of freedom of speech violations in Syria, the Syrian security services issued an order prohibiting Ḥasan from leaving the country. In 2012, one year after the demonstrators took the streets in Syria, Ḥasan fled to Germany following the journey of many thousands of Syrian refugees who migrated to Europe.

Brūvā is presented as the first draft of an unfinished novel. The unnamed, fictional novelist is an agent of the Syrian secret police, the *mukhābarāt*, who spends his time listening to tapped phone calls. During his compulsory military service, the *mukhābarāt* agent develops an obsession with some of those on whom he spies and turns them into the characters of his first novel. The novel consists of raw, transcribed phone calls, semi-developed narratives and monologues, and three brief, but informative, diary entries that grant the reader access to the world of the *mukhābarāt* agent himself. Two of these entries introduce and conclude the novel, while the third is inserted in the middle. The semi-developed narratives are further supplemented by dense footnotes wherein the *mukhābarāt* agent credits the sources on which the narratives and monologues are built, and addresses himself, documenting ideas and suggestions to be included in the intended second draft of the novel. Throughout the novel, the *mukhābarāt* agent emphasizes that he attempts to convey the stories of his subjects of surveillance with utmost transparency and credibility, however the text is laced with ambiguities that blur the lines between the real and the imagined.

The novel introduces the reader to a group of friends in their thirties. The characters' present lives, memories, and histories are revealed in fragments through an unfinished and nonlinear narrative that jumps back and forth between the past and the present. While the stories of some characters are developed, those of others are abruptly cut off, leaving it to the reader to fill in the gaps and construct her own endings. Additionally, the diary entries tackle the intra-national sectarian divide in Syria, shedding light on the relationship between the 'Alawite community and the Ba'th party. The access that the *mukhābarāt* agent gains into the lives of the friends, who are supposedly enemies of the ruling authority, leads him to his own journey of transformation, including an obsession with preserving the stories, memories, and histories of those on whom he spies.

My discussion of *Brūvā* is divided into three sections. The first section traces the ways in which the novel creates an unreliable narrator, and uses metafiction, footnotes, and

multiperspectivity, challenging the notion of authorship as well as the legitimacy of the authority it metonymically represents. The second section reveals how through subtle, but powerful allusions and cross-genre intertextual practices, the novel provides its reader with a critique of the project of *ḥadātha* as a rupture with the nation's past. While *Brūvā* continues to assign the Arab intellectual social responsibility, it also announces the death of the savior, prophet-like writer, and calls for the rise of a novelistic intellectual who engages in a dialogical relationship between the self and the other, both in literary texts and in real life.

The Arabic novel of the 20th century, which actively contributed to the projects of nation-building by shaping national imaginaries, often burdened women with excessive symbolization, constructing them and their bodies as signs and symbols of the nation, an eroticization that is premised, as Wen-chin Ouyang reminds us, “on gendered binary dualities, whereby culture, mind, power, state and agency are masculinized and nature, soul, powerlessness, nation and passivity are feminized.”³⁵⁹ Following the (hi)stories of Hālah and Šibā, two female characters from different generations, the third section of my analysis aims to show how Ḥasan's novel works against this prevalent discourse and investigates the ways in which an emerging feminist sensibility and literary discourse manifest within the literary space.

A Story of a Generation

إلى جيلي، جيل السبعينات،
فمن خساراتك وخيباتك ولدت هذه الرواية.

To my generation, those who were born in the seventies,
from your defeats and disappointments, this novel was born.

The above statement is the dedication with which Ḥasan opens her novel. As a paratextual element that mediates between Ḥasan, her novel, and her reader, the dedication promises to shed light on the lives of those Syrians who have known no other Syria but the one burdened by the totalitarian rule of the al-Asad family, which took control of the country in 1971. Unlike previous generations of modern Syrians that participated to various degrees in the social and political life of the country, *jīl al-sab 'īnāt* was born and raised under a state of political disenfranchisement and social and economic exclusion. Since paratexts, as Gerard Genette and Marie Maclean suggest, “*present* [the text], in the usual sense of this verb, [and] in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world,”³⁶⁰ Ḥasan's dedication can be read as an attempt to *present* both the text itself and those to whom the text is dedicated. By exploring the lives of a group of friends who belong to *jīl al-sab 'īnāt*, *Brūvā* is involved in an act of counter exclusion, establishing the *presence*

³⁵⁹ Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity, and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 105.

On the complex relationship between gender, nation, and the novel in the Arab world, see also Elsadda, *Gender, Nation and the Arabic Novel*.

³⁶⁰ Gerard Genette and Marie Maclean, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (Spring, 1991), 261.

of a whole generation against the systematic political and economic marginalization practiced by the state and its unilateral discourse.

The reality of Syria under the rule of the “eternal leader,” where the state recognizes no limits to its authority, corresponds to many dictatorships and totalitarian regimes around the world. In his writings on the totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel points out that in totalitarian systems, where there is one central agent of all truth and all power, an institutionalized “rationale of history” becomes the sole natural agent of all social activity. In such systems, “public life,” he explains, “ceases to be an arena where different, more or less autonomous agents square off, and becomes no more than the manifestation and fulfillment of the truth and the will of this single agent. In a world governed by this principle, there is no room for mystery; ownership of complete truth means that everything is known ahead of time.”³⁶¹ Immersed in such reality, *Jāl al-sab ‘īnāt* is best described by the characters themselves. For example, Ayham, one of the friends under surveillance and a talented young man who is struggling to fulfill his dreams as a musician, reveals a static country whose story has already been written and depicts a generation that harbors an embittered feeling of superfluity.

ربما كانت هذه حال جيلنا، أتى إلى خشبة المسرح بعد انتهاء العرض المسرحي وانسدال الستار. كأنه أتى في الوقت الفائض حين انتهى المعنى، ثم ترك في لا معناه، لخلاصه الفردي.³⁶²

Perhaps, this is the story of our generation. It came on the stage right after the play had ended and the curtains had closed. As if it arrived during an added-on time, when meaning had ceased to exist, left on stage alone in its meaninglessness; searching for its own salvation.

Against this reality, *Brūvā* strives to introduce a cacophony of personal living experiences. It uncovers a dynamic life, and shows that behind surveillance, singularity, and stillness, there are multifaceted lives that cannot be boxed into one narrative. While the characters are supposedly under surveillance because of their opposition to the state, the novel avoids any mention of political activities, focusing exclusively instead on the characters’ private lives and personal histories. As the *mukhābarāt* agent explains,

سألاحظ قارئني أنني لم أعن البتة في روايتي تلك بما تهتم به القيادة. لم أعن بالنشاطات العامة لشخصياتي ولا بأسرارها السياسية، لم أعن بانتماءاتها ولا بنقاشاتها العقائدية ولا بما تفعله ضد السلطات. ما كان يعنيني موجود ومكتوب هنا في حقيبتني الجلدية حيث كومبيوترتي المحمول. هذا كل ما يعنيني. هذا كل ما يعنيني من الحياة الآن.³⁶³

My reader will notice that I did not pay attention to what the leadership was looking for. I did not pay attention to the public activities of my characters or political secrets. I did not pay attention to their affiliations, ideological discussions, or oppositional activities. All that matters to me is written here, available in my leather bag, where my laptop is. This is all that matters to me. This is all that matters to me in life.

³⁶¹ Václav Havel, “Stories and Totalitarianism” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1964-1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 333.

³⁶² Hasan, *Brūvā* (Beirut: Dār Riyād al-Rayyis, 2011), 58.

³⁶³ Ibid., 234.

From Šiba, who through sexual pleasure crosses imposed cultural boundaries and realizes her emergent sense of self, and Ayham, a Kurd who navigates his way through a social and political culture of discrimination, to Diyālā who struggles with her self-image, trapping herself in an unhappy marriage, the novel traces the lives of a young generation of Syrians at a micro level. It rescues the personal through everyday experiences, foolish mistakes, and minute dreams, victories, and losses, enabling the emergence of multiple humanized and individualized images of intellectuals who are characterized by a complete loss of any grand unifying narrative. Havel argues that “between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization, in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline.”³⁶⁴ From the homogeneity, regularity, and anonymity imposed by the state, *Brůvā* rescues the personal and the unique. It is the inherent tension between the individual and authoritarian system that the novel attempts to capture.³⁶⁵

Unreliable Narrative, Unreliable Reality

Against fixed ideological discourses and an image of the nation that is constructed by an official, omniscient narrative, and around one omnipresent leader, *Brůvā* introduces a text that is marked by uncertainty and conflict over the right to authorship. In her work on self-conscious fiction, Patricia Waugh proposes one of the most influential definitions of metafiction:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.³⁶⁶

By disrupting the relationship between fiction and reality, the metafictional nature of the first draft style in *Brůvā* draws attention to how fictional writing cannot be isolated from the wider concerns of history and politics. Revealing the constructed nature of the characters invites the readers to reflect on the way subjectivity is similarly constructed by ideological means in the non-fictional world. It urges them to question their own assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives. In that sense, *Brůvā* destabilizes the national narrative and the notion of a central agent of all truth and all power by challenging the very notion of authorship, and the legitimacy of authority behind truth and

³⁶⁴ Havel, “The Power of the Powerless” in *Open Letters*, 134-135.

³⁶⁵ In his article, “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel does not make distinctions between classical dictatorship, early totalitarianism, and post-totalitarianism clear. However, in her study of Havel’s thought, Delia Popescu explains that unlike her precursors, the post-totalitarian citizen has to be a rule-obeying one, independent of his or her conviction about the authority’s ideologies. This notion is emphasized also in Lisa Wadeen’s work on the Syrian case. For a discussion of Havel’s definition of post-totalitarianism, see Delia Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel’s Thought: The Responsibility of Resistance* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), 40-45. For aspects of post-totalitarianism in Syria, see Wedeen, “Acting ‘as if’: The Story of M” in *Ambiguities*, 67-86.

³⁶⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 2.

historical knowledge. The juxtaposition of three different types of narrative—the “fictional” narratives, the imagined author’s diary entries, and the phone logs—also contributes to reinforcing the notion of unreliability. While the conventions of the phone logs and the diary entries are meant to serve the fictional author’s claims to authenticity, their reliance on a first-person narrator also implies a high degree of subjectivity, signaling the complexity and unreliability of self-representation.

The notion of unreliability further emerges from the ways in which the characters’ experiences are mediated and interpreted. In addition to the fact that the reader is twice removed from the characters’ experiences; once by Ḥasan, the author of the novel and again by the fictional novelist, the *Mukhābrāt* agent, the latter’s claim to trustworthiness only renders him suspicious. Throughout the footnotes, the fictional author insists that his main goal is to be faithful in rendering the lives of his characters, but this insistence only betrays his underlying lack of credibility. As he reveals in his final diary entry,

أخاف أن أكون كتبت الشخصيات بمنطقي وليس بمنطقها، فأعيد القراءة وأعيد، ولا أترك فكرة تخطر على بالي إلا أدونها ملاحظة على الهامش. أخاف أن أكون قد قصرت في نقل اختلاجات من اختلاجات الشخصية، وأستमित كي أشعر بالذي كانت تشعر به في لحظة ما.³⁶⁷

I am always afraid that I have construed the characters through my own perspective, rather than theirs. So, I read, reread, and make certain to document every idea that comes to my mind in the footnotes. I am always afraid that I might have failed to convey the smallest of the characters’ internal flutters. I therefore make desperate efforts to feel what a character felt in a certain moment.

The deep anxiety detected in this paragraph points at the inherent tension between fiction and reality, and reminds us that it is impossible to reduce reality to a single truth. As Ben G. Yacobi puts it, “Human perceptions of the world and concepts for their interpretation are entangled and inseparable. To a great extent, the perceived reality is intricately intertwined with illusions of observations and their interpretations.”³⁶⁸ Like the writing of fiction, *Brūvā* presents reality itself as a process of engagement and of subjective acts, something that is ongoing. The disjointed text not only manifests a fragmented reality, but one that is also always in the making.

The all-knowing, monolithic author is further contested by destabilizing the reader-author relationship. As part of an authoritarian system and a representative of it, the fictional author is, from the very outset, under strong suspicion. Despite all his claims of trustworthiness, it is never clear to what extent he has manipulated the stories of those he spies on. His excessive footnotes further heighten the reader’s suspicions and engage her in the politics of storytelling. Packed with ideas and suggestions, the footnotes reveal the *mukhābarāt* agent’s willingness to exploit those on whom he spies and to twist their stories in order to create a more “thrilling text.” For example, when Ayham reveals his sexual adventures with a girl named Ḥamīdah during the time he spent working in Libya, the *mukhābarāt* agent recognizes how appealing it could be to elaborate on the story.

³⁶⁷ Ḥasan, 234.

³⁶⁸ Ben G. Yacobi, “The Human Dilemma: Life between Illusion and Reality,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.3, No.3 (September 2013), 203-4.

(٢١) من الممكن القول في مكان ما من الحكاية بأن حميدة كانت سمراء جداً بلون مائل إلى الزرقة وبأن شفاهها كانت غليظة. ولربما سردت أكثر عن قصتها مع زوجها السابق كي أعمق وجودها كشخصية، وقد يكون زوجها قوادة عمل على تشغيلها بضع سنوات ثم رماها. أو قد يكون زوجها بائعاً جوالاً اكتشف خيانتها وطلقها. وربما قتل في حادث سيارة أو ربما في حادث إطلاق نار بين عرب الشمال وطوارق الجنوب، وبالتالي أعرج على قصص النزاعات الأهلية في ليبيا. أو ربما قتله الإسلاميون لأنه تقدمي؟³⁶⁹

(21) It is possible to add, somewhere in the story, that Ḥamīdah's skin color was very dark with a blue tone, and that she had thick lips. I could perhaps add more details about her story with her ex-husband in order to deepen her presence as a character. Her husband could perhaps be a procurer who had her work for him for years and then threw her away, or a peddler who discovered her infidelity and then divorced her. He might have died in a car accident, or been killed in a fire exchange between the Arabs in the north and the Tuareg people in the south. This way I would be able to mention the civil conflict in Libya. Was he perhaps killed by Islamist groups for being progressive?

The juxtaposition of the main text against marginal footnotes disrupts the continuity of the narrative, and reveals the hierarchal relationship between the official narrative on the one hand, and the marginalized living memories of *Jil al-Sab'ināt*. Shari Benstock suggests that footnotes call attention to the presence of author and reader on textual grounds. She further argues that while authors of fiction depend on narrative personae to distance themselves from the text and veil their authority, footnotes in literary works, on the other hand, highlight the very interplay between author and subject, text and reader that is always at work in fiction.³⁷⁰ The fictional author's suggestions in his footnotes are, as in the footnote above, marked by ambiguity. Every suggestion engages a sign of uncertainty; a "perhaps," a "maybe," or a "could be," leaving the reader to wonder what the novel will eventually look like. The footnotes do not fill the various gaps that the text creates, but rather invite the reader to do so, and in the process, open up the boundaries of the narrative and disturb the very authority they supposedly represent.

The uncertainty embodied in the footnotes, which destabilizes the notion of one representative narrative and challenges the authority of an all-powerful narrator, also makes possible a process of multiplication. By inviting the readers to fill the gaps and construct their own accounts of the characters' lives and histories, the novel allows the emergence of multiple, individualized drafts that can take the narrative out of bounds and into new directions. However, this room for multiplication is complicated by the fact that the imagined author is a state agent, underscoring the power hierarchy involved in writing the (hi)story of the nation, and the inherent conflict between individual experiences and state narrative. Despite the possible individual variations, the one with the upper hand in the novel is the state agent, since no individual reader has the authority to make his or her version official, to print a completed text and present it to the world.

Challenging the notions of certainty and authorship goes much deeper than that—it not only manifests itself through juxtaposing different genres, but also in the very formulation of the narrative chapters. The internal structure of the narrative chapters reveals an intense struggle

³⁶⁹ Hasan, 57.

³⁷⁰ Shari Benstock, "At the Margin of Discourse: Footnotes in the Fictional Text," *PMLA*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Mar., 1983), 205.

between the characters on the one hand, and a traditional third-person narrator on the other, a struggle over the right to tell the story. This struggle, which will be further discussed later in this chapter, is manifested through abrupt switching among a first-person, third-person objective, and third person omniscient narrator, making it hard for the reader to navigate the text. The centrality of this struggle is further evident in the way the chapters in the novel are labeled. Instead of titles, each of the novel's fifteen chapters is headed with a statement that reveals the narrator(s) in charge of recounting the events in the chapter, calling the reader's attention to the competing voices within each chapter. While, for example, in some chapters, and after many attempts by a character to take control of the narrative, an omniscient narrator triumphs and finishes the chapter, in others, a character eventually succeeds in seizing the right to narrate her or his story.

Rewriting the Intellectual

Through subtle but powerful allusions and cross-genre intertextual practices, *Brūvā* provides its reader with a critique of the project of Arab modernity (*ḥadātha*), as interpreted by the liberal intellectual of the fifties and sixties, and this intellectual's subsequent relationship with and imagining of the nation and its past. This project, which strongly linked poetic *ḥadātha* with a more general cultural *ḥadātha*, and aspired to change the world, politically, socially, culturally, and linguistically, produced, as the Syrian critic Kamal Abu Deeb explains, "a totalizing discourse which sought to interpret the world in terms of identity, modernity, secularism and nationalism and, very often, socialism, and was utterly certain and confident in the absolute validity of its premises."³⁷¹ In contrast to the *ḥadāthī* intellectual, *Brūvā* introduces multiple humanized and individualized images of intellectuals who are characterized by uncertainties and are in constant search for new possibilities.

The relationship between the disabled Hālah al-Summāqī and her son, Mihyār al-Sālimī calls for special attention. Mihyār, one of the friends under surveillance, is a leftist artist who suffers from impotence and lives with his disabled mother. The name Mihyār al-Sālimī (Mihyār of Salem) evokes Mihyār al-Dimashqī (Mihyār of Damascus), the poetic persona through which the prominent *ḥadāthī* Syrian poet and cultural critic Adūnīs articulated his revolutionary vision of the world in a collection of poems titled *Aghānī mihyār al-dimashqī* (*Songs of Mihyar of Damascus*). Known for his metaphorical adventures and formal experimentation, Adūnīs, in his collection, adopts the persona of the medieval Arab poet Mihyār al-Daylamī (Mihyār of Daylam) and, "refashion[s] him into his own image, a modern Arab poet."³⁷² As Adūnīs himself explains, he wanted in these poems "to get out of the direct object of discourse and speak an impersonal language, objective-historical and personal, symbolic and mystic at the same time." Therefore, "Mihyār is more than a mask; it is a vortex where Arab culture would meet with all its dimensions in the central and pivotal cause: crossing from the old Arab world into the new."³⁷³ In *Aghānī mihyār al-dimashqī*, Mihyār becomes Adūnīs' alter ego, and "what makes him an appropriate alter

³⁷¹ Abu Deeb, 347.

³⁷² Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity, and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 22.

³⁷³ Quoted in the Introduction to *Adonis Selected Poems*, trans. Khaled Mattawa (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), Xvi.

ego, is that Mihyār of Daylam launched a rebellious voice within the political and religious culture, making him one of those who stood far enough outside the tradition to endure its dynamism.”³⁷⁴

Hence, the novel’s allusion to Mihyār al-Dimashqī simultaneously extends to Adūnīs himself, and establishes Mihyār al-Sālimī as the successor of a generation of Arab intellectuals who, like Adūnīs, defined the *ḥadāthī* project as an epistemological posture, an intellectual revolution against referential systems, values, and paradigms.³⁷⁵ It is as Adūnīs puts it, “the emergence of new movements, theories and ideas, and new institutions and systems, which leads to the disappearance of old, conventional structures in society and the rise of new structures.”³⁷⁶ The stanza inscribed in Mihyār al-Sālimī’s painting exemplifies Adūnīs’ vision of the modern Arab intellectual, emerging as a fire that battles the old order, setting fire to the stagnation of society, and then blooming with new beginnings.

ملكٌ مهيار
ملكٌ والحلم له قصر وحدائق نار
واليوم شكاه للكلمات
صوتٌ مات.
ملكٌ مهيار
يحيا في ملكوت الريح
ويملك في أرض الأسرار.³⁷⁷

Mihyar is king,
A king who dreams of a palace and gardens of fire.
Today a voice deceased
challenged him before the words.
Mihyar is king,
He dwells in the realm of wind
And rules the land of mysteries.

The rupture between Mihyār and the nation’s past can be traced through his anxious relationship with his own mother’s past. Although he does not explicitly voice his opposition to traditional and religious world views, the reader can sense his anxiety on many occasions. Despite his attempts to convince himself, and the reader, that he is at peace with his mother’s religious background, Mihyār’s nervousness betrays him, for example, when Shaykhah Saḥar, a religious old friend, pays his mother a visit. “I had agreed to have an interview that day with a young journalist who worked for an art magazine. I told myself, I would leave them alone to remember the beautiful old days,”³⁷⁸ he tells us. However, throughout the interview, Mihyār cannot hide his agitation, and, at the same time does not understand the real reason behind it. The tensions between him and the journalist escalates, until he abruptly ends the interview, and unintentionally reveals the reason behind his

³⁷⁴ Adnan Haydar and Michael Beard. Introduction to *Mihyar of Damascus: His Songs* (Rochester, New York: Boa Editions, 2008),

³⁷⁵ Khālīdah Sa’īd, “*al-Malāmiḥ al-fikriyyah li’l-ḥadāthah*,” *Fuṣūl* (V.4-3, 1984), 25-33.

³⁷⁶ Adūnīs, *Fātiḥah li-nihāyāt al-qarn* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Awadh, 1980), 320–321. Quoted and translated in Abu Deeb, 343.

³⁷⁷ Adūnīs, *Aghānī mihyār al-dimashqī* (Beirut: Dār majallat shi’r, 1961), translated in *Songs of Mihyar the Dascene*, trans. Kareem James Abu Zeid and Ivan Eubanks (New York: New Direction Books, 2019).

³⁷⁸ Hasan, 162.

stress: his fear that his mother might find refuge in religion again. Mihyār is not relieved until he is certain that his mother will not take that path again.

كانت همسات هالة والله الشیخة سحر تتناهی إلي من الصالون، تشعلان في رغبة ملحة للإنصات، المهمات والضحكات من ثم. كان يبدو أن أمي سعيدة للغاية. وقت أغلقت الباب وراء الصحافية، سمعت الشیخة سحر تقول لأمي شيئاً ما معناه بأن الله يبلونا كي يختبرنا، وبأنه ابتلاها لاختبار إيمانها، وكانت هالة صامتة. وقفت خلف الباب أنصت بكامل جوارحي. أخفضت الشیخة صوتها كأنها أحست بأذان تتنصت عليها ... أتيت لأدعوك إلى الإيمان الحق ... ظلت هالة طيلة هذا الجزء من الحديث صامتة، وأنا عدت إلى مرسمي. كنت شبه متأكد من ردها فأنا أعرفها جيداً. حالما دخلت المرسم تذكرت كل ما كنت أستذكره لأقوله في اللقاء الفاشل.³⁷⁹

The whispers of Hālah and Shaykhah Saḥar that I was able to hear induced within me a burning desire to listen. Whispers and then laughs. It seemed that my mother was very happy. As I was closing the door after the journalist left, I heard Shaykhah Saḥar telling my mother that God tests us with ordeals; that her ordeal was a test of her belief, but Hālah was silent. I stood behind the door listening with all my might. The Shaykhah lowered her voice, as if she felt that some ears were listening ... I am here to invite you back to the real belief ... Hālah was silent for the whole time. At that point I went back to my studio. I knew it. I knew what Hālah would say. I know her so well. As soon as I got to the studio I remembered all that I wanted to say in that failed interview.

Unlike Adūnīs' Mihyār, or the Mihyār we encounter in Ḥaydar's work *Walimah li-a 'shāb al-baḥr*,³⁸⁰ *Brūvā* introduces Mihyār, who is no longer a protagonist, as a disillusioned antihero. The son of a communist activist, and the heir of his father's secular revolutionary vision, Mihyār is impotent, depressed, and unable to engage in the real life around him. He lives in his own world and continues to trap himself in an old model of progress; one that, as *Brūvā* suggests, needs to be thoroughly reevaluated. Emasculated Mihyār represents the modern Arab intellectual who is powerless, crushed by the oppressive political regimes under which he lives. It was on the day of his mother's "disastrous accident [that] everything changed,"³⁸¹ that young Mihyār lost his sexual abilities and therefore the power that the notion of masculine sexuality signifies in a patriarchal system. Depressed and unable to engage in the life around him, Mihyār adopts, as Samira Aghacy points out in her work on the post-*naksa* Arab intellectual, "elitist and seclusionist stands by seeking refuge in the ivory tower of [his] inward states of consciousness and direct[s] [his] path towards the self rather than people's destiny."³⁸² A transcribed phone call between Mihyār and his friend Ayham, conjures the 'betrayal of the intellectuals' narrative—the abandonment of the people by elite writers and thinkers who seem to be out of touch with the collective mood.³⁸³ "You bend everything in order to serve agenda. Why do I feel that you live in the paintings you create instead of immersing yourself in reality?!"³⁸⁴ says Ayham, before accusing Mihyār of being one-

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 167.

³⁸⁰ See chapter-II.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 93.

³⁸² Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1976* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 56.

³⁸³ See chapter-II.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 175.

sided, and unwilling and unable to acknowledge the multiplicity embedded in the world around him.³⁸⁵

The novel's critique of the elitist, prophet-like Arab intellectual continues, suggesting that Mihyār's impotence is not only a sign of the oppressive systems in place, but rather of Mihyār's own entrapment in a particular coveted image of progress. The first chapter graphically details Mihyār's nearly incestuous obsession with his mother's body, and his indefatigable efforts to preserve it in its most sexualized image—he immensely enjoys bathing her every Thursday, scrubbing her body with perfumed soap and her long beautiful hair with shampoo, dressing her in colorful short dresses, and even removing her body hair in order to show her velvety skin. In other words, Mihyār is shackled by the belief that he, the hero, is the only one who should save and preserve the desired nation/mother, and his impotence constitutes him as an anti-hero riddled with guilt and failure. Despite the nights that he spends weeping, and the constant suffocation he feels, he is too frightened to break out, explore new ideas, and move forward.

يوماً بعد يوم راح ذلك الجسد الشاب يفرض سطوته الساكنة على كل أوقاته، يجلده بصمت منذ أول الصباح وحتى آخر الليل. جسد يتحكم بكل أجزاء البيت، يتمدد ليتحكم بكل أجزاء جسده وأجساد النساء في لوحاته.³⁸⁶
مجرد انتصاب ذكره كفيل بفتح بوابات الندم المرير. الانتصاب يعني الموت ندماً، فما بالك بالمتعة!!³⁸⁷

Day after day, [her] young body imposes its static authority on Mihyār's time, lashing him with its silence all day long. [Her] body controls every little thing in that house. Its authority further extends to control [Mihyār's] own body parts, and the bodies of the women in his paintings.

The mere notion of an erection provokes feelings of bitter guilt. Erection means death by guilt. All the more so sexual pleasure!

Echoing the *ḥadāthī* intellectual's particular interest in the myth of death/rebirth, which stems from his preoccupation with cultural salvation,³⁸⁸ Mihyār is obsessed with preserving Hālah's fertility, the nation's capacity for revival and rebirth.

في اليوم الثالث من كل شهر كان مهيار السالمي يأخذ القوطة المضمخة بالدماء وينطلق إلى مرسومه وهو غرفة ملحقة بالبيت من الجهة الجنوبية. يغرز الريشة في القطن المبتل بالأحمر ثم ينقل السائل إلى اللوحة... للون الأحمر طاقة دافئة تجعل الناظر إليه ينفث على الحياة وتنتشر الحرارة في جسده. إنه اللون القادر على

³⁸⁵ In 2011, as Adūnīs generated massive criticism when he harshly criticized the Syrian uprising, the Lebanese Islamic scholar Raḍwān al-Sayyid criticized Adūnīs for reducing all the ills against which Arabs were revolting to Islam, without acknowledging the complex problems of the regimes in place. Al-Sayyid accused Adūnīs of living in the past and stressed that Adūnīs refused change unless it confirmed to his own conditions, showing no respect or understanding of people's realities. See "*al-muthaqqaf al-'arabī wa-ḥarakāt al-taghyīr wa'l-zaman al-munqadī*," *al-Ḥayāh*, June 25, 2011; and "*al-muthaqqafūn al-'arab wa-ikrāhāt al-taghyīr*," *al-Ḥayāh*, July 07, 2011.

³⁸⁶ Ḥasan, 18.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 92.

³⁸⁸ In the 1950s and 60s, ancient Near Eastern mythic figures of rebirth, such as Ishtar, Tammuz, and the Phoenix became powerful symbols through which *ḥadāthī* poets, most prominently Adūnīs, expressed their desire to escape from what they regarded as the stifling tradition in the contemporary Islamic world, stressing the possibility of and the need for a rebirth in the face of cultural and political death. see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Modernist Poetry in Arabic," in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. M. M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 132-79.

أن يحررنا من الحزن والسوداوية والاكتئاب ... لم يعرف أحد أن ذلك اللون الغريب: البني المحمرّ القاتم، المحمل بالخصب والغواية، ذلك اللون الفريد الذي يغوص في كل لوحة من لوحات مهيار هو دم عاداتها.³⁸⁹

On the third day of every month, Mihyār al-Sālimī takes his mother's bloody pads and runs to his studio, a little room on the southern side of the house. He dips his brush in the red cotton, and transfers the liquid on to a painting The red color has warm energy, capable of opening us up to life and spreading warmth through our bodies. It is the color that can free us of sadness, melancholy, and depression ... No one knows that that strange color: that dark, reddish brown, which bursts with fertility and seduction, that unique color, which is embedded in each of Mihyār's paintings, is her menstrual blood.

However, Mihyār's fixation on Hālah's body indicts the myth of death and revival embedded in the *ḥadāthī* intellectual's quest to capture and preserve the essence of fertility and rebirth. Not only does Mihyār's ritualized preservation of the mother by painting with her blood extend her body and completely dissolve the boundaries between her and the nation, but it also is in itself a visceral patriarchal appropriation that is rooted in tension and absurdity, since, as a palpable sign of failure to conceive, what Mary Douglas has termed a sort of human being *manqué*,³⁹⁰ menstruation has historically marked women as defiled and impure, placing them at the bottom of social hierarchy that is in turn expressed as ritual status from pure to polluted. Further, Mihyār's paintings lack energy and life. As his friend Ayham tells him, the naked female bodies in his paintings are opaque and impermeable.³⁹¹

In contrast, *Brūvā* suggests a new path for the national hero: to break free from a single truth, a unidimensional narrative and image of the nation. Echoing the hero journey in the pre-Islamic *qasida*, bonds of dependence must be cut away in order for Mihyār to explore new beginnings. The mother's death towards the end of the novel, the shattering of the intellectual's long-preserved image of the nation, generates new possibility, forcing Mihyār to rethink his world views. The hero's journey is precipitated by the emergence of productive uncertainty as an incentive for exploring new narratives.

هاوية الشك، هذا ما كان بمستطاعي تسمية هذه الحيرة التي تأكلني يوماً إثر يوم. مر شهران على غياب أمي وأنا أجاهد كي أحب نفسي كما أنا بكل شكّي. غيابها ترك تلك الأفكار المتناقضة تتناهشني على هواها هناك من يقول إن الشك بذرة الإبداع، هو وحده الذي يحقّقنا بالحياة، واليقين شلل ... أنوس بين الأقطاب، كاني أريد مزجها معاً، أنوس كأن قدر البشرية النوسان.³⁹²

An abyss of uncertainty. This is what I can call the bewilderment that continues to destroy me day after day. Two months have passed since my mother passed away, during which I have tried to love myself despite my uncertainty. Her absence has left me torn apart by contradictory ideas ... there are those who say that doubt carries the seeds of creativity, and that certainty is a sort of paralysis ... I oscillate between different poles, trying to bring them together. I oscillate, as if it is the destiny of humanity to oscillate.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 90.

³⁹⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

³⁹¹ Hasan, 95.

³⁹² Ibid., 222.

The fragmentation of the nationalist narrative of the nation-state, and the intellectual's possible quest for new prospects is a frightening notion for the state. The significance of Mihyār's possible transformation can be traced in the *mukhābarāt* agent's anxious reaction, as he, without paying any attention to the destinies of the other characters, abruptly ends the novel with the chapter that reveals Mihyār's possible exploration of new trajectories, as he, following his mother's advice, plans a journey to India in an attempt to explore new world views and new possibilities. "No matter what order the chapters of the novel take, this will be the final chapter,"³⁹³ a footnote firmly states. With the reason behind surveilling this group of friends continues to be unclear, the *mukhābarāt* agent's last diary entry further accentuates the establishment's apprehension over the possible emergence of a new intellectual: an official order is issued prohibiting Mihyār from leaving the country.

Though Ḥasan follows in the footsteps of Adūnīs and his generation in terms of aesthetic and formal experimentation, she rejects their entrapment in one worldview as the only way forward, and their insistence on severing the nation from its past. In opposition to the calcified prophet-like poet of the fifties and sixties who sees himself as a catalyst for Arab modernity,³⁹⁴ a new type of Syrian intellectual emerges: a novelist who is in constant exploration of the relation between self and other, both in literary texts, and in real life. The diary entries of the *mukhābarāt* agent uncover another conflict within the world of the young man who belongs to the 'Alawite ruling minority. They reveal another journey of rediscovery, one that involves the self and the other, and suggests that only by stepping out of our social and cultural location, out of our own boundaries, are we able to interrogate the determining features of our world, to experience a new relation with the other, and to eventually become able to novelize the world around us.

Relying once again on a multi-layered cross-genre allusion to communicate a new vision of the role of literature and of the intellectual in society, Ḥasan opens the first diary entry, and in fact the whole novel, with the following stanza-like lines.

أنا الذي استمعت.
تتصّت، أنصت، عرفت واكتشفت.
على الرغم من الصمت المحيط بي التقطت حاستي كل ما قيل، وما لم يُقَلْ كذلك.
أنا وحدي الذي استمعت.³⁹⁵

It is I who have listened;
eavesdropped, hearkened, learned and discovered.
Despite the silence that surrounds me, my senses caught all that has been
said, and all that has not.
It is only I who have listened.

³⁹³ Ibid., 221.

³⁹⁴ In *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel*, Wen-Chin Ouyang points out that the dialogue that Adūnīs establishes with the mythical, literary and cultural past of the Arabs is characterized by an antinomy between a desire for crisis and rupture with the past and a longing for a totalizing or unproblematic circulation of the same past. Ouyang exposes the asymmetries and the assumptions hidden beneath the 'grand narrative' of Arab modernity developed by Adūnīs in his theorization of Arabic literary history in *al-Thābit wa'l-mutaḥawwil*, where often the 'cultural other' is the catalyst of a selectively determined Arab modernity.

³⁹⁵ Ḥasan, 11.

The lines allude to a post-*naksa* epic poem by the Syrian poet Muḥammad ‘Umrān, titled “*Anā al-ladhī ra’ayt*” (It is I who have seen), in which the mythic hero and the prophet merge into the modern poet who is rendered powerless by the tragic state of the nation.

أنا الذي رأيت
أرمني نبوءتي
في هجعة الساحات ثم أمضي
مكللاً بشوك أرضي.³⁹⁶

It is I who have seen
I cast my prophecy off
in the silence of the squares, and walk away,
crowned with the thorns of my own land.

The bilateral and mutual reinterpretation at the heart of literary allusion illuminates the novel’s vision of the intellectual.³⁹⁷ On the one hand, the alluded-to text informs Ḥasan’s, establishing the novelist as a successor of the poet and claiming for the novel a leading role in Arab culture that poetry had enjoyed exclusively for centuries. On the other hand, Ḥasan’s text calls into question the prophet-like intellectual. By replacing the verb “to see,” which indicates knowledge, experience and prophetic vision, with the verb “to listen,” the monologic intellectual disappears, and a new uncertain, dialogic intellectual emerges; one who, by listening, opens up her world to the other, constantly seeking new imaginings and understandings.

While the novel exposes the state of surveillance that engulfs everyday life in Syria, its obsession with the power that inhabits the notion of voice becomes a space where exclusive narratives and rhetoric are contested. Though brief, the diary entries shed light on the world in which the *mukhābarāt* agent was born and raised, and on the rhetoric around which this world is constructed. A young ‘Alawite man who has just graduated from college with a degree in philosophy, the *mukhābarāt* agent grew up as a loyal follower of the state’s rhetoric, and when he began his compulsory military service, he was determined to support the regime in repressing any opposition. His father’s opinions and conversations, documented in the diary entries, further reflect how for many ‘Alawites, “the Asad regime symbolized the rise to equality in Syrian society after centuries of marginalization and periodic persecution,”³⁹⁸ and how it was necessary for the community to support the regime in order to preserve its historically threatened existence. The father’s words merge homeland, the state, and the ‘Alawite sect into one being, and echo the official rhetoric as he describes oppositional voices as saboteurs and the demons who want to burn the whole country.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Muḥammad ‘Umrān, *Anā al-ladhī ra’ayt* (Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa’l-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1978), 107; my translation. In this poem, ‘Umrān relies heavily on allusion. The opening line of the poem evokes the opening line of the myth of Gilgamesh: “It is he who has seen it all. Oh my land, sing for him! It is he who experienced everything and gathered lessons.” For an Arabic translation of Gilgamesh, see Ṭāhā Bāqir, *Malḥamat gilgāmish wa-qīṣaṣ ukhrā ‘an gilgāmish wa’l-tūfān* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu’ūn al-Thaqāfiyyah al-‘Āmmah ‘Āfāq ‘Arabiyyah, 2002).

³⁹⁷ Chana Kronfeld argues that the intertextual patterning, which results from the simultaneous activation of two texts through allusion, is not uni-directional, but rather bilateral, and as such, a mutual interpretation of the two activated texts occurs. Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Press, 1996), 130.

³⁹⁸ Leon Goldsmith, *Cycle of Fear*, 3.

³⁹⁹ Ḥasan, 115.

Ironically, the act of listening, which had aimed to control the other, opens the *mukhābarāt* agent's closed borders, redrawing the self as a set of relations, without which there is no self and there can be no self-reference. Listening turns the agent from a static figure to a curious being, seeking to understand the other. Only when the *mukhābarāt* agent listens to the subjects of his surveillance, when he engages with their human experiences, does he break out of the enclosed cocoon in which he had lived and see the friends as persons with full human status. The sympathy that results from seeking knowledge of the other and engaging in her human experience, the novel suggests, does not lead to losing the self entirely into the other. It rather generates what the German philosopher Max Scheler terms a "fellow feeling," where there remains a clear distinction between the self and the other,⁴⁰⁰ a notion that the *mukhābarāt* agent emphasizes by situating himself such that he now exists within that space between the self and the other. He is one of them and not one of them, he tells us.

The more the *mukhābarāt* agent listens the more obsessed with the power of voice he becomes.

للصوت لون وحرارة ومزاج وفردانية، الصورة عاجزة عن الجهر بها ... كنت أعتقد أن لأذني وظيفة واحدة: أن أتلقي أصوات الحياة، الأصوات التي تريدني الحياة أن ألتقاها ... جعلني الصوت يوماً بعد يوم أقشّر ما لم أراه، أعرف ما أسدلت عليه الصورة حجبها، ما كان المكان ينغلق عليه، وما جعله الزمن نائياً عني. الصوت يوابتي إلى المعرفة والكشف.⁴⁰¹

[v]oice has color, warmth, mood, and individuality that a picture cannot reveal ... I always thought that my ears had one task: to receive life's sounds, the sounds that life wants me to receive [but] day after day, the voice made me discover what I had not seen, the things that the still picture had veiled from me, what place had closed off, and what time had kept distant. The voice is my gate to knowledge and revelation.

In addition to conjuring the ecstatic, Sufi experience of *kashf*, through which the Divine mysteries are unveiled to a devoted seer, the evoked antithesis of *ḥajb/kashf* (veiling/revealing) in the quote above further takes on a teleological dimension, for *kashf*, or stepping beyond the accessible-to-all meaning (*ẓāhir*) of Quranic verses towards the implicit meaning (*bāṭin*), is a fundamental concept in the belief system of the 'Alawite community, to which both the *mukhābarāt* agent and Ḥasan herself belong. In both meanings and traditions, the Sufi and the 'Alawite, reaching a state of *kashf* requires mental and spiritual struggle.⁴⁰² Listening becomes the intellectual's passage towards a state of *kashf*, a quest that aims to move beyond the static *ẓāhir* of the nation in order to uncover its diverse *bāṭin*, where individual human experiences reside.

⁴⁰⁰ In *The Nature of Sympathy*, first published in 1913 with a fifth and a final edition in 1948, Max Scheler considers the connection between fellow feeling and moral motivation. Scheler differentiates between fellow feeling and three other phenomena involving the emotional state of others, or co-feeling. These are vicarious feeling, psychic feeling and identification. Often referred to as sympathy or pity, fellow feeling carries an intention of the other, a feeling for the other, with a clear distinction between the self and the other. In genuine cases of fellow feeling, Scheler argues, we not only share the suffering the other feels, but we also feel for the person who suffers, often motivated to act to end the suffering.

⁴⁰¹ Ḥasan, 12–13.

⁴⁰² On the 'Alawite concept of *kashf*, see Farhad Daftari, ed. *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2001); and Yaron Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden. Boston: Brill, 2010).

Ḥasan foregrounds novelization as the process through which opening to the other materializes, and the heteroglossia at the heart of the nation is literarily captured through an aesthetic of democracy. Acknowledging that the regime is not safeguarding the marginalized other, the *mukhābarāt* agent documents “dislodged memories”⁴⁰³ through a process of novelization, reintroducing the marginalized voice into the national narrative. It is, once again, the responsibility of the new intellectual, the novelist, to highlight and preserve the multiplicity of the nation. Rooted in a dialogic imagination, both novels, Ḥasan’s and the agent’s, become spaces that rest on encounter, coexistence and interaction. Echoing a Bakhtinian vision, Ḥasan approaches human existence itself as a dialogical event. She advocates dialogism as “an epistemology, a way of knowing the world, a philosophy of truth, knowledge, and the self.”⁴⁰⁴

A Gendered National Narrative

Hālah : A Battle Over the Female Body

Out of the many individual stories that *Brūvā* implicates, that of the disabled Hālah al-Summāqī occupies the largest space in the novel. Through Hālah’s story and her relationship with men, including her own son, Mihyār, *Brūvā* exposes and seeks to undermine the patriarchal system of representation. “The new postcolonial nation,” Elleke Boehmer explains, “is historically a male-constructed space ... in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition.”⁴⁰⁵ Nationalisms, critics further argue, are necessarily implicated in gendered binaries. Anne McClintock remarks that “despite many nationalists’ ideological investments in the idea of *unity*, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*.”⁴⁰⁶ As in other places in the postcolonial world, the 20th century Syrian novel actively contributed to the project of nation-building by shaping the national imaginary. Governed by gendered binary dualities, it often burdened women with excessive symbolization, constructing them as ciphers for the nation, and their bodies as the site upon which the battle for national identity and sovereignty is fought. Reflecting an emerging feminist literary discourse, *Brūvā* uses this masculine-feminine binary only to subvert it from within, exposing the ways the nation has been narrated into modern self-consciousness by male writers who more often than not cast women as symbols, rather than as literal national subjects.

Attempts to render the sick/disabled female a symbolic or metaphoric embodiment of the state of the nation are not new to modern Arabic fiction. In *The Female Suffering Body*, Abir Hamdar studies the representation of the disabled and ill female body in the work of male and female Arab writers, a topic that, as she remarks, remains largely outside the Arabic literary imaginary. Comparing the patterns of literal and symbolic representation of the ill female body in

⁴⁰³ Ḥasan, 114.

⁴⁰⁴ Gergana Vitanova, *Authoring the Dialogic Self: Gender, Agency and Language Practices* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010), 24.

⁴⁰⁵ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 22.

⁴⁰⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 353.

the works of male and female Arab writers between 1950 and 2000, Hamdar demonstrates that, with slight differences, most writers did not only use the female suffering body as a social or political signifier, but gave it minimal narrative voice, and denied it the textual freedom to embody itself. However, as Hamdar argues, with the unfolding of the new millennium, the representation of the female suffering body, which had been marked by invisibility, symbolic meaning, and voiceless presence, completed its journey towards narrating its own subjective identity.⁴⁰⁷

Situated within this newly emerging literary discourse, *Brūvā* uses the female body as a cultural signifier only to destabilize it. Hālah, the ill mother, is placed at the center of the narrative, and presented as a powerful voice capable of challenging the patriarchal stranglehold on her body. The novel's first chapter opens with the day on which Hālah was injured and paralyzed, establishing her as a cultural signifier whose immobility symbolizes the overall paralysis of society:

لم تكن قد بلغت الرابعة والثلاثين من عمرها حين هوت هالة سماقي عن السلم الخشبي. كانت تحاول أن تطاول قامتها كي تلتقط تنكة زيت الزيتون من سقيفة المطبخ. زلت قدمها الحافية من أعلى درجات السلم فارتطم قذالها بحافة المجلى الرخامية. للتو انسحق نخاعها الشوكي بين فقرات عنقها الأمر الذي جعل جسدها، خلال ثوان، كومة لحم لا يتحرك فيها شيء إلا رأسها ولسانها وبقيّة من روح كانت مفعمة، تخرج ضابجة من عينيها. منذ ذلك اليوم وحتى اللحظة كان على مهيّار السالمي أن يعتني بأم شابة، أنثى في الرابعة والثلاثين من عمرها تتكور بين زوايا جسد حجري.⁴⁰⁸

Hālah al-Summāqī was almost 34 years old when she fell off the wooden ladder. She was trying to reach an olive oil can in the kitchen's attic. Barefoot, she slipped off the highest step, and the back of her skull hit the edge of the marble sink. Her spinal cord was crushed between the vertebrae of her neck. Within seconds, her body turned into a pile of lifeless flesh, just like a hay stuffed doll. Nothing left alive except for her head, her tongue, and the residue of a soul whose vigor used to shine through Hālah's eyes. Since that day, Mihyār al-Sālimī has been caring for his mother, the thirty-four-year old mother trapped within a stone body.

The mapping of the state of the nation on the disabled female body is emphasized through the subtle reference of Hālah's age, connecting her, incapacitated at the age of thirty-four, to Syria, which was also incapacitated by the rise of a dictator thirty-four years after Syria's "birth" as an independent entity—an independence that was assured at the signing of the Franco-Syrian treaty of independence in 1936. Throughout the first chapter, the mapping of the nation on the mother manifests itself through detailed, idealized descriptions of her beautiful, but paralyzed, body. Between her son, Mihyār, and the masculine fictional author, her beauty is illustrated through an excessive use of markers native to Syria—Hālah's body smells like pine trees, and her brown-reddish hair has the color of henna. The brown and red colors in her hair are balanced in two-to-one proportions, exactly like the traditional triple-distilled 'araq liquor, which is enjoyed in Syria mixed, in two to one proportions, with chilled water.⁴⁰⁹

The narrative chapters that tell Hālah's (hi)story are marked with a struggle over who has the right to speak. Although the first narrative chapter opens with Hālah's story, she is, in this

⁴⁰⁷ Abir Hamdar, *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

⁴⁰⁸ Hasan, 17.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 18-19.

chapter, rendered visible only through two competing masculine voices, that of an omniscient narrator, supposedly the state agent, and that of her son, Mihyār, both of whom reduce Hālah's life and (hi)story to detailed descriptions of her body. Against these two dominant masculine intermediaries, Hālah's voice emerges in the following chapters fighting for agency, until it finally seizes the narration and steps out of the boundaries of her body, to tell Hālah's (hi)story in her own words. The footnotes in these chapters unveil the intensity of the struggle between Hālah and the official masculine discourse on the right to speak. In the chapter when Hālah finally seizes the right to narrate her own (hi)story, using a first-person narrative, the state agent interferes, expressing dissatisfaction and anxiety with the emergence of the female voice. "I should perhaps let other characters tell her story, her son for example, or perhaps her deceased husband ... (Serious reconsideration [is required]),"⁴¹⁰ he writes.

The unfolding of Hālah's (hi)story, as she tells it, challenges Syria's history as constructed by the official discourse and exposes how the female sexualized body is the territory over which political and ideological battles are fought. All men in Hālah's life are rendered powerless and ineffective by means of emasculation or death. Since Hālah symbolizes the nation, and her body the home of the nation-state, the novel announces the defeat of all masculine ideologies competing over owning or preserving the female body at the hands of the authority currently in place. Any man who dares to desire Hālah or attempts to have rights to her body, the novel suggests, is destined to be crushed by the one and only leader, whose power is all-pervading despite his absence in the narrative. However, against the silence, death, and emasculation of men in the novel, the female voice emerges, unearthing hidden histories and contesting dominant narratives.

Sālim al-Sālimī, Hālah's first husband and the father of her only son, was a member of the communist party. After a romantic love story, and a short marriage, he, according to the forensic report, died by suicide. However, Hālah's fragmented process of remembering puts to question the findings of the official report, suggesting that the husband was actually murdered. "He was filled with love and life, waiting for your arrival. A man in love and an expecting father does not kill himself,"⁴¹¹ she keeps telling her son. Although Hālah does not go any further with her doubts, a footnote interrupts to complicate the relationship between fiction and history, allowing Hālah's doubts to take on new dimensions. "A return to Akram Ḥawrānī's memoirs might help me here,"⁴¹² the fictional novelist tells himself. In his memoirs, Ḥawrānī, a prominent politician who played a fundamental role in the rise of the Ba'th party to power but was exiled in the aftermath of the 1963 coup d'état, reveals a history of violent practices by the Ba'th against political activists in Syria.⁴¹³

The killing of Hālah's first husband is followed by that of her second, Abū Khālid, the religious man who, three months after she gives birth to Mihyār, takes her as a second wife and raises her son. Abū Khālid, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was killed during the group's uprising against Asad's regime in the late seventies and early eighties. Describing Abū Khālid's murder and funeral, Hālah's words echo the fear that engulfed people during the Muslim

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 75.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ḥawrānī's memoirs were first serialized in the Lebanese newspaper, *al-Sharq al-Awasat*, and later gathered in a book. Akram Ḥawrānī, *Mudhakkirāt Akram Ḥawrānī* (Cairo: Madbūlī, 2000).

Brotherhood's uprising, and the state's practices that aimed to render men like Abū Khālīd and his fellow fighters completely expendable.

لم يأت أحد على ذكر الحادثة طيلة فترة العزاء، اللهم إلا همساً أو بين الشخص ونفسه. أقيم العزاء على روح أبي خالد بدون أن يتسلم أهله جثته، فيما لم تفارق سيارات المراقبة الشارع أبداً. حفر له قبر مرتجل ورميت فيه بعض حاجياته وطمر ثم وضعت الشاهدة.⁴¹⁴

Throughout the funeral, no one mentioned the incident [*al-hādithah*], except in whispering or between one and one's own self. Abū Khālīd's funeral was held, without his family receiving his body, while the watching [military] cars did not leave the street. A grave was hastily dug, and some of his belongings were thrown in it. It was then covered with dirt, and a headstone was thrown on top.

The fear embodied in people's whispers is juxtaposed to the bombastic rhetoric of the authorities, which relies on tactics of depersonalization, reinforcing the enemy's lack of humanity and allowing for acts of violence that would usually be forbidden to be celebrated.⁴¹⁵

كان الجميع متأكدين من موته قبل أن يسمعوا الخير: (انتصار أفراد الجيش الباسل. على وكر المخربين ذاك ومقتل كل الذين كانوا فيه) في فاتحة أخبار الساعة الثامنة والنصف مساءً على القناة الرسمية الأولى.⁴¹⁶

Everybody was certain of [Abū Khālīd's] death before hearing the headline in the introduction to the 8:30 evening news on the official channel: The Triumph of our Brave Army over the Saboteurs and the Death of all Those Who Were Hiding.

Though the novel does not attempt to paint Abū Khālīd as a pure victim,⁴¹⁷ it does emphasize his humanity—it portrays him as a loving, warm husband and reestablishes him as a member of society by uncovering the impact his death on those who love him. Abū Khālīd's status as human who deserves grief is restored through graphic description of his first wife's pain and grief.

كانت زوجته أشبه بمومياء توشك أن تستحيل رماداً إذا لمسها أحدهم. عينان مفتوحتان على سعتيها تهيمان في الفراغ. بدا لي أنها لن تنتظر طويلاً حتى تلحق بزوجها الراحل. شعرت بحنو وحب غريب تجاهها، جعلاني ألصقها لأول مرة في حياتي، أتشم رائحتها وأقبل جبينها، وكان بارداً كجبين ميت.⁴¹⁸

His wife looked like a mummy that would turn into ashes if touched. Her eyes were wide open hovering in the vacuum. She seemed ready to follow her deceased husband. I felt strange love and longing toward her, which made me, for the first time in my life, stay close to her. I would smell her and kiss her forehead, which was clod like that of a dead body.

Nevertheless, contrary to all men in her life, Hālah herself has managed to break out of the constraints of her body. Her accident leads her to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Her body, she realizes, "even when it was brimming with health, never paid attention to the tremendous

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁴¹⁵ See Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, *At War with Metaphor: Media, Propaganda, and Racism in the War on Terror* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2008), 38.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 195.

⁴¹⁷ The novel mentions that Abū Khālīd and his group did indeed have improvised explosive devices and weapons in their hideout.

⁴¹⁸ Hasan, 195.

potential of her soul.”⁴¹⁹ This tension between the body and the soul represents the inherent tension between the nation and the state, echoing Ernest Renan’s argument that while the nation is a soul, a spiritual principle constituted by a rich legacy of memories and a desire to live together, the state is a legal and political entity.⁴²⁰ Hālah’s celebration of the nation as a spiritual principle undermines the state as the prototypical institutional embodiment of political modernity. For Hālah, as she tells us, the body is limited, limiting, and enclosed, while the soul is open, vibrant, and energetic. She sees in the failure of the body and the political ideologies it signifies an opportunity to rethink and rediscover the soul. The failure of the state, as the novel suggests, does not mean the death of the nation. For Hālah, the death of her body is the only way to liberate herself from its shackles. It is the death of her metaphoric existence that allows the birth of her literal one.

As she rejects exclusionary agendas, Hālah focuses on instances of human connection, of individuality and solidarity as a new way of imagining the nation. Her approach manifests itself in her relationship with her family. Abandoned by her mother, Hālah grew up with her two aunts who were members of the Qubaysi Sisters, a women’s group whose main focus is the revivalism of Islamic piety in Syria and the Arab world.⁴²¹ Under her aunts and the Qubaysi Sisters, Hālah lived a life of silence where opinions and questions were forbidden and where the Shaykha’s central voice represses all others. However, when recalling moments from her past, Hālah highlights the loving and accepting individual voices within this circle—from her loving little aunt to accepting Saḥar, a religious woman with whom she had a close connection, the reader traces instances of humanity and solidarity that characterize these circles.

الأمر الأساسي الذي سحرني في ذلك المكان هو الشعور المقيم الذي زرعه تلك النسوة في دواخلي: الاهتمام. هناك كنت محاطة بالاهتمام كما تحيط الأشجار سائراً في غابة. كل تفصيل من تفاصيل حياتي ومشاعري واختلاجاتي وحوادث يومي كان محل اهتمام هناك.⁴²²

What fascinated me about [the religious circles I attended] was the attentiveness those women gave me. There I was surrounded with solicitude the way trees surround someone in a forest. My feelings, my thoughts, and every little detail about my life mattered there.

Informed by a profound desire for multiplicity and a rejection of all claims to truth embedded in political ideologies, Hālah embarks on a journey of self-discovery that allows her to engage in a trans-historical dialogue and to raise new questions of selfhood and subjectivity. Using mystical language that heavily borrows from Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist teachers, Hālah develops a

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁴²⁰ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” in *Nation and Narration*, 19.

⁴²¹ The Qubaysī movement is one of the largest Sunni Muslim women’s revivalist movements in the world. Originating under the guidance of Munīrah al-Qubaysī, the movement is estimated to have several hundred thousand adherents. The group is characterized by a tight hierarchal organization and is known for subordination, monitoring, and high emphasis on allegiance. See Sarah Islam, “The Qubaysīyyāt: The Growth of an International Muslim Women’s Revivalist Movement from Syria (1960-2008),” in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Change in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, edited by Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 161-186; and Khatib, *Islamic revivalism*. 168–172.

⁴²² Hasan, 85.

new vision, to which acknowledging uncertainty is fundamental. It is only in giving up all ideas about Truth that we have the possibility of being ourselves, she always tells her son.⁴²³

Şibā: Carving a Space of Equality

“For those on the margins,” Emmanuel Yewah suggests in his work on the postcolonial African novel, “contesting various boundaries has often come through their way of framing what might be considered personal, individual, local issues, everyday life stories in ways that transcend the boundaries of their imagined communities.”⁴²⁴ In *Brūvā*, this dynamic manifests itself in the journey of Şibā, a determined woman from *jīl al-sab ‘ināt* who, frustrated with the certainty in which she lives, struggles to find uniqueness, mystery and individuality. Mysterious things, she believes, give life meaning. Without them, life becomes sheer certainty. Having “lost hope to find amazement in public life, Şibā seeks adventures through the most personal, her sexual life.

The male characters in the novel conceive of Şibā solely through her sexuality and sexed body. Seductive and sexually assertive, as they describe her, they reduce her to a detailed description of her body, which, once again, confirms to the persistence of gender hierarchies in which women are positioned as objects. When one of the friends under surveillance, for example, describes her long black hair, and compares her gaze to that of a lioness, we find that even the imagined author, the *mukhābrāt* agent, steps in, in the footnotes, and maps his own sexual fantasies on Şibā’s body.

جملة [أيهم] تحفز التخيل على رسم صورة لتلك المغربية: شكل وجهها مدبب، عيناها واسعتان مكحلتان، شفاتها مكنتزتان وضحكتها داعرة. من الممكن رسمها كلها حتى تفاصيل جسدها وطريقتها في وضع الحلي واختيارها، ألوانها المفضلة وطريقة ارتشافها القهوة، ولسانها الذي يسمح شفاهها مرطباً إياها كل حين.⁴²⁵

Ayham’s words trigger the imagination to paint a picture of that seductive woman: a sharp-featured face, big eye-lined eyes, full lips and a slutty laugh. Perhaps, a detailed picture of her body should be provided, her jewelries, her favorite colors, the way she sips her coffee, and her tongue, which licks her lips every now and then keeping them moist.

However, while Şibā’s sexual assertiveness makes her wildly attractive, it also makes her deeply threatening, as she represents the woman who does not yield to the order of a system that subordinates women to men, and therefore her assertiveness could undermine the order of things within a patriarchal social system. Ayham, one of the men under surveillance and who is obsessed with Şibā’s, is open about how intimidating her assertiveness is to his masculinity:

كنت أرغب بها بشدة.. بشدة. كلما صافحتني كنت أرتبك. ذبت فيها تلك الشرسة. لكني كنت أخشى الاستجابة لها. قوتها تفقدني حس المبادرة الذي كنت فخوراً به. رجل دون مبادرة ليس رجلاً، سيغدو أقرب إلى دابة مفادة.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Ibid., 45.

⁴²⁴ Yewah, 46.

⁴²⁵ Hasan, 50.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 49.

I desired her desperately... desperately. Every time she shook my hand, I felt disconcerted. I was infatuated by that ruthless woman. But I was too scared to react. Her strength stripped me of any sense of initiative, something that had always been a source of pride for me. A man who lacks initiative is not a man. He becomes closer to a submissive animal.

Contrary to the fixation of the male voices in the novel on Şibā's sexed body, Şibā's own voice tells a different story. The story she tells of herself opens with her revolt against the abusive men in her life. Marked with a loose use of verb tenses that blurs the lines between past and present, signaling the persistence of women's abuse at the hands of men, the opening scene into Şibā's story reveals a cycle of violence that has governed her life and the lives of the women around her—from herself to her sister and her mother. The rebellion of Şibā, whose name means 'youth' in Arabic, is juxtaposed to a submissive older generation of women embodied in her own mother. The mother's passiveness is emphasized in the novel through various subtle techniques. Despite Ḥasan's focus on and careful choice of the characters' names throughout the text, Şibā's mother is left nameless, symbolizing her background role in the primary storylines of history. Namelessness is further reinforced by an almost complete absence of the mother's voice in the narrative. Throughout the novel, we only learn about her and her suffering through Şibā, who is engrossed by her mother's silence and how her exhausted body silently received her husband's beatings. When he left her to marry another woman, she remained silent. When he threatened that he would take her daughters away from her if she asked for a divorce, she also remained silent. Only on two occasions does the reader encounter the mother's voice, and in both cases, we see a woman who has internalized patriarchal oppression and continues to perpetuate it by blaming her daughters for their husbands' abuse.

The revolt of women against the oppressive patriarchal power in the family is certainly not a new theme in the Syrian novel. As Vauthier points out in her study of the Syrian novel in the second half of the twentieth century, the Syrian novel often detached itself from the denunciation of political and religious spheres by applying its criticism to a general social code, often embodied on the level of the family.⁴²⁷ Contrary to the older generation of Syrian writers, Ḥasan explicitly locates the familial and social oppression within the political. Şibā, we are told, is trapped between two violent men, a Ba'thist father who is also a general in the army, and a communist husband who is the editor-in-chief of his party's official newspaper. By associating the male abusers with prevalent political ideologies opposing in nature, the novel intentionally highlights the intricate relationship between the social and the political, announcing women as the principal victims of both spaces.

On her way to the police station to report her husband's abuse, bloody faced Şibā repeatedly asks herself why it is now that she finally feels the courage to stand up against her husband. The focus on the timing of her empowerment emphasizes the date that is explicitly stated in the first line of the chapter that disclosing her story: the year is 2000. Şibā's revolt against her abusive husband in the year 2000 coincides with the death of the dictator, and the shattering of the wall of fear in the country. But soon, as the police officer simply returns her to her husband's house, she realizes that nothing has changed, and that the ruling establishment continues to function within a patriarchal framework, as it soon did under Bashar al-Asad, following his father's death, and following a very brief period of hope for change. Frustrated with the authorities' response, Şibā

⁴²⁷ Vauthier, 345-351.

takes matters into her own hands. She divorces her husband without her parents' approval and goes back to Latakia, the city in which she grew up, where she meets Mihyār, who quietly falls in love with her.

A typical approach in the novel, the narrative structure in the chapters that disclose Şibā's story reproduces a patriarchal system. Şibā's voice emerges in the narrative after a long struggle with an omniscient narrator. It repeatedly erupts in the text, breaking the continuity of the male voice, before it finally takes control. For example, in the chapter that describes her return to Latakia after her divorce, Şibā's voice breaks through the narrative during moments of strength in her personal life, highly correlating literary agency with actual agency—as she takes command of the narrative, she also reclaims agency in her own life. The chapter begins as follows:

بعد عودتها إلى بيت أهلها جمعت صبا عبد الرحمن ثياب زواجها برمتها، ودون أن تكلف نفسها عناء تنظيفها
حزمتها في كيسين كبيرين، ثم رمتها في حاوية القمامة على زاوية الشارع ... مضت أسابيع قبل أن يصل
خبر الطلاق إلى الأب، أتى مباشرة من مقر الإدارة إلى البيت ...

- وين هالشرموطة بنتك؟

باغت الأم في المطبخ، ثم اتجه من فوره إلى غرفة صبا في مراته القليلة التي يدخلها فيها. هناك على بابها،
وبزيه العسكري الكامل، طفق يزعم بأن ما كان ينقصه هو طلاقها، وبأن حالها هذه أوصلتها إليها الفلتنة،
وبأنه سيزوجها من مقدم مقرب إليه اسمه حسان حيدر، ابن حلال ووطني ... ستكون زوجته الثانية ... رفق
ابنته التي كانت ما تزال جالسة على سريرها فاعرة فمها، ثم انسحب مزجراً.

- ولن تخرجي من البيت حتى تتزوجي ..

... 428

When Şibā 'Abd al-Raḥmān returned to her family's house, she gathered all the clothes that she had when she was married in two big bags and threw them in the garbage bin at the corner of the street ... Weeks later, when her father learned of her divorce, he immediately left the [military] center and came home ...

—“Where is that whore, daughter of yours?”

he asked the mother who was in the kitchen, and immediately headed to Şibā's room, which he rarely entered. There, at the door, in full military uniform, he began to scream that divorce was not allowed in his family, and that it was her looseness that had led her to where she was now. He also told her that he would immediately marry her off again to a friend of his: Lieutenant Colonel Ḥassān Ḥaydar, who is a good man and a nationalist ... She would be Ḥaydar's second wife ... He glanced at his daughter who was sitting on her bed in shock, and then thundered out of the room.

—You are not leaving the house until you get married again!

— ...

By beginning the chapter with Şibā's first and last name, the third-person objective narrator immediately distances himself from her. The camera's eye, as a type of external narrative mode, describes Şibā and her parents from the outside. The narrator, just like Şibā's father, is not interested in feelings or internal struggles. For him, all that matters is the very surface of events.

⁴²⁸ Hasan, 104.

Likewise, for the father, who in his military uniform represents the whole authoritarian system, all that matters is that Şibā stays within the entrenched social order, and her divorce threatens to disturb that order. While Şibā herself is completely silent, the narrator's voice continues to dominate the narrative, describing later on how she succumbs to her father's orders and agrees to meet with Ḥassān. However, at the end of her first meeting with Ḥassān, when Şibā's father slaps her in order to force her to be silent, her voice finally emerges as an active force in the text. The following two pages, for example, are marked with abrupt and sometimes confusing alternations between the narrator's and Şibā's voices, illustrating Şibā's struggle for agency both within the narrative and in her life. The struggle within the narrative continues until Şibā finally gathers her strength and revolts against her father's orders, describing, in her own voice this time, how she unapologetically stormed out of the restaurant where she was meeting with Ḥassān. From that moment on, Şibā's voice dominates the chapter, uncovering her new journey.

For Şibā, a victim of male abuse and sexual frustration, sexual pleasure and assertiveness become synonymous with her liberation. "365 men per year is my goal in life,"⁴²⁹ she declares. Sexual pleasure, as Şibā announces, is a means through which she crosses imposed cultural boundaries and realizes her emergent sense of self. Since patriarchal society is obsessed with women's sexuality, it is through this space that she strengthens her resistance to patriarchal conceptions. In other words, Şibā uses her body to redefine herself and rewrite her story in terms of her own rules.

كلما عرفت رجلاً صار لدي فضول قوي لأعرف آخر

لن تعرف المرأة أبداً مالذي تريده من الرجال، أي نمط منهم تحب ومع من تستمتع إلا إن عرفت كل الألوان

....

مع الزمن كنت أكتشف جسدي وأماكن لذته، أماكن كنت غير عارفة بوجودها أصلاً. مع الزمن الغني رحت أتقري روعي أكثر، صرت أعرف أمزجتها وأقترب أكثر من حقيقة تفردا. اليوم ربما كان بإمكانني أن أقول إنني اختبرت جسدي.⁴³⁰

Every time I met a man, I grew curious to get to know another

A woman will never know what she wants from men, what type she likes and with whom she enjoys sex, unless she experiences all types

Over time, I discovered my own body, and its hidden spots of pleasure, spots that I had no idea existed. Over that rich time, I learned how to investigate my own soul. I learned all about its tones and uncovered the truth of its uniqueness. Today I can say that I experienced my own body.

Nonetheless, Şibā's quest for sexual freedom and assertiveness is rooted in violence and a result of victimization.

بالنسبة لي ارتبطت ممارسة الجنس لدي بصراخ أمي. على الرغم من أن غرفة نومها وأبي كانت في نهاية الكوريدور بجانب الحمام، وباب غرفتنا أنا وديالا مفتوح على الصالون، إلا أن الليل كان يضح بصوتها وهي

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 155.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 156-58.

تتوسله مستعطفة. لا أعرف إن كانت دبالا تدعي النوم أم تكون نائمة دوماً كما يبدو! لكني كنت أستوي في فراشي وأروح أنصت ... [و] أنشج بصمت.⁴³¹

Sex has always been associated with my mother's screams. Although my parents' bedroom was next to the bathroom at the end of the hallway, and my sister's and my bedroom was next to the living room, our nights were filled with our mother's voice begging him to stop. I did not know whether my sister really slept through that or she pretended to, but I used to sit in my bed listening ... [and] crying silently.

As a result, what she thinks of as a struggle for liberation and an attempt to avenge patriarchy at large, positions her body as a playground for men, retaining the binary and hierarchal structure of the prevalent, faulty system. This dynamic embodies itself in a rejection of any link between sexual desire and emotional involvement. She represses the feelings she begins to develop towards Mihyār, and continues with her sexual adventures. Over time, Şibā finds herself trapped in an endless cycle of corroborating men's ideas of female sexuality and reproducing the story of her body with male logic.

كنت أعرف مفتاح الرجل من عينيه. هناك من يفضلها فاضلة طاهرة، فألعب دور الطاهرة بمتعة حتى أسره، هناك من يموت في فجور العاهرات فأغدو أكبر عاهرة في البلاد، هناك من يستمتع بلعب دور البطل فألعب معه. هكذا كنت أقضي ليلة واحدة مع كل منهم، قلائل من أعدت الكرّة معهم.⁴³²

Looking through a man's eyes, I was able to figure out the key [to his desire]. There is a man who is attracted to [sexually] pure women, so I would joyfully play that role to get him. There are those who are attracted to slutty behavior, so I would become the biggest slut in the country. There are those who enjoy playing the role of the hero, so I would nourish that feeling for them. I usually spend one night with a man and never return. Rarely have I done it again with any of them.

Her sexual experiences were far from bringing her the liberation to which she aspired. As she puts it, "I now feel that every man I meet takes a piece of me and runs away. Perhaps [he takes] a part of my liveliness or my soul."⁴³³ Şibā's sexual encounter with 'Abd al-Hādī, a man she meets at a bar, makes it painfully clear that what she had thought of as an expression of freedom was merely another form of repression. In his apartment, Şibā finds herself with a sadist monster. Fighting back, trying to survive his beatings, "I saw my mother. I saw her history repeating itself in me,"⁴³⁴ she tells us. She manages to escape, but, in addition to the trauma she endures, Şibā discovers the next morning that the violence she experienced the night before ended a pregnancy of which she had had no knowledge. With memories of her oppressive father looming heavily on her, Şibā feels disjointed, ripped away from herself and from her sanity. "Like a desert at night, emptiness whistles through my soul,"⁴³⁵ Şibā asserts. Rooted in oppression and not based on mutual love, recognition and respect, Şibā's sexual experiences result in death, not in life.

Hasan does not object to women's sexual liberation, which can be seen, for example, when Şibā herself explicitly warns the reader not to take her frustration as a sign of guilt or repentance.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 156-57.

⁴³² Ibid., 156.

⁴³³ Ibid., 158.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 216.

The novel rather calls to question the power relations that inform Şibā's approach to sexual liberation. She uncovers the social meaning that female bodies carry and advocates a sexual self-determination that does not play into normative gendered codes. Reflecting a Foucauldian view on disciplinary practices of the body, Hasan underlines how power works, not necessarily through physical coercion, but through individuals forcing their own bodies into compliance with social norms. Death is the inevitable ending of violence, and her baby was killed by the violence from which it originated. Instead of destroying the older system, Şibā unwittingly contributed to preserving its logic. Her actions were a diversion from pain, and therefore the liberation she felt was temporary and artificial. In that light, death, in *Brūvā*, becomes a precondition for a new beginning. The death of Şibā's unborn baby coincides with two other deaths, the physical death of her former husband and the metaphorical death of her father as he loses all sorts of power after his dismissal from the army. In other words, it is only through a complete collapse of the whole system that women can truly and effectively realize themselves. The loss of her baby becomes the sacrifice that completes Şibā's rite of passage. Laying down with her blood flowing, she, for the first time, realizes what she is really looking for. "I want a man who loves me for myself, the way I am."⁴³⁶

Conclusion

Through language pregnant with possibilities and uncertainties, and a narrative that is fluid, polyphonic, and open-ended, *Brūvā* symbolizes a total loss of faith in a unifying and comprehensive central narrative. It exposes the falsity and failings of the official, nationalist imagining of Syria as a homogenous entity built around a central leader. Additionally, the novel embodies a newly emerging Arab women's narrative discourse that disentangles itself from the patriarchal binary thought that informs the nationalist discourse, carving an equal space for women in both the private and public spheres. Like many other female writers in the Arab world, Hasan "choose[s] alternative routes to the traditional borders of discipline, hence crossing the borders of genre, of history, of sexual preference, of bodies, and of politics."⁴³⁷ Manifested on many levels in the text, border crossing or border opening is portrayed in the novel as a productive model for the re-construction of the self in relation to the other. First and foremost, *Brūvā* in itself is a border text that destabilizes the authority of the literary canon by negotiating the established borderlines between creative and documentary writing.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁴³⁷ Nawar al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 175.

Beyond the Nation

In the year 2000, as demands for reform, freedom of speech, and an open civil society were gaining strength and momentum, a shock wave hit the literary field when the Druze Council in Syria issued a statement condemning the novel *Qaṣr al-maṭar* (*The Rain Castle*) by Mamdūh ‘Azzām. Signed by three of the Druze community’s spiritual leaders (*shuyūkh al-‘aql*), including the shaykh Shiblī al-Hinnāwī, the spiritual leader of the community in Syria at the time, the council’s statement accused ‘Azzām of slandering the Druze and demanded the termination of the novel’s print authorization and the removal of all copies from the market. The statement was further accompanied by expressions of outrage by members of the Druze community, some calling for the death of the novel’s author, who himself belongs to the Druze community. All copies of *Qaṣr al-maṭar* were indeed pulled out of the market and destroyed at the hands of a committee formed by the Syrian Prime Minister, while high officials in the Arab Writers Union urged ‘Azzām to ask for forgiveness. Although the situation was later diffused through various channels of reconciliation and the council eventually did not file a case against ‘Azzām, he continued for months to receive death threats and live in fear for his safety.

Qaṣr al-maṭar returns to the time of the Great Syrian Revolution against the French mandate (1925-1927), which, led by the Druze Sulṭān, Bāshā al-’Aṭrash, began in Jabal-Druze, a mountainous region in the southeastern corner of the French mandate, and later expanded to include various sectarian groups, regions, and classes. In addition to the fact that it was the first Syrian novel to be exclusively set within a clearly designated minority community, the Druze in this case, the novel exposes a seminal, yet contested event that over the years underwent multiple processes of appropriation and mobilization, as advocates of different national narratives incorporated it into their visions of modern Syrian history. As evident in the statement below, what seems to have triggered cries of anger was, above all, the novel’s engagement in an open and public probe into Syria’s national history and the intricate role and place of a minority community in the making of it.

يتضمن هذا الكتاب رواية مختلفة واثباتات ملفقة تفيض باللوم فيضاً وتغيظ الكرام غيظاً واستحل مؤلفه الفسق لنفسه نسباً وجعل العفاف لأهل الشرف والمروءة عجباً واختلق على أهل التوحيد والصدق وأنكر عليهم رفع راية الجهاد ... فلم يمنعه الحياء ما فعل ولم يميز لخبلة بين الجبان والبطل إذ جعل الجهاد ضد المستعمرين (العثماني والفرنسي) عبارة عن ترهات وقلل من شأن الثورة السورية الكبرى ومن قائدتها المغفور له سلطان باشا الأطرش الذي كرمه الرئيس المفدى حافظ الأسد.⁴³⁸

The book includes malicious, invented narratives and fabricated accusations that outrage honorable people. The author of the book has embraced immorality and denied chastity to people of honor and magnanimity. He defamed the people of monotheism (*tawhīd*) and honesty, denying them their raising of the banner of Jihad ... Lacking any shame, he did not distinguish between cowards and heroes, as he belittled the Jihad against the colonists (Ottoman and French) and trivialized the Great Syrian Revolt and its leader, the late Sulṭān Bāshā al-’Aṭrash, who was honored by the one we sacrifice our lives for, President Hafez al-Assad.

⁴³⁸ “*Tā’ifah durziyyah tahdur damm al-kātib al-sūrī Mamdūh ‘Azzām*,” *al-Bawwabah* June 26, 2000. www.albawaba.com/ar/ساخرون/طائفة-درزية-تهدر-دم-الكاتب-السوري-ممدوح-عزام

The timing of the controversy is of great significance to this dissertation, for when it was first published in 1998, *Qaṣr al-maṭar* went almost unnoticed, and it was not until the year 2000 that the novel gained attention. On one level, the unprecedented interference of a religious entity, which not only openly attempted to control the country's literary production, but further used intimidation and social and religious exclusion to achieve such power, points at a general feeling that the state had begun to lose its full control over the literary field, highlighting the need for other authorities to interfere and practice new forms of narrative power. On another level, as questions of freedom, transparency, and inclusion had come to dominate the cultural field, the condemnation of 'Azzām's novel is more than an attack on an individual literary work or author. It exemplifies the anxiety around emerging sensibilities and language of activism that were deeply threatening to the interrelated power establishments in the country.

Unlike in other Arab countries, the literary field in Syria was new to the kind of controversy that surrounded *Qaṣr al-maṭar*—it was the first time in the country's modern history that a literary work received a heated religious or popular reaction. In a time when they were struggling to establish some sort of autonomy and to limit the authority that the political had had over the literary and the cultural, many Syrian intellectuals were rattled and troubled by the council's attempt to expand its power over the literary field. The majority of the country's writers, artists, and thinkers stood in solidarity with 'Azzām, casting the case as a new battle between freedom of expression and authoritarian powers, and drawing parallels between the council's reaction and state's censorship. Syrian intellectuals' courageous stand in support of 'Azzām is considered one of the first initiatives that characterized and catalyzed the Damascus Spring period. In his statement about 'Azzām's case, the author and journalist Ya'rub al-ʿĪsā presented the case as a battle that must be won. Losing was not an option, because it would allow the emergence of a new type of censorship in the country. “We should be aware that if we fail now,” he stated, “we are allowing the execution of many more intellectuals in the future by religious decrees.”⁴³⁹ Despite the council's and the state's reaction to *Qaṣr al-maṭar*, 'Azzām continued with his quest—he published *Jihāt al-janūb* (*The Directions of the South*) in 2000 and *Arḍ al-Kalām* (*Land of Words*) in 2005, both of which are set within the Druze community and contest the leveled and homogeneous image of the nation projected by the official discourse. *Qaṣr al-maṭar* was also followed by many novels from multiple authors that openly challenged established narratives and reconstructed the nation's history, memory, and power hierarchies.

This dissertation has focused on the historical moment that 'Azzām's case represents and from within which it emerged, the critical period from around the turn of the century up until the 2011 popular uprising, which mobilized people after decades of fear and silence. Collectively, the preceding chapters of this dissertation have tracked the emergence of subversive aesthetic engagements and practices within Syrian fiction, placing them within the larger context of a continuously evolving literary field that has always been engaged with the political, social, and cultural world around it. Here it is important to place my reading of this junction within recent scholarly discussions. Within the field of postcolonial literary studies, the notion of national narration has been at the heart of many debates and discussions. Caught between globalization on the one hand and ethnic or regional particularisms on the other, many scholars have emphasized the vanishing of the nation as a means of social transformation. They advocate the abandoning of

⁴³⁹ Ya'rub al-ʿĪsā, “Ṭāʾifah durziyyah tahdur damm al-kātib al-sūrī Mamdūh ʿAzzām,” *Al-Bawwābah*

the nation, a necessarily repressive construct, for the sake of post-national, trans-national, or cosmopolitan paradigms. This shift from nationalism to post-nationalism is symptomatic of a prevalent postcolonial trend that celebrates the post-national as a *fait accompli* and renders anticolonial nationalisms indistinguishable. The national paradigm is unfavorably opposed to the transnational, to border crossing, and to a post-national, hybrid, and globalized academic and social world.⁴⁴⁰ To think of experiences in national terms, where one could give a certain amount of fidelity and attention to basic national identities is pretty much over, Edward Said states.⁴⁴¹ Taking into consideration the ever increasing flow and movement of people across national borders either voluntary or under the pretext of internal unrest, Arjun Appadurai further suggests that “[w]e need to think beyond the nation,” for “as the ideological alibi of territorial state, it is the last refuge of ethnic totalitarianism.”⁴⁴²

Other scholars, however, continue to emphasize the relevance of the nation in the cultural production of the formerly colonized world. In “Nationalism: Irony and Commitment,” Terry Eagleton argues that “to wish class or nation away, to seek to live sheer irreducible difference *now* in the manner of some contemporary poststructuralist theory is to play straight into the hands of the oppressor.”⁴⁴³ Timothy Brennan also points out that “if one means by globalization the creation of new world subjects who are not bound by the laws and territorial limitations of locality or, indeed, are necessarily happy in their uprootedness, one is indulging in a fiction and is either missing the point or obscuring it.”⁴⁴⁴ For Brennan, the nation-state remains the linchpin of any attempt to counter the workings of transnational capitalism, since “any meaningful politics is still about the control of states,”⁴⁴⁵ and “cosmopolitanism worthy of the name ... would have to give space to the very nationalism the term is invoked to counter.”⁴⁴⁶ In the context of the Arab world, Anna Bernard argues that the lived realities of many peoples and communities pose a challenge to the constructed binary of nation-coercive/post-nation-liberational. Focusing on Palestinian-Israeli national narration, Bernard makes it clear that “our understanding of national narration is not exhausted, but rather left seriously incomplete, if we stop with Anglophone responses to mid-twentieth-century decolonization and its aftermath,” for “the idea of national narration as a literary strategy, process, and goal is even more in need of elaboration considering the 2011 uprisings in many Arab countries, all of which have been fought in the name of diverse ideas of the nation.”⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁰ See Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 7-8.

⁴⁴¹ Edward Said, “Criticism, Culture, and Performance: An Interview with Edward Said,” *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan, 1991), 40.

⁴⁴² Arjun Appadurai, “Patriotism and its Futures,” *Public Culture* 5, no. 3 (spring 1993), 411-412.

⁴⁴³ Terry Eagleton, “Nationalism: Irony and Commitment” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature: Terry Eagleton, Fredrick Jameson, Edward W. Said*, introduction by Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 23.

⁴⁴⁴ Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 220.

⁴⁴⁵ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 317.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁴⁷ Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging*, 8.

My reading of the pre-2011 Syrian novel points to an aspiration not to necessarily bypass the nation altogether. Rather, these new literary voices think beyond singular definitions and emphasize nuanced and fluid, yet distinct, conceptualizations of the nation. They strive to undo the political subjugation of the cultural that would produce hegemonic, exclusionary narratives of homogeneity. In other words, driven by post-ideological frameworks and no longer informed by the colonial condition, the pre 2011 Syrian novel attempts to unshackle the nation located in the nation-state construct and dislocate the belief that the state is the rational arbiter of conscious collective will. This consciousness further manifests through the slogans, banners, and chants that the protestors adopted during the first months of the 2011-uprising. Slogans such as “the Syrian people are one,” (*al-sha‘b al-sūrī wāḥid*) and “the Syrian people will not be humiliated” (*al-sha‘b al-sūrī mā-bi-yendhall*), dominated protests all around the country, making a public proclamation of “national” identity. While, as in Egypt, the Syrian protesters announced themselves as ‘the people,’ they anchored that announcement in unmistakable national terms, i.e., “the Syrian people,” which constituted, as Salwa Ismail argues, a performance of peoplehood and nationhood, in which the re-imagining of the nation was an imperative of envisioning a political community different from the one that had been nurtured by the current regime.⁴⁴⁸ This re-imagining reflects what Immanuel Wallerstein identifies as a fundamental break in the modern history of the world system, which, he suggests, was inaugurated in 1968 with worldwide protests against military and bureaucratic elites and intensified in the following decades. A disillusionment with the efficacy of transforming the world by altering its economic and political forms, Wallerstein argues,

has led many to see “culture” as an alternative arena in which at last human action might be efficacious ... Against the so-called objective pressures that are said to come from the politico-economic realm, the acolytes of culture assert the intrusion of human agency — as intrinsic possibility, as source of collective hope. The people are oppressed (by the state, that is), but the people (and/or the intelligentsia) have the power (and exercise the power) of forging their own destiny ... The concern with “culture” represents the search for ways out of the existing system, for ways out other than via the “classical” nostrums that seem to have failed.⁴⁴⁹

In his reading of oppositional movements in pre-2011 Egypt, Talal Asad identifies the development of what he terms “a democratic sensibility as an ethos” that has the potential to undermine “democracy as a state system.” The former, Asad explains, “involves the desire for mutual care, distress at the infliction of pain and indignity, concern for the truth more than for immutable subjective rights, the ability to listen and not merely to tell, and the willingness to evaluate behavior without being judgmental toward others; it tends toward greater *inclusivity*.”⁴⁵⁰ In the Syrian case, such an ethos manifests through not only the radical inclusivity that transpires on the pages of the Syrian novel and within the intellectual discourse that developed around the advent of the new millennium in Syria, but also through the oppositional activities that took place on the ground during the Damascus Spring, which brought together for the first time in the

⁴⁴⁸ Salwa Ismail, “The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2011, 542.

⁴⁴⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geocultures: Essays on the Changing World System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12.

⁴⁵⁰ Talal Asad, “Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics” *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 56.

country's recent history a variety of social elements—Christians and Muslims, both Sunni and heterodox, Islamists and secular liberals, men and women— all working against the authoritarian, neoliberal state.

In addition to the "Manifesto of the 99," and the "Manifesto of the 1,000," to give one example, the Muslim Brotherhood published the "National Honor Pact for Political Work" in May 2001, which sought to spark a dialogue between the movement and other opposition groups inside and outside Syria. The pact proposed a pluralistic vision that allows for the transfer of power by means of free elections and called for separation of powers, no discrimination among citizens, and equality between men and women.⁴⁵¹ What allowed for such dialogues to take place was a pervasive sense of outrage and a shared feeling that the situation had become unbearable. Asad's analysis of the plurality within the *Kifaya!* (Enough!) movement, which emerged in Egypt during the first years of the 21st-century, applies to the oppositional atmosphere that prevailed in Syria at the time. Asad argues that the outrage at the brutality and corruption of the Mubarak regime, which compelled different social elements to act, was not merely negative, for it provided a space of daily interaction and negotiation. The religiosity of Muslims involved in this movement, Asad remarks, "is characterized by a mode of being often inwardly unsettled yet outwardly civil. This religiosity seeks the cultivation of feelings tuned to mutual care within the community, and in that sense it can lay claim to a democratic ethos."⁴⁵²

However, as much as the pre-2011 Syrian novel can be read as an aesthetic anticipation of and an engagement in an inevitable change, it also embodies, as this dissertation has indicated, a deep anxiety about the fragility of the national bond constructed and imposed by the Ba'ath party's discourse and exclusionary practices. Facing a crisis of nationhood and well aware of the long history of inter-communal tensions and conflicts, which was first exploited by the colonial and imperialist powers to solidify their dominance in the region and later deepened by the contradictory ideologies and practices of the Ba'ath party, the pre-2011 novel emphasizes the hazards and complications of a shattered national self that is trapped between a publicly concealed, yet embodied and experienced, self—gender, religious, sectarian, or ethnic— and an imposed identity that is defined by an external discourse through an identification with a national construct that simultaneously denies the authentic self its existence. This very reimagining of a complex self and a nuanced cultural space, where multiple identities and embodied practices overlap, underscores an urgent need for a reconsideration of the meanings and implications of notions such as citizenship, loyalty, and belonging in Syria. This reconsideration will unearth, identify, and address the underlying forces that produced the fissures and fractures in Syria's national façade, and perhaps it can also help us better understand how to create more sustainable architectures.

⁴⁵¹ See Yehuda U. Blanga, "The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War," Middle East Policy Council Vol. xxiv, no. 3, fall 2017, 48-69.

⁴⁵² Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics," 56.

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