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Left Behind: Literature and Left Critique in Neoliberal Egypt

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Left Behind: Literature and Left Critique in Neoliberal Egypt

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

by

Brady Ryan

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Nouri Gana, Chair

Left Behind: Literature and Left Critique in Neoliberal Egypt traces trajectories of the Left literary critique of neoliberalism in Egypt from the aftermath of Nasser's imprisonment of the communists in 1959-64 and the 1967 defeat to Israel, through the present aftermath of the 2011 Revolution. I contend that despite the 1967 defeat and the Left's political capitulations, disillusionment, and rents that emerged in its fallout, the literary Left has remained a force for engagement. Its approach shifted from literary forms of political commitment (iltizām) – rooted in socialism and national liberation, but also tied to the Nasserist state – to forms of Left literary critique marked by alienation, Marxism, and innovative literary aesthetics. I extend the lineage of Left literary critique from the Sixties Generation's New Sensibility (Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm), through the rightward swing of infitāḥ (Arwa Ṣāliḥ), and to the consolidation of the postrevolutionary neoliberal order (Nādiya Kāmil and Muḥammad Rabīʿ). I am primarily concerned with gendered

aesthetic and epistemological aspects of the literature of iltizām and its legacies in the neoliberal era. Specifically, I refer here to sexual-political symbolism, gendered affect, and modes of reading and critique that were produced during the hegemony of the Nasser era. The authors I examine deform, intensify, reroute and reject these aesthetic aspects of iltizām as central components of their critiques of neoliberalism.

My attention to the symbolism and aesthetics of these literary critiques of neoliberalism is grounded in a concern for sex and gender: gendered affect, sexual-political symbolism, and gendered language and literary forms. This is a divergence from dominant scholarly approaches to iltizām and its legacies, which are articulated largely in terms of literary theory and political critique. While I engage this scholarship and these aspects of iltizām's literary and intellectual history, my focus on aesthetics and symbolism is important because they are among the most enduring aspects of iltizām in the literature of the neoliberal era and in modes of reading Arabic literature broadly speaking. The critical literary works discussed in *Left Behind* are marked by exhausted and grotesque aesthetics (Ibrāhīm, Rabīʿ), analytical rigor and principled despair (Ṣāliḥ), and reanimated and reframed past political commitments (Kāmil). These aesthetic, methodological, and formal aspects direct our authors' literary critiques of neoliberalism Egypt. Together they form the contours of the Left literary critique of neoliberalism in Egypt.

The dissertation of Brady Ryan is approved.

Hosam Aboul-Ela

Stephanie Frances Bosch

Eleanor K. Kaufman

Samah Selim

Nouri Gana, Committee Chair

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2022

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Arabic are my own. When available, I have used existing English translations. On several occasions I have altered these translations and noted this in the footnotes. I have chosen to cite the original Arabic alongside the English translation, whether my own or a previously published one. Arabic words and names have been transliterated using the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system. I have striven to transliterate Egyptian Arabic in a way that is largely faithful to this system and the phonetics of spoken Egyptian Arabic, e.g., khawāga instead of khawāja.

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I wish to thank those friends and colleagues who made my time in Los Angeles enjoyable and supported me intellectually and socially. Molly Courtney has been with me every step of the way. I am grateful for her enduring friendship and scholarly perspective. Vipin Krishna has been a dear friend, thoughtful and kind – a rare combination. I owe Samar Nattagh thanks for her friendship and for teaching me the link between Marxism and aesthetics. I am grateful to Anita Vukovic for her heart and intellect. Los Angeles would have been lonelier without Sumita Mitra, Saad Shaukat, Azeem Malik, Justin Absher, and Sonali Abraham.

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Introduction

Left Behind: Neoliberal Egypt and Literary Critique

Left Behind traces trajectories of Left literary critique of neoliberalism in Egypt. This intellectual history is situated within the political and economic history of the fall of the Egyptian Left, which took place after the collapse of Nasser's socialism and Sadat's neoliberal turn. First, the mass arrest, torture, and imprisonment of communists in 1959-64 effectively eliminated independent Leftist opposition to Nasser's consolidation of power. This was reinforced by the state's near monopoly on the institutions of cultural production, including publishing and film. Therefore, when Nasserism collapsed with Egypt's 1967 defeat to Israel, there was little by way of an organized and independent political Left. Second, as the Left was soul searching in the aftermath of the defeat, Sadat, riding a nationalist wave following his liberation of Sinai in 1973, pivoted from socialism to infitāḥ – the neoliberal opening – pushing Egypt into the capitalists' Cold-War camp. This was the beginning of Neoliberal Egypt. Neoliberalism in Egypt is marked by the state's retreat from the public sector, which under Nasser had lifted millions into the middle class through land reform, public education, and investment in industry and jobs. Neoliberalism in Egypt has relied on policies of divestment from industry, education, health, and public services; privatization and foreign capital investment; 'structural adjustment' in exchange for IMF loans; and dependence upon US agricultural and military aid. Infitāḥ caused massive economic pain for the masses, sparking the 1977 Bread Riots against IMF-led neoliberal restructuring. The neoliberal turn left swaths of the Egyptian public in need of social services. A cadre of Islamist businessmen, whom Sadat supported to act as a political counterweight to

Leftists, got rich off investments they made following infitāḥ.[1] This put the Muslim Brotherhood in a position to provide the very social services the state had abandoned, propelling the Brotherhood's growing influence and political power. Thus, infitāḥ created the opening and means for the Muslim Brotherhood to develop institutional, cultural, and ideological autonomy from the state and expand its cultural and political influence with the public.[2] These neoliberal policies succeeded the defeat of Nasserism and were begun under Sadat, consolidated under Mubarak, and intensified under al-Sisi. The inequalities of Neoliberal Egypt and the police state upholding them sparked the Kifāya Movement's calls for genuine democracy in 2004-05 and pushed Egyptians to revolt en masse in 2011 in the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution. Despite this, under al-Sisi's postrevolutionary military regime, neoliberalism has only intensified in severity and violence. That today's Egypt is (still) a police state with tens of thousands of political prisoners behind bars has further constricted the space for cultural and political critique of the state's neoliberalism.[3] Though political despair marks virtually every juncture of Neoliberal Egypt's history and though socialism has largely been left behind, a literary critique of neoliberalism persists. This persistent literary critique is the subject of *Left Behind*.

While the Left may have largely capitulated to neoliberalism in the political realm (to the point that 'the Egyptian Left' lacks a clear referent in contemporary politics), a striking number of authors in Neoliberal Egypt make up a cultural or literary Left - Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, Salwa Bakr, Ahdaf Soueif, Raḍwa ʿĀshūr, Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, Aḥmad Fuʾād Nijm, and ʿAlāʾ al-Aswānī may

[1] Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony*, The Global Middle East 14 (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 186.

[2] Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2008), 24.

[3] "Egypt: Little Truth in Al-Sisi's '60 Minutes' Responses," *Human Rights Watch*, January 7, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/07/egypt-little-truth-al-sisis-60-minutes-responses#.

be among the most prominent authors of this literary Left, but they are by no means the only ones. In telling the story of the literary critique of neoliberalism, I push back against the notion that when the literary forms of socialist and nationalist commitment (iltizām) largely collapsed in the wake of 1967 they only gave way to disillusionment, disaffection, and neoliberal identity politics. Instead, I trace how the aesthetics and symbols of iltizām live on in the neoliberal era. How do these particularly gendered aspects of iltizām shift from animating literary forms of commitment to animating literary forms of critique? How do they further critiques of neoliberalism in particular? By addressing these questions, *Left Behind* acts as a history of iltizām's critical afterlives. Iltizām's formal, aesthetic, and political shift toward Edward Said's notion of secular criticism – engaged in the world, oppositional, and conditioned by alienation and displacement – demands theorization as a critical literary response to the massive neoliberalizing changes to Egyptian political economy and public culture that were foreshadowed with Nasser's imprisonment of the communists in 1959-1964, began in earnest with Sadat's infitāḥ, and continue in the present.[4] This is *Left Behind*'s objective.

Inspired by recent studies of Arabic literature, especially of the Nahḍa period, that center the relationship between political economy and literature, *Left Behind* turns to the last half-century of Egyptian literature as belonging to the era of neoliberalism.[5] The broad strokes of Egyptian literature and culture in the neoliberal era are well documented: the post-1967 New

[4] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1–30.

[5] For example: Elizabeth M. Holt, *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of Al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2012): 269–98, https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341244.

Sensibility's aesthetic and symbolic revolution,[6] the Nineties Generation's narrative experimentation and shift toward depoliticized social or personal-is-political frames,[7] the mainstreaming of literature inflected by feminism and issues of religious identity,[8] and post-2011 trends toward despair and dystopia.[9] These trends primarily emphasize how literature has developed according to neoliberal logic. *Left Behind* chronicles literary countertrends that critique neoliberalism and reframes these dominant literary trends in terms of neoliberalism and its critics. My interest lies in how Left literary critique persists through the present despite the ways neoliberal cultural and literary trends have rerouted class politics through identity-political discourses of feminism and secularism vs. Islamism. Without ignoring how religion and gender have developed within the cultural logic of neoliberalism and Egypt's political context of neopatriarchal authoritarianism, I am primarily interested in how the works examined in *Left Behind* step outside the discursive boundaries of identity politics to mount their critique.[10] Our

[6] See: Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993); Sabry Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7 (1976): 68–84; Yasmine Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2012): 409–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341242.

[7] Sabry Hafez, "The New Egyptian Novel: Urban Transformation and Narrative Form," *New Left Review*, no. 64 (August 2010): 46–62.

[8] See: Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 189–91; Hoda El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*, 1st ed (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 145–64; Mary Youssef, *Minorities in the Contemporary Egyptian Novel*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[9] See : Theresa Pepe, "Aḥmad Nājī's Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (Using Life) as 'Critical Dystopia,'" in *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL), May 2016, Oslo*, ed. Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019); Walaa' Said, "Dystopianizing the 'Revolution': Muḥammad Rabīʿ's ʿUṭārid (2015)," in *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL), May 2016, Oslo*, ed. Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019); Yasmine Seale, "After the Revolution: Three Novels of Egypt's Repressive Present," *Harper's*, January 2018.

[10] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

authors engage gendered language (Kāmil) and gendered critical methods (Ṣāliḥ) to stage their historical and political critiques; others (Ibrāhīm and Rabīʿ) deform the sexual symbolism central to the literature of iltizām and draw on affects of disgust and exhaustion to make their political critiques.

Umm al-dunyā: Particularities of an Egyptian Study

The account of intellectual history, literary aesthetics, and politics I put forth in *Left Behind* centers around interrogating Egyptian literary critiques of neoliberalism. My focus on Egyptian literature allows me to keep the study grounded in Egypt's political and cultural history. There are several aspects that make Egypt's political and cultural context unique in ways pertinent to how we might situate it in relation to the other Arab states and Arabic literatures, namely Nasser's central role in pan-Arabism/Arab Nationalism (al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya), Egypt's state-cultural apparatus, Egypt's shifting relationship with Israel, and the politically dominant role of Egypt's military. This study begins at the close of the Nasser era, but Nasser's mark on Egyptian politics and culture far outlasts his life. For the Left in particular, Nasser's shadow is immense. One aspect of the Nasser era is how Egypt's cultural and political stature, highly centralized around Cairo, was self-consciously and almost inherently pan-Arab. Nasser was Egypt's leader (zaʿīm) and the leader of the Arabs. His voice was broadcast from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf (min al-muḥīṭ ilā al-khalīj) as *Sawt al-ʿarab* (The Voice of the Arabs). Egypt's cultural production – cinema and music, especially – made the Cairene vernacular of Umm Kulthūm and ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ the language of a pan-Arab golden era that still dominates popular culture in a way that has not been matched since. That the Nile valley's metropolis might speak not only to the Egyptian hinterlands but also the broader

community of Arabs is a hallmark of intellectuals' and artists' sincere belief in the vanguard political potential of their art, writing, and public culture. In this way, Nasser's larger-than-life figure and the equally grand ambitions of Egypt's (i.e., Cairo's) cultural scene are fundamental components of iltizām's intellectual and cultural histories.

The lineage of iltizām's critical afterlives and Left literary critique in *Left Behind* coincides with the collapse of the grand pan-Arab political and cultural ambitions for Egypt's artists and intellectuals. This contraction of the political stakes of Egyptian literature and culture – which were both national yet looked beyond the nation – is certainly an effect of the 1967 defeat and infitāḥ. Egypt's fall from its place (justly conceived or not) at the vanguard of Arab culture and politics is even clearer in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. As Roger Allen has argued, the assumptions that once maintained modern Arabic literature together as a singular field may no longer hold in the wake of the Arab Uprisings.[11] The uneven outcomes of mass protests, revolutions, and civil wars across the Arab world have compounded the already divergent political economies and cultural directions of the Arab states. This has direct implications for how we approach Egyptian and Arabic literatures in the neoliberal era. While one could arguably conduct a study of the literary Left's critiques of neoliberalism in any number of Arab states, especially the once-socialist republics of Algeria, Iraq, Tunisia, and Syria, I focus on Egypt because of the intensity of its swing from revolutionary socialism to neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, given the country's political and cultural role as a regional leader in the Nasser era, the fracturing of Arab cultural production is inextricably linked to Egypt's post-Nasser neoliberal trajectory. It is precisely because of Egypt's history of Leftist pan-Arab politics

[11] Roger Allen, "The End of the Nahḍah?," in *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL), May 2016, Oslo*, ed. Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019), 3.

and intense neoliberal policy – and a robust and growing canon of literary works that touch on these historical trends – that make the Egyptian case so revealing.

A second particularity of the Egyptian case is Egypt's changing relationship with Israel as a defining aspect of Egyptian nationalism and – to the extent that nationalism is a major current of Leftist politics – the Egyptian Left. The inauguration of Egypt's neoliberal era is marked by war with Israel: the 1967 June War and the 1973 October War, which paved the way for infitāḥ. The 1971-72 Student Movement's calls for war with Israel were themselves sparked by Israel's occupation of the Sinai, seen as a fundamental affront to Egypt's national sovereignty just a generation removed from the Suez Crisis / Tripartite Aggression (al-ʿudwān al-thulāthī). Moreover, Sadat's infitāḥ was not just an economic pivot, but a geopolitical one. The context was undoubtedly the Cold War, but the shift to the American capitalists' camp also entailed major concessions to Israel, most notably the 1978 Camp David Accords. All the authors studied in *Left Behind* are shaped in no small part by the Israeli specter upon Egyptian politics: Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm in his account of 1967 in *67*; Arwa Ṣāliḥ for her role in the Student Movement and in her critique of nationalism and "post-nationalist nihilism" (ʿadamiyya waṭaniyya);[12] Nādiya Kāmil in Marie's Jewish roots, Palestinian grandson, and Leftist politics caught in between; and Muḥammad Rabīʿ in the specter of foreign military occupation.

Another aspect of Egypt's cultural politics which must be considered in relation to literary critique is the dominance of its state-cultural apparatus. Samia Mehrez traces the state-cultural apparatus back to Egypt's relatively long history (since Muḥammad ʿAlī) of a modern,

[12] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn: dafātir wāḥida min jīl al-ḥaraka al-ṭullābiyya*, al-ṭabʿa al-ūlā (al-Duqqī: Dār al-nahr li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1996), 8.

centralized state.[13] The state has historically depended upon a cadre of educated bureaucrats, who are in turn dependent upon jobs in state bureaucracies. After the Free Officers' Coup of 1952, many of the institutions of cultural production – publishing houses, journals, newspapers, production companies, etc. – were nationalized by the state. Moreover, the Ministry of Culture provided direct government employment for the intellectual and creative classes. These Nasser-era changes to the political economy of cultural production were central to the cultural hegemony of the time and the alliance between the state and writers, intellectuals, and artists. Yasmine Ramadan traces the emergence of the Sixties Generation to young writers rebelling against institutional barriers to entry into the state-dominated cultural and literary scenes of the late Nasser era.[14] The break from state-backed cultural institutions and publishing houses is a line of continuity we can trace through the writers in *Left Behind*'s lineage of Left literary critique. Indeed, these writers are on the margins of Egypt's dominant cultural scene. Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's independence as an author is a remarkable feat and adds to the credibility of his literary and political critiques.[15] Arwa Ṣāliḥ, for her part, writes from the margins of the Left. As a result, much of her writing was never published. Nādiya Kāmil is an independent filmmaker by profession. These writers' position on the margins of the Egyptian cultural mainstream is part and parcel of their oppositional critical position and the counter-current nature of their literary lineage.

[13] Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies 13 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

[14] Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization."

[15] On the relationship between Ibrāhīm's institutional positionality, publishing, and literary critique, see: Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars*; Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction: Sssays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal al-Ghitani* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994).

The last important particularity of the Egyptian case is the military's authoritarian rule and domination of the economy. Egypt's military rule is stitched into the fabric of neoliberalism in Egypt. This is an even more salient and problematic feature of Egyptian cultural politics when we consider the reach of the state-cultural apparatus, discussed above. As numerous scholars of neoliberalism have argued, security states and authoritarian regimes are often a feature – not an aberration – of the neoliberal order.[16] The severity of Egyptian authoritarianism and military rule underscores the violence needed to enforce boundaries of political participation and enact unpopular economic measures. Furthermore, given the military's increasing dominance of Egyptian political economy, the Egyptian literary critique of neoliberalism has often entailed revising, re-imagining, and rerouting the literary and rhetorical symbols of the nation and national belonging, chief among them the military-led state.

The distinct characteristics of neoliberalism and literary culture in Egypt – Egypt's centrality to pan-Arabism/Arab Nationalism, the looming figure of Israel, the state-cultural apparatus, and the military's authoritarian hold on political and economic power – make Egypt a site from which key political and theoretical concepts can be reimagined and critiqued. I mean that *Left Behind*'s lineage of Left literary critique also implicates and critiques core figures in the political, cultural, and intellectual histories of the modern Arab world such as the nation and nationalism, the state and its cultural apparatus, and the military's centrality to political and economic power. These figures are central concerns of our authors. As such, examining them within the frame of neoliberalism and literary critique is a primary ambition of *Left Behind*.

[16] See: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Timothy Mitchell, "Dreamland," in *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, ed. Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (New York: New Press, 2007), 1–33; Paul Amar, *The Security Archipelago ; Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*, Social Text Books (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation: The Army, Business, and Revolution in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Despite these particularities of the Egyptian case, there is reason why a focus on Egypt is well suited for comparison. My approach to literature at the intersection of history, aesthetics, and politics should resonate with scholarship on neoliberalism and the global Left, postcolonial and Marxist criticism, and emerging artistic and cultural trends like Afrofuturism and accelerationism. Furthermore, this study's weight extends beyond the immediate Egyptian context because of the near universality of the neoliberal order, the marginality of the global Left since at least 1989 and the premature declaration of 'the end of history,' and the ongoing global search for aesthetic and cultural forms to critique capitalism and confront the daunting crises it has produced.[17] The political marginality of the Egyptian Left speaks to this global context and invites comparison between the forms of literary critique explored in *Left Behind* and those forms and aesthetics from other historical-cultural contexts and literary traditions. The grounds for comparison with literatures from the Global South are particularly fertile because of shared historical links between socialism, national liberation movements, the return of the 'colonial international' through neoliberal/neocolonial economic and geopolitical institutions like the IMF and World Bank, US military dominance, and militarized regimes allied with an internationally mobile financial elite.[18]

Defining Neoliberalism in Egypt

Neoliberalism is often understood in political-economic and ideological terms. Steven Shaviro sees neoliberalism as a mode of capitalist production (drawing on Marx) hand in hand

[17] Francis Fukayama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.

[18] Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt*.

with specific forms of governmentality (drawing on Foucault).[19] Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro elaborate further, writing,

> Features of neoliberalism include state deregulation of markets, privatization, and anti-labour and social welfare strategies; the ascendancy of finance capital; the renewed imperialism of law-and-order schemes on the global level (as in the endless "war on terror") and in domestic arenas (as with the creation of a prison industrial complex); the elite project of wealth redistribution through new forms of ecological enclosure and accumulation via dispossession; the proliferation of metrics that spur competition in new realms of social life and administrative oversight; the exploitation of crises and disasters to force the imposition of austerity and structural adjustment; the increased biopolitical control of individuals by the state; the redefinition of individuals as quantums of human capital rather than subjects of interior development or political representation; the deployment of mass personal debt in ways little foreseen by prior macroeconomics; and the emergence of new algorithmic technologies of surveillance and financialization that have penetrated everyday life.[20]

Theirs is an expansive account of neoliberalism's political-economic and social force. I wish to highlight an implicit ideological thrust of neoliberalism that is related to the project of subsuming the totality of life to market logic. This ideological aspect of neoliberalism is the assertion – sometimes overt, sometimes implicit – that there is no alternative to capitalist production or culture. Such an assertion is accompanied paradoxically with the state's imperative to safeguard financial institutions, markets, and property rights above all other political concerns and constituencies, e.g., labor, environment, social solidarity, etc. Because of these imperatives, neoliberalism has anti-democratic tendencies in theory and practice.[21]

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[19] Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 10.

[20] Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro, *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent* (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2019), 2.

[21] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 66.

Neoliberalism in Egypt reflects the above descriptions to a large degree, but any account of Egypt's political economy must squarely address the role of the military. The military has ruled Egypt (but for a brief government of Muslim Brothers) since the Free Officers Coup of 1952. Since the 1990s, the military has become increasingly invested – financially and politically – in the ongoing project of further neoliberalizing the economy, giving way to a cadre of those Zeinab Abul-Magd calls "neoliberal officers" with tremendous wealth.[22] The wealth of the oligarchical officer-capitalist class is derived from extracting and selling off natural resources, securing government contracts and monopolies, and attracting foreign aid and investment.[23] These economic activities primarily or exclusively serve the rich and generate few jobs. This has entrenched the military in every corner of the economy and allied its interests with the civilian capitalist class who benefit from pro-investment and deregulatory neoliberal policy. The rise of the military as an oligarchical economic and political force in Egypt must be considered in tandem with the wider push toward neoliberalism, for the two reinforce each other.

The implications of this link between the economic rise of the military and neoliberalism are grim when we consider the political repression integral to both. Timothy Mitchell argues that neoliberalism requires violence and repression – because it is anti-democratic and against workers' and peasants' interests – on a scale that only a militarized state can deliver.[24] Therefore, authoritarian repression and state violence must be integral components of our conception of neoliberalism in Egypt. Some may point to Nasser's authoritarianism as evidence that state violence predates infitāḥ, which I view as beginning the neoliberal turn in Egypt, and they are

[22] Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation*, 72.

[23] Mitchell, "Dreamland."

[24] Mitchell.

not wrong. But even Nasser's violence was directed at radical labor activists and communists.[25] Authoritarian military rule has been uniquely instrumental in initiating, consolidating, and intensifying neoliberalism in Egypt. Indeed, the nationalist prestige of military victory paved the way for neoliberalism: Sadat's infitāḥ was pursued on the coattails of the liberation of Sinai in 1973. The United States has since provided billions of dollars in aid to the Egyptian military in exchange for neoliberal reforms and amenable relations with Israel. And dissent towards the economic hardships of neoliberal policy – from the 1977 Bread Riots in response to termination of state subsidies for basic commodities, to civil society organizing against the military's privatization of public spaces under al-Sisi – have been routinely crushed by the state security apparatus.[26] While there are neoliberal states without authoritarian regimes, Neoliberal Egypt as it has developed and exists at present cannot be conceived without the economic and political dominance of the military and its continual threat of violence and imprisonment against those who imagine an alternative political economy or dare to cross the ideological boundaries of the police state. By highlighting military authoritarianism in this account of neoliberalism in Egypt, I am not suggesting that the two are the same. They are, however, inseparable as a matter of political economy and public culture.

Theorists of neoliberalism point to how neoliberalism destroys social solidarity by subsuming all aspects of life to the market in search of profits everywhere. This leads to a need to reconstitute social bonds in new, alternative ways. David Harvey argues that this impulse has

[25] The executions of labor leaders in Kafr Dawwār in 1953 and longstanding persecution of communists are case and point.

[26] See, for example: "Kūrnīsh al-iskandariyya: bayna al-khaṣkhaṣa wa ḥaqq al-ruʾiyya" (al-Insān wa-l-madīna li-l-abḥāth al-insāniyya wa-l-ijtimāʿiyya, 2020).

revived religion, morality, and nationalism as sources of identity and belonging.[27] The argument goes: neoliberalism threatens to give way to forms of populism that might threaten the very class interests and market logic neoliberal policies protect. The need to head off such populist reactions explains, in part, why the Egyptian state defends its neoliberal authoritarianism through conservative appeals to nationalism, morality, and religion. This was made famous by Sadat, who promoted moral conservatism, only to be outflanked by the Islamists he backed in a bid to weaken the Left. Statist appeals to religious morality, the patriarchal family, and national unity have not abetted. Therefore, we might view the social dynamics of the Egyptian state's neoliberalism less in terms of the discourse of individual freedoms that have come to justify economic inequality in the United States especially, and more plainly as a form of "neoconservative militarized nationalism," to borrow Harvey's language.[28] The state's position as protector of nation, family, and religious morality – the boundaries between these concepts seem to collapse as social ties fray under the neoliberal onslaught and the rise of austere Islamism – allows it to strategically frame dissent as an intimate threat. In such a frame, it is not the state's neoliberal policies that threaten society's ties of solidarity and mutual belonging, but any who would challenge the military's authoritarian rule and conservative moral projections.

From this description of neoliberalism in Egypt, it should be clear that the trajectory of Left literary critique traced in *Left Behind* stands in stark contrast to the cultural conservatism of the state and the fundamentally religious nature of Egypt's mass political movements (the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis). The gulf between the Left's prominence in Egypt's literary

[27] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 81.

[28] Harvey, 86.

scene and its removal from the politics of the masses is perhaps especially extreme and visible given the nature of Egypt's political economy: extreme centralization around Cairo, masses of peasants and urban poor, and the polarizing and chilling effects of military rule. Yet this disconnect between (Leftist) intellectuals and the masses is a shared feature of Arab – not just Egyptian – cultural politics in the neoliberal era. As Elliott Colla points out, the alienation of the Egyptian Left's intellectual tradition from actual mass political movements has produced a literary lineage of critique increasingly skeptical – especially since 2013 – of the possibilities of revolution, emancipation, or justice.[29] Ayman El-Desouky has framed this situation as a dilemma – with roots in Nasserism's enduring discursive construct of the people (al-shaʿb)[30] and that of the peasant (al-fallāḥ)[31] before that – wherein the intellectual speaks the people's truth to them, yet communication fails.[32] For El-Desouky, this failure to communicate across classes is an issue of amāra, a distinctly Egyptian term which he defines not as an issue of authority or representation (dominant ways of framing the role of intellectuals) but of speaking to shared social conditions in an idiom that resonates with shared cultural memories, experiences, and sentiments.[33] Thus the breakdown of communication between Leftist intellectuals and the people is, in essence, due to severe social, economic, and cultural fragmentation, which I view as

[29] Elliott Colla, "Revolution on Ice," *Jadaliyya* (blog), January 6, 2014, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30039/Revolution-on-Ice.

[30] See: Sharīf Yūnis, *Nidāʾ al-shaʿb: tārikh naqdī li-l-aydiyūlūjiyā al-nāṣiriyya*, al-ṭabʿa al-ūlā (Cairo: Dār al-shurūq, 2012).

[31] See: Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, RoutledgeCurzon Studies in Arabic and Middle-Eastern Literature (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

[32] Ayman Ahmed El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution*, Palgrave Pivot (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 33–34.

[33] El-Desouky, 107.

symptomatic of the severity of neoliberalism in Egypt. This impasse is a major reason why I turn to the Egyptian literary Left. Thinking beyond the false dichotomy of military-backed neoliberalism and political Islam is imperative; despite its political defeats, the Left articulates the only clear critique of the state's authoritarian neoliberalism that does not rest on retrograde cultural conservatism and religious ideology.

A Left Literary History

The Egyptian Left's close relationship to literature and culture is not new. It emerged out of historical and political-economic change, particularly the postwar shift from bourgeois liberalism to the revolutionary socialism that would bring the Free Officers to power. The relationship between the Egyptian Left and Arabic letters coalesced in earnest with the postwar generation of writers like Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Luṭfī al-Khūlī, Najīb Maḥfūẓ, Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, Fatḥī Ghānim, Yūsuf Idrīs, ʿabd al-Rahmān al-Sharqāwī, et al. The anticolonial politics of this generation were radicalized by the experiences of the war, occupation, a collapsing economy, labor and peasant unrest, and the partition of Palestine and formation of the state of Israel. For these reasons, this generation of writers saw socialism as central to national liberation.[34] Notably, these writers differed starkly from the pioneers of modern Egyptian literature such as Taha Ḥusayn and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm who were notably bourgeois, classically liberal, and the products of European education. The more politicized postwar generation began a trend of writers emerging from the middle and lower classes, studying in Egyptian educational institutions, and viewing literature as inextricably linked to the political crises facing the Egyptian nation. With the Free Officers' Coup in 1952, the expansion of free public education, and the growing

[34] Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, 135.

hegemony of Nasser's Arab Nationalism, the demographic and political trends that had formed the relationship between literature, the Left, and – increasingly – the state accelerated through the 1950s and early 1960s. It was during these decades that the Left wielded political influence either as participants in Nasser's cultural apparatus or as independent (though often allied) critics from within the socialist fold. During the Nasser era, the state nationalized and founded presses, literary and cultural institutions, and various organs of cultural production, monopolizing the cultural sphere and molding it to fit its socialist agenda. As a result, literature was not just linked politically to the Left, but to the state. This would prove catastrophic for the Left in the long run, hampering its ability to articulate a salient critique of infitāḥ and neoliberalism.

The collapse of Arab Nationalism and the alienation of the independent Egyptian Left – first with Nasser's mass arrests of communists in 1959 and then in the wake of the shocking 1967 defeat to Israel – mark the unravelling of progressive time in modern Arab politics and culture. By 'progressive time' I mean the logic of linear narration and personal development underlying the bildungsroman as well as the sense of historical time inherent in discourses of progress, development, and socialist future-building.[35] This progressive time sees its fullest manifestation in the socialist-realist fiction of the anticolonial nationalist era and the revolutionary political projects of national liberation, socialism, and nation building in the 1950s and 1960s. Classic literary examples include ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Arḍ* (The Earth, 1954), Najīb Maḥfūẓ's *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-57) and Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* (The Open Door, 1960), all characterized by national allegory. This was precisely the era in which

[35] Fayṣal Darrāj calls this broad phenomenon, the novel of progress (riwāyat al-taqaddum). See: Fayṣal Darrāj, Riwāyat al-taqaddum wa-ightirāb al-mustaqbal: taḥawwulāt al-ruʾiya fī al-riwāya al-ʿarabiyya (Beirut: al-Ādāb, 2010).

iltizām was being theorized, and when its aesthetics and symbols were profoundly shaped by ongoing innovations in realist narrative forms. The 1967 defeat disrupted this political-aesthetic project because it cast doubt upon the promised future of socialist development and national liberation upon which the temporal logics of Arab Nationalism and committed realism rested. This breakdown introduced a new, fractured, and less linear sense of time to Arabic literature.[36] The centrality of time to the historical-political and aesthetic transformations in modern Arabic literary form cannot be overstated. This is reflected in the logic of progressive time in Nahḍāwī writings on historical and cultural development, backwardness and modernity, economic and political progress, etc.[37] Theorizing time at the intersection of the historical-political and the cultural-aesthetic is not limited to the Nahḍa period. Time is especially prominent in the Arab cultural and literary criticism that has emerged since 1967 including the writings of Ilyās Khūrī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf, Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Adūnīs, and Abdallah Laroui, who all theorize time at the intersection of politics, history, the challenge of modernity, and literary aesthetics.[38]

The breakdown of progressive time gave way to deformed and degenerate sexual-political symbols, which were culture-wide and not limited to literature or Egypt alone. For example, Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid discusses his generation's coming of age in the

[36] Sabry Hafez, "The Transformation of Reality and The Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 57, no. 1 (1994): 93–22.

[37] See: On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of Al-Nahḍah."

[38] Ilyās Khūrī, *Tajribat al-baḥth ʿan ufuq: muqaddima li-dirāsat al-riwāya al-ʿarabiyya baʿd al-hazīma* (Beirut: munaẓẓamat al-taḥrīr al-filiasṭīniyya markaz al-abḥāth, 1974); Ilyās Khūrī, *Zaman al-iḥtilāl* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-abḥāth al-ʿarabiyya); Ilyās Khūrī, *al-Dhākira al-mafqūda: dirāsāt naqdiyya* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-abḥāth al-ʿarabiyya, 1982); ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf, Dhākira li-l-mustaqbal (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-nashr, 2001); Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993); Adūnīs, al-Thābit wa-l-mutaḥawwil: baḥth fī al-itbāʿ wa-l-ibdāʿ ʿand al-ʿarab, al-ṭabʿa al-ūlā, vol. 3 Ṣadmat al-ḥadātha (Beirut: Dār al-ʿawda, 1978); Abdallah Laroui, *L'idéologie Arabe Contemporaine: Essai Critique*, Ed. rev. 1977, Textes à l'appui (Paris: F. Maspero, 1977).

shadow of the 1967 defeat as ushering in a "defeat-conscious cinema" whose gender roles are not idealized constructs of victorious masculinity and virtuous feminine motherhood but emerge from the reality of political defeat.[39] Bouzid writes on cinema, but the defeat's effect upon literature was similarly profound. It brought about numerous literary examples of sexual-political symbolism revolving about sexual abuse and rape, impotence, dishonor, and degeneracy including in the literature of Yūsuf Idrīs (*Abū al-rijāl*, 1987), Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (*Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 1966; *Sharaf*, 1997; et. al) Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (*Waqāʾiʿ ḥārat al-zaʿfarānī*, 1976), and Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Majīd (*Bayt al-yasmīn*, 1986).[40] It is at this breaking point and breakthrough at the intersection of temporality and sexual-political symbolism that *Left Behind* begins.

Aesthetics of Literary Critiques of Neoliberalism

The collapse of progressive time is the substrate in which the shifts in sexual-political symbolism and affective intensity that run through *Left Behind*'s genealogy of literary critique occur. Intertwined, progressive time and sex punctuate the major junctures in the history of Arabic literary form, from Nahḍāwī modernism, through the independence-era bildungsroman and the committed realism of Arab Nationalism, to the collapse of the progressive temporal and symbolic order in the wake of the 1967 defeat. *Left Behind* extends this lineage from the collapse of committed realism and the New Sensibility of the Sixties Generation (Ibrāhīm), through the rightward swing of infitāḥ (Ṣāliḥ), to the consolidation of the postrevolutionary neoliberal order (Kāmil and Rabīʿ). The deformed sexual-political symbolism of the Sixties Generation is

[39] Nouri Bouzid, "New Realism in Arab Cinema: The Defeat-Conscious Cinema," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 15, Arab Cinematics: Toward the New and the Alternative (1995): 242–50.

[40] Joseph Andoni Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

alternately intensified and rejected in neoliberalism's consolidation. On the one hand, sex remains a potent way to animate injustice and corruption, though in postrevolutionary Egypt this demands increasingly violent and grotesque symbolic representations (Rabīʿ) to register as political critique and not mere realism. On the other hand, sex and gender are increasingly the stakes – not merely signifiers – of politics. Women's lives and bodies are politically contested as such, often making symbolism superfluous or ineffective. In this context, gendered language, gendered affect, and gendered critical approaches drive innovative and profound literary critiques of neoliberalism, its politics and cultural history (Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil).

Both these trajectories grow out of the crisis of progressive time's unravelling. The severed link between socialist politics and futurity has redirected the temporal logic of literary critique. The unshakable neoliberal present – unshakable because politics no longer imagines a remade (socialist) future and because economic policies trap the future in the present order through debt and dependency – intensifies affect in art and literature (Ibrāhīm and Rabīʿ). As such, he neoliberal present remains so intransigent that imagining a would-be break with it results only in representing its horrific intensification (Rabīʿ). The past, though, has offered the literary Left a way of escape. Past political ideals, utopian projects, and communal formations have provided a source of hope and inspiration for a contemporary moment marked by revolutionary failure and an intransigent neoliberal military dictatorship that virulently suppresses dissent. In such a reality, the past – not as a nostalgic escape, but as the object of critique, memory, and mourning – serves the present by offering the possibility to again reimagine politics and rediscover hope (Kāmil). But this is not universal. The past – past politics, past idealized forms, and past selves – is also the object of innovative critiques, shaped by the very affect that marks present as being immutably in crisis (Ṣāliḥ).

I understand the gendered aesthetics and symbols of iltizām as being the raw material for Left literary critiques of neoliberalism. However, these critical afterlives of iltizām are not triumphant continuations of literary commitment. They are deeply critical of the literary tradition they take as their aesthetic and symbolic referent. This dynamic is most obvious in the degenerate (rather than progressive) sexual-political symbolism in, for example, the oeuvre of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm. I also read Muḥammad Rabīʿ's *ʿUṭārid* and the post-2011 dystopian turn of Arabic literature as constituting an Arabic accelerationist aesthetic in Ibrāhīm's lineage. Where Ibrāhīm linked degenerate and impotent sexual-political symbolism with an exhausted affective indicative of political and social malaise, Rabīʿ's innovation is to charge sexual-political symbolism with aestheticized violence befitting of postrevolutionary dystopia. However, this symbolic approach to sex and political critique is just one trajectory of the Left literary critique of neoliberalism. The second trajectory engages with gender as a mode of understanding, narrating, and critiquing history and politics. This is clearest in the critical method of Arwā Ṣāliḥ's *al-Mubtasarūn*, which is deeply affected by gendered experiences and analyses. Similarly, gender informs the language and narrative form of Nādiya Kāmil's *al-Mawlūda.* These gendered aspects of *al-Mawlūda* are integral to its historical critique and revitalization of Leftist politics.

These two trajectories of Left literary critique traced in *Left Behind* relate to affect in distinct and nuanced ways. Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* produce an exhausted affect through their narrators, narrative styles, and disgusting aesthetics. The horrific affective dimensions of Rabīʿ's *ʿUṭārid* are distinct from this exhaustion, but similarly emerge through narrative aesthetics. Thus, works from this trajectory of Left literary critique deform and accelerate sexual-political symbolism, thereby producing particular affects and conveying them to the reader.

While Ibrāhīm and Rabīʿ deploy affect to critical ends, such affective intensity is characteristic of artistic production in the neoliberal era.[41] By contrast, gendered affect informs Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil's language, analytical method, and narrative form. They do not relay affect to the reader so much as it guides the formal and methodological decisions that characterize their works and direct their historical and political critiques. Notably, these formal and methodological aspects of Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil's works are highly idiosyncratic elements that position their writing between genres. I contend that these aspects – affected and gendered – are precisely what make their writing insightful, engaging, and uniquely compelling.

Gender, Genre, Jins adabī

One trajectory of *Left Behind* follows gendered and affected aspects of Arwā Ṣāliḥ and Nādiya Kāmil's language, form, and critical approach to history. Both authors write in a voice that emerges from the lived experience of a politically engaged woman, Ṣāliḥ in her own voice and Kāmil in her mother's. These narrative voices do not advocate an overtly feminist politics per se, but integrate lived experiences, relationships, and affect into the form and analytical method of their works. For Ṣāliḥ, this is primarily an analytical and methodological intervention into the historiography of the Egyptian Left with broad implications for political and historical epistemology and critique. Ṣāliḥ's language – especially her critical reworking of patriarchal language and symbolism and her dialogically inflected syntax – facilitates this intervention. For Kāmil's part, her striking use of ʿāmiyya and disruption of authorial and generic boundaries (by writing her mother's life story in her voice) achieves similarly profound interventions into the

[41] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 16.

history of the Egyptian Left. Kāmil's critical perspective may be subtler than Ṣāliḥ's, and it may appear at first glance less politically inflected, but it is just as novel in terms of deploying an embodied and dialogic feminine language to reframe political (and familial) history and its contemporary legacy. Given these authors' shared recourse to gendered affect, language, and genre-defying form as a central means of intervening in the history of the Egyptian Left, I would like to consider them as representing a minor strand of gender- and genre-informed literary critiques of neoliberalism in Egypt. Notably, while gender and genre are distinct words in English, their relationship is more overt in French (genre) and Arabic (jins adabī).[42]

In Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil's approach to history, criticism, and writing, both authors view the individual's lived experience as central. For Ṣāliḥ this is framed as an explicitly ethical component of her critical method. I argue that the ethical imperatives that motivate Ṣāliḥ's biting analytical prose in *al-Mubtasarūn* and grew out of her lived experiences as a militant are partially what occasion and make possible Kāmil's literary project. By this I mean that while Kāmil certainly approached *al-Mawlūda* with the desire to record and convey her mother's remarkable life, the approach she takes – one that emerges from Marie's singular voice in conversation with her daughter (Nādiya Kāmil, the author) – assumes that the engaged individual, however marginal she may be, has a perspective of historical and critical import. Notably, in both Ṣāliḥ's *al-Mubtasarūn* and Kāmil's *al-Mawlūda*, we witness political commitment (iltizām) transform into critique through dialogic language. This dialogue is epistolary and introspective for Ṣāliḥ; it is intergenerational for Kāmil and her mother Marie. The

[42] Jins adabī (literary genre) is most common, but nawʿ adabī is also used to refer to genre. Jins – from the same Greek root that gives us the English genus – commonly means sex, though nawʿ is also used. There is not a widely recognized term for gender in Arabic, though junūsa has been proposed by some for its formal similarity to unūtha (feminity) and dhukūra (masculinity). See: "Gender and Knowledge: Contribution of Gender Perspectives to Intellectual Formations," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 19 (1999): 6–7.

shift from commitment to critique is not a retreat into individualism for these authors. Their recourse to the individual's embodied experience and voice is meaningful and impactful precisely because the critical perspectives their works animate are profoundly engaged in collective, class, and national politics and public culture. Both intervene in political projects and historical discourses that too readily overlooked engaged women. We might also extend their interventions into the literary realm where the formal aspects of their works are most salient. Yet their literary impact goes beyond form; they critique the very politics and sense of nation produced in the canonical novels of iltizām. I draw upon Hoda Elsadda's argument that "the nation, 'an imagined community,' is gendered, and by extension, the canon is equally gendered" to frame Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil's projects, which directly address national history and politics, as similarly intervening in the field of literature in this way.[43]

I see these critical gendered disruptions to genre conventions as a line of inquiry that speaks to a broader segment of Arabic literature beyond the scope of *Left Behind*. The prose of Īmān Mirsāl (who is most famous for her poetry) comes immediately to mind. She has brought a similarly gendered and affected critical method to inter-genre works of narrative nonfiction, *Kayfa taltaʾim: ʿan al-umūma wa ashbāḥiha* (How to Mend: Motherhood and its Ghosts, 2016) and especially *Fī athar ʿInayyāt al-Zayyāt* (In the Footsteps of ʿInayyāt al-Zayyāt, 2019).[44] Mirsāl rejects the confines of genre that would restrict her investments and emotions from informing the language, form, and critical method of *Fī athar ʿInayyāt al-Zayyāt*. Instead, she excavates the forgotten history of al-Zayyāt's life, work, and premature death. In so doing,

[43] Hoda Elsadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), xiii.

[44] Īmān Mirsāl, *Fī athar ʿInayyāt al-Zayyāt* (Cairo: al-Kutub khān li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2019); Īmān Mirsāl, *Kayfa taltaʾim: ʿan al-umūma wa ashbāḥiha* (Cairo: Kayfa ta, 2016).

Mirsāl composes a book that is interwoven with her own deeply personal process of discovering and retelling al-Zayyāt's story. Significantly, Mirsāl's intimate retelling of al-Zayyāt's life and posthumously published novel, *al-Ḥubb wa-l-ṣamt* (Love and Silence, 1967), creates avenues for critically reevaluating how her life and work intersected with and challenged the dominant political and literary culture of the Nasser era. In this, Mirsāl joins Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil in completely upending the formal, methodological, and even epistemological conventions of history, biography, and memoir alike.

A second aspect of this strand of gender- and genre-informed critical method is a guiding concern for legacy and inheritance. For both Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil, this is an explicitly political concern, though in Kāmil's case it also entails a familial dimension. Ṣāliḥ is clear about how her concern for reaching future generations informs her affected language. The urgency of her task supersedes any concern for conventional forms of historical or political genres. The result is a work in between political polemic, history, and memoir. For Kāmil, her concern for inheritance is similarly self-evident in the intergenerational thrust of her work, which is apparent in *al-Mawlūda*'s language and form. It should also be noted that these authors' concern for inheritance and legacy is bidirectional, meaning they are interested in how they inherit political (and familial) history from the past in addition to how they transmit such history to future generations. This sensitivity to inheritance and legacy informs their innovative approaches to recounting and critiquing political history with an eye toward how that critical history might be received and mobilized to more just ends in the future.

Overview of Chapters

The first chapter of *Left Behind*, "Aesthetics and Politics of Iltizām," is conceived of as a prelude to the following four chapters. In it I trace the intellectual and literary histories of iltizām. I trace iltizām to the debates in literary theory sparked by Ṭaha Ḥusayn's translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's littérature engagée into Arabic, which were politicized by decolonial, communist, and Arab Nationalist movements. I focus especially on the literary debates raging on the pages of *al-Ādāb* and erupting between Ḥusayn and younger, more radical thinkers like ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim. These debates – which centered on the relationship between literature and social reality, political commitment, Nasserism, communism, and the national struggle to decolonize – coincided with experiments in narrative realism, shifting the narrative forms of fiction in line with the class-political and cultural priorities of the Nasserist era. It was this nexus of theory and experimentation in narrative form that produced the lasting aesthetics, symbols, and literary approaches associated with iltizām. These include sexual-political symbolism, gendered and sexualized national allegories, and idealized forms of masculinity and femininity. It is these aesthetic and symbolic elements of iltizām that are deformed, intensified, challenged, and rejected in the works of literature and criticism after the hegemony of Nasserism and its state-cultural apparatus collapsed.

The remaining chapters of *Left Behind* deal primarily with the trajectories of iltizām's critical afterlives, meaning how it shifts from a literary form of commitment to one of critique. Communist writers were pioneers of this shift largely because they were among the first victims of the Nasserist regime's authoritarianism. I contextualize the literary and political developments that influenced the aesthetics and politics of these critical afterlives from the Sixties Generation's New Sensibility to the Nineties Generation of (mostly women) writers who introduced a new approach to the body and literature more at home in the neoliberal era. While these authors are

generally ambivalent toward (rather than critical of) neoliberalism, their innovations marked a crucial moment in terms of altering the aesthetic, symbolic, and political dimensions of the body – an essential aspect of the critical legacy of iltizām. As such, the Nineties Generation is an important reference point for the trajectories explored in *Left Behind* that are more critical of neoliberalism.

In Chapter 2, "Collapsed Time and Critical Affect in Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rāʿiḥa* and *67*," I read *Tilka al-rāʿiḥa,* Ibrāhīm's inaugural work of the Sixties Generation's New Sensibility, alongside *67*, a belatedly published work with similar aesthetic features that purports to recount the 1967 defeat. I frame these works in terms of degenerate sexual-political symbolism and an affect of exhaustion, both resulting from the collapse of progressive time. The erasure of the future, both narratively and ideologically, i.e., as the hallmark of a progressive or revolutionary political project, contextualizes the disgusting bodily, sexual, and social behaviors and descriptions that stand out in both works. I argue that disgusting aesthetics and an exhausted narrative stalled out in the present combine to form Ibrāhīm's portrait not only of a society which has lost its direction, but also of a political reality so desperate that its critique is not found in the revolutionary and progressive future-oriented visions that marked the previous decades of national liberation and committed realism. Rather, the degenerate sexual-political symbolism and exhausted aesthetics of Ibrāhīm's works force us to confront how literary forms of critique might function in the absence a progressive promise of futurity.

Chapter 3, "Arwā Ṣāliḥ and the Horizon of Critique," is the theoretical heart of *Left Behind*. Arwā Ṣāliḥ was a member of the Egyptian Communist Workers Party (ECWP, ḥizb al-ʿummāl al-shuyūʿī al-miṣrī) and a leader in the Student Movement of 1971-72 (al-ḥaraka al-ṭullābiyya). In this chapter, I read *al-Mubtasarūn* (The Stillborn, 1996), Ṣāliḥ's sweeping and

deeply personal critique of her own Student-Movement generation of Leftists, the toxic legacies of the Nasser era, and the gendered logic of neoliberal culture and economy in Egypt. I clarify the stakes of Ṣāliḥ's critical methodology by reading her project – specifically her development of Milan Kundera's notion of kitsch, her analytical use of gender, and her formal and political concern with legacy and inheritance – alongside the literary history of iltizām. Though nowhere in *al-Mubtasarūn* does Ṣāliḥ explicitly reference iltizām, I contend that her critical method and search for ethical knowledge frame iltizām as a form of militant kitsch that prized dogma and ready-made answers over ethical and political curiosity. In literature, this kitschy strain of iltizām produced an aesthetic ideology with gendered metaphors and aesthetics that colored how the Egyptian Left of the Nasser era (and, to some extent, beyond it) represented their world and understood its politics: as linked to the state.[45] We should see Ṣāliḥ as fitting into the lineage of Leftist writers renegotiating their relationship to the state through innovations in critical method, style, language, and form.[46] I will show how the form, method, and content of Salih's critique interrupt further inheritance of iltizām's political and literary kitsch. In this sense, Ṣāliḥ's critique proclaims the collapse of a symbolic order whose political agenda she once embraced, a sentiment that resonates with the central thrust of *Left Behind*. Salih's critical and epistemological intervention offers an alternative lens through which we might theorize the shifts in the literature, culture, and politics of Egypt's transition from Nasserism to neoliberalism. I explore the richness of Ṣāliḥ's analytical lens and critical method by juxtaposing my reading of *al-Mubtasarūn* with a reading of her literary criticism on the fiction of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāḥim. This

[45] See: Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 108–19.

[46] Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, 145–51.

acts as a compelling link between Chapters 2 and 3 and allows me to draw connections between the trajectories of Left literary critique traced in *Left Behind*.

Chapter 4, "The Language and Politics of Nādiya Kāmil's Intergenerational Storytelling in *al-Mawlūda*," turns Nādiya Kāmil's biography-memoir hybrid *al-Mawlūda* (2018), which tells the story of twentieth-century Egyptian politics and history from her communist khawāga (resident 'foreigner') mother's marginal yet engaged perspective. I begin from Kāmil's notion of home and show how her intergenerational narrative storytelling produces a sense of home which is both expansive enough to cross the international boundaries of her mother's political and family networks across the Mediterranean region and intimate enough to engender a sense of familial and local belonging. I contend that Kāmil's artistic choices – language, form, and especially her robust commitment to intergenerational dialogue – become political choices in how they produce this sense of political and familial home. Specifically, her choice to write *al-Mawlūda* in her mother Marie's Egyptian-Arabic voice offers a mode of dialogic storytelling charged with intimate familial bonds. Given Marie's lifelong communist commitments, this familial bond is also political, offering a sense of belonging to the Egyptian and international Left. I draw on scholarship by Hala Halim to show how Marie's account of twentieth-century Egypt, rooted in commitment and critique, stands starkly against nostalgia for colonial cosmopolitanism.[47] Instead, Marie's Egyptian-Arabic voice proclaims an anticolonial politics of class and national liberation while simultaneously destabilizing the contours of the nation. This is achieved by Kāmil's displaced and intergenerational narration, use of Egyptian ʿāmiyya, and by

[47] See: Hala Halim, "The Pre-Postcolonial and Its Enduring Relevance: Afro-Asian Variations in Edwar al-Kharrat's Texts," in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, ed. Monika Albrecht (New York: Routledge, 2020); Hala Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

virtue of Marie's position as a working-class khawāga of Jewish and Italian parentage. I draw upon David Scott's notion of intergenerational mourning to argue that the intergenerational impulse of Kāmil's project, inseparable from its narrative voice and form, invites readers to mourn Marie's (and the Egyptian Left's) political commitments and grapple with how to move forward from decades of successive political defeats.[48] Kāmil invites a contemporary readership to find a home Marie's political commitments and imagine a future through them.

Chapter 5, "Aesthetics from Hell in Muḥammad Rabīʿ's *ʿUṭārid*," addresses the accelerationist aesthetic in post-2011 Arabic fiction as a form of political critique. [49] In *ʿUṭārid* (Otared, 2015), Muḥammad Rabīʿ accelerates the postrevolutionary violence of Neoliberal Egypt through grotesque and abject aesthetics of political despair and violence, especially sexual violence. The novel's aesthetics mark the extreme culmination and exhaustion of the critical sexual-political symbolic vocabulary inaugurated by Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* (Chapter 2). In Rabīʿ, we encounter grotesque symbolic recourse to the body and sex, desire and despair, disgust and exhaustion as a vehicle for political critique of neoliberalism in Egypt. My juxtaposition of *ʿUṭārid* and *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* underscores the continuity of authoritarian military rule in Egypt and its role in forging the symbolic and aesthetic economy through which neoliberalism was – and still is – depicted and critiqued. I read *ʿUṭārid*'s grotesque aesthetic project as an extreme acceleration of the contours of neoliberalism in Egypt – state violence, abject inequality, rogue

[48] See: David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice.*, 2015.

[49] Other examples of recent accelerationist and speculative fiction from Egypt and across the Arab world: Basma ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, *al-Ṭābūr: riwāya* (Beirut: Dār al-tanwīr, 2013); Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh, *Ḥarb al-kalb al-thāniyya: wa-hal khaṭar bi-bālika annaha mujarrad mirāyā li-l-mirāyā al-latī nuḥaddiq fīha?: riwāya* (Beirut: al-Dār al-ʿarabiyya li-l-ʿulūm nāshirūn, 2016); Boualem Sansal, *2084: la fin du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015); Wāsīnī al-Aʿraj, *2084: ḥikāyat al-ʿarabī al-akhīr* (Dār al-ādāb, 2016); Aḥmad Najī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāt* (Cairo: Manshūrāt marsūm, 2014); Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī, *Fiʾrān ummī ḥiṣṣa* (Beirut: al-Dār alʿarabiyya li-l-ʿulūm nāshirūn / Manshūrāt ḍifāf, 2015).

police officers, and the inadequate cover of bourgeois respectability. Furthermore, by reading Rabīʿ's critique of neoliberalism in terms of abject and accelerationist aesthetics, I place him in conversation with theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, and Bataille.[50] I argue that these aesthetic aspects of *ʿUṭārid* render the stakes of Rabīʿ's political critique intelligible in terms of visceral senses and embodied affect. By framing Egypt's past, present, and future, as an eternal hell, Rabīʿ allows us no hope for escape from *ʿUṭārid*'s horrific onslaught of aesthetic excess.

[50] See : Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. I Consumption (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. II History of Eroticism (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. III Sovereignty (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Chapter 1 – Aesthetics and Politics of Iltizām

Iltizām

Iltizām (commitment) was one of the most influential literary movements of twentieth-century Arabic literature, yet its precise definition and contours have proven difficult to articulate concretely. Depending on one's perspective, iltizām was a politicized approach to literature, a dogma, or an aesthetic ideology and practice.[1] Iltizām is variably framed as nationalist, statist, and/or communist. This confusion emerged and persists partially because iltizām was conceived not as a simple translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's 'littérature engagée' but as a suite of significant retheorizations to suit immediate political priorities in the decolonizing Arab states. The priority placed on anti-colonial nationalist movements in the 1940s–1960s and, especially in Egypt, the formation of a powerful state-cultural apparatus colored iltizām in explicitly nationalist hues and linked it politically and institutionally to the state. It is not coincidental that the height of iltizām in Egyptian literature coincided with the Nasser era. At the same time, communists offered a view of iltizām heavily influenced by Soviet socialist realism, while still privileging the nationalism seen as central to anti-colonial struggle. Innovations in Arabic narrative in the 1950s combined with these committed theoretical and political approaches to literature to produce the symbols and aesthetics of iltizām. I will trace these contours of iltizām and its intellectual and literary histories in the sections that follow.

[1] For example, Pannewick, Khalil, and Albers treat iltizām in the broadest possible sense as a political approach to literary commitment, especially when considering its afterlives. Yet, at important junctures, they acknowledge the specific aesthetic and ideological characteristics of iltizām. See: Friederike Pannewick, Georges Khalil, and Yvonne Albers, eds., *Commitment and beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, Literaturen Im Kontext = Literatures in Context, vol. 41 (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), 9-25.

Before attending to this history, however, I would like to make clear how I will engage with iltizām in *Left Behind*, which covers literary works from the 1960s through the 2010s. I am primarily interested in the shared symbolic and aesthetic aspects of the literature of iltizām. These are heavily inflected with gender and sex, the nation and nationalism, and invite a mode of symbolic reading that politicizes the (almost always female) body and sexualizes the nation. My interest in these dimensions of iltizām emerges from several assumptions and goals. First, as the title of this dissertation suggests, the anti-colonial and Leftist political projects that fueled theories and literary works of iltizām have largely been left behind. What has endured is this sexual-political symbolic and aesthetic nexus and the mode of reading it engenders. The authors examined in *Left Behind* disrupt, dismantle, and deform the progressive nature of this symbolism in iltizām, yet it remains their clear referent. Secondly, attention to these aesthetic aspects of iltizām and its critical successors allows me to center gendered affect and language as key modes of critique. And lastly, I direct this concern for critique toward the neoliberalism that has dominated Egyptian political economy since Sadat's infitāḥ. I am particularly interested in how the aesthetics and symbols of iltizām morph from modes of commitment to modes of critique in this context of neoliberalism.[2]

Turning to genre, it is important to point out the close association between iltizām and the novel. The Arabic novel, especially that of a realist or historical bent, was the primary genre in which romance and nationalism – often linked – found greatest expression. Timothy Brennan argues that the novel was particularly suited to the discursive formation of the nation. He writes,

[2] Pannewick, Khalil, and Albers acknowledge this shift, in terms broader than commitment though with iltizām as the clear referent: "The political in art (and therefore literature) is no longer primarily understood as a transmitter of a certain political ideology through the artistic medium but also as a kind of critique that primarily subverts established political and cultural orders." See Pannewick, Khalil, and Albers, 10.

"Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation."[3] That the literature of iltizām centered a particular vision of nationalist romance (with themes of revolution, rural purity, moral and political redemption, masculine heroism and justice overcoming greed, and a nationally symbolic female body) partially explains why iltizām emerged, in large part, through the novel. What is more, many novels from the Nasser era were recast as state-produced films, which reached broader audiences. The adaptability of novels to the big screen is significant because writing for films was an important source of income for authors. Cinema was a major way the state-cultural apparatus influenced literary production. Partly because of these novels' enduring filmic legacies and partly because of the literary stature of the novels themselves (a mutually reinforcing dynamic), a relatively small number of committed literary works were especially well positioned to shape the aesthetic contours of iltizām.[4] These novels and films continue to wield outsize influence on scholarly and popular approaches to Arabic literature.[5] Yūsuf Idrīs's novels and short stories, in particular, were influential in shaping this aesthetic partly because of their second lives as films.[6]

[3] Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 49.

[4] Elliott Colla makes a similar argument regarding the role of cinema and nationalized university curricula in the Nasser era in establishing what was a long-standing critical consensus that Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's Zaynab (1914) represented the first mature Arabic novel. (Elliott Colla, "How Zaynab Became the First Arabic Novel," *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009): 214–25.

[5] Novels recast as films include ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Arḍ* (1954/1970), Yūsuf Idrīs's *al-Ḥarām* (1959/1965) and *al-ʿAyb* (1962/1967), Yūsuf al-Sibāʿī's *Rudda Qalbī* (1954/1957), Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Qaddūs's *Fī baytinā rajul* (1957/1961), Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ* (1960/1963), Fatḥī Ghānim's *al-Rajul al-ladhī faqada ẓillah* (1962/1968), Najīb Maḥfūẓ's *Mīrāmār* (1966/1969), and Tharwat Abāẓa's *Shayʾ min al-khawf* (1967/1969), a strong critique of Nasserism and iltizām that repurposed its symbols and aesthetics. We might also include Ṭaha Ḥusayn's *Duʿāʾ al-karawān* (1934/1959), which well predates the formative period of iltizam's aesthetics and theory but was remade as a film in 1959 in precisely this mold.

[6] We can add Idrīs's short story/film "Ḥādith sharaf" (1958/1971) to the novels/films cited above.

This claim regarding the centrality of the novel to iltizām is most applicable to Egypt. This is largely due to the state-cultural apparatus (and mammoth film industry) of the Nasser era, which played such a strong role in influencing theories and practices of iltizām. There were, of course Egyptian poets who should be considered in the broader context of iltizām and its critical afterlives. Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn is the obvious example of the former, while Aḥmad Fuʾād Nijm is an example of the latter. While this poetic dimension of iltizām in Egypt is not covered at length in *Left Behind*, it is fertile ground for comparison and theorization between Arab contexts. A comparative approach to the Palestinian poetic tradition of resistance literature (adab al-muqāwama) or the revitalization of protest poetry (e.g., al-Qāsim al-Shabbi's "Irādat al-Ḥayāt) during the Arab Uprisings would be fruitful opportunities for further study to more robustly tease out the issue of genre and its relationship to various iterations of iltizām.

Despite the major influence of iltizām, it is impossible to speak of a monolithic era of iltizām dominated by the novel and state-backed cinema. Radical innovations were abreast in poetry at the same time, with aesthetic and political approaches and agendas distinct from those of iltizām. The two most obvious examples on this front are the al-Shiʿr al-Ḥurr (Free Verse) movement led by Iraqis Nāzik al-Malāʾika and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, on the one hand, and the abstract prose poems of Adūnīs, Yūsuf al-Khāl, and the Beirut-based *Shiʿr* cohort. As Emily Drumsta points out, translating 'al-shiʿr al-ḥurr' as 'free verse' is something of a misnomer: "Far from free of metrical regularity, *al-shiʿr al-ḥurr* isolated the Arabic metrical 'foot,' or *tafʿīlah*, as the most basic unit of sound in Arabic poetry."[7] More radical breaks from poetic meter were afoot amongst the authors of the prose poem (qaṣīdat al-nathr):

[7] Emily Drumsta, "Introduction," in *Revolt Against the Sun: The Selected Poetry of Nazik al-Mala'ikah: A Bilingual Reader*, ed. Emily Drumsta (London: Saqi Books, 2020), 3.

> Poets like Yūsuf al-Khāl, Unsī al-Ḥājj, Adūnīs, and others in the Beirut circle of Shiʿr magazine advocated – in theory and in practice – a form similar to English-language free verse: poetry whose rhythms, line-breaks, and layout on the page would be determined entirely by the poet's will, not by the dictates of classical poetic feet.[8]

It was these prose poets who were positioned in opposition to the overtly politicized directions iltizām would take. Notably, the issues at stake in the literary discussions among poets and novelists of various persuasions highlighted the political stakes of literature quite explicitly: the freedom of the artist, nationalism and the state, communism, and whether literary innovation is found in Arab cultural heritage or foreign (usually Western) literary forms. Having characterized iltizām as being in conversation with other contemporary literary movements like abstract poetry and having clarified my particular concern for the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of iltizām and its critical legacy, I now turn to the intellectual history of iltizām.

Becoming Multazim: Jean-Paul Sartre, Ṭaha Ḥusayn, and *al-Ādāb*

Beginning in 1947, Jean-Paul Sartre published a series of articles in *Les Temps modernes* in which he posed a series of questions: What is writing? Why do we write? For whom do we write? In 1948, these essays would be collected and published by Gallimard under the famous title *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* The notion of littérature engagée Sartre developed in these essays had a profound impact on a generation of intellectuals whose countries were waging decolonial struggles, especially those intellectuals on the political Left. Sartre theorized a politically situated role for the committed writer, whereby the writer seeks to change the world

[8] Drumsta, 6.

by laying it bare, revealing it in a particular way, and burdening the reader with responsibility.[9] Central to Sartre's understanding of the transformative function of writing is the relationship between reader and writer: both are burdened with freedom and responsibility. As such, Sartre insisted on a collaborative partnership between reader and writer rooted in mutual freedom. He argues that "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work."[10] Sartre's mark upon Arab existentialism and the literary theory of the 1950s and 1960s cannot be overstated.[11] This was nowhere truer than in Egypt. Questions of literary commitment and engagement stoked contentions and often intergenerational debates concerning the political and cultural roles of literature.

Iltizām (commitment) and al-adab al-multazim (committed literature) were first introduced to Arabic literary criticism in 1947 by Ṭaha Ḥusayn, who coined the moniker but expressed misgivings about politics weaponizing literature.[12] Ḥusayn was reading Sartre in *Les Temps modernes* and digesting Sartre's essays on littérature engagée – essentially in real time – for the readers of *al-Kātib al-miṣrī*, the journal he edited. While Ḥusayn would later be portrayed as a stalwart opponent of iltizām, he in fact played a pivotal role in introducing the concept to readers of Arabic. Ḥusayn reads Sartre's project immediately in terms of freedom. He sees Sartre as offering:

> طريقاً وسطاً بين مذهب الشيوعيين الذين يلغون حرية الفرد، ومذهب البورجوازيين الذين يبيحون هذه الحرية لفريق من الناس دون فريق. أراد أن يصل إلى نوع من النظام يكفل للفرد حريته كاملة، ويكفل للجماعة عدلا شاملا، ويكفل للأديب حريته الكاملة في التفكير والتصوير والتعبير دون أن يخضع لما

[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *"What Is Literature?" And Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 37.
[10] Sartre, 54.

[11] See: Di-Capua, *No Exit*.

[12] Ṭaha Ḥusayn, "Mulāhaẓāt," *al-Kātib al-miṣrī*, no. 21 (June 1, 1947): 9-21.

تفرضه الأحزاب على أعضائها من قيود وأغلال تضطرهم إلى أن يفكروا ويصورا ويعبروا كما يريد نظام الحزب، لا كما تريد حرية الفرد ولا كما تريد طبيعة الأشياء وحقائق الحياة. [13]

> a middle way between the communist school of thought (madhhab) which denies individual freedom, and the bourgeois school of thought which grants this freedom to a class of people while excluding others. [Sartre] wanted to reach an order that guarantees the individual complete freedom, that guarantees the public (al-jamāʿa) full justice, and that guarantees the author his full freedom of thought, representation, and expression without him yielding to the constraints and shackles political parties place upon their members and which force them to think, represent, and express as the party wishes rather than as a free individual, the natural order of things, or life's truths would wish.

In this excerpt, Ḥusayn presciently lays out the very terms that would animate the public debates regarding committed literature, which unfolded across the pages of literary journals (most prominently in *al-Ādāb*) and even on television. He highlights concerns for individual freedom, social justice, the Communist party, and the bourgeois intellectual who is unceasingly referred to as inhabiting the ivory tower (al-burj al-ʿājī). We should note that Ḥusayn's early concerns about the political weaponization of literature are explored in Sartre's own writings. Sartre writes that "the literature of a given age is alienated when it has not arrived at the explicit consciousness of its autonomy and when it submits to temporal powers or to an ideology, in short, when it considers itself a means and not as an unconditioned end."[14]

Iltizām would reach a broader audience and stoke the contentious public debates that have been referenced in the wake of two events: the Free Officers' Coup of 1952 which brought the military regime to power promising socialism and national liberation, and the founding of Suhayl Idrīs's Beirut-based literary journal *al-Ādāb* in 1953. *al-Ādāb* was, from the outset,

[13] Ṭaha Ḥusayn, "Fī al-adab al-firansī: Jean-Paul Sartre wa-l-sīnimā," *al-Kātib al-miṣrī*, no. 26 (November 1947) : 180.

[14] Sartre, *"What Is Literature?*, 134.

focused on questions of literary commitment and literary engagement. In the journal's first editorial, Idrīs laid out his vision for *al-Ādāb*, which was explicitly centered on iltizām:

> وهدف المجلة الرئيسي أن تكون ميداناً لفئة أهل القلم الواعين الذين يعيشون تجربة عصرهم، ويُعدّون شاهداً على هذا العصر: ففيما هم يعكسون حاجات المجتمع العربي، ويعبّرون عن شواغله، يشقّون الطريق أمام المصلحين، لمعالجة الأوضاع بجميع الوسائل المجدية. وعلى هذا، فانّ الأدب الذي تدعو إليه المجلة وتشجّعه، هو أدب "الالتزام" الذي ينبع من المجتمع العربيّ ويصبّ فيه.

> The principal objective of the journal is to be a public square (maydān) for that conscious class of writers who live the experience of their age and act as witness upon that age in that they reflect the needs of Arab society, express its concerns, and pave the way for reformers to address its issues by all laudable means. As such, the type of literature this journal invites and encourages is literature of commitment (adab al-iltizām), which emerges from Arab society and flows back into it.[15]

al-Ādāb did indeed serve as a public square for literary debate surrounding iltizām. It published divergent perspectives on the nature of literary commitment to the point that a singular and precise theory and form of iltizām is difficult to discern. As Qussay Al-Attabi argues, this indeterminate nature of iltizām did not prevent it from serving as a highly productive concept and giving way to novel and divergent literary and cultural forms.[16]

Nevertheless, the iltizām of *al-Ādāb* diverged from Sartre's littérature engagée in several meaningful ways. Verena Klemm points out that Idrīs and his cohort were far less interested in the philosophical underpinnings of literary engagement than Sartre's notion of the writer's situatedness in history, which they elevated in their theories of iltizām.[17] As such, the relationship between writer and reader is treated in a different manner. Whereas Sartre frames

[15] Suhayl Idrīs, "Risālat *al-Ādāb*," *al-Ādāb*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1953): 1.

[16] Qussay Al-Attabi, "The Polemics of Iltizām: Al-Ādāb's Early Arguments for Commitment," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 52, no. 1–2 (April 16, 2021): 124–46, https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341422.

[17] Verena Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment *(Iltizam)* and Committed Literature *(Al-adab Al-multazim)* in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq," *Arabic & Middle Eastern Literature* 3, no. 1 (January 2000): 55, https://doi.org/10.1080/13666160008718229.

this relationship upon collaboration and mutual freedom, the theorists of iltizām were much more attuned to the class-cultural dynamics of literary circulation. They centered questions of which class (both in the traditional sense of the bourgeoisie and working class, and in the more expansive cultural sense of a class of citizens, elites, patriots, etc.) one writes for. Whose reality ought to be reflected in literature? Who is the arbiter of literary taste and value, and on what grounds? More than anything, *al-Ādāb* linked iltizām to Arab Nationalism (al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya). Immediately following the above excerpt, Idrīs continues, making the link between iltizām and Arab Nationalism explicit in *al-Ādāb*'s inaugural editorial:

> والمجلة، اذ تدعو إلى هذا الأدب الفعّال، تحمل رسالة قوميةً مثلى. فتلك الفئة الواعية من الأدباء الذين يستوحون أدبهم من مجتمعهم يستطيعون على الأيام أن يخلقوا جيلاً واعياً من القراء يتحسسون بدورهم واقع مجتمعهم، ويكوّنون نواة الوطنيين الصالحين. وهكذا تشارك المجلة، بواسطة كتّابها وقرائها، في العمل القومي العظيم، الذي هو الواجب الأكبر على كلّ وطنيّ.

> And so, the journal invites this efficacious literature and carries a model nationalist (qawmiyya) message. That conscious class of litterateurs who seek inspiration for their literature in their society are capable – over time – of creating a conscious generation of readers who experience – in their turn – the reality of their own society, and of forming a nucleus of good patriots (al-waṭaniyīn al-ṣāliḥīn). Thus, the journal participates – through its writers and readers – in the great nationalist project (al-ʿamal al-qawmī al-ʿaẓīm), which is the greatest duty of every patriot (waṭanī).[18]

For the twenty-first-century reader, *al-Ādāb*'s manifesto might smack of jingoism more than it resembles literary criticism, especially when compared to Sartre's writing. It did elicit charges that it was the type of alienating temporal power and ideology of which Sartre warns.[19] To contextualize these debates, I would point out that the political circumstances of Sartre's postwar France and Idrīs's postwar Beirut were quite different. France was grappling with a profound moral and political crisis following its capitulation to and collaboration with the Nazis.

[18] Idrīs, "Risālat *al-Ādāb*," 1.

[19] Sartre, *"What Is Literature?*, 134.

This crisis was made even more urgent by the fact that France was still an imperial power whose colonial subjects demanded liberation, Vietnam and Algeria being the most violent theaters of this struggle. These crises' clear links to anticolonial movements perhaps explain why Sartre's writing resonated so strongly with Third-World intellectuals. Sartre himself would lend his moral and intellectual weight to the very sort of engaged literary causes that centered historical situatedness as Idrīs and the writers of *al-Ādāb* did. The foremost examples here are Sartre's introductions to Léopold Senghor's Négritue poetry collection *Orphée noir* in 1948 and Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* in 1961. If the French postwar crises centered around the specter of the Holocaust and the reality of a contracting empire, the situation in Beirut and much of the Arab world was radically hopeful by comparison. Full national independence in military, political, and economic spheres was the cause of the era, promising tangibly improved lives for the impoverished masses. In this sense of sovereignty and material power, history was being made across the decolonizing world in truly dramatic ways. But these achievements were not spread equally. Lebanon's economy remained a freewheeling capitalist one, while the state was weak and fractured by sectarian political institutions. It is easy to imagine Suhayl Idrīs following events in Cairo from Beirut. He must have seen the Free Officers as capturing the historical zeitgeist. Crucially, the authoritarianism that followed Nasser's rise to power did not directly restrain political or intellectual life in Beirut as it did in Cairo. In Beirut, Arab Nationalism could remain an abstract political ideal, uncomplicated by the lived realities of Nasserism. *al-Ādāb*'s manifesto should be seen in this broader Arab context, looking to Egypt and engaged in shared cultural politics yet removed from Nasser's emerging regimes of censorship and state control. This is not to belittle the fact that Egyptian writers living under Nasser were also major theorists and practitioners of iltizām. The cultural and political hegemony Nasserist Egypt achieved –

through coercion and consent, as Sara Salem reminds us – was unlike any historical force most people living today have experienced in their lifetimes.[20] I say this not to glorify, condemn, or excuse the intellectual history of iltizām, but to insist that it be taken seriously both as critically engaged with one of the most influential literary-theoretical movements of the twentieth century and as producing an approach to Arabic literature that has endured decades. Indeed, as I will argue in *Left Behind*, the critical potency of iltizām's aesthetics and symbols – albeit through their deformation and disruption – was sharpened once Nasser's cultural and political hegemony began to collapse.

The Communists are Realists

If *al-Ādāb* clarified the link between iltizām and Arab Nationalism, the class commitments this entailed were derivative in that they flowed from the socialist aspects of Arab Nationalism. This was inadequate for more dogmatic Marxists who saw the emphasis on national liberation and the revolutionary Arab Nationalist regimes as just one aspect of broader class liberation. In 1955, a Communist philosopher, Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, and a Communist mathematician, ʿAbd al-Azīz Anīs, published their manifesto of literary theory titled *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya* (On Egyptian Culture) which brought these concerns to the forefront and articulated a robust yet rather rigid theory of engaged socialist realism. They highlighted not just the nationalist political content of literature but also its class position. In this sense, they broke with Nahḍāwī romanticism as well as earlier forms of social realism they viewed as too

[20] Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 17.

bourgeois.[21] They criticized the older generation of conservative writers like ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād and, most famously, the classically liberal Ṭaha Ḥusayn for focusing too heavily on literary form and the technique of literary writing rather than its content and social, i.e., class, position. They directly address Ḥusayn, writing:

> كتب هذا المقال رداً على مقال للدكتور طه حسين في جريدة "الجمهورية" وعنوانه "صورة الأدب ومادته" بتاريخ 1954/2/5، وفيه يقدم الدكتور طه حسين النظرة النقدية القديمة، التي تقوم على أساس أن "اللغة هي صورة الأدب وأن المعاني هي مادته،" وأضاف الدكتور طه حسين عليهما عنصراً ثالثاً في الدراسة الأدبية وهو ما سماه عنصر الجمال، وإن لم يوضح نظرته إليه.[22]
>
> This article was written in response to an article by Dr. Ṭaha Ḥusayn in *al-Jamhūriyya* entitled "The Form and Content of Literature," published 1954/2/5. In it, Dr. Ṭaha Ḥusayn presents the old critical perspective that is based upon that "language is the form of literature, and meanings are its content," to which Dr. Ṭaha Ḥusayn added a third aspect of literary study, which he called aesthetics, though he did not clarify his view of it.

al-ʿĀlim and Anīs were not just responding to Ḥusayn personally, but by a shortcoming they ascribed to the entire 'Old School' of literary criticism:

> الاحتفال البالغ بالأسلوب[23]
>
> Over-the-top celebration of form.

al-ʿĀlim and Anīs pushed for content explicitly engaged in class struggle and privileged this revolutionary class position in their theory of socialist realism. For them, only this engaged and revolutionary position toward reality and – by extension – literature, whatever its form, could produce genuine socialist realism. al-ʿĀlim and Anīs's heavy focus on the class content of literature and their dictate that literature glorify revolutionary heroism, paving the way for

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[21] Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985,* 139.

[22] ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, "al-Adab bayna al-ṣiyāgha wa-l-maḍmūn," in Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya, al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 1989), 39.

[23] ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, "al-Adab bayna al-ṣiyāgha wa-l-maḍmūn," in Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya, al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 1989), 40.

utopia, has led their theoretical writing to be criticized as "programmatic" and the harbinger of "a Stalinist literary trend."[24] In essence, al-ʿĀlim and Anīs responded to the 'over-the-top celebration of form' by privileging literature's political content. For example, even as Anīs anticipates criticism that his and al-ʿĀlim's theory discounts literary form, his attempt to valorize form rests upon the correct choice of content:

> فالواقعية لا تتمثل فقط في اختيار الموضوع، وانما في الشكل الذي يصب في هذا الموضوع، في الأسلوب الذي يعبر به الكاتب عن هذا الموضوع.[25]
>
> Realism is not represented only in the choice of a subject but in the style running through that subject, in the form by which the writer expresses it.

This defensive tone in al-ʿĀlim and Anīs's writing about their focus on content over form emerges largely because their intervention is – at its core – a political one. They do not neglect literary form so much as they view it as clarifying the nature of a writer's positionality vis à vis the social content of a literary work, which is simply more important. Even when they theorize a dialectic approach to form and content, this this too rests unevenly upon content:

> ان الأدب صورة ومادة، ما في هذا شك. ولكن صورة الأدب كما نراها، ليست هي الأسلوب الجامد، وليست هي اللغة، بل هي عملية داخلية في قلب العمل الأدبي لتشكيل مادته وإبراز مقوماته.
>
> Literature is form (ṣūra) and content (mādda) – there is no doubt about this. But the form of literature, as we see it, is neither a fixed form (al-uslūb al-jāmid) nor language; it is an internal process within the heart of the literary work to construct its content (tashkīl māddatahu) and reveal its component parts (ibrāz muqawwamātah).[26]

Later they continue,

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[24] Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment *(Iltizam)* and Committed Literature *(Al-adab Al-multazim)* in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq," 56; Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, 141.

[25] ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs, "Fī al-adab al-wāqiʿī," in Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya, al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 1989), 33.

[26] Anīs and al-ʿĀlim, *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya*, 41.

وبهذا الفهم الوظيفي للصورة تتكشف أمامنا ما بينها وبين المادة من تداخل وتفاعل ضروريين.

> And with this functional understanding of form, its necessary overlap and interplay with content is brought to light.[27]

While al-ʿĀlim and Anīs seek to outline the complexity of their approach to the relationship between form and content in these passages, they in fact show its limits. Their militant obsession with the class position of literary content constrained their theories of realism and its narrative forms. This marks an important point in the intellectual history of iltizām. Not only do al-ʿĀlim and Anīs clarify the theoretical link between iltizām and socialist realism, but they also articulate the priorities of iltizām, which were political. This link between socialist realist forms and the revolutionary political imperatives of iltizām is what produced the aesthetic and symbolic characteristics of committed literature.

al-ʿĀlim also publicly disagreed with Adūnīs regarding the nature of revolutionary poetry. Over the decades, Adūnīs argued for an aesthetic and linguistic notion of revolution rooted in poetics. In the wake of 1967, he proposed in *Zaman al-shiʿr* (The Time of Poetry, 1972) that the revolutionary aspect of poetry is separate from the social-political realm:

> إذا أردنا أن ندرس هذه العلاقة بين اللغة والموضوع، على الصعيد الاجتماعي – السياسي في العالم العربي الذي يتحرك في اتجاه الثورة، لماذا نلاحظ؟ نلاحظ أن ثمة انفصالاً بين الثورة، كلغة وفكر، أي كواقع يفكّر ويعبّر، والثورة، كعمل وتغيير، أي كواقع يتبدل في قاعدته وقمته، في بنيته السفلى وبنيته العليا.[28]

> If we wanted to study this relationship between language and subject matter on the socio-political level in the Arab world, which is moving toward revolution, what would we notice? We would notice that there is a split between revolution as language and thought, i.e., as a reality that thinks and expresses, and revolution as work and change, i.e., as a reality that is replaced at its foundation and its peak, in its base and superstructure.

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[27] Anīs and al-ʿĀlim, *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya*, 41.

[28] Adūnīs, *Zaman al-Shiʿr*, al-ṭabʿa al-thāniyya (Beirut: Dār al-ʿawda, 1978), 139.

In *Siyāsat al-shiʿr* (The Politics of Poetry, 1985) Adūnīs reaffirms and clarifies the implications of his theory:

> موقفي هو أنّ الشعر في ذاته ثوريّ بوصفه حدثاً إبداعياً: فهو ثورة داخل اللغة من حيث أنه يجددها، وثورة في الواقع نفسه، من حيث أنه يرى إليه روية تجديدية، ومن حيث أنه يغيّر، بتجديده للغة، صورة الواقع، أي العلاقات القائمة بين الأشياء والكلمات، وبينها وبين الإنسان – وهو لذلك ثورة في وعي الإنسان. وفي هذا الإطار نفهم كيف أنّ اللغة مجموعة من الكلمات – الكائنات الحيّة التي لها عُمرها وتاريخها الخياليّان والفكريّان، ونفهم أنّ بعضها يتجدّد أو يُولد، وكيف أن بعضها الآخر يفرغ من دلالته القديمة ويكتسب دلالة جديدة. فالشعر ثوري لا بكونه يتحدث عن قضايا ثورية، بل بكونه يحمل رؤية جديدة بلغة جديدة.[29]
>
> My position is that poetry is, in itself, revolutionary as a creative event. Poetry is a revolution within language in that it renews language. And poetry is a revolution in reality itself in that it looks to reality with a vision of renewal, and in that it changes – through its renewal of language – the image of reality, i.e., the existing relations between things and words, between these and man. This is why poetry is a revolution in the consciousness of man. In this framing, we understand how language is a group of words – of living beings that possess their own imaginary and intellectual lifespan and history. And we understand how some of these words are renewed or reborn, and how others are emptied of their old meanings and take on new ones. Thus, poetry is revolutionary not for speaking about revolutionary issues but for carrying a new vision in a new language.

Adūnīs's position here is clearly contrary to that of Anīs and al-ʿĀlim, who see the revolution of literature in its content and politics, not its form and aesthetics. al-ʿĀlim took particular issue with how Adūnīs seems to retreat from political reality through his valorization of revolutionary aesthetics.[30] This was immediately relevant in terms of Adūnīs's dismissal of nationalist resistance poetry.[31] Tellingly, Adūnīs objected to this poetry being considered properly revolutionary on the grounds that it shares qualities of mundane prose. The immediate context of Adūnīs's writing here is Palestinian resistance poetry, but the terms he uses might be similarly considered in light of earlier debates over iltizām: "ideological content" (al-maḍmūn al-

[29] Adūnīs, *Siyāsat al-shiʿr: dirāsāt fī al-shiʿriyya al-ʿarabiyya al-muʿāṣira* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1985), 175.

[30] Mahmud Ghanayim, "Mahmud Amin Al-'Alim: Between Politics and Literary Criticism," *Poetics Today* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 326.

[31] Adūnīs, *Siyāsat al-shiʿr: dirāsāt fī al-shiʿriyya al-ʿarabiyya al-muʿāṣira*, 176.

īdiyūlūjī), "nationalist and political aspirations" (al-taṭallu'āt al-qawmiyya wa-l-siyāsiyya), and ultimately dismissing it as "instrumentalist poetry" (al-shi'r al-waẓīfī).[32] Clearly, poetics and aesthetics are remarkably privileged in Adūnīs's approach, while political approaches to poetry and poetic language disrupt these qualities, which he sees as the true source of revolution. By contrast, al-'Ālim questions how Adūnīs's notion of a revolution within poetry has any bearing on lived experience or political reality:

> حسبي أن أقول مخلصاً، أن هذه الثورة التي ينادي بها الشاعر أدونيس داخل الشعر، والتي يمارسها فعلاً في شعره، هي غربة بالشعر عن الحياة والإنسان، والثورة. ان للشعر قوانينه الخاصة بغير شك، التي تختلف وتميز عن قوانين الواقع الحي، ولكن الاختلاف والتمايز لا يعني الاستقلال والانفصال. ما قيمة التجديد في جماليات الشعر والفن، بحيث يصبح عجزاً عن التعبير عن الحياة والإضافة إليها، والمشاركة في تجديدها وتغييرها. فليتجدد الشعر بقوانينه وأساليبه ومناهجه، في غير انقطاع عن الاتصال بالحياة والفعل الخلاق فيها.[33]

> Let me sincerely say that this revolution within poetry that the poet Adūnīs calls for and puts into practice in his own poetry is a form of alienation in poetry from life, humanity, and revolution. There is no doubt that poetry has its own guiding principles, which differ and are distinct from those of living reality, but difference and distinction do not mean independence and cutting off. What is the value of renewal in the aesthetics of poetry and art such that they become unable to express life, add to it, or take part in renewing or changing it? Poetry ought to be renewed by its guiding principles and forms and methods without cutting off its connection to life and the creative act within it.

I would also suggest that an aspect of their disagreement lies in the extent to which each critic values the 'instrumentality' of prose. al-'Ālim values the political function of prose writing a great deal and has no qualms about poetry taking on this quality, whereas Adūnīs sees it as a corruption of the poetic form.

In 1985, thirty years after *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya*, al-'Ālim and Anīs wrote a new introduction to their manifesto. In it they reaffirmed their conviction in their core argument

[32] Adūnīs, 176.

[33] Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim, "al-Thaqāfa al-thawriyya wa-l-thawra al-thaqāfiyya," *al-Ādāb*, vol. 18, no. 7 (July 1970): 82.

regarding the class content of literature. Yet they also acknowledged shortcomings in their approach. Among these is their neglect of aesthetics:

> إلا أننا نقر أننا في الكثير من تطبيقاتنا النقدية كانت العناية بالدلالة الاجتماعية والوطنية للعمل الأدبي تغلب على العناية بالقيمة الجمالية. ولن نفسر هذا فقط – أو بالأحرى نبرره – بأن هذا حدث في لحظات تحتدم فيها المعارك الوطنية والاجتماعية وإن كان هذا صحيحا في بعض الأحيان. وإنما نفسره في الحقيقة بعدم امتلاكنا للوسائل والآليات الإجرائية لتحديد وكشف العلاقة بين الصياغة والمضمون، بين القيمة الجمالية والدلالة العامة كشفا موضوعيا دقيقا. ولعل أثمن ما تعلمناه طوال هذه السنوات هو محاولة الخروج من الأحكام العامة سواء قيما يتعلق بالدلالة المضمونية أو القيمة الجمالية إلى تحديد آليات هذه الدلالة وهذه القيمة على نحو أكثر دقة.[34]

> Though we have established that in many of our critical applications, our care for the social and nationalist significance of a literary work overpowered our care for aesthetic value. We will not explain – or rather excuse – this only by the fact that this happened in a moment ablaze with nationalist and social struggles, so it was at times proper. Rather, we explain this by our not possessing the means or tools of implementation to identify and objectively and specifically examine the relationship between form and content, between aesthetic value and general meaning. Perhaps the most valuable lesson throughout these years has been attempting to eschew general value judgements, whether they be related to the meaning of content or aesthetic value, for identifying with greater specificity the mechanisms of this meaning or value.

What stands out in Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's framing of how their 1955 methodology fell short is their attempt to revitalize aesthetics as a key mode of understanding the social significance of literature. This is noteworthy because aesthetics was precisely the point of contention in al-ʿĀlim's public disagreements with Ṭaha Ḥusayn and Adūnīs. However, setting these personal debates aside, I am struck by Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's stated attempts to grapple with the specific forms and narrative mechanisms of presenting the political content they value in literature. I read in their statements about the specificity of aesthetics an assumption that committed literature has particular aesthetic forms. I see my own concern for the aesthetics of iltizām as emerging from this effort of theirs, not to better use literature as a revolutionary political tool (as Anīs and al-ʿĀlim would like) but

[34] Anīs and al-ʿĀlim, *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya*, 23.

to better understand the aesthetic and symbolic profile of the literature of iltizām and trace its critical afterlives.

At the same time as critics like Suhayl Idrīs, Ṭaha Ḥusayn, Adūnīs, al-ʿĀlim and Anīs were debating theories of commitment, realism, and aesthetics in literature, a shift in Arabic narrative form was afoot. Realist fiction shifted from individual bourgeois perspectives to a "fluid web of social and economic relationships within history as the proper fabric of narrative realism."[35] Even if Najīb Maḥfūẓ's *Trilogy* (1956-57) did not quite satisfy the conditions of al-ʿĀlim and Anīs's committed socialist realism, it's emphasis on multiple perspectives, social and economic relations, and explicitly political themes of social and national liberation exemplifies the shifting terrain of realist narrative fiction. In the 1950s, narration shifted toward the use of vernacular language (ʿāmiyya) in dialogue as in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Arḍ* (The Earth, 1954), a rather obvious but significant example of how narrative form emerges from social reality.[36] On a broader level, this turn in the intellectual genealogy and literary history of iltizām toward social and economic relations is important because it gave political direction and critical weight to the older jīl al-ruwwād's (Generation of Pioneers) more technical interest in the craft of narrative forms. The uneasy and fraught union of theoretical debates surrounding political commitment and literary experimentations in narrative form in the 1950s should be seen as the nexus that gave way to the symbols and aesthetics of iltizām. It was the foundation upon which the Sixties Generation would stage their aesthetic revolution, which had profound political reverberations and ushered in iltizām's critical afterlives.

[35] Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, 142.

[36] Selim, 144.

The Left and the State

Amidst these literary debates and developments, the relationship between the Left and the Nasserist state was ambivalent and fraught. Nasser and the Free Officers won immense public support following the 1952 coup and successive victories over imperial powers, most notably following the Suez Crisis/Tripartite Aggression (al-ʿudwān al-thulāthī), nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, and construction of the Aswan High Dam. Nasser also charted Egypt on an economic path that promised tangibly improved standards of living for millions of peasants and workers who would move into the middle class. Yet, Nasser's hegemony was not built upon consent alone but also the repressive state apparatus. Nasser was not ideological, and he was certainly not a Communist. Even his socialism needs to be qualified as Arab Nationalist or, more to the point, state socialism. The regime's intolerance for independent Leftist movements, especially radical labor and peasant activism, was evident almost immediately. In 1953, the regime violently suppressed the labor strikes in Kafr Dawwār and executed its leaders. Thus, the anti-communist actions of the regime were paired with the symbolic and rhetorical elevation of the worker and the peasant as authentic Egyptians, forming an uneasy disconnect that lasted throughout Nasser's regime. The literary Left were, in many respects, producers of these idealized representations of the working and peasant classes. These in addition to Nasser's anti-colonial policies bolstered his moral authority among the Left, even as the independent (mostly Communist) Left was persecuted by his regime.

Especially after Nasser's public anti-colonial successes of 1956, the regime built and expanded the institutions of Egypt's state-cultural apparatus through which the state sought to mobilize and manage intellectuals. This system included the Higher Council for Arts and Letters (established 1956) and the Ministry of Culture (established 1958), and it expanded already

existing state institutions in radio and theater.[37] The regime also created state television (1960), and nationalized the press (1960), film industry (1961), and elements of the publishing industry (1960, 1965).[38] In an institutional sense, the state exercised a virtual monopoly on public culture, which was amplified by the fact that most literary figures – even if they published in foreign journals or with foreign presses – were employed in these very institutions of education, media, and culture that came under state control after 1956. In this context, the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP, ḥizb al-shuyūʿī al-miṣrī) and the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (HADITU, al-ḥaraka al-dimuqraṭiyya li-l-taḥrīr al-waṭanī) remained independent communist political organizations and critiqued the regime through the 1950s. However, their members – including notable authors like Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm – were imprisoned en masse in 1959. They were released in 1964 in advance of Kruschev's visit to Egypt and Nasser's appeal to the USSR for funding for the Aswan High Dam, prisons filled with communists making for bad optics when seeking funds from the communist superpower. In 1965, the ECP and the HADITU dissolved themselves and joined the Single Party, the Socialist Union (al-ittiḥād al-ishtirākī).[39]

Given the trials communists faced under Nasser, one might assume that the communists were somewhat separate from the rest of the Egyptian Left, whether conceived of as a political or literary Left, or both. However, this was not entirely the case. Many communists held Nasser in high esteem for his anti-colonial nationalist bona fides, even as he persecuted communists. This high esteem often weathered communists' own experiences of prison, though it would become

[37] Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2008), 15.

[38] Jacquemond, 15–16.

[39] Gennaro Gervasio, *al-Ḥaraka al-mārkisiyya fī miṣr, 1967-1981*, trans. Carmine Cartolano and Basma Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, al-Ṭabaʿa al-ūlā (Cairo: al-Markaz al-qawmī li-l-tarjama, 2010), 20.

tempered by strong criticisms of the regime's anti-democratic and authoritarian practices. Nevertheless, many communists accepted posts in Nasser's Ministry of Culture after they left prison. Perhaps more important than this history is how communists like al-ʿĀlim and Anīs were central to developing theories and literary practices – aesthetics, forms, and symbols – of iltizām. Communists were among the first to suffer the violence of Nasser's hegemony, and they were among the first to translate that violence into an aesthetic revolution in literature. Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm is the foremost example of this, of course. One ambition of *Left Behind* is to expansively trace the lines of aesthetic, critical, and symbolic continuity that pass from iltizām, through Ibrāhīm and the Sixties Generation, to later literary figures like Arwā Ṣāliḥ, Muḥammad Rabīʿ, and Nādiya Kāmil, whose parents were communists of Ibrāhīm's generation. In sometimes unexpected ways, communism is a prominent line of continuity in this literary history. As such, I find it helpful to consider communists as belonging to Egypt's broader literary and political Left, even if – and because – they offered pointed critiques of it.

The Critical Afterlives of Iltizām

Objections to the Nasser era's political and cultural hegemony would emerge out of the regime's prisons. As Yasmine Ramadan and Elisabeth Kendall show, the emergence of significant literary critiques of the regime after 1965 was relegated to the margins and to foreign (mostly Beirut-based) publishers by an Egyptian publishing industry that had been essentially appropriated by the Nasserist state. [40] In this context, the emergent Sixties Generation (jīl al-sittīnāt) – some of them straight out of prison – developed their voices in the experimental

[40] Elisabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde Intersection in Egypt*, 84–85; Yasmine Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization."

margins, away from the institutions they came to hold responsible for the 1967 defeat and the state's authoritarianism. As many critics have already argued in English and Arabic, this Sixties Generation ushered in a turning point in Egyptian literature, marking a break with the social realism of the 1950s and developing an avant-garde style that would dominate the second half of the century.[41] As Ramadan outlines, this generation was immediately and self-consciously recognized for its youth as 'the Young Litterateurs' (al-udabāʾ al-shabāb), a framing that posed them as the disrupters of established literary institutions, styles, and values.[42] Indeed, the break with 1950s socialist realism and Maḥfūẓian modernism was prompted by the Sixties Generation's complicated disillusionment with the postcolonial national project. Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, himself an older member of the Sixties Generation, wrote perhaps the most significant study of their new literary currents. His analysis in *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda* (The New Sensibility) outlines five major currents: reification (tayyār al-tashayyuʾ), interiority (al- tayyār al-dākhilī), revitalizing heritage (tayyār istīḥāʾ al-turāth), magical realism (al-tayyār al-wāqiʿī al-siḥrī), and neo-realism (al-tayyār al-wāqiʿī al-jadīd).[43] While these currents span a broad scope of literary approaches and narrative aesthetics, they point to a generational reimagining of literary commitment and critique beyond the forms of socialist realism and iltizām that had come to dominate the Nasserist literary sphere.

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[41] See: Sabry Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7 (1976): 68–84; Elisabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde Intersection in Egypt* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2006); Yasmine Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization 1," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2012): 409–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341242; Yasmine Ramadan, *Space in Modern Egyptian Fiction*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993).

[42] Ramadan, *Space in Modern Egyptian Fiction*, 4.

[43] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993), 15.

The young Egyptian authors of the Sixties Generation (Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Bahāʿ Ṭāhir, Raḍwa ʿĀshūr, Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, ʿAbd al-Hakīm Qāsim, Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Rajab, Yaḥya Ṭāhir ʿAbdallāh, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna, et al.) pioneered these new literary symbols, aesthetics, and forms out of their disillusionment with the Nasserist state and their own marginalization from the state-dominated cultural industries.[44] Their formal experimentations emerged out of the collapse of state socialist ideology and the social(ist) realist dialectic of representing reality and changing it in favor of the New Sensibility's bolder, though in a certain sense less engaged, rejection of that old reality.[45] The Sixties Generation's break with social(ist) realism constituted a new critical perspective (ruʾiya) and position (mawqif), to borrow al-Kharrāṭ's words.[46] Al-Kharrāṭ's language here repurposes Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim and ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs's vocabulary of engaged realist fiction. They write,

> في التعبير الأدبي عامة هناك دائما اختيار لزاوية رؤية وزاوية موقف، وهناك تشكيل وصياغة لهذه الزاوية[47]

> In literary expression generally, there is always a choice of perspective (zāwiyat ruʾiya) and positionality (zāwiyat mawqif), and there is a formation and composition of this perspective and position.

By echoing this language, al-Kharrāṭ places the New Sensibility in a tradition of iltizām, though recalibrated in the shadow of 1967 to elevate the liberal notion of "the freedom of the artist

[44] Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization"; Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties."

[45] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993), 11.

[46] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993), 12.

[47] Anīs and al-ʿĀlim, *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya*, 20.

(ḥuriyyat al-fannān)" and to retreat away from the revolutionary nation-building projects of Arab Nationalism.[48]

Here I should emphasize that the 1967 Naksa marks a culture-wide event, felt immediately in politics, e.g., Nasser's unfulfilled resignation; poetry, e.g., Nizār Qabbānī's scathing "Hawāmish ʿala daftar al-naksa" (Footnotes to the Naksa, 1967); and cultural criticism, e.g., Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm's *al-Naqd al-dhātī baʿd al-hazīma* (Self-Critique after the Defeat, 1968). However, literature authored in the interim between the communists' arrest and the 1967 defeat pioneered the alienated politics and aesthetics that would become definitive of post-1967 literature. Works such as Shawqī ʿAbd al-Karīm's *Aḥzān Nūḥ* (Noah's Sorrows, 1964), Maḥmūd Diyāb's *al-Ẓilāl fī al-jānib al-ākhar* (The Shadow on the Other Side, 1963), Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-Rāʾiḥa* (That Smell, 1966), ʿInayyāt al-Zayyāt's *al-Ḥubb wa-l-Ṣamt* (Love and Silence, 1967), et al. point to the centrality of Nasser's imprisonment of the communists in sparking the hallmark social and political alienation of the post-defeat overhaul of Arabic letters. This intellectual and political history points to a political and ideological crisis – not merely a question of military strength – at the center of the problematic of committed literature after 1967: its extensive entanglement with Arab Nationalism and the authoritarian Nasserist state. Therefore, we can sympathize with the post-1967 political imperative to redefine iltizām beyond nationalism or simply turn away from it entirely. This imperative underlies Jūrj Ṭarābīshī's discussion of iltizām as something to be liberated from,[49] lest commitment alienate the writer as

[48] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, "Kull minnā multazim," *Taḥawwulāt fī mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*, ed. Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 73.

[49] Jūrj Ṭarābīshī, "Shihādat naṣīr sābiq li-l-iltizām," *Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*, ed. Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 67.

she or he – in the words of Sartre – "submits to temporal powers or to an ideology,"[50] e.g., Arab Nationalism. Simply, iltizām had become synonymous with state ideology. Furthermore, the post-defeat shift away from a notion of iltizām steeped in Arab Nationalism toward a politically plural (and also more ambiguous) conception of iltizām, such as Fayṣal Darrāj's

الالتزام بالدفاع عن كرامة الإنسان

commitment to the defense of human dignity

and

الالتزام بالحقيقة

commitment to truth

are in many ways more faithful to the individual freedom at the base of Sartre's theory of *littérature engagée*.[51] In Darrāj's words, this liberalized post-'67 conception of iltizām has

وعي أكثر ارتقاء وحس أرقى بالمسؤولية

a more refined awareness and higher sense of responsibility.[52]

As fitting as these new forms of iltizām may be, they belie a shift in temporal logic and political function, echoing the public experience of the defeat and the loss of socialist future-building. Namely, the shift here is from representing reality in order to change it – which was central to al-ʿĀlim and Anīs's theorization of committed socialist realism and entailed a revolutionary relationship to the past, present, and future[53] - toward revealing and exposing

[50] Sartre, "*What Is Literature?*, 134.

[51] Fayṣal Darrāj, "Mā maʿnā al-iltizām fī zaman maqūḍ?" *Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*, ed. Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 195.

[52] Fayṣal Darrāj, "Mā maʿnā al-iltizām fī zaman maqūḍ?" *Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*, ed. Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 196.

[53] ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs, "Fī al-adab al-wāqiʿī," *Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya*, al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 1989), 31-34.

reality in order to mourn it or critique it. This is precisely the shift from commitment to critique, which occurs as the Left separates itself from the institutional and political domination of the Egyptian state – or, at least to the extent that such a separation is feasible in Egypt's state-dominated cultural field. Darrāj describes this critical afterlife of iltizām as differing from pre-1967 iltizām:

> فعوضاً عن التزام تمليه المبادئ، الأخلاقية المجردة والتحزب الأيديولوجي الصريح، جاء التزام جديد تنتجه بنية النص الأدبية، التي تحتضن الواقع في عريه، وتنفذ إلى قرار الواقع بأدوات وصيغ فنية. وهذا ما يمكن أن يدعى ب"الالتزام بالحقيقة"، رغم اضطراب العبارة، ونتج عن ذلك التمحور حول الحاضر وتكثيف كل الأزمنة فيه كما لو كان الحاضر هو الزمن الوحيد الذي يليق بالكتابة الأدبية. وهذا ما جعل النص الأدبي "يؤرخ" وقائع الستينات والسبعينات والثمانينات، بمواضيعها الممتدة من القمع والنفط إلى فساد الأرواح والمؤسسات وانتشار أيديولوجيا الاستهلاك.[54]

> In place of an iltizām filled with values – those abstract moral values and overt ideological partisanship – came a new iltizām produced by the literary structure of the text which embraces reality in its nakedness and penetrates the fixity of reality with artistic techniques and forms. And this is what might be called "commitment (iltizām) to truth," despite its muddled phrasing, from which the present emerged as an axis of revolution upon which all times are compressed as if the present were the only temporality suited to literary writing. And this is what caused literary texts to "historicize" the events of the sixties, seventies, and eighties – stretching from oppression and oil to the corruption of souls and institutions and the spread of the ideology of consumption.

Darraj's insistence upon the centrality of elegy or mourning (al-rithāʾ) in this triangulation between commitment to truth, literature, and history is telling.[55] Mourning becomes central because the future is blocked: "there are no promises (fa-lā wuʿūd)."[56] Darrāj's notion of the "collapsed time" (zaman mutadahwir) of mourning is stalled out and defeated, the future stalled,

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[54] Fayṣal Darrāj, "Mā maʿnā al-iltizām fī zaman maqūḍ?" *Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*, ed. Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 195.

[55] Fayṣal Darrāj, 196.

[56] Fayṣal Darrāj, 196.

the wounds of history lingering, and the present all-consuming.[57] I argue, though, that the barrenness of the future in this temporal logic and the political defeat it expresses should not be overlooked simply because commitment to truth is more responsible or honest than Arab Nationalist ideology and earlier aesthetic forms of iltizām. The formal inventiveness of the Sixties Generation's New Sensibility is, historically speaking, occasioned by a major setback for the political stakes of Egyptian literature: political disillusionment, military defeat, and the end of Egypt's socialist project coincided with the exposure of individual freedom as an urgent and neglected issue. Valorizing individual freedom does not alter the fact that socialism and national liberation were/are no longer futures to be made but defeats to be mourned.

From this perspective, we might legitimately critique the ideological dogma of pre-1967 iltizām and its overt links to the Nasserist regime. However, we should also interrogate the ideological ambivalence – so characteristic of neoliberal literature – of the retreat to a present-focused liberal individualism not just as a principled commitment to human dignity but also as submitting to the historical and political defeat of socialist and nationalist projects, i.e., as the triumph of a neoliberal order. The turn to neoliberalism, reflected in the scaled-back stakes of literature, have had disastrous consequences for politics and culture alike. As Ilyās Khūrī describes, the post-1967 ascendance of liberalism amongst Arab intellectuals marked the retreat from the Arab Nationalist project and left political Islam as the only viable alternative.[58] The Left was sidelined while religious fundamentalism waxed ascendent. In effect, these altered stakes of

[57] Fayṣal Darrāj, 195.

[58] Ilyās Khūrī, "Thaqāfat mā baʿd al-iltizām," Bidāyāt, no. 7 (2014), https://www.bidayatmag.com/node/159.

literature marked a retreat from socialist future-building in politics and literature alike, a double defeat captured in Nizār Qabbānī's biting line,

لقد خسرت الحرب مرتين[59]

Twice you've lost the war.

The central argument of *Left Behind* emerges from the idea that the literary Left did not simply surrender to the neoliberal triumph. There are works of literature that move beyond neoliberalism, see through it, and critique it. Thus, despite the political capitulations, disillusionment, and rents that emerged in the fallout of the 1967 defeat, the notion of iltizām in socialism and national liberation was not abandoned by all. Iltizām did, however, shift from forms of commitment associated with institutions of power and influence to forms of critique associated with dissent and resistance. In its critical afterlives, iltizām animates a major literary countercurrent in the works of Sixties Generation icons Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm and Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, Seventies Generation Student Movement activists Salwa Bakr, Arwa Ṣāliḥ, and Ahdaf Soueif, and writers who have emerged in the aftermath of 2011 like Nādiya Kāmil and Muḥammad Rabīʿ, among others.

The critical afterlives of iltizām developed in a dramatically changed political context, a context fundamentally shaped by defeat and despair. This reality shapes the form and function of the critical and literary writings in *Left Behind*. The relationship between the literary Left and the Nasserist state – which despite its tensions resulted in a flourishing of Leftist (and at times propagandist) literature and culture – was pushed to the brink by the late 1960s and fully broken under Sadat. Sadat's infitāḥ and promotion of conservative political and social orthodoxy pushed the literary Left decidedly into a critical position of opposition to the state. Many Leftist writers

[59] Nizār Qabbānī, "Hawāmish ʿalā daftar al-naksa."

and journalists were purged from newspapers and cultural posts in Sadat's swift crackdown on the Left. This Leftist opposition was largely based upon objections to the neoliberal opening (infitāḥ) that began in 1973. The Camp David Accords of 1978 further clarified the extent to which Sadat's policies were a reversal of Nasser's engagement with the decolonizing, Cold-War world. Sadat was abandoning Arab Nationalism on all fronts by embracing American-led capitalism and 'normalizing' relationships with Israel. During the 1970s, in the context of this grand geopolitical reset, Sadat encouraged Islamists as a way of weakening the Left by proxy.[60] The Islamicization of public culture in Neoliberal Egypt alongside the state's retreat from the socialist policies that supported the urban working class and peasants – two trends that mutually reinforced one another – created a major rupture in the demographics of the Left and Egyptian politics at large. During the 1970s, urban Leftist intellectuals grew increasingly alienated from the masses of workers and peasants they claimed to represent,[61] a trend that intensified as secularism and Islamism opened up further rifts in Egyptian culture. Meanwhile, some Leftists jumped ship to Islamism, a phenomenon explored in Makkāwī Saʿīd's *Taghrīdat al-Bajaʿa* (Cairo Swan Song, 2008). That Saʿīd's former Leftist turns to a politicized Islamism is an important development from, for example, the Leftist-turned-Sufi who withdraws from politics in Maḥfūẓ's *al-Shaḥḥādh* (The Beggar, 1965) or the impotent malaise of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's autobiographical protagonist – a communist just released from Nasser's prisons – in *Tilka al-Rāʾiḥa* (1966). This is to say that the political-cultural landscape of Neoliberal Egypt was and remains markedly different from the Nasser era. The neoliberal state is antagonistic to socialism

[60] Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt*, 185.

[61] Gennaro Gervasio, "Marxism of Left-Wing Nationalism? The New Left in Egypt in the 1970s," in *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s-1970s*, ed. Laure Guirguis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 152.

while Islamism threatens to derail the class-political core of the Left's critique of neoliberalism by forcing the issue of secularism.

The issue of secularism has posed immense challenges for the critique of neoliberalism in Egypt. The secularism-Islamism prism of political debate that was prominent in the 1990s and into the 2000s – a result of neoliberal sociopolitical and economic transformations – was framed by the Egyptian state (and in academic studies) as enlightenment (tanwīr) vs. obscurantism (ẓalām), thus pitting secular liberals and their statist allies against Islamists.[62] This framing further sidelined class-political critiques of Neoliberal Egypt by producing an 'enlightened' nationalist cultural alliance between the authoritarian state and a wide sector of the secular intellectual elite.[63] The neoliberal paradox at the height of the Mubarak presidency was continued privatization, an ascendent cultural liberalism alongside an undercurrent of religious fundamentalism, and state control over culture, information, and civil society.[64] The reality of Islamists' growing cultural influence in neoliberalism has pushed liberals, seculars, and even some Leftists into an uncomfortable alliance with the authoritarian state, which they view as the lesser evil and protector from further Islamicization.[65] It should be emphasized that these 'enlightenment' cultural politics buttress the state's authoritarianism and all but give up on class

[62] Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Enlightenment on the Eve of the Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[63] The state's role as protector of 'enlightened' culture was promoted in such projects as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (built 1995-2002), the pet project of President Hosni Mubarak and especially First Lady Suzanne Mubarak.

[64] Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2008), 27.

[65] This characterizes Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's position. It is less an endorsement of the al-Sīsī regime than a stance against the Muslim Brotherhood.

critique by redirecting political and intellectual energy toward discussions of national identity, religion and secularism, etc. The Left lost ground as intellectuals were drawn into these debates on terms amenable to the authoritarian state. Secular intellectuals found themselves pantomiming the Left's old dance with Nasser but this time with a shared enemy (Islamists) instead of a shared goal (socialism). All the while, the military was inserting itself into every corner of the private sector, such that a tremendously wealthy corps of "neoliberal officers" dominated swaths of the economy and deepened the regime's investment in the neoliberal order, further fueling inequality, fracturing society, and alienating many.[66]

In this context of an increasingly unequal and fractured society, an entrenched army-backed neoliberalism, and the retreat from class politics, the 1990s saw the emergence of young authors whose work turned inward and disengaged from the major political struggles that had defined Egyptian literature until then: nationalism, socialism, commitment, and disillusionment with state authoritarianism. This Nineties Generation was led by women including Nūrā Amīn, Mayy al-Tilmisānī, Mīrāl al-Ṭaḥāwī, Sumaya Ramaḍān, and Īmān Mirsāl. Despite their success, they faced criticism from the literary establishment for shifting politics toward the personal. They neglected "the major issues" (al-qaḍāyā al-kubrā) and their work was received pejoratively as "girls' writing" (kitābat al-banāt).[67] The political and aesthetic shift these writers made centered upon the role of the body, especially the female body. For this reason, their literature was described controversially as "writing the body" (kitābat al-jasad).[68] This type of language cast these authors as central to the ongoing gendered debates surrounding religion, secularism,

[66] Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation*, 72.

[67] El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel*, 145.

[68] El Sadda, 145.

and social conservatism, while diminishing the way they meaningfully contributed to the broader project of reframing the theories and aesthetics of iltizām's critical afterlives.

At issue in these debates was whether these women's often semi-autobiographical writing constituted a meaningful literary project despite its disengagement from broader class or national politics. In truth, this generation's approach to literature fit within the broader post-defeat iterations of iltizām in Neoliberal Egypt – iterations which were not always critical of the neoliberal turn or the retreat from class and national politics. The stakes and ambitions of engaged literature were rerouted toward concerns for truth and human dignity. The controversy surrounding this literature was surely in part because these were women – not men – writing about the female body. But it was also due to Sixties Generation authors and critics – now the literary establishment – failing to acknowledge a new approach to literature and politics pioneered by writers for whom Neoliberal Egypt was not a political pivot away from socialism, but the only Egypt they had ever known. The Nineties Generation was the first to come of age after infitāḥ, and their notion of politics was built upon this experience – markedly different from the socialism and anti-colonial nationalism of the Sixties Generation. By the 1990s, politics was already in ideological retreat, so this generation's disengagement from 'the major issues' was not really shocking. What separated them from earlier generations was how their personal-is-political approach assumed – in a way that affirms neoliberal logic – the failure of past ideological politics as accomplished fact rather than a loss to be mourned or a cause to revitalize. Their focus on the body as a locus of politics also fit well within an ascendant feminist vocabulary that speaks the discourse of human rights.[69]

[69] See, for example : Nūrā Amīn, *Fann al-muṭālaba bi-l-ḥaqq: al-masraḥ al-miṣrī al-muʿāṣir wa-ḥuqūq al-insān* (Cairo: Markaz al-qāhira li-dirāsāt ḥuqūq al-insān, 2000).

Nūrā Amīn is exemplary of this generational shift. She develops the notion of embodied feminist politics in her literature, critical writing, and theatre. Amīn credits her training as a dancer with her early awareness of the body's role in mediating her social experience as a woman.[70] Given this background in an embodied approach to artistic expression, it is not surprising that she has gone on to a successful career in theater. Her debut novel, *Qamīṣ wardī fārigh* (An Empty Pink Shirt, 1997) is a self-aware reflection upon the process of writing about love and transgressing gendered social norms. The importance of the novel lies in Amīn's attempts to push beyond idealized conceptions of masculinity and femininity in writing about love. Amīn does not shy away from the shift in aesthetics and politics she makes in her literature. She describes the politics of committed literature (adab al-iltizām) as a "trap" (fakhkh).[71] Moreover, she argues that historical, political, and social circumstances have changed so fundamentally that "collective commitment" (iltizām jamāʿī) or any form of "commitment toward the collective" (iltizām naḥwa al-jamāʿa) no longer informs the writing process.[72] The author is no longer moved by his/her "vanguard responsibility" (al-masʾūliyya al-ṭalīʿiyya), but

أصبح الكاتب مجرد فرد لا يجسد إلا فرديته في مواجهة أفراد آخرين.[73]

> The author has become merely an individual who only embodies his or her individuality in the face of other individuals.

[70] Nora Amin, Video Interview: Nora Amin, 2016, https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/interweaving-performance-cultures/fellows/fellows_2017_2018/nora_amin/Video-Interview-Nora-Amin/index.html.

[71] Nūrā Amīn, "al-Taḥawwul ḥawla al-mawt," *Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*, ed. Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 135.

[72] Nūrā Amīn, 137.

[73] Nūrā Amīn, 137.

For Amīn, laying claim to rights as an individual and to sovereignty over one's body is an inherently subversive political act in a neopatriarchal and authoritarian context. The body as a site that takes upon socio-political dimensions in literature – often as an expression of gendered alienation – is also portrayed in Mīrāl al-Ṭaḥāwī's *al-Khibāʾ* (The Tent, 1996), which explores the gendered confines of Bedouin society, and Mayy al-Tilmisānī's *Dunyāzād* (Dunyazad, 1997), which looks at the womb as an alienating site of life and death through the experience of miscarriage and stillbirth.

I argue that the Nineties Generation cohort of authors was central to reframing iltizām's aesthetics by centering the immediacy of the body as a contested field of politics in their literature. Their writing marks an important development in the relationship between sex, politics, and embodied affect in Egyptian literature. These are central aspects of iltizām's aesthetic and symbolic vocabulary. More importantly, these very aesthetic and symbolic dimensions are animating aspects of the literary critiques of neoliberalism explored in *Left Behind*. Even though these authors have a largely ambivalent rather than critical relationship to neoliberalism, they represent an important node in Egypt's literary history beside which I situate other authors' more direct critiques of the neoliberal order. Arwā Ṣāliḥ and Nādiya Kāmil reject the political symbolism of the female body, which is a simple yet significant departure from the literary history of iltizām. Ṣāliḥ, in particular, treats the individual and her embodied experiences as a source of critical knowledge in *al-Mubtasarūn* (The Stillborn, 1996). Her scathing Marxist critique of bourgeois marriage should be read in the broader context of the Nineties Generation's gendered interventions. Therefore, while I frame the gendered aesthetic, symbolic, and formal dimensions of the Left literary critique traced in *Left Behind* as emerging from the lineage of the literary Left stretching back to Nasser-era iltizām, the same gendered dimensions might be

viewed alternatively in the specific context of neoliberalism. The Nineties Generation's role in articulating the (gendered) body as a field of politics (largely separate from class politics) demonstrates how these gendered dimensions of literature, with their varied political and critical orientations, offer a rich snapshot of the literary aesthetics of neoliberalism.

Not all authors made the aesthetic shift toward a body-conscious politics of the personal. Older politically engaged authors maintained their insistence upon the centrality of the 'major issues' of socialism and national liberation, issues made more pressing given the political and cultural shifts that resulted from infitāḥ. One example is Salwa Bakr, a communist and student activist in the Student Movement of 1971-72 who was also imprisoned for her role in the steel workers' strike of 1989.[74] Bakr's fiction pays attention to the way political shifts – namely the neoliberal turn of infitāḥ - have harmed the poor in particular.[75] She portrays poor and working-class women's alienation as fundamentally linked to class. As Hoda Elsadda notes, these characters possess an "awareness derived from the wisdom of experience and an instinct that manages to escape unscathed from the distortions and falsifications that have touched broad segments of society, especially the middle class."[76] For Bakr, the class consciousness of the poor illuminates the forms of oppression women face.

Perhaps no author has continually reinvented the aesthetic critique of neoliberalism as successfully as Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm. For Ibrāhīm, the 1990s – precisely when much of Egyptian literature was migrating away from a political critique of infitāḥ and its consequences – were a

[74] Aḥmad Zakariyā "Salwā Bakr…kātibat al-nisāʾ al-ʿashwāʾiyyāt," *al-ʿArabī al-jadīd*, July 16, 2014, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/سلوى-بكر-كاتبة-النساء-العشوائيات.

[75] Hoda Elsadda, "Egypt," in *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999*, ed. Radwa Ashour, Ferial J Ghazloul, and Hasna Reda-Mekdashi, trans. Mandy McClure (American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2008), 138–39.

[76] Elsadda, 139.

crucial decade in his literary trajectory of insisting upon politics' enduring relevance. During these years he published *Dhāt* (Zaat, 1992) and *Sharaf* (Honor, 1997). *Sharaf*, especially, is notable for its use of sexual symbolism as an overt political critique. These works mark a shift in Ibrāhīm's oeuvre from depictions of disillusioned Leftists and critiques of authoritarianism – as in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* (That Smell, 1966) and *al-Lajna*, (The Committee, 1981), for example – toward a more direct critique of the consumerism and neoliberal capitalism of post-infitāḥ Egypt. *Dhāt* – meaning 'self' – follows the life of its eponymous anti-heroic protagonist whose life is marked by apathy, despite the newspaper headlines of corruption and scandal that literally interrupt the narrative. Yoav Di-Capua reads Dhāt's character as emblematic of an ahistorical traumatized subjectivity whose roots are obscured.[77] At issue in *Dhāt* is not a disillusioned intellectual in an alienating and ambivalent society as in *Tilka al-Rāʾḥa.* As Di-Capua states, "In *Dhāt* the entire social body and the protagonists' environment are infected by trauma."[78] Sabry Hafez has described the 1990s Egyptian novel as "the novel of the closed horizon," for the way neoliberal economic policies have created the "intolerable condition" of social and subjective alienation.[79] *Dhāt* expresses this closed horizon not through the inward turn and embodied politics found in Amīn's *Qamīs Wardī Fārigh* and al-Tilmisānī's *Dunyāzād*, but by literally injecting the political (in the form of newspaper headlines) into the text of a traumatized subject and thereby historicizing the trauma that Dhāt herself cannot. Just as *Dhāt*'s narrative is framed "within the broader picture of neoliberal global politics," the international commodities and

[77] Yoav Di-Capua, "The Traumatic Subjectivity of Sun'Allāh Ibrāhīm's Dhāt," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 80–101, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006412X629719.

[78] Di-Capua, 101.

[79] Sabry Hafez, "The New Egyptian Novel: Urban Transformation and Narrative Form," *New Left Review*, no. 64 (August 2010): 62.

brands of Neoliberal Egypt's consumerism litter the text of *Sharaf* and anchor the novel's political thrust.[80] Sharaf – meaning 'honor' – is another eponymous protagonist. His struggle to defend his honor after he inadvertently kills the British tourist who attempted to rape him is stymied by his (and Egypt's) dependent position in global capitalism and the state's need to sacrifice Sharaf (the protagonist and his honor) lest Egypt appear unwelcoming to wealthy international tourists. The geopolitics of Sharaf's plight is signaled by the litany of foreign brands and consumer products, thus figuring consumer capitalism as a geopolitically charged – and unredressed – rape. Here the body is not a cite of social resistance, but the locus upon which capitalist inequality and authoritarian violence manifest upon the individual subject and citizen.

Iltizām in *Left Behind*

Left Behind traces an aesthetic genealogy of Left literary critique of Neoliberal Egypt. The relevance of iltizām to this genealogy may seem either self-evident or strained. On the one hand, in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat, iltizām has come under attack for its defense of and dependence upon the Nasserist state, so invoking it conjures up this burdensome baggage of the state-cultural apparatus, the state's repressive functions, and a generation of compromised collaborating intellectuals.[81] On the other hand, iltizām is perennially revitalized in scholarship even when the aesthetic and political connections between the historical theory and praxis of

[80] Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed, "Heterotopias of the Neoliberal Egyptian State in Sonallah Ibr's Narratives," *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 61, https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1549202.

[81] The following serve as examples of how, to varying degrees and ends, scholars emphasize the relationship between iltizām and state hegemony: Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde Intersection in Egypt*; Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization"; Di-Capua, *No Exit*; Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*, Translation/Transnation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

iltizām and its reincarnations are not always evident.[82] These two scholarly attitudes toward iltizām – first that it has been discredited, second that it has taken on vital new lives and forms – suggest divergent understandings of how literature and aesthetics intersect with politics and history. The dismissive perspective sees clearly in hindsight the political compromises inherent in iltizām and frame it as a state-sponsored aesthetic ideology, whereas the revitalizing perspective seeks to lay claim to a lineage of political engagement despite its baggage. I take cue from both perspectives.

To situate my approach vis à vis the dismissive camp, I will explore Robyn Creswell's 2019 monograph, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*. Creswell focuses on modernist poetry in Cold-War Beirut and argues that abstract poets like Adūnīs and Yūsuf al-Khāl of the *Shiʿr* journal formed something of an opposite pole to Idrīs's committed *al-Ādāb* and the theorists and practitioners of iltizām. As outlined above, that modernist and abstract poetry should stand in contrast to adab al-iltizām, which was dominated by the novel, points to the contemporaneity of multiple literary movements whose contours and points of divergence were intertwined with issues of genre.[83] Yet the points of divergence between modernist poetry and committed literature went beyond genre alone. Creswell argues that their contrasting literary forms expressed different orientations to the nation and Arabic literary heritage: the modernists looked expansively beyond both, whereas the committed novelists were constrained by the

[82] Two edited volumes serve as examples of theoretical revitalizations of iltizām and its legacy: Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth, ed. Muḥammad Barrāda (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003); Friederike Pannewick, Georges Khalil, and Yvonne Albers, eds., *Commitment and beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, Literaturen Im Kontext = Literatures in Context, vol. 41 (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015).

[83] It is interesting to note that the issue of genre – and the distinction between prose and surrealist poetry in particular – is a major focus of Sartre's theorization of littérature engagée. He argues that the poet does not utilize the written word in the same way as the prose writer. The poet does not share the same goal of communication. Therefore, the poet does not 'commit' in the same way as the engaged writer of prose.

nationalism of state culture. In such a framing, Creswell reads the weak Lebanese state and its laissez-faire policies as a refuge from the political overreaches of Nasserist Egypt: "In many histories, Lebanon in these two decades before the civil war was an oasis in the midst of an authoritarian wasteland."[84] This statement belies a notion of the postwar Arab world which completely elides the Maghrib (and its most prominent critic of iltizām, Tunisian Maḥmūd al-Masʿadī) and reduces the various Arabic literary cultures to the state-dominated monoliths of Nasserist Egypt and Baʿathist Syria. Despite this, Creswell's framing of Beiruti modernism in terms of Cold-War politics invites welcome literary debates regarding artistic freedom, the state, and covert campaigns of influence, e.g., the CIA's Congress for Cultural Freedom. Creswell finds fault with iltizām because it was weaponized politically, but he celebrates the artistic freedom and globally legible poetic modernism of contemporaneous Beirut-based writers whose work he frames in the explicitly ideological terms of Cold-War liberalism:

> The works of Arab modernism are heavily marked by this midcentury liberal imagination. In their poems and critical writings, abstract individualism is heroized, figures of collectivity are eschewed, local landscapes are sublimated or ignored, and the state is figured as a source of permanent threat. As if often the case of liberal art, the ideological content of Arabic modernist poems is most present where it is most strongly denied.[85]

Creswell asks us to overlook the ideological aspects of the Beiruti modernists' poetry and their international institutional backers,[86] but he treats the same ideological and institutional concerns in Egypt as proof of Nasserist Egypt being "an authoritarian wasteland" and the literature of iltizām tarnished.[87]

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[84] Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 4.

[85] Creswell, 10.

[86] Creswell, 10.

[87] Creswell, 4.

It appears that this double standard expresses not only a political preference for liberalism over the mix of nationalism and socialism underpinning iltizām; it also expresses an unspoken aesthetic taste that values poetic modernism over the symbols of iltizām. This aesthetic taste for modernism is contextualized by Creswell's framing this poetic movement almost exclusively with theoretical writing on European and global modernisms. Creswell's account of what he tellingly terms 'late modernism' versus state-sponsored literary commitment valorizes forms of poetic modernism that speak to an already established global (read: Western) literary canon and aesthetic vocabulary. He uses 'late modernism' to refer to "the historical moment – roughly, the quarter century following World War II, the earliest and most intense period of the Cold War – in which artistic modernism was formalized and made global."[88] Later he clarifies that late modernism's ideology of literary autonomy was paradoxically linked to the implicitly Western aesthetic standards of world literature:

> The claim of poetic autonomy would help [the modernists] radically alter the definition of Arabic poetry, in part by subjecting it to the standards of what the *Shiʿr* poets called 'world literature.' Late modernism is thus a moment of contraction, in which modernism is narrowed by virtue of its formal and ideological specificity but also of vertiginous expansion in geographical terms.[89]

Stated otherwise: modernist European poetic forms went global. Finally, Creswell's approach to Arabic 'late modernism' relies heavily on Adūnīs's poetic oeuvre yet rejects his signature and unorthodox thesis of modernity/modernism (al-ḥadātha) emerging from translation and cross-cultural exchange as being an animating characteristic of Arab-Islamic history and literary heritage, a thesis that would challenge the Eurocentrism of 'late modernism.'[90] I invoke these

[88] Creswell, 7.

[89] Creswell, 9.

[90] Creswell, 5n5.

details of how Creswell frames *City of Beginnings* to highlight divergent literary developments under way simultaneous to the rise of iltizām and to illustrate how unspoken aesthetic tastes can direct scholarship in particular directions, while obscuring or foreclosing other modes of reading, inquiry, and theorization. The potential of an approach grounded in the links between aesthetics, critique, and theories of literature is precisely why centering aesthetics in *Left Behind* has ramifications on literary movements – like poetic modernism – beyond the immediate issue of iltizām and its legacies.

I wish to make clear that while iltizām is partly a translation of a European theory (littérature engagée), my use of the term in *Left Behind* seeks to attend to its movement between languages by tracing iltizām's theorization, contours, and critical afterlives in the Arabic (specifically Egyptian) literary tradition. In turning to iltizām as a critical frame, I do not seek merely to force an outdated theoretical frame upon new literary works. I am interested in the ways iltizām outlives itself and permeates the forms, approaches, and literary critiques of the neoliberal era. As few readers long for the committed socialist-realist literature of iltizām's heyday, *Left Behind* is not driven by an aesthetic appreciation for the literature of iltizām. The critics and authors who seek to reframe and revitalize the intellectual and literary histories of iltizām are essentially united in rejecting the aesthetic and symbolic hegemony of this literary tradition as dogma. Ilyās Khūrī even writes of "post-iltizām culture" (thaqāfat mā baʿd al-iltizām).[91] The writers who continue to wrestle with iltizām are instead concerned with the issue of committed literature broadly defined, the post-defeat trajectories of committed literature, and specifically situated notions of commitment, e.g., personal, to truth, feminist, etc. This critical and theoretical literature of the revivalist trajectories of iltizām informs my approach to literary

[91] Ilyās Khūrī, "Thaqāfat mā baʿd al-iltizām," Bidāyāt, no. 7 (2014), https://www.bidayatmag.com/node/159.

texts in *Left Behind.* Of more immediately importance, however, is how the aesthetics and symbols of iltizām – its network of sexual-political symbolism first and foremost – continue to permeate Arabic literature and modes of reading it, despite the fact that iltizām no longer maintains the ideological grip on Arabic literature that it did during the Nasser era. I am specifically invested in the aesthetic and symbolic purchase of iltizām in the neoliberal era. I am concerned with the modes of political critique iltizām offers the authors who integrate, distort, and disturb the modes of writing and reading marked by its legacy.

Iltizām is a rather uneasy literary theory and form from which to draw inspiration and claim critical and aesthetic lineage. I refer here, of course, to the state's hegemony during the Nasser era, which extended to literary and cultural production. Given the intense authoritarianism in present-day Egypt, I do not invoke this legacy lightly. Yet, it seems undeniable that the debates about political commitment and realism in literature alongside the innovations in narrative literary form in the 1950s that gave way to the aesthetics of iltizām forged a sexual-political symbolic vocabulary that endures through the present. I refer especially to romanticized and nationalist forms of masculinity,[92] feminine sacrifice,[93] and the masculinist visions of the female body as representing the nation.[94] These symbolic forms continue to shape modes of reading and writing Arabic literature. By this I mean that even the literary works – such as those studied in this dissertation – that stage critical breaks with the idealized representations of masculinity, femininity, romance, the nation, and the symbolism of the body do so as critical

[92] E.g., Yūsuf al-Sibāʿī's Rudda qalbī (1954), which was made into a film in 1957 and broadcast annually on the anniversary of the Free Officers' Coup (see Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, 147); and differently ʿInāyyāt al-Zayyāt's al-Ḥubb wa-l-samt (1967).

[93] E.g., Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* (1960).

[94] E.g., ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Arḍ* (1952), Yūsuf Idrīs's *al-Ḥarām* (1959), and differently Najīb Maḥfūẓ's Mīrāmār (1967).

deformations of such ideals. Even in its rejection and critical deformation, the symbolic vocabulary of iltizām is given a second life, if only as referent. Moreover, given the extent to which the female body has been made into a nationalist political symbol (almost exclusively by male writers), even literature which conjures the female body to ends seemingly unrelated to the political concerns of iltizām is burdened by allegorical modes of reading. Therefore, I see the legacy of iltizām most clearly in sexual-political symbolism and allegorical modes of interpretation. This aesthetic legacy is quite different from the revitalizing impulse to read politically engaged literature through the political-critical legacy of iltizām, which – as stated above – is complex and compromised.

A central ambition of *Left Behind* is to robustly attend to literary aesthetics, symbolism, and modes of interpretation. There are several reasons this is important. Firstly, the scholarly-literary critical apparatus continues to be dominated by European and Eurocentric critical approaches that valorize particular aesthetic forms that speak to a world-literary tradition dominated by Europe. I do not believe this is merely an issue of aesthetics but also one inflected by politics that shapes our historical and cultural narratives and critiques of modernity. Secondly, and on a related note, the endurance of Fredric Jameson's Third-World allegory casts a haunting shadow over the literature of iltizām. While scholars have taken Jameson to task for collapsing the histories and literatures of the Third World, for conflating socialism and anti-colonial nationalism, or for privileging Western sites of reading, his article's core ambition remains productive: to read the sexual-political symbolism of national allegory through a lens explicitly concerned with political economy, i.e., multinational capitalism.[95] In today's parlance we might

[95] Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. No. 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–88; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*, Radical Thinkers 25 (London ; New York: Verso, 2008).

call this a lens concerned with globalized neoliberalism. With Jameson in mind, I turn to the critical legacy of iltizām – its literary aesthetics, symbolism, and interpretive modes – as a source for theorizing and critiquing neoliberalism in Egypt.

Finally, given the gendered nature of the intellectual and literary histories of iltizām, *Left Behind* is necessarily invested in sex and gender as sites and modes of critique. Sexual-political symbolism is a primary inheritance of iltizām, which I trace through its critical deformations and intensifications in Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad Rabīʿ. The gendered legacy of iltizām is also operative in less overt yet perhaps more critically weighty ways. Here I refer to how the gendered logic of iltizām's symbolic and aesthetic vocabulary almost invariably belies a male subject. *Left Behind* traces epistemic and linguistic interventions in iltizām's literary aesthetics and forms, interventions by Arwā Ṣāliḥ and Nādiya Kāmil that stage critiques of iltizām and Egypt's neoliberal era driven by gendered affect. I read these innovative and gendered critiques as rejections of the inherited symbolic approach to the female body in Egyptian literature. The contours of these literary critiques of neoliberalism are broad: gendered political and historical critique and innovative gendered literary form. I read them through the contested aesthetics and symbolic forms of iltizām, which still shape how we read, write, and critique literature.

Chapter 2: Collapsed Time and Critical Affect in Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67*

Introduction

Sunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's novella *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* (That Smell, 1966) tells of his disaffected relationship with Nasserist politics following his imprisonment, an experience shared by a large swath of the Egyptian Left in the early sixties. The novella inaugurated a new – particularly Egyptian – generation of Arabic literary aesthetics of despair and disgust. Central to this project were the dysfunctional sexual symbolism and exhausted affect of political alienation and disillusionment. Ibrāhīm's second novella, *67* (written 1968, published 2017), furthers this project, this time addressing the social reverberations of the 1967 Arab defeat. These first-person narratives with their dry, straightforward language are intensely centered around the immediate present of the narrator. Indeed, their language is so compressed upon the narrator's present that past memories emerge only as fleeting appendages to the hyper-present narrative stream. The future has been completely excised. The erasure of the future, both narratively and ideologically – i.e., as the hallmark of a progressive or revolutionary political project – contextualizes the disgusting bodily, sexual, and social behaviors and descriptions that stand out in both works. For Ibrāhīm, masturbation, sexual harassment, and bloody bug-bites are physiological manifestations of social and political stagnation and corruption. Disgusting aesthetics and an exhausted narrative stalled out in the present combine to form Ibrāhīm's portrait not only of a society which has lost its direction, but also of a political reality so desperate that its critique is not found in the revolutionary and progressive future-oriented visions that marked the previous decades of national liberation. Rather, the symbolism and exhausted aesthetics of Ibrāhīm's works force us

to confront how literary forms of commitment (iltizām) and critique might function in the absence of a progressive promise of futurity.

Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm and the Sixties Generation

Sunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's debut novella, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* is virtually devoid of a plot. It is the story of a political prisoner on parole who visits family and meanders through Cairo seemingly without emotion. *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* is widely considered to be an early example of a Sixties-Generation mood of disenchantment in Arabic literature, a mood that would rise to prominence in the wake of the 1967 defeat (al-hazīma).[1] As many critics have already argued in English and Arabic, this Sixties Generation (jīl al-sittīnāt) ushered in a turning point in Egyptian literature, marking a break with the social realism of the 1950s and developing an avant-garde style that would dominate the second half of the century.[2] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ outlines five major currents of the New Sensibility: reification, interiority, revitalizing heritage, magical realism, and neo-realism.[3] While these currents span a broad scope of literary approaches, they point to a generational reimagining of literary commitment and critique beyond the forms of socialist realism and iltizām that had come to dominate the Nasserist literary sphere. This generation's complex relationship to these dominant literary forms in addition to the politics of the 1950s

[1] Paul Starkey, *Sunʿallāh Ibrahim: Rebel with a Pen*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 11.

[2] See: Sabry Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7 (1976): 68–84; Elisabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde Intersection in Egypt* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2006); Yasmine Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization 1," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2012): 409–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341242; Yasmine Ramadan, *Space in Modern Egyptian Fiction*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhīra al-qaṣṣaṣiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993).

[3] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhira al-qaṣaṣiyya (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993), 15.

were ambivalent and unresolved. We might read Ben Hammed's assessment of Ibrāhīm's alternating identification and disenchantment with the Nasserist state in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* as emblematic of this ambivalence: "The novel delivers its critique of repression and political stagnation in the later period of the Nasserite state without, however, disputing its ideological capital."[4] We could take this statement further by arguing that the Sixties Generation's discontent with the state's repression and stagnation extended to literary institutions. As Sabry Hafez writes, "During this decade, there was no public activity not subject to official control."[5] As I showed in Chapter 1, theorizations of iltizām, especially in 1950s Egypt, were explicitly linked to socialist-realist form and Arab Nationalist politics. Therefore, the Sixties Generation's break with the aesthetics of iltizām and socialist realism carried profound political weight.

In 1959 Nasser's increasingly authoritarian regime arrested a huge swath of the communist Left, including Ibrāhīm. He and his comrades remained imprisoned until they were released *en masse* in advance of Krushchev's visit to Egypt in a bid to secure Soviet favor and funds to build the Aswan High Dam. Nasser's popularity soared in Egypt and throughout the Arab world during this time. Charismatic and socialist, Nasser was not a natural enemy of the communists. However, Nasser's authoritarian tendencies proved stronger than any potential for Left-regime political unity. Nasser's imprisonment and sometimes torture of the Egyptian Left created a lasting ambivalence: Many communists were 'appropriated' by the Nasserist state, employed in the Ministry of Culture or offered other positions in the bureaucracy. Others stepped away from the increasingly confined space of independent politics, disaffected, or joined a

[4] Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed, "Heterotopias of the Neoliberal Egyptian State in Sunʿallāh Ibrahim's Narratives," *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 56–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1549202.

[5] Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties," 68.

professional cadre of culture-industry and NGO-industry types. In any case, a profound compromise, disaffection, or disengagement followed the communists' release from prison. At issue for Ibrāhīm and his peers was their frayed relationship to Nasser's Arab Nationalist state, state culture and institutions. This caused them to rethink the aesthetics and politics of literature, dominated by the debates and practices of iltizām, and to innovate alternative modes of representing and critiquing social reality through literature. Indeed, in the introduction to the 1982 reprint of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, Ibrāhīm acknowledges that the novella emerged out of the political and ideological contradictions of the Nasserist regime, between Nasser's vocal anti-colonial socialism and the torture Ibrāhīm experienced at the hands of the very regime that should have been his ideological ally.[6] It is important to situate *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* in the aftermath of this confrontation between Nasser and the communist Left several years before June 1967 because it emphasizes the Left's drawn-out process of losing political faith in Nasser's Arab Nationalist state – faith that was not suddenly shattered with the Arab defeat in 1967 but which unraveled in an increasingly authoritarian political atmosphere. Parallel to this, the theories and practices of engaged socialist realism were growing increasingly out of touch with the experiences of the political and literary Left, even before 1967. When theorizing engaged socialist realism in 1955, Anīs justifies his and al-ʿĀlim's engaged approach on the grounds that:

> هذه هي النظرة الوحيدة التي تحترم حياة الإنسان وتؤمن بمستقبله، وهي نظرة تجعل من صناعة الأدب رسالة، ومن الأديب رسولاً مسؤولاً.
>
> This is the only approach which respects the life of man and believes in his future. It is an approach which forms a message out of literary production and out of an author a responsible messenger.[7]

[6] Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa: wa-qiṣaṣ ukhrā*, al-ṭabʿa al-khāmisa (Cairo: Dār al-hudā li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2019), 13-16.

[7] ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs, "Fī al-Adab al-wāqiʿī," in Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya, al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 1989), 34.

The experience of Ibrāhīm and the imprisoned communists – brought into provocative fictional form in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* – points to a profound personal and political crisis stemming from the painful confrontation with the reality that Nasser's regime whose socialist vision of the future they embraced did not in fact 'respect the life of man.' Nasser imprisoning the Egyptian communists marked a turning-point in the political and literary relationship between iltizām and individual freedoms. This crisis of faith and commitment reached a wider swath of the Egyptian and Arab public with the 1967 defeat, but it was evident earlier. The urgent question for this generation and, indeed, the question this dissertation revives remains without a definitive answer: Is committed literature possible after the imprisonments of 1959-64 and the defeat of 1967? If so, to what does literature commit and in what forms? The fact that this question evades closure and that attempts to answer it lead to discussions of critique rather than commitment is, I think, proof of iltizām's dynamic role in driving innovations in Arabic literary form.

Deconstructing National Allegory

I have so far framed Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* as an intervention into the politics and aesthetics of socialist realism and iltizām. I seek to mobilize theorizations of these literary forms to approach a rather specific phenomenon that exists at the core of socialist realism and iltizām and animates a dominant mode of reading and interpreting Egyptian and, more broadly, Arabic literature: the progressive sexual-political symbolism of the national allegory. Overtly gendered and sexualized allegories of the nation, national progress and liberation are a backbone of committed socialist-realist works like ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Arḍ* (The Land, 1954). They also inflected multiple novelistic genres and forms rooted in the realism of the late Nahḍa and nationalist periods such as bildungsroman, autobiography, and historical romance. Indeed, it

is not an exaggeration to say that gendered and sexualized allegory formed one of the dominant aesthetic-symbolic currents in the Arabic novel during the first half of the twentieth century, a period whose influence upon political consciousness, public culture, and literature is still felt today. Therefore, while the political implications of Ibrāhīm's aesthetic innovations are clearest in terms of their break with the committed socialist realism of Nasserist state culture, the formal and aesthetic aspects of these same innovations are starkest when viewed in relation to the progressive temporal logic of the sexual-political symbolism that runs through not just socialist realism but also the bildungsroman.

Indeed, there is a clear autobiographical bent to *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*: the first-person narrator has just been released from prison on parole. Though not stated explicitly, we understand him to be a Leftist political prisoner like Ibrāhīm. After the narrator denies a wide range of potential offenses, we assume political offenses landed him behind bars.[8] In another instance, the fiancé of the narrator's sister includes him in his 'you guys' (antum) when criticizing the socialists and their aspirations for the country's political economy:

> وقال: أنتم تريدون أن تنشروا الفقر. وقال: ليست أمامي فرصة للثراء. لو كوّنت أي شيء ستأخذه الحكومة.
>
> You guys want to spread poverty, he said. There's no way for me to make money. If I build something, the government will take it away.[9]

This autobiographical aspect of the novella, made plain by Ibrāhīm's own statements, has informed its reception and strengthened critics' politically inflected readings.[10] Additionally, critics like Paul Starkey point to Ibrāhīm's narrator as an anti-hero, the anti-hero being an aspect

[8] Ibrāhīm, Tilka al-rāiḥā, 30.

[9] Ibrāhīm, 45; Sonallah Ibrahim, *That Smell: And Notes from Prison*, trans. Robyn Creswell (New York: New Directions Pub, 2013), 39.

[10] For example: Firās ʿUbayid, al-Insān al-maqhūr fī adab Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm: ruʾiya sūsiyūlūjiyya naṣṣiyya (Acre: Muʾassasat al-aswār, 2001).

of what Hafez calls "the new Arabic novel's" aesthetic response to a transformed reality.[11] While keeping in mind the historical context of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa's* publication driving Starkey and Hafez's analyses, i.e., the in-between of Ibrāhīm's release from prison in 1964 and the Arab defeat in 1967, I wish to point out the important juncture *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* marks in terms of the bildungsroman and autobiography in the development of the Arabic novel.

The Arabic bildungsroman, which often contains vaguely autobiographical elements, often follows a common plot arc of the young Arab male student whose cultural and intellectual awakening is sparked by study and sex in Europe. Fayṣal Darrāj frames the linear and developmentalist temporal structure of these coming-of-age novels as being defined by "the promising young man (al-shabb al-wāʿid)."[12] Notable examples include Suhayl Idrīs's *Latin Quarter* (al-Ḥayy al-Lātīnī, 1953) and al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Season of Migration to the North* (Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamāl, 1966), though the progressive march of *Season* – published in 1966 like *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* – is interrupted by racist and patriarchal violence. Together, *Season* and *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* show how the progressive veneer of the sexual-political symbolic economy was cracking on multiple fronts during this time. The feminine corollary to this trend tends to frame the promising young woman – who doubles as the figure of the nation – in need of social liberation though her sexual desires are often left unfulfilled. This formula lends itself to a rather specific interpretation of national allegory whereby women's liberation is partial, bittersweet or

[11] Starkey, *Sonallah Ibrahim*, 41; Sabry Hafez, "The Transformation of Reality and The Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 57, no. 1 (1994): 110.

[12] Fayṣal Darrāj, *al-Dhākira al-qawmiyya fī al-riwāya al-ʿarabiyya: min zaman al-nahḍa ilā zaman al-suqūṭ* (Beirut: Markaz dirasāt al-waḥda al-ʿarabiyya, 2008), 13-14.

postponed.[13] Examples here include Emily Naṣrallāh's *September Birds* (Ṭuyyūr aylūl, 1962) and Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's *Open Door* (al-Bāb al-maftūḥ, 1960). *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* offers a stark contrast to the progressive temporal logic of the bildungsroman and its related sexual-political symbolic economy. Moreover, the breakdown of progressive unity of time and sexual-political symbolism in literature – i.e., the representation of sex as a way to discover the self and the other, as being linked to political progress and national sovereignty – is intimately bound to the political and aesthetic exhaustion of Arab Nationalism and state-sponsored forms of literary commitment, i.e., iltizām. This aesthetic and political exhaustion is precisely what Ibrāhīm inaugurates with *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and later *67*.

To make this temporal relationship between aesthetics and politics clear, let us turn to Ibrāhīm's notorious narrative style. Critics are quick to discuss Ibrāhīm's short sentences, his dry telegraphic style, and his dull yet direct descriptions of daily life. Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim refers to the language as "detailed reporting language (al-lugha al-taqrīriyya al-tafṣīliyya)."[14] Starkey describes the narrator's relationship to his environment as "almost totally mechanical or mechanistic" and Ibrāhīm's narrative style as "de-emotionalised."[15] In fact, Ibrāhīm seems to announce this de-emotionalized style in the novella's opening page, the narrator pondering:

> وفتشت في داخلي عن شعور غير عادي، فرح أو بهجة أو انفعال ما، فلم أجد. الناس تسير وتتكلم وتتحرك بشكل طبيعي كأنني كنت معهم دائماً ولم يحدث شيء.

[13] For a well theorized study of this phenomenon from a historian's perspective, see: Sara Pursley, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[14] Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, *Thulāthiyyat al-rafḍ wa-l-hazīma: dirāsa naqdiyya li-thalāth riwāyāt li-Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (Tilka al-rāʾiḥa / Najmat aghusṭus / al-Lajna)* (Cairo: Dār al-mustaqbal al-ʿarabī, 1985), 48.

[15] Starkey, *Sunʿallāh Ibrahim*, 41.

> I searched myself for some feeling that was out of the ordinary, some joy or delight or excitement, but found nothing. People walked and talked and acted as if I'd always been there with them and nothing had happened.[16]

Here the narrator alludes to the lack of social response to his imprisonment and his own lack of emotion. This sheer lack of emotion is perhaps achieved in part by what Starkey sees as the narrative's chronological sequence coming at the expense of its logical coherence.[17] His observation underscores the senseless routine of daily life, which the novella frames as the starts and fits of individual pleasure seeking, essentially a capitalist rhythm.

In a very attentive literary analysis, al-ʿĀlim sees Ibrāhīm's narrative style as dual: two styles run in parallel with the alternating roman and italicized typeface. The first style is the 'detailed reporting language' which al-ʿĀlim ascribes to the narrator's rejection of literary aesthetics more beautiful than the reality of life.[18] This is an assessment al-ʿĀlim links to the disgusting sexual descriptions that permeate the novel, a point to which we will return later. Ibrāhīm's second narrative style, according to al-ʿĀlim, takes the form of a mental reaction and consideration of the first, a sort of "language of dreams and memories (lughat al-aḥlām wa-l-dhikrayāt)."[19] Narrative time in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* is also articulated through this bifurcated narrative style. Without chapter breaks, the shifts in typeface – between roman and italics – become temporal markers, though not necessarily of any linear progression in time. Again, al-ʿĀlim sees a duality in the novella's time: horizontal time (al-zamān al-khaṭṭī al-ufuqī) and

[16] Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 27; Ibrahim, *That Smell*, 19.

[17] Starkey, *Sunʿallāh Ibrahim*, 41.

[18] Al-ʿĀlim, *Thulāthiyyat al-rafḍ wa-l-hazīma*, 48.

[19] Al-ʿĀlim, 51.

vertical time (al-zamān al-ʿumūdī).[20] Horizontal time, associated with the 'detailed reporting language,' presents events in a chronological sequence, proceeding toward the horizon of the future. Vertical time, on the other hand, is "the time of memories, dreams, and meditations (zamān al-dhikrayāt wa-l-aḥlām wa-l-taʾammulāt)," always a reaction to the more repetitive and routine horizontal time.[21] Additionally, al-ʿĀlim reads this horizontal-vertical temporal duality not merely as a structural narrative feature, but as key to the contradictions the narrator lives. He writes:

> لا يشكل مجرد ازدواجية في بنية زمان الرواية فحسب، بل يفجر تناقضا دلاليا بين الزمان الخارجي المرجع، والزمان الداخلي المُعاش.
>
> It does not merely form a duality in the structure of the novel's time; it cleaves open a contradiction in meaning between the [novella's] external temporal reference and [the narrator's] lived internal temporality.[22]

In short, he points to a clash in time between the novella's social-political context and its narrator's inner world, a clash pushed to further extremes in *67*.

This clash of temporalities in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* reflects the rupture of the notion of coherent progressive historical time, which had animated the Nahḍa and the very origins of the Arabic novel's biographical-biological temporality underpinning its sexual-political symbolic economy. Progress, coming of age, revolution, maturation, discovery, development, and liberation all require a seizing of the future or, at very least, a confident progressive march toward it. They evoke and depend upon a confident, even determined, notion of progress and development. This progressive temporality makes social and political projects like national liberation and socialism

[20] Al-ʿĀlim, 40.

[21] Al-ʿĀlim, 40.

[22] Al-ʿĀlim, 41.

coherent, logical, and even inevitable. But when this progressive temporality breaks down, future-oriented political visions stall out. David Scott describes the sort of 'rupture,' to borrow his term, with which Ibrāhīm's novella grapples,

> I believe that a deep *rupture* has occurred in this form of experience. There is, I think, a profound sense in which the once enduring temporalities of past-present-future that animated (indeed, that constructed, even *authorized*) our Marxist historical reason, and therefore organized and underwrote our ideas about historical change, no longer line up so neatly, so efficiently, so seamlessly, so instrumentally – in a word, so *teleologically* – as they once seemed to do. That old consoling sense of temporal *concordance* is gone.[23]

In Europe, the World Wars may have marked the beginning of this rupture in historical time, but the Arab experiences were different. Though the Maghrib and Mashriq did experience violence and occupation during World War II, the defining political and intellectual movements in the wake of the War were not tasked with coming to terms with the Enlightenment's collapse or Europe's barbarity, for that was quite apparent from the experience of colonization. Rather, the postwar period saw intensified momentum toward the progressive and revolutionary projects of national liberation and socialism. In the Arab world and the Third World broadly, history was being made tangibly and dramatically throughout the fifties and sixties.[24] In Egypt, Arab Nationalism drove this march. The temporal logic propelling humanity toward the horizon of history was certainly alive, not yet ruptured. This historical context only underscores the gravity of the temporal contradictions and dualities that al-ʿĀlim describes in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*. It seems that Ibrāhīm's imprisonment alerted him to the fact that all was not well, that Arab Nationalism had in some significant way ceased to be a liberating force, and that the march toward a socialist

[23] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 6.

[24] It is tempting to except Palestine from this historical trajectory, however the victories of the Zionist project in constructing the state of Israel in the postwar era suggest that a particular political future was being radically remade in Palestine – at a terrible cost to Palestinians.

future had stalled out. It is essential that we understand the temporal duality in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* in the politicized terms that al-ʿĀlim and Scott formulate. It is neither a private response to the trauma of prison nor a structural problem of memory. Indeed, Ibrāhīm acknowledges his narrator's (and own) past as a political prisoner, but never recalls the communist political vision that occasioned his imprisonment. He refuses to even pantomime the narrative motions of remembering his would-be trauma – a trauma which is neither the crisis at hand nor the cause of his disgust. Rather, as I will argue later, his imprisonment is framed as a moment of realization.[25]

Tilka al-rāʾiḥa's break with the bildungsroman's logic is not merely on the level of its narrative form but also the level of the sexual-political symbolism produced by the stalling out of progressive historical and narrative time. One much-debated sequence in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* shows the critical punch of Ibrāhīm's austere style, mechanical rhythm, and disgusting aesthetics taken in tandem: After overstaying his curfew, the narrator bribes his parole officer. Then he reads an article about Moupassant's argument that an artist's creation ought to be more beautiful and simpler than the real world. After that, the narrator attempts to write, but fails. In an abrupt twist, he imagines the beautiful young woman he saw through the window the previous day, stares blankly at the piece of paper, and masturbates. The next day (but only a few lines later), his brother makes a comment expressing his disapproval of socialist economic changes:

تلف كل شيء منذ أصبح العمال في مجالس الإدارات.

Everything's ruined since the workers joined the Administrative Committees. [26]

Several pages later, the narrator notes:

[25] This is in contrast with later trauma-inflected trends in Arabic fiction, especially prominent in response to the Algerian War of Independence, the Lebanese Civil War, and further developed in response to wars in Iraq and Syria.

[26] Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 50; Ibrahim, *That Smell*, 44.

وعلى الأرض ظهرت بقع سوداء من أثر لذتي.

The traces of my pleasure looked like black spots on the floor.[27]

(It is worth reiterating that the tone of the entire novella is utterly devoid of emotion, and this scene is no difference. Thus, we should resist any inclination to read actual pleasure into Ibrāhīm's euphemism for masturbation.) This sequence is a good example of how Ibrāhīm's commitment to chronological sequence over logical or emotional coherence creates rather remarkable juxtapositions. The masturbation scene is obviously the attention-grabbing incident that provoked Yaḥya Ḥaqqī's biting disapproval. He saw it as excessively tasteless, needlessly revolting, low-brow, and ugly.[28] However, al-ʿĀlim sees the juxtaposition between Moupassant's call for beauty, the narrator's inability to produce writing of that kind, and his offensive masturbation as a sort of defiant rejection of the respectable literary aesthetics invoked by the article on Moupassant. He reads it as a way of labeling such beautiful literary aesthetics a masturbatory practice:

> وتكاد هذه السطور أن تعبر بشكل ضمني لا عن عجزه عن الكتابة بالطريقة التي يقول بها موباسان بل رفضه لها بل إدانته الرمزية لها باعتبارها نوعا من الاستمناء!
>
> These lines are on the verge of implying not his inability to write in the style Moupassant speaks of, but his rejection of that style and his symbolic condemnation of it as a form of masturbation![29]

For al-ʿĀlim, masturbation here functions symbolically as a form of refusal. If we extend al-ʿĀlim's view to the wider sequence of the novella's events, we might see this sort of symbolic rejection not just of idealized literary aesthetics but also rejection of the

[27] Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 53-54; Ibrahim, *That Smell*, 48.

[28] Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 12.

[29] Al-ʿĀlim, *Thulāthiyyat al-rafḍ wa-l-hazīma*, 48.

corruption of the parole officer and the capitalist disdain for workers shown by the narrator's brother, the two events which bracket the Moupassant-masturbation scene. Again, the absence of any logical sequence in Ibrāhīm's narrative style allows us to make these connections between juxtaposed events even if they appear logically distant at first glance.

After this sequence, two of the narrator's friends bring home a prostitute. Despite his friends' goading encouragement, the narrator cannot muster the will or ability to have sex with her. He spends some time alone with her, but ultimately cannot perform. Interestingly, while critics like Ḥaqqī were particularly disturbed by the masturbation scene, Egyptian censors were bothered by the narrator's apparent impotence.[30] The inability of the narrator to perform a basic socio-sexual function of masculinity seems to have struck a nerve. As Joseph Massad argues, echoing al-Ālim's language of refusal (rafḍ), the narrator "refuse[s] the social dimension of sex, limiting it to autoerotic activity," showing a sort of social breakdown or dysfunction.[31] Moreover, Massad continues, referring to the notorious masturbation scene, "His indifference to his spilled seed is an indifference to his future. Imprisonment and torture by the postcolonial state was such that the postcolonial citizen refuses to generate, indeed leaving himself open to *degeneration*."[32] Here, Massad draws our attention to the refusal of the social dimensions of sex and an indifference or contempt toward the future, both of which he frames in the political terms of Sharabi's neopatriarchal postcolonial state.[33] What I would like to highlight is the way the

[30] Sonallah Ibrahim, "The Experience of a Generation," trans. Marilyn Booth, *Index on Censorship* 16, no. 9 (1987): 20.

[31] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 307.

[32] Massad, 307.

[33] Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*.

very elements animated in sexual terms above – the social and the futurist – are central to the temporal logic of Leftist politics and utopian visions. Their refusal, especially in a work by Ibrāhīm – imprisoned for his communism – speaks to the extent of crisis he sees in the Nasserist state.

When Massad argues that the neopatriarchal postcolonial state pushes *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*'s narrator to degeneracy, he is pointing to the use of 'degenerate' sexual behavior (masturbation) to symbolize a degenerate sociopolitical state. He situates this argument within the changing temporal and political dynamics of sexual symbolism and allegory in Arabic fiction. The shift at hand is from the developmentalist use of classical national allegory, i.e., progressive and 'functional,' common in socialist realism and especially the bildungsroman, to the use of dysfunctional or degenerate sexuality to symbolize a troubled sociopolitical reality. It also entails the construction of new national allegories based in symbolic castration and deviant sexuality, e.g., the nation as emasculated and emasculating, defiled, degenerate, etc. *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* is an important inflection point in this shift, i.e., the transition between the classical national allegory's progressive sexual-political symbolism and its challenge and deformed reconstitution. The social dimensions of this transition are further developed in *67*. When Muḥammad Badawī states:

الجنس في *67* جنس مريض، ليس بمعنى التحقق الإنساني[34]

Sex in *67* is diseased sex, not signifying human actualization,

he is pointing to the shift from the progressive, healthy vision of the national allegory to 'diseased' or deformed allegories in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67*. This symbolic shift belies the shifting temporal logics of allegory. Maturation, liberation, progress, and discovery all proclaim

[34] Aḥmad Jād and Muḥammad Yaḥiyā, "Riwāyat '67' li-Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm," Khārij al-naṣṣ (al-Jazīra, June 7, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN3luOJH3fc.

and await a decidedly better future. But when that future disappears, the progressive allegory's logic collapses and sex as a national symbol is deformed and critically remade.

67, whose narrative style follows the example set by *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, consists of twelve chapters which recount the twelve months from 1967. In fact, the entire book, which despite its title only references the June defeat in cursory terms, revolves around the open secrets of symbolic sexual (read: political and social) degeneracy that permeate mundane social life. For example, the narrator maintains a half-secret affair with his brother's wife. The fact that he lives in his brother's home only emphasizes the notion that the most intimate and foundational relationships in Ibrāhīm's depiction of Egyptian society are built upon lies, betrayals, and poorly kept secrets. This need not necessarily be read as reflecting social reality for its political corollaries – corruption, compromise, willful and dogmatic delusions – to resonate. Perhaps the most striking example of deformed sexual-political symbolism is the never-ending litany of instances of sexual harassment on public transportation. Beyond the descriptions of groping, we are stunned by the way the public fails to react to these visible and public attacks on women:

> كانت هناك فتاة صغيرة تحاول النزول. ورأيت الشاب الذي يتقدمني يمد يده ويعتصر ثديها في حشية. شرع الأتوبيس يتحرك والفتاة تحاول النزول بلا فائدة والشاب يعتصر صدرها. وبدا الرعب على وجهها وصرخت قائلة إنها تريد أن تنزل ثم بكت. نجحت أخيراً في أن تمر من الشاب فاستدار خلفها ومد يده إلى ظهرها وكنا جميعاً نتطلع إلى وجهه الوادع وإلى وجه الفتاة المرعوب.

> There was a young woman trying to get off. I saw the young guy ahead of me reach out his hand and squeeze her breasts brutally. The bus started to move as the young woman was trying to get off to no avail as guy was squeezing her bosom. Horror appeared on her face, and she shouted that she wanted to get off. Then she cried. She finally managed to pass the guy, so he went around behind her and reached his hand toward her back. We were all staring at his gentle face and at the girl's horrified face.[35]

[35] Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, *67: riwāya* (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 2017), 108.

The overwhelming image Ibrāhīm paints here is a society that does not say 'no' to harassment, a society complicit. I argue that like the other scenes in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* charged with sexual-political symbolism, we needn't read this one through the lens of realism for it to bear weight. Yes, this is a scene of sexual harassment, but in the context of Ibrāhīm's fiction it is also a scene about a harassing state apparatus and a society compromised by the social and political distortions such harassment produces.

Exhausted Aesthetics

Aesthetically, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* are similarly disturbing. They translate Ibrāhīm's political alienation and despair into disgusting descriptions that go beyond dysfunctional and degenerate sexual-political symbolism. Ibrāhīm's aesthetics set the tone of both works and critique reality in arresting fashion. I mean to clarify that Ibrāhīm's aesthetics are not simply a representation of reality but rather usher in a critique of it through their disturbing excesses. I view this critical function of Ibrāhīm's aesthetic style, which is revelatory more than it is representational, as part and parcel of his reputation for commitment to truth. The foremost non-sexual example of these aesthetics – bloody bug-bites – is repeated between the two works, highlighting the thematic and stylistic coherence between the two novellas. *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* opens with the narrator at the police station,

> وكان هناك رجال كثيرون. وفي كل لحظة كان الباب يُفتح ليدخل آخرون. وأحسست بوخز في رقبتي. ومددت يدي إلى رقبتي فشعرت ببلل. ونظرت إلى يدي لوجدت بقعة دم كبيرة على أصبعي. وفي اللحظة التالية شاهدت عشرات من البق على ملابسي. ووقفت. ولأول مرة رأيت بقع الدم الكبيرة تلوث جدران الحجرة في كل مكان.

> There were many men there and the door kept opening to let more in. I felt a prick on my neck. I reached my hand to my neck and felt something wet. I looked at my hand and found a big patch of blood on my fingers and in the next moment saw

> swarms of bugs on my clothing. I stood up. And I saw for the first time the big patches of blood that stained the walls of the cell, everywhere.[36]

The scene is plainly gross. Ibrāhīm illustrates an infestation in the prison, alluding to moral and political corruption. We can only imagine whether the blood staining the walls is from the crushed blood-filled bodies of the bugs, remnants of human violence or torture, or merely an extraneous aesthetic feature of the filth the narrator finds in prison. Two points deserve explanation here. First, the bug bite prompts the narrator's realization of the blood on his hands and the blood smeared on the cell walls. It is a moment of clarity and discovery (not a trauma), however darkly gross it may be. We ought to read Ibrāhīm's own prison experience as a sort of bite to the neck, drawing his attention to the realities of the Nasserist state. Second, blood is physiological. Responding to Yaḥya Ḥaqqī's scathing criticism of the revolting aesthetics of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, particularly those of a sexual nature, Ibrāhīm explains the need to aesthetically address the reality of torture, which – if portrayed clearly – entails its own revolting imagery and descriptions of the grotesque physical and psycho-social affront to human dignity it inflicts. He writes in the 1986 introduction:

> ألا يتطلب الأمر قليلاً من القبح للتعبير عن القبح المتمثل في سلوك فزيولوجي من قبيل ضرب شخص أعزل حتى الموت ووضع منفاخ في شرجه، وسلك كهربائي في فتحته التناسلية؟ وكل ذلك لأنه عبر عن رأي مخالف أو دافع عن حريته أو هويته الوطنية؟
> ولماذا يتعين علينا عندما نكتب ألا نتحدث إلا عن جمال الزهور وروعة عبقها، بينما الخراء يملأ الشوارع ومياه الصرف الملوثة تغطي الأرض، والجميع يشمون الرائحة النتنة ويشتكون منها؟
> أو أن نصرف على الورق كائنات أوشكت ان تختفي تفحاتها التناسلية، كي لا نخدش حياءً كاذباً لدى قراء يعرفون عن أمور الجنس أكثر مما يعرف السيد الكاتب.

> Wasn't a bit of ugliness necessary to expose an equivalent ugliness in 'physiological' acts like beating an unarmed man to death, or shovint a tire pump up his anus, or electric cords into his penis? All because he held a contrary opinion or defended his freedom and sense of nationalism? Why is it stipulated that we werite only about flowers and perfume when shit fills the streets, when sewage water covers the earth and everyone smells it? Or that we write about

[36] Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 28; Ibrahim, *That Smell*, 20. I have revised Creswell's translation for accuracy and rhythm.

creatures seemingly without genitals, so that we don't violate the supposed decency of readers who actually know more about sex than we do.[37]

For Ibrāhīm, plain yet revolting physiological descriptions are central to describing the human violence he witnessed in prison and which he sees in various forms throughout public and private life.

In *67*, the bloody bug-bites make a return on the day of the June defeat, an incident Ibrāhīm alleges happened to him.[38] Here, through repeated symbolism, Ibrāhīm draws an intertextual link between the torture he witnessed in prison and the Arab defeat in 1967, both painful moments of awakening for the Egyptian Left. Ibrāhīm writes,

وشعرت بشيء يخزني في ذراعي فحككته بأصبعي. لكن الوخز ازداد. وظننته برغوثا فنفضت يدي بعيداً. وانتظرت في رعب أن يعلن عن نفسه في مكان آخر من جسدي كما يحدث دائماً. شعرت بوخزة في ساقي. لم أتحرك فربما كنت أتوهم. تكررت الوخزة فلم يعد هناك شك. فبللت أصبعي ومددته في بطء داخل سروالي مقتربا في حذر من مكان الوخزة. ثم ضغطت عليه بأصبعي فلم امسك بشيء. شعرت بوخزة جديدة في صدري فقمت في بطء وفتحت باب الغرفة وسرت متصلباً إلى الصالة حيث كانت الشمعة. وقفت أمامها ورفعت قميصي في حذر آملا ألا يكون البرغوث قد تحرك من مكانه. وأخذت أبحث عنه في ثنايا القميص. تطلعت إلى صدري العاري فوجدت بقعاً حمراء كبيرة مثل تلك التي يصنعها البرغوث بلدغته ولكن أكبر وأحسست ايضاً ان كل مكان في حسدي يحكني. دعكت ساقي وصدري لكن الإحساس بالحك زاد وانتقل إلى وجهي ورأسي وكل جسمي. حملت الشمعة إلى حجرتي ووقفت أمام المرآة. رفعت الشمعة وتأملت وجهي في دقة فوجدت البقع الحمراء البارزة منتشرة على سطحه. حاولت أن أتجاهل الأمر لكن جسدي كله كان مشتعلا. مضيت إلى حجرة أخي حاملاً الشمعة وطرقت الباب. دخلت ونزعت قميصي دون أن أتكلم ثم رفعت الشمعة امامه. نهض أخي من فراشه وفحص البقع الحمراء على ضوء الشمعة ثم طلب مني أن أجلس وأهدأ. وقال إنها لا شيء.

I felt something prick me on my arm, so I scratched it with my finger. But the sting increased. I thought it was a flea, so I shook out my hand at a distance. I waited in horror for it to reveal itself somewhere else on my body as always happens. I felt a prick on my leg. I didn't move; maybe I was deluding myself. The prick repeated, so there was no longer any doubt. I wet my finger and reached it cautiously under my trousers, nearing the sting. Then I pressed my finger upon it but grasped nothing. I felt a new prick on my chest, so I stood slowly, opened the door, and went, stiff, to the sitting room where there was a candle. I stood in

[37] Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, 16; Ibrahim, *That Smell*, 71.

[38] In an interview with BBC Arabic (11 August 2017) Ibrahim claims that this bug-bite incident happened to him on the day of the 67 defeat as a physiological response to his inability to adequately respond. Perhaps that is true. However, as he had already written the strikingly similar bug-bite episode in *That Smell*, in 1966, we might have reason to be skeptical of this particular autobiographical detail. Or, perhaps these bugs dogged Ibrahim chronically.

> front of it and removed my shirt cautiously, hoping the flea hadn't moved from its place. I started to look for it in the folds of the shirt. I stared at my bare chest and found large red blotches like those flea bites make except bigger. I also felt every part of my body itch. I itched my leg and chest, but the itchy feeling increased and moved to my face and head and my entire body. I carried the candle into my room and stood in front of the mirror. I raised the candle and pondered my face in detail, finding the prominent red blotches spread across its surface. I tried to ignore the issue, but my whole body was burning. I proceeded to my brother's room carrying the candle, and I knocked on the door. I entered and pulled out my shirt without speaking. Then I raised the candle in front of him. My brother got up from his bed and examined the red blotches by the candlelight. Then he asked me to sit and calm down. He said it was nothing. [39]

Beyond the significance of this episode's simultaneity with the 1967 defeat, there are several important new developments since the bloody bugs of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* that require explanation. First, the bugs are no longer in prison cells, but have infested the private dwellings and bodies of ordinary Egyptians. The wide and embodied spread of the infestation is unavoidable. If imprisonment and torture were wake-up calls for the Egyptian Left, the June defeat would force a society-wide political reckoning. Examples of this post-1967 reckoning include Syrian poet Nizār Qabbānī's scathing poem "Hawāmish ʿala daftar al-naksa" (Footnotes to the Naksa, 1967) and Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jallāl al-ʿAẓm's *al-Naqd al-dhātī baʿd al-hazīma* (Self-critique after the Defeat, 1968). This broadening from the collective but contained experience of the Egyptian communists to the whole of society is also reflected in the narrator's response. He looks himself in the mirror and then shows the bloody bites to his brother, who responds with utter denial. If these bug bites point to a sociopolitical rot, the narrator of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* seems to be the only person who sees and acknowledges them, and he does so only in passing, without emotion. In *67*, however, the narrator inspects himself in the mirror and forces his brother to come face to face with the bloody evidence of the rot, which is now in Egyptians' homes and on

[39] Ibrāhīm, *67*, 82-83.

their bodies. Moreover, throughout *67* Ibrāhīm implicates a broader swath of Egyptian society in the political failings that were perhaps easier to overlook in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*, emphasizing the blow the defeat dealt to the whole of Egyptian society. The bug bites were made undeniably visible in defeat, whether or not the characters of *67* wish to acknowledge them.

The scenes of the bug bites in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* evoke a sense of physiological exhaustion and embodied defeat that is a common aesthetic feature of both novellas. Neither narrator exhibits pleasure. This holds true for the sexually impotent narrator of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and the noxiously and antisocially virile narrator of *67*. Just like the strange bloody bug-bites, the narrators' sexualized exhaustion creates a sense of resign and detachment because the cause of their embodied experiences of pleasureless monotony (and mysterious bug bites) are so absurdly removed from their overtly political context: prison, Arab Nationalism's collapse, and the 1967 defeat. Gilles Deleuze's concept of 'the exhausted' expresses this detachment and estrangement which Ibrāhīm's narrators experience. Deleuze is specific regarding the subject-object relations of exhaustion: while one grows tired of something, exhaustion does not take an object. Exhaustion is affective. We might deploy Deleuze's notion of exhaustion to describe the condition of embodied social and political alienation in Ibrāhīm's fiction. Just as Ibrāhīm obscures the obvious political context of *67* in favor of disturbing aesthetic and affective descriptions, Deleuze's exhaustion centers affect rather than its logical cause. This comparison between Ibrāhīm's narrative aesthetics and Deleuze's exhaustion becomes more salient in light of Deleuze's notion of "the exhaustion of the possible," which is explicitly political.[40] Through this political strand in Deleuze's thought, we can marry the political context of Ibrāhīm's

[40] Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," *Parallax* 2, no. 2 (September 1996): 116, https://doi.org/10.1080/13534649609362029.

aesthetics to their seemingly detached physiological and affective manifestations. Indeed, this link between exhausted politics and the exhausted body is central to Ibrāhīm's works and his aesthetic innovations.

These aesthetic and political links, which I have introduced through Deleuzian exhaustion, also place Ibrāhīm in dialogue with theorists of abjection, revulsion, and disgust. The bug bites and smeared blood from *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* are images of confused and violated physiological boundaries. Bugs pierce human flesh, extract human blood. Human and/or insect blood covers the walls in the prison of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*. Does the blood on the narrator's finger belong to him or another? This type of boundary transgression in Ibrāhīm's novellas is central to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. She describes the abject as "What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[41] As a point of contrast, in Sianne Ngai's theory of disgust, she is careful to distinguish between disgust and the language of desire and jouissance that articulates Kristeva's concept of the abject.[42] For Ngai, disgust is neither confused about subject-object boundaries nor ambivalent about its object, distinguishing her from both Deleuze's exhaustion and Kristeva's abjection.[43] Ngai makes an important gesture toward the critical horizons of disgust: she ultimately sees the exclusionary revulsion of disgust as ripe with potential for a principled politics of refusal.[44] We should note that Ngai's invocation of a principled politics of refusal resonates with the critical vocabulary of refusal (rafḍ) and defeat (hazīma) al-ʿĀlim uses to describe Ibrāhīm's fiction.

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[41] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

[42] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 332.

[43] Ngai, 335.

[44] Ngai, 344.

The tension between this principled disgust and the literary history of iltizām (with its acquiescence to and reinforcement of state power) is the critical space Ibrāhīm opens up but does not quite pursue in these two early works.[45] Notably, the complicity Ibrāhīm portrays throughout Egyptian society prevents the righteous and principled disgust Ngai discusses. Ibrāhīm's narrators are left pondering where the boundaries lie between them and the rotten state. The attentive reader's inevitable questions 'Whose blood?', 'On whose hands?', and 'Why are the bloody bugs so pervasive?' demand a personal and social reckoning before the politically critical horizons of disgust and refusal might be fully pursued. This is not necessarily a shortcoming, for Ibrāhīm makes the need for critique and refusal uncomfortably obvious through his disgusting aesthetic project. Moreover, Ibrāhīm invites the reader to a more urgent task of self-critique, similar to how *67*'s narrator looks himself in the mirror and reflects upon the red blotches covering his face.

Even on the level of Ibrāhīm's narrative aesthetics, self-critique and political refusal are linked. Both are reactions to and expressions of disgust. The subject-object boundary confusion present in the two bloody bug-bite scenes (and the masturbation scene) – the fact that the bloody bites (and wasted semen) are at once self and other, external and internal – prompts the autocritical question of the individual's role in society: how do I belong to the sociopolitical state around me? This sort of playing with transgressed physiological boundaries in the context of stalled revolution and decolonization is also the form of "excremental postcoloniality" Joshua Esty ascribes to Irish modernists Beckett and Joyce and African authors disillusioned with

[45] The attentive reader will note critical similarities between the principled disgust in Ibrāhīm's fiction and principled despair in Arwā Ṣāliḥ's affected analyitical approach explored in Chapter 3.

postcolonial progress.[46] It is on the one hand gross and disturbing, and on the other precisely the aesthetic disruption Ibrāhīm puts forth as a necessary form of sociopolitical self-critique in the wake of Arab Nationalism's exhaustion. Thus, the physiological acts as a link between the self and society, pushing the reader to confront the grotesque reality of Nasserism's suffocating authoritarianism and leading Arwā Ṣāliḥ (1951-1997), Leftist activist and writer, to describe Ibrāhīm's fiction as a journey in discovering the truth and through it, the self:

> يعني الصدق عند بعض الكتاب رحلة استكشاف للذات، ويعني عند بعضهم الآخر استكشافاً للعالم الخارجي، وعند صنع الله إبراهيم تتخذ هذه الرحلة مسار استكشاف الحقيقة.
>
> Honesty for some authors is a journey of discovering the self, and for others it is discovering the other (al-ʿālam al-khārijī, the external world); for Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, this journey takes the route of discovering the truth.[47]

Aesthetics and Critical Affect

I have argued that Ibrāhīm's temporally stagnant and exhausted aesthetics force a visceral confrontation with the truth in the reader, which is articulated physiologically and personally in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and with a more developed social dimension in *67*. The political-aesthetic horizon opened up between principled disgust and iltizām gets to the heart of the debates surrounding the possibilities and forms of literary commitment and critique after defeat, whether that be understood as the 1959-64 imprisonment of the communists or the culture-wide defeat of 1967. The urgency of these debates is even more prominent in the context of entrenched authoritarian neoliberalism. Lying beneath these debates and at the center of the impasse of disgust is the reality that the future no longer promises progress or an opportunity for revolutionary change.

[46] Joshua D. Esty, "Excremental Postcolonialism," *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. No. 1 (Spring 1999): 22–59.

[47] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, Saraṭān al-rūḥ (Cairo: al-Nahr li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1998), 65.

With the future closed and stagnant, does committed literature lose its historical telos, its raison d'etre?

In a 2003 collected volume on the transformations of the understanding of iltizām in modern Arabic literature edited by Muḥammad Barrāda and featuring several giants of twentieth-century Arabic literary criticism, Fayṣal Darrāj addresses the notion of post-June (i.e., June 1967) literature's (adab mā baʿd ḥuzayrān) relationship to iltizām in an essay titled: "What is the meaning of iltizām in destroyed time?"[48] His sustained reference to the 1967 defeat's upending of temporality – he later refers to post-1967 time as "collapsed time (zaman mutadahwir)" – is central to his critique and my argument in this chapter and dissertation.[49] Darrāj traces two forms of iltizām that emerge out of emerge out of Arab Nationalism's defeat: commitment to defend human dignity (karāmat al-insān) and commitment to truth despite the ambiguity or obscurity (iltibās) of its meaning.[50] Ibrāhīm is a key figure for Darrāj, particularly inasmuch as he exemplifies the trend of 'commitment to truth' (al-iltizām bi-l-ḥaqīqa). Ibrāhīm's writing, with *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* as the literary text which would propel him to infamy and literary celebrity, is perhaps the example par excellence of this all-consuming approach to the present captured in the Darrāj's notion of 'collapsed time.'

Darrāj's focus on the narrative compression of time upon the present is just one among of a mélange of critical diagnoses regarding temporality's dysfunctions in post-1967 Arabic literature and Arab culture more broadly. In 1967, Abdallah Laroui framed the lived Arab

[48] Fayṣal Darrāj, "Mā maʿnā al-iltizām fī zaman maqūḍ," in *Taḥawwulāt mafhūm al-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth* (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2003), 194.

[49] Darrāj, 195.

[50] Darrāj, 194.

temporality as a '*futur antérieur*,' a received past and anticipated future, which causes a constant change in historical orientation.[51] As Laroui sees it, this notion that the future has already been lived elsewhere (Europe) poses a *Catch-22* scenario of either calling for a backwards-looking and fixed notion of authenticity or acceptance of capitalist modernity's inevitability, which – if inevitable – is not really a choice. By contrast, Iliyās Khūrī, writing in in 1982 in the shadow of the Lebanese Civil War, frames the Nahḍa's incomplete attempt at modernity as a crisis between a lost past and the search for a future, which – most importantly for our purposes – collapses the present away.[52] For him, the challenge is to begin criticism from this erased present and to recover a lost, inventive language to express in and of the present. For him, innovating a language of the present is a way out of the binary bind between authoritarian modernization and Salafism, with al-salaf (forebears) expressly connoting the past. However, it is 'Abd al-Rahman Munif who is perhaps most aligned with Darrāj's argument surrounding 'commitment to truth,' when he argues that the reality of the Arab present is so obscure (because of state ideology and official media, uneven petro-modernity, and the contemporary disjunctures of the postcolonial present) that the state's modernity and Salafism seem to grant protection from a total loss of direction, identity, or grounding. Thus, for Munif, the flee to memory – a hallmark of secular nostalgia and religious fundamentalism alike – is proof of the despair of the present.[53] Confronting the reality of the present with clear eyes is central to alleviating the temporal crises that each of these critics formulate.

[51] Laroui, *L'idéologie Arabe Contemporaine*, 66.

[52] Ilyās Khūrī, al-Dhākira al-mafqūda : dirāsāt naqdiyya (Beirut : Muʿassasat al-abḥāth al-ʿarabiyya, 1982).

[53] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf, Dhākira li-l-mustaqbal (Beirut : Muʾassasat al-ʿarabiyya li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-nashr, 2001), 346.

What I seek to achieve by considering Ibrāhīm in light of these Arab critics' concern for time generally and the present in particular is to show how he maintains important critical functions of committed socialist realism as theorized by Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's in terms of literary form and content. In particular, I mean how form and content (which Anīs and al-ʿĀlim understand politically) shape and reveal each other dialectically. Ibrāhīm creates this dialectic relationship between form and function in literary works that lack the future horizon of socialist realism. As Darrāj, Laroui, Khūrī, and Munīf remind us, locating the present – the temporal plane of Ibrāhīm's novellas – is a remarkable feat in and of itself. As such, it would be a misrepresentation of the literary field in which Ibrāhīm intervened (which was saturated in various forms of realism) and its social and political contexts (which were obscurantist) to read *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* through the lens of realism or exposing reality, strictly speaking. Rather, Ibrāhīm's works reveal the obscured truths of the present, though not necessarily in a literal sense. By this I mean, that we shouldn't read Ibrāhīm's novellas as evidence of a sexually degenerate 1960s Egyptian middle class. Rather, I contend that the content of truth and the means by which it was politically, ideologically, and aesthetically obscured in literature and public culture explicitly shape the aesthetic forms of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67*, which are at once disgusting, exhausting, and absurdly mundane.

To return to Ngai's theory of disgust as an aesthetic of principled commitment, we should note that her account of disgust lacks the progressive temporality central to theories of committed socialist realism. Her theory of disgust complements reformed notions of iltizām (commitment to the individual, to truth, etc.) developed after 1967 that have largely ceded futurity. Importantly, Ngai's notion of disgust seems to explicitly accept political defeat as its proper context. I return to this point to highlight how affect – in this case disgust, but also

exhaustion as explored above – takes on the critical function of socialist realism's progressive sense of time when the horizon of futurity is cut off and time collapses upon the present. This is nothing short of a paradigm shift in literary aesthetics and their relationship to political critique, which perhaps explains part of the notoriety Ibrāhīm acquired in the wake of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*'s scandal-riddled publication. Part and parcel of the critical punch of affect in Ibrāhīm's writing, i.e., why his quotidian yet repulsive and vulgar aesthetics register as political critique, is the immediate context of political impotence in the face of authoritarianism. This is the difficult paradox of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67*: Readers' enduring identification with aspects of Ibrāhīm's aesthetic and affective world – exhaustion, disgust, impotence, insatiety – is integral to his literary critique's sustained relevance through the neoliberal era. At the same time, the longevity of Ibrāhīm's aesthetic project of critical affect points to the durability of authoritarianism and the complicities and compromises it fosters.

Chapter 3 – Arwa Ṣāliḥ and the Horizon of Critique

Introduction: The ECWP, the Student Movement, Arwa Ṣāliḥ, and *al-Mubtasarūn*

In the wake of the 1967 defeat and the global student protests of 1968, Marxist student groups formed across Egyptian universities. Some were folded into the Egyptian Communist Workers Party (ECWP, ḥizb al-ʿummāl al-shuyūʿī al-miṣrī). The ECWP was not a state-sanctioned political party but benefitted from the university campus's status as a space from which students might openly challenge Sadat's authoritarianism, his slowness to reclaim sovereignty over Sinai (which prolonged mandatory youth military service), and the dire economic reality of a state retreating from social welfare programs.[1] Given its origins and the importance of the university as a site of political organization and demonstration, the ECWP was made up primarily of student members. The ECWP was the most intellectually influential and radical of the parties of the third-wave Left. (Genarro Gervasio describes the first-wave Left as the labor organizing of the early twentieth century; the second-wave Left came in the postwar period and the Nasser era.)[2] Throughout the 1970s, the ECWP circulated publications offering a strong Marxist critique of the Sixties Generation's compromises with the Nasser regime, especially the decision to dissolve the independent Egyptian Communist Party (ECP, al-ḥizb al-shuyūʿī al-miṣrī) and the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (HADITU, al-ḥaraka al-

[1] Hanan Hammad, "Arwa Salih's 'The Premature': Gendering the History of the Egyptian Left," *The Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 123.

[2] Gennaro Gervasio, *al-Ḥaraka al-mārkisiyya fī miṣr (1967-1981)*, trans. Basma Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and Carmine Cartolano (Cairo: al-Markaz al-qawmī li-l-tarjama, 2010), 337.

dīmuqrāṭiyya li-l-taḥarrur al-waṭanī) into Nasser's Socialist Union (al-ittiḥād al-ishtirākī) in 1965.[3]

Among the writers for ECWP's publications was Arwa Ṣāliḥ, a student of English literature at the University of Cairo. Ṣāliḥ and her comrades transformed the ECWP and its student activists into a political movement that briefly demanded national attention. Their movement was known as the Student Movement (al-ḥaraka al-ṭulābiyya). In 1971-72, Ṣāliḥ played a leading role in escalating student protests on campus. She was arrested when police stormed campus in December 1972.[4] In late December 1972 and early January 1973 the Student Movement occupied Tahrir Square. Their demands for social justice, an end to authoritarian rule, and war with Israel to reclaim Sinai won them popular support. The call for a war to reclaim national sovereignty exemplifies how dominant the national cause remained on the Egyptian Left, even among the ECWP which was critical of the previous generation's compromises with the Nasserist state. As Gervasio notes, this marked the second time when the Left elevated the national cause at the expense of 'the social cause,' i.e., class struggle.[5] When Sadat did wage a limited war to reclaim Sinai, he effectively neutralized a major aspect of the Student Movement's popular appeal. Moreover, he – the head of state and the military, not the students – reaped the political benefits of the limited nationalist victory. Tragically for the Left, Sadat seized the moment to reorient Egypt toward the capitalist Cold-War camp, make peace with Israel, and set Egypt upon a path of neoliberalization with his infitāḥ, the so-called Open Door.

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[3] Samāḥ Najīb, "al-Ḥaraka al-shuyūʿiyya al-miṣriyya: tarīkh min al-furuṣ al-ḍāʾiʿa," *al-Ādāb*, December 12, 2017, http://al-adab.com/article/الحركة الشيوعيّة-المصريّة-تاريخ-من-الفرص-الضائعة.

[4] Hammad, "Arwa Salih's 'The Premature': Gendering the History of the Egyptian Left," 123.

[5] Gervasio, *al-Ḥaraka al-mārkisiyya fī miṣr (1967-1981)*, 254

After the 1973 October War and infitāḥ, Ṣāliḥ's activities with the ECWP were pushed further underground as Sadat cracked down on the Left and arrests escalated throughout the decade. These arrests increased after the 1977 Bread Intifāḍa, a spontaneous popular revolt against the economic pains caused by infitāḥ and neoliberal restructuring pushed by the IMF and World Bank. While the ECWP did play a role in the Bread Intifāḍa, it was an unorganized expression of popular rage and economic despair rather than the 'communist conspiracy' Sadat used as grounds to arrest scores of ECWP members and other Leftists.[6] After Sadat shocked Egypt and the Arab World by travelling to Jerusalem to address the Knesset in 1977 and then by signing the Camp David Accords in 1978, the ECWP doubled down on the national issue. Sadat, growing increasingly sensitive to dissent, intensified arrests and repression of the Left – including the ECWP – and openly supported the Islamicization of Egyptian public culture as a counterweight to the Left. Mass arrests in 1980-81 and the conservative turn in public culture and politics were existential threats to the ECWP.

Because of the increasingly clandestine and insular nature of the ECWP, the record of Ṣāliḥ's political writings is regrettably inconsistent. By the mid-1980s, Ṣāliḥ had grown deeply frustrated with clandestine politics, the Left's toxic interpersonal relationships, and her peers' casually sexist behavior toward women. These experiences offered little support in her lifelong struggle with depression and schizophrenic episodes. As a result, Ṣāliḥ withdrew from political militancy and left Egypt for Spain for several years in the mid-1980s. While there, she wrote a memoir, but then lost the manuscript. In 1991, she published an Arabic translation of Tony Cliff's 1984 book *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation*. In 1996, her sweeping and deeply personal critique of her own Student-Movement generation of Leftists, *al-Mubtasarūn* (The

[6] Gervasio, 345.

Stillborn), was published. The bulk of the book's text was written in 1991, however this core is framed by a 1996 preface and an appendix containing two letters written in 1985 and 1988. This textual layering offers a glimpse at the genealogy of her thought and helps us understand how it evolved in the context of the deepening neoliberalism of the Mubarak era and the global waves of disenchanted Leftists surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 1980s-1990s saw the development, in Egypt and globally, of body-conscious liberalism and feminism conversant in the discourse of human rights. The layers of *al-Mubtasarūn* highlight Salih's concerns and, at times, uneasy convergence with aspects of this shift from defeated Leftism to ascendent liberalism. Perhaps because of how directly Salih addressed the changing postures of the Egyptian Left during these and preceding decades, *al-Mubtasarūn*'s publication cost Ṣāliḥ dearly: she was dismissed from her job and denied another job offer, in both instances by former Leftist comrades disgruntled by her book's critical depiction of their generation and its political movement.[7] In 1997, just months after *al-Mubtasarūn*'s publication, Ṣāliḥ committed suicide. Her friends hastily published a collection of her writings after her death under the title *Saraṭān al-Rūḥ* (Cancer of the Soul, 1998). That book includes several short journal entries and personal reflections, a rather long poem from which the book draws its title, and essays of literary criticism on the novels of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm. Her friends reveal in the introduction to *Saraṭān al-Rūḥ* that some of Ṣāliḥ's writings that remain unpublished: literary translations, literary criticism, poetry, autobiographical writing, letters, and a third introduction to *al-Mubtasarūn* criticizing her own Seventies Generation's views of the national cause.

Access to Ṣāliḥ's writings remains sorely limited. This fact underscores how marginal a figure Ṣāliḥ was to the literary Left, despite her political engagement. She published with minor

[7] Hammad, "Arwa Salih's 'The Premature': Gendering the History of the Egyptian Left," 132.

Leftist publishers, staying removed from the state-cultural apparatus. Unlike so many of her colleagues, she never made the career compromises that brought much of the Student-Movement Generation into state-backed cultural institutions and internationally funded NGOs. Her marginal and oppositional position to this post-infitāḥ inheritance is an important aspect of her critique, evoking Edward Said's discussion of secular criticism, which he describes as oppositional to both ideological dogma and the "quasi-theological" order and influence of the state.[8] Salih's example of what Said calls "critical consciousness" is not critique from afar, but a manner of critique structured by the gendered affect that comes from her personal experience of political militancy.[9] By this I mean that Salih's embodied, gendered experiences and emotions are not excluded by an idealized masculinist logic or vulgar Marxism. She treats her lived experiences and affect – her anger, resentment, regrets, and doubts – as sources of critical knowledge. Thus, gender is neither the central object of Salih's analysis nor a mere afterthought. It is part and parcel of her critical methodology. In this way, Salih addresses key gaps in the historiography of the Egyptian Left, which has been dominated by male partisans interested in theoretical and organizational factions.[10] Gender inflects the tone of principled despair that dominates her work and is integral to her epistemological project. This principled despair clarifies the horizon of her critique and search in communism for the "ethical knowledge (al-maʿrifa al-akhlāqiyya)" of how to exist in a cruel and unjust world, which is how she describes her project in the 1996 preface.[11]

[8] Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 10–11.

[9] Said, 5.

[10] Joel Beinin, "Book Review: The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988.," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (February 1992): 258, https://doi.org/10.2307/2164676.

[11] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn: dafātir waḥida min jīl al-ḥaraka al-ṭullābiyya* (al-Duqqī: Dār al-nahr li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1996); Arwa Salih, *The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt*, trans. Samah Selim, The Arab List (London: Seagull Books, 2018), 15.

In *al-Mubtasarūn*, Ṣāliḥ's analysis focuses upon the legacy her generation inherited from the Sixties Generation of Leftists – their political compromises, Cold-War political map, nationalism, and sense of their own historical role. Most notably, Ṣāliḥ's analysis also draws upon extensive analysis of the affective and social experiences of militancy in this transitional, intergenerational context. Ṣāliḥ's juxtaposition of an embodied and gendered analysis of individual and collective affect and a strident Marxist analysis of class formation and bourgeois morality shed light on the lived experience of political militancy, historical change, and class relations across the decades between the Student Movement and the solidly neoliberal Egypt of the 1990s. The layered nature of the *al-Mubtasarūn* is fundamental to assessing how Ṣāliḥ's own understanding and critique of the major issues she addresses – the defeat of the Left, the Left's compromises, the thorny question of a militant's personal motives, and the nation and nationalism – changed over time. Her 1996 preface on militant kitsch (al-kītsch al-niḍālī) is a particularly significant layer of *al-Mubtasarūn* because in it Ṣāliḥ critiques elements at the core of her 1991 text. By critiquing her past commitment to the nation and by introducing the concept of militant kitsch as a way of approaching the personal and social experience of militancy (and, by extension, militant art forms like iltizām), Ṣāliḥ offers us analytical tools to read her book explicitly "within the parentheses of history."[12]

Political Maps, Political Inheritance

[12] Hassan Khan, "Archetypal Intellectuals, Devastated Revolutionaries, Kitsch Mythologies, and a Writer Who Dared to Look at Herself: The Disenchanted," *Bidoun*, no. 9: Rumor (Winter 2007), https://www.bidoun.org/articles/archetypal-intellectuals-devastated-revolutionaries-kitsch-mythologies-and-a-writer-who-dared-to-look-at-herself.

A major concern of Ṣāliḥ's 1996 preface is how to grapple with and situate the haunt of the national struggle in her earlier writing. This amounts to a redirection of the historiographical intervention she made in the core chapters of *al-Mubtasarūn* and invites a critical reading of the entire book as a layered, dynamic text. As Ṣāliḥ wrestles with the national issue in her writing and in the history of the Egyptian Left, she employs the metaphor of the shifting Cold-War political map of postcolonial Egypt and the decolonizing – then neoliberalizing – globe. Her first reference to the map comes with her introduction to the Student-Movement Generation of Leftists (to which she belonged) and the sense of geopolitics they inherited from the Sixties Generation. She writes of her own generation:

> أول جيل من اليساريين تصفق له مصر المحروسة بأسرها، "الجيل الذي قبض ثمن وطنيتها قبل أن يدفع ثمنها" كما قال لي بمرارة حقيقية شيوعي قديم ممن شهدوا مجزرة عبد الناصر للشيوعيين في عام 1959، ولكن أيضاً لأنه – وربما كان ذلك الأهم – لا يتصور في الواقع وجوده خارج هذه الخريطة التي يدينها بالذات، الخريطة التي يحدها شرقاً المعسكر الاشتراكي وغرباً المعسكر الرأسمالي، وفي الوسط – بل القلب – حركات التحرر الوطني في العالم الثالث.

> It was the first ever generation of the left that all of Egypt applauded; 'the generation that was rewarded for its nationalism before it had paid the price for it', as an old Marxist who had witnessed Nasser's purge of the communists in 1959 bitterly told me. Even more importantly, this same generation was never able to imagine itself escaping the borders of the established political map that it eventually came to see as a pipe-dream: to the east the socialist camp, to the west the capitalist one, and in the middle, at the very beating heart, the national independence movements of the third world.[13]

This statement shows the extent to which Ṣāliḥ and her peers saw their world and their place in history through a nationalist lens – this despite being communists. She coins her generation's historical-political worldview:

> الوعي المتناقض الماركسي - الوطني

[13] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 6-7; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 3.

contradictory consciousness, simultaneously Marxist and nationalist.[14]

While this worldview makes sense in the historical context of the Cold War and decolonization, it also belies the marginality of the Marxist Left and the extent of its political debt to nationalist populism, which was dominated by the state. Indeed, Ṣāliḥ directly confronts this situation in her 1996 preface:

> ولم نكن في الواقع إلا جزءً لا يتجزأ من هذه الخريطة نفسها – يحتل هامشها بالتحديد، معارضة ماركسية بنت مجدها الوحيدة في عجز الحكم المؤقت في "حل القضية الوطنية". وبرغم كل "شقشقاتنا" الماركسية والطبقية أيضاً – اللغة التي اخترنا (أو شاء لنا التاريخ) أن نتصور الواقع من خلالها – كان وعينا التاريخي وطنياً.

> But in reality, we were nothing but bonded inhabitants of the Cold War map. We stood at its margins though – a communist opposition that built its one moment of glory on a transitional regime's inability to resolve the national question, a tiny Marxist faction on a political map whose broader leadership and goals were nationalist. In spite of all our Marxist nattering then, the language which we chose to read our world (or which history chose for us) was nationalist, as was our historical consciousness.[15]

The 'transitional regime' Ṣāliḥ references here is, of course, Sadat's. His regime transitioned from Nasserist socialism to U.S.-backed capitalism. Sadat's infitāḥ, which inaugurated this geopolitical and economic shift, was made on the heels of the October 1973 War with Israel. In this way, Sadat's response to the Student Movement's demands for war with Israel over the Sinai ushered in the geopolitical and economic realignment (infitāḥ) that would rewrite the map of Egyptian politics and render the communist Left irrelevant.

Moreover, Ṣāliḥ emphasizes how fundamentally misplaced the Left's nationalist nostalgia was. It was one thing for the Sixties Generation to play a marginal role on the Cold-War map to which they properly belonged. It was quite another for the Student-Movement

[14] Ṣāliḥ, 14; Salih, 14.

[15] Ṣāliḥ, 7; Salih, 4.

Generation of the seventies to fancy themselves marginal players on a map that had dissolved and been made over. Comparing her generation to the Sixties Generation, Ṣāliḥ describes the difference though her map metaphor:

> وكأنهم – في مكانهم المعتاد ذاك، في الهامش – يحتلون نفس المساحة من الخريطة، في صورتها السالبة.
>
> It was as though we found ourselves standing in the same marginal spot, on the same map, only in reverse, like a ghostly negative image.[16]

This place on a political map so ahistorically conceived distorted the Student-Generation Left's sense of politics and history, a sense which properly belonged to the previous generation. Not only was their conception of the Nasser era a vision through rose-tinted glasses; it also skewed their sense of belonging to history – both the political history of Egypt and the specific history of the Egyptian Left. Their nostalgia for Nasser's nationalism, whose prisons they – unlike the Sixties Generation – never saw from the inside, blinded them to the ways nationalism could (and would) be used to shift Egypt's politics to the right and consolidate authoritarian military rule.

For Ṣāliḥ, confronting the remade political map entails confronting the process of historical change and questioning the relationship between intellectuals and the state. Ṣāliḥ condemns the vision of history that places militant political activists and intellectuals at the center. She argues that history is

> ليس "جوهراً"، ليس روحاً يسبح في الفضاء ويقوم – ضمن مهام أخرى – بدور الحَكَم، يصفق المناضلين الذين "يدفعون عجلته للأمام"، ويتوعد من يجرونها للخلف، إنه أحداث يصنعها بشر ليسوا "من طينة أخرى" كما وصف الشيوعيين يوماً ستالين، وغالباً ما يستقر مصيرها بيد أسوأهم.
>
> not some spirit that floats in the ether and passes judgement, applauding militants who move the wheel forward and threatening those who impede its progress. History is constructed by human beings who are not 'made of different clay,' as the communists once described Stalin, and its course is most often determined by the worst of them.[17]

[16] Ṣāliḥ, 8; Salih, 6.

[17] Ṣāliḥ, 9; Salih, 7–8.

This statement amounts to a critique of the political activists and urban intellectuals who overvalued their own historical role and sway with workers and peasants as well as a critique of their slowness to see the regressive nature of the state's nationalism. In castigating her generation's failure to confront the way history was being constructed before them, Ṣāliḥ offers a caveat to her critique, a caveat that ultimately reinforces her point: she too writes as

كمثقف هامشي يتأمل الأحداث ولا يؤثر فيها

> an intellectual on the margins who merely observes events and cannot affect their outcomes.[18]

To illustrate the ineffective insularity of militant intellectuals, Ṣāliḥ makes clear how the activist class's alienation from the masses was both part of their sense of self-worth and superiority that they derived from militancy and central to their political failures. She writes in her 1988 letter:

> فيه ناس لو طرحت منها النضال – في ظروفه التاريخية الراهنة – مايفضلش منها حاجة تقريباً، وده لإن علاقتهم بالبشر (اللى بيناضلوا عشانهم) دخلها فساد عميق.. وبكده "القضية" – برغم إخلاصها – بتتشيأ عندهم.. أنا شفت ناس استمرارها مالوش علاقة بمشاركة البشر كبيرة، بل ربما تكون الرابطة الأكثر حقيقة "بالنضال" هي التعالى!
>
> There are people of whom nothing is left once you've subtracted the militant. That's because their relationship to the human beings on whose behalf they fight is corrupted, and so their 'struggle' falls to pieces in spite of their sincerity. I've seen people who kept on going despite having hardly any real contact with flesh-and-blood human beings. For them, the struggle is a form of condescension.[19]

This portrait and its attention to political class in tandem with the affective and interpersonal dynamics of the lived experience of militancy are central to Ṣāliḥ's gendered critique of the committed intellectual and the aesthetic dogma of iltizām.

[18] Ṣāliḥ, 9; Salih, 8.

[19] Ṣāliḥ, 99-100; Salih, 121.

Gendering Iltizām

In this chapter, I seek to clarify the stakes of Ṣāliḥ's critical methodology by reading her project alongside the literary history of iltizām. Though nowhere in *al-Mubtasarūn* does Ṣāliḥ explicitly reference iltizām, I contend that her critical method and search for ethical knowledge frame iltizām as a form of militant kitsch that prized dogma and ready-made answers over ethical and political curiosity. In literature, this kitschy strain of iltizām produced an aesthetic ideology with gendered metaphors and aesthetics that colored how the Egyptian Left of the Nasser era (and, to some extent, beyond it) represented their world and understood its politics: as linked to the state.[20] As explored in Chapter 2, the Sixties Generation had a markedly ambiguous relationship to the state, often supporting its socialist and/or nationalist vision but objecting to its authoritarianism. We should see Ṣāliḥ as fitting into this lineage of Leftist writers renegotiating their relationship to the state through innovations in critical method, style, language, and form.[21] I will show how the form, method, and content of Ṣāliḥ's critique interrupt further inheritance of iltizām's political and literary kitsch. Ṣāliḥ's critical and epistemological intervention offers an alternative lens through which we might theorize the shifts in the literature, culture, and politics of Egypt's transition from Nasserism to neoliberalism.

While Ṣāliḥ's discussion of the individual's experience of political militancy and the (ex)militant's compromises with the state undeniably sits in a decades-long line of literary and political theory inflected by the central concerns of iltizām, I seek to push the critical impact of Ṣāliḥ's critique beyond these rather self-evident and broad theoretical connections toward a

[20] See Di-Capua, *No Exit*, 108–19.

[21] See Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, 145–51.

specific, less overt aspect of iltizām's literary legacy: its gendered aesthetics and symbolic economy. That is, I seek to connect Ṣāliḥ's distinctly gendered critical method to gendered elements of iltizām's literary history and aesthetic legacy such as national allegory and its political-sexual symbolism, committed and socialist realism and their gendered ideals of heroic masculinity and sacrificial motherhood, and their critical deformations in the wake of Nasser's mass arrest of Egyptian communists 1959-64 and, more broadly, the 1967 military defeat. Ṣāliḥ's relationship to iltizām's politics and gendered aesthetics is not straightforward. Her experience as a militant did not leave her simply "disillusioned," a term she despises and views as a way to avoid confronting the sincerity of defeated convictions or, alternately, confronting how one has compromised principle.[22] In a similar vein, Ṣāliḥ's relationship to the Nineties Generation's personal-is-political turn away from 'the major issues' (al-qaḍāyā al-kubra), i.e., class and national liberation, toward a gendered 'writing the body' (kitābat al-jasad) is also uneasy.[23] Because the various gendered interventions made by Ṣāliḥ and the Nineties Generation alike were central to the broader aesthetic shifts in the half-century of literary history in Neoliberal Egypt, *al-Mubtasarūn*, a political-historical critique at face value, offers an insightful model for rethinking the gendered aesthetic and political legacy of iltizām in literature, the arts, and public culture. Gender and affect lie at the heart of these aesthetic transformations and Ṣāliḥ's analytical method alike. By reading her historical-political critique in terms of gendered literary symbolism and aesthetics, I seek to make clear the resonance of her analytical method in the field of modern Arabic literature – especially Egyptian literature – on the one hand, and to point out the way

[22] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, al-Mubtasarūn: dafātir wāhida min jīl al-ḥaraka al-ṭulābiyya (al-Duqqī: Dār al-nahr li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1996), 112. Ṣāliḥ uses the English term here without a translation.

[23] El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel*, 145.

literature and critique are implicated in the very social and political changes that forged and solidified Egypt's neoliberal era on the other.

Al-Mubtasarūn is primarily an account and critique of the fall and aftermath of the Student-Movement Generation of the Egyptian Left. The major literary context of that history is the legacy of iltizām and its undoing. While Ṣāliḥ does not once explicitly address iltizām as aesthetic ideology in her work, the terms she repeats – munāḍil (militant), multazim (committed), al-wāqiʿ (reality), al-ḥaqīqa (truth) – evoke iltizām's theoretical vocabulary. Ṣāliḥ's use of multazim and al-wāqiʿ are particularly innovative and subvert the intellectual history of iltizām. Ṣāliḥ often refers to the committed (multazim) intellectual or artist sarcastically to rhetorically discredit his pretensions. This is evident from the very first instance the word appears in *al-Mubtasarūn*, in Ṣāliḥ's opening portrait of the male intellectual:

> فتأتي قفزته من أرض "الأخلاق البرجوازية" إلى الهواء الطلق حيث يكتشف نعيم الحرية، من كل أخلاق. فيلمّ في حجره المفاسد الأخلاقية لكل الطبقات، ثم يطلق ذقنه ويدعو نفسه "مغترباً"، وذلك قبل أن ينجح ذكاؤه أخيراً في اصطياد مقعد محترم في الهيئة الاجتماعية (قد يعلن منه مع ذلك في التلفزيون – إن بلَغَة – أنه فنان "ملتزم"، وهو ما يفهم منه المشاهدون – محقين – أن شيئاً حول هذا الشخص يبعث على الملل).

> From his solid ground of bourgeois morality, he leaps up into the open air of freedom, only to find that he has gathered into himself the moral corruption of all classes. So he grows his beard and declares himself to be 'alienated' (mughtarib). Then, thanks to his native intelligence, he finally succeeds in securing a respectable position in society. From his comfortable armchair on the set of some television talk show (if he happens to make it that far), he might announce that he is a 'committed (multazim) artist', and the audience is rightly bored to tears.[24]

Ṣāliḥ's use of al-wāqiʿ (reality) and al-wāqiʿiyya (realism) amounts to a more dramatic critique of iltizām's lexicon. She departs from notion of reality that belonged to the committed realism of the mid-twentieth century. As Samah Selim writes, such committed realism grew out of a shift away from bourgeois first-person narrators in favor of dialogue expressive of a wider

[24] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 25; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 22–23.

range of social classes and relations.[25] Ṣāliḥ also departs from the socialist realism rigidly theorized by Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim and ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs, who saw reality as the object and starting point of literary critique - "the source of literature (maṣdar al-adab)".[26] For them, reality was understood as moldable and open to radical change. However, the critical use and potential of reality shifted dramatically from the quasi-Stalinist literary ideology of Nasserism's heyday with the series of Leftist defeats that paved the way for Neoliberal Egypt: Nasser's imprisonment of the communists in 1959, the 1967 Naksa, and the 1973 infitāḥ. In these defeats, reality was made static, impervious to socialist future-building projects or ideals. In the neoliberal turn of infitāḥ, reality became a weapon to snuff out Leftist aspirations and calls for change. The reality of Neoliberal Egypt is capitalist markets and authoritarian military rule. Thus, reality ceased to be a term from which and upon which we might imagine a more socially just future. It became a term that forces us to forgo progressive change – those dreams need a reality check! Reality grew bitter and constraining as in al-wāqiʿ al-murr (bitter reality) and amr al-wāqiʿ (status quo or fait accompli). Ṣāliḥ incorporates this changed sense of reality and realism and addresses it directly when chronicling the bourgeois morality of the Nasser era:

> وهو المناخ الذي كان "يتسامح" إزاء الماركسية والماركسيين تسامح الأقوياء مع أحلام لا تضر، مع أنه كان يسرق لغتها، لفقر حال منبعه الروحي الأصلي – لا المستعار – أي الفكر البرجوازي، فالحال الذي كانت قد بلغته البرجوازية العالمية وقت صعود نظام عبد الناصر، لم يكن ينفع لغة أحلام تغيير وجه الدنيا، كانوا قد سبقونا إلى "الواقعية" التي نغص بها اليوم. وقد اختلطت الرؤية الناصرية بالرؤية الماركسية لم يسمح بالتمييز بينهما في حالات كثيرة إلا بعد أن حل الانحسار.

> The political climate was one in which Marxism and Marxists were 'tolerated' as harmless dreamers. The regime would nevertheless occasionally steal bits from the language of Marxism to make up for the poverty of the bourgeois thought which was its real – not borrowed – ideological basis. The language of the international bourgeoisie at the time of Nasser's rise to power was not fitted to

[25] Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, 139–45.

[26] ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, Fī al-thaqāfa al-miṣriyya, al-Ṭabʿa al-thalitha (Cairo: Dār al-thaqāfa al-jadīda, 1989), 21.

> people's dreams of changing the world. It was this same bourgeoisie that invented the 'pragmatism' (al-wāqiʿiyya) that chokes us to death today. The Nasserist vision got all tangled up with Marxism, and it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two until well after the flood waters had receded.[27]

In this passage, 'al-wāqiʿiyya,' which Samah Selim has strategically translated as 'pragmatism' but which literally means 'realism,' is a clear reference to the opportunistic pragmatism of the Nasserist state intelligentsia and the intellectual histories of iltizām and socialist realism. A similar transformation can be seen in Ṣāliḥ's use of al-ḥaqīqa (truth). Truth shifts from a revolutionary inspiration to a limiting factor – the bitter truth, the hard truth. Defeat becomes integral to truth. Ṣāliḥ makes this link explicit in her 1996 preface when clarifying her driving question of the truth of who she and her generation used to be:

> وقد حاولت في هذا الكتيب أن أرسم نصف الحقيقة الأول هذا، من نحن، ما هي تجربتنا؟ أي بتعبير آخر، على أي نحو هزمنا؟

> In this book, I've tried to sketch this first part of the truth. Who were we? What was our experience? In other words: How did we come to be defeated?[28]

These twin shifts in the lexicon of Ṣāliḥ's critique belie how the horizon of engagement has been redrawn in Egypt's neoliberal turn. Engagement is reoriented from a committed act that changes social reality and shapes lived experiences in a deeply material and political sense, to an individual act of struggle and critique to grapple with truth – of politics, self, and collective – and reconcile it with defeated but not altogether lost political ideals. In response to the question of who Ṣāliḥ and her comrades truly were, she writes,

> فالإجابة عبء فردي تماماً

[27] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 28; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 27–28.

[28] Ṣāliḥ, 13-14; Salih, 13.

I think that everyone must simply shoulder his own burden on this.[29]

For the Left, absent independent political community, recovering truth and reality from the collective dogma and compromises of the Nasser era and its literature of iltizām must be undertaken individually. The type of critique this would entail is practically challenging given how truth itself is fleeting and precious in a society continually seeking to justify, normalize, and obscure the profiteering and deeply antisocial and inhumane relations of the authoritarian market logic that drive it. The same fragility holds true for socialist ideals – to say nothing of politics – given how relentlessly they are portrayed as unrealistic, naïve, or dangerous. Ṣāliḥ's writing stands out as an example of Left critique precisely because she pursues truth and political ideals – two rarities in Neoliberal Egypt – in dialectical tandem. This is the fundamental challenge and necessity at the heart of her "quest for ethical knowledge."[30]

The major critical gestures Ṣāliḥ puts forward in *al-Mubtasarūn* also speak the legacy of iltizām. Iltizām is implicated in three aspects of Ṣāliḥ's critique in particular: her critique of nationalist politics, her notion of militant kitsch, and her gendering of the committed intellectual. The first two lines of critique are found in her 1996 preface, while gendering the committed intellectual male is a backbone of her 1991 core text. With these major lines of Ṣāliḥ's implicit critique of iltizām, we might read *al-Mubtasarūn* as something of an antidote to iltizām's dogmatic aesthetic ideology. I argue that Ṣāliḥ repudiates the dogma and aesthetic of iltizām as emblematic of the compromises that poisoned the Leftist legacy her generation inherited. Ṣāliḥ describes the compromised role of Marxist intellectuals in Nasser's regime – especially after the 1959-1964 imprisonment of communists:

[29] Ṣāliḥ, 13; Salih, 13.

[30] Ṣāliḥ, 15; Salih, 15.

كان مثل هذا المثقف في الستينات هو ذلك الذي حددت له سلطة عبد الناصر دوره، اعتقلته فترة كافية ثم أخرجته وعينته في إحدى مؤسساتها العامرة في ذلك الزمن، وكان ملزماً أن يغني من قفص أو يذوى في عزلة كاسرة.

> In the sixties, the intellectual's role was scripted by the Nasser regime: a reasonable prison sentence, discharge, then a job in one of the regime's bustling bureaucracies. The Marxist intellectual had one of two choices: he could either sing from behind the bars of his cage or wither away in a crushing tomb of solitude.[31]

For the Marxists, their compromise was multiple. On the political level, they settled for a nationalist regime whose socialism was based less on class politics than the Cold-War political map that centered Nasser as the father of the liberated nation. Indeed, Ṣāliḥ understands this keenly when she describes how Marxist opposition to Nasser's regime – had it succeeded – would have alienated the Marxists from the masses whose political investment was in the national struggle, not socialism.

ولو استطاع أن يكرهه تماماً، كلية، لكان بليداً حقاً إذ يعزل نفسه عن المعركة الوحيدة الدائرة، التي لا يحارب الشعب أخرى غيرها كي سترك هذه لتلك، لذلك فقد انتمى جزء منه – هو أيضاً إلى ذلك النظام التي يقمعه ويقمع الشعب – ثم يعود فيلفهما من حوله – ودائماً باسم الوطن.

> If the militant of the sixties had actually managed to oppose the regime thoroughly and completely, the only good it would have done would have been to isolate him totally from the only struggle in town, the only one of real interest to the masses. This is why part of him was always attached to the regime – a regime that constantly alternated between rallying and persecuting the people in the name of the nation.[32]

On the personal level – the specter of private motives being a recurrent haunt of Ṣāliḥ's account – the Marxists who "settled down to sing half a song (iktafā bi-niṣf ughaniyyatih)," i.e., who took

[31] Ṣāliḥ 25-26; Salih, 23.

[32] Ṣāliḥ, 27; Salih, 26.

jobs in Nasser's state-cultural industries and government ministries, compromised because the alternative was an alienated and impoverished irrelevance.[33]

These compromises pushed the Nasser era toward a Soviet-style hegemonic conception of culture, literature, and politics dominated by the state and by Nasser as its "benevolent patriarch (rabb al-ʿāʾila)."[34] In the literary arena, the practitioners and theorists of iltizām were overwhelmingly men. They produced a gendered symbolic and political schema that elevated heroic masculinity and feminine sacrifice and supported a social reality of neopatriarchal state authority. It is because of the endurance of this gendered symbolic language in Ṣāliḥ's writing that Hanan Hammad argues that "Salih uncritically uses gendered language throughout her narrative and contradicts her own critique of mainstream masculinity."[35] Hammad continues,

> Mocking the failure of her old comrades under Nasser, she writes that they 'failed to be real men.' To her, when bourgeois men had to face life's realities, they experience 'losing' and even violation of virginity (bakara). She uses the Arabic term fadd al-bakara, which literally means hymen removal, a process that only the female body can undergo. Such expressions echo traditional understandings of masculinity and a sexual regime that equates failure with femininity and virginity with a pristine female body.[36]

I disagree with Hammad's reading. Given the literary legacy of iltizām and the pervasive nostalgia among large sectors of the Left for Nasser as the so-called 'benevolent patriarch,' Ṣāliḥ's use of gendered language is, in fact, smartly critical. We should consider her gendered language as responding to the progressive sexual-political symbolism of iltizām's allegories and its critical deformations in the New Sensibility. As is evident in Ṣāliḥ's literary criticism on the

[33] Ṣāliḥ, 26; Salih, 24.

[34] Ṣāliḥ, 36 ; Salih, 41.

[35] Hammad, "Arwa Salih's 'The Premature': Gendering the History of the Egyptian Left," 137.

[36] Hammad, 137.

fiction of Ṣunʿallah Ibrāhīm,[37] she writes with an awareness of how deformed sexual-political symbolism offered a literary critique of state torture in the 1960s and the corruption of post-infitāḥ society beginning in the 1970s.[38] Thus, she does not merely reproduce this gendered symbolic language but satirizes and disturbs it. The specific instances Hammad references as examples of Ṣāliḥ's supposedly uncritical use of patriarchal language are rather exemplary in showing how she weaves gender into her critique of the bourgeois morality and social relations of Neoliberal Egypt. Ṣāliḥ's 'mocking' reference to the Sixties Generation Leftists comes as part of a broader discussion of the relationship between that generation and her own Student-Movement Generation, a relationship she pointedly critiques for passing on a toxic inheritance. A fuller quotation captures this context:

> فأرضعونا اللبن المسموم دون أن يتركونا لتجربتنا وللواقع الحي يفرز بالتجربة اليمين من اليسار، وسبق التقسيم نمو الحركة التي كانت في مهدها، ورثته جاهزاً من قبل أن يقول أي واقع كلمته، لأن أناساً اتخذوا حفنة من البشر مادة لتصفية حسابات قديمة، فقط لأنهم كانت لديهم وقاحة كافية ليعتبروهم إرثاً يتنازعوه، "صبية" للمعلمين الجاهزين الآتين من زمن لم يعرفوا فيه كيف يكونوا رجالاً.

> Instead of leaving us to our own devices – of giving us the space to work out our living reality and to let experience sift out left from right – they nursed us on their poisoned milk. These prior and internecine conflicts had devastating consequences. The student movement inherited them before the real world could shape its growth, before certain individuals deliberately moulded a handful of people into material with which to settle old scores. These individuals were shameless enough to treat their 'disciples' as though they were a contested family legacy: dunce apprentices for ready-made teachers who had never learnt how to be men.[39]

While some might fault Ṣāliḥ for mixing gendered metaphors in this passage, the images of a mother breastfeeding poisoned milk and a father who never learned to be a man cut at the heart

[37] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, Saraṭān al-rūḥ (Cairo: al-Nahr li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1998), 105-61.

[38] See Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 334.

[39] Ṣāliḥ, 49; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 60-61.

of the gendered symbolism of the nation. By reading Ṣāliḥ on her own terms, we see that learning how to be men has less to do with gender in the Arab cultural context and more to do with social and political values. She later bemoans the loss of what Nouri Gana has posited as a gender-neutral notion of manhood (rujūla), which carries personal, social, and even political virtues available to men and women alike.[40] Ṣāliḥ writes,

> لقد كان في القيم "المتخلفة" تصور إنساني رفيع للرجولة. لا يرجع للتخلف بل لكل إرث إنساني الذي انطوت عليه رحلة البشرية الباحثة عن جدارتها، فأسقط هؤلاء النبل من الرجولة واحتفظوا بالتخلف.

> There was, in what we call our 'backward' values, a finer conception of manhood, one that was based in a rich legacy of ethical striving. Our generation simply dropped the nobility of the ideal and kept the backwardness.[41]

By integrating this language into her critique – especially within the immediate context of her book, which is a scathing repudiation of bourgeois family values and social structures – Ṣāliḥ simultaneously criticizes the harmful relationship between the Sixties and Student-Movement Generations of militants and discredits the idealized gendered symbolism she ascribes to the bourgeois morality of the Nasser era.

The same can be said of Ṣāliḥ's unconventional description of the bourgeois male being deflowered or losing his virginity upon confronting the fact that

> هذا العالم، إرثهم الطبيعي ذاك، إنما يسير بقوانين لعبة متوحشة، وأن امتيازاتهم الموروثة لا تقدم لهم إعفاء من المشاركة فيها.

> this world – this natural inheritance of his – turns according to the rules of a savage game and that his inherited privileges are merely conveniences that do not exempt him from playing this game.[42]

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[40] Nouri Gana, "Bourguiba's Sons: Melancholy Manhood in Modern Tunisian Cinema," *The Journal of North African Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 2010): 106–7.

[41] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 88; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 110.

[42] Ṣāliḥ, 74; Salih, 95-96.

(The game Ṣāliḥ refers to here is the self-interested attitude toward marriage and sexual mores that centers property and status accumulation.) The broader context of this statement matters; the fact that it precedes Ṣāliḥ's critique of the "triangle of goddess, wife and whore" that traps women in a bind with its sexist equation of a woman's morals with her sexual behavior should inform our understanding of Ṣāliḥ's figurative use of virginity.[43] Moreover, that

ولو علم كل الحقيقة لفضت بكارته

If he knew the full truth it would deflower him[44]

does not make literal sense when gendered male is precisely Ṣāliḥ's point. Just as with her mixing of gendered parental metaphors, Ṣāliḥ's playful notion that the bourgeois male being deflowered by truth is not merely a way to sully his moral reputation with distinctly feminine shame. Ṣāliḥ's unconventionally gendered expression subverts the sexist and capitalist moral underpinnings of that very shame. Her critique here is more robust than merely recycling patriarchal language in order to criticize it. Ṣāliḥ confronts a more engulfing condition in Neoliberal Egypt – with economic, political, and gendered dimensions – which implicates men and women.

Political Compromises

On a political level, Ṣāliḥ describes the constraints of iltizām as the prescribed aesthetic form of the Nasser era:

انخرط الموهوبون من اليساريين في زمن عبد الناصر في حركة أدبية مُسيّجة حدد إطارها النظام، فأرغمهم على حديث الرمز والإشارة.

[43] Ṣāliḥ, 89; Salih, 112.

[44] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 74. My translation.

> During the Nasser era, leftists with real talent engaged in a circumscribed literary movement whose parameters were defined by the regime. It forced them to speak in symbols and metaphors.[45]

The progressive sexual-political symbolism of iltizām was built upon a national allegory that hinged in large part upon the era's Cold-War political map focused upon anti-colonial national struggles. Though often inflected with a veneer of socialist class-consciousness, this political frame and its corresponding literary forms were rooted in the nation and, therefore, easily associated with the state and with Nasser himself. The Student-Movement Generation inherited this compromising posture toward the regime and its nationalism – even if they fancied themselves beyond it:

> لقد ظننا أننا أبناء عهد جديد، يبدأ فيه الشعب رحلته المستقلة عن نظام عبد الناصر بعد طول تبعية، ولكننا كنا مخطئين.

> We had imagined that we were the children of a new era, an era in which the people would finally declare their independence from the Nasser regime, but we were wrong.[46]

This legacy was found in the overt nationalism – not socialism – behind the demand for war with Israel over Sinai, a position that only makes sense in the framework of the Cold-War political map that Nasser had so thoroughly dominated but which was shattered in 1967. When Ṣāliḥ writes of the masses' support for a war to reclaim Egypt's national sovereignty, she also implicates the Student-Movement Left:

> تجربة الجماهير الغفيرة من الشعب مع هذا النظام لم تكن قد أنهت بعد ما بينها وبينه من روابط. كانت تريد من هذا النظام أن يحارب، إذ لا يدور بخلدها أن يخوض غيره المعركة مع الاستعمار (فعلى ذلك عوّدها)، فضلاً عن أن يكون هذا الغير هو هي نفسها، لوحدها! إن الطلاب الذين كنا نقنعهم بضرورة خوض حرب تحرير شعبية لم يخطر لهم ببال أننا ندعوهم لسكة مستقلة عن النظام.

> The impoverished masses had not yet severed their ties to the regime. The people wanted the regime to go to war. It never occurred to them that anybody else could

[45] Ṣāliḥ, 45; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 54.

[46] Ṣāliḥ, 28; Salih, 27.

> wage the battle against colonialism (the regime had trained them to believe this). They themselves certainly couldn't do it – and all alone no less! Nor did it occur to the students whom we set out to persuade of the necessity of fighting a popular war of liberation, that we were asking them to part ways with the regime.[47]

It becomes clear in Ṣāliḥ's account that the strategic compromise with the regime, i.e., the decision not to part with it in a clear way, went hand in hand with the political compromise surrounding nationalism's place ahead of socialism. This is in part a result of the specific demand of the Student Movement: war – a military function of the state. Moreover, the fact that war was central to this transitional moment in Egyptian political economy and the Egyptian Left shows how central the militarized state remained despite the geopolitical shifts.

The seeds of the Left's failures in the wake of the October 1973 War and infitāḥ were thus sown in the Nasser Era with the Left's compromises with the state's militarized nationalism. In them Ṣāliḥ sees major lines of continuity despite the geopolitical and economic transitions from the Nasser era to the Sadat era. Even when the Student Movement succeeded in goading the Egyptian nation to war, it lost the struggle to redefine the post-1973 agenda because it never mounted a challenge to the centrality of the state and its military. Summarizing the extent of the blunder whose path was littered with political compromises, Ṣālih writes:

> لقد أصبح "الحفاظ على النظام" الذي يريد الاستعمار به شراً، يعادل استعادة سيناء فقط، وبأي ثمن حتى لو كان بيع الاقتصاد الوطني المستقل، فاستعيدت سيناء وخرج النظام من الأزمة مصوناً من كل شر، ورحل الاقتصاد الوطني المستقل رخيصاً، "فداه"!

> 'The preservation of the regime' against the evil conspiracies of colonialism became equivalent to the liberation of Sinai, nothing more – and that, at any price, including the price of selling off our national economy. Sinai was returned, the regime emerged from the crisis unscathed and the economy was sold off on the cheap as the regime's ransom.[48]

[47] Ṣāliḥ, 28-29; Salih, 28–29.

[48] Ṣāliḥ, 37 ; Salih, 44.

The costs of compromise for the Student-Movement Left had grown more severe under Sadat. After the October 1973 War, the imperative to struggle in defense of the nation had lost its Cold-War smokescreen; Sadat's pivot to the capitalist West was out in the open. This led to a profound experience of personal, social, and political alienation on the Left.

For the political and cultural elites who had climbed Nasser's bureaucracy, this geopolitical pivot could have proven costly. As Ṣāliḥ shows in her analysis of this ascendant class, however, their compromising and opportunistic approach to changing political winds made for continuity in their class's hold on power and projection of morality. Ṣāliḥ is attentive to the calculating private motives of a class that sought social advancement in Nasser's state-cultural apparatus. As such, when profiteering was explicitly centered in Sadat's post-infitāḥ Egypt, the existence of those same dynamics under Nasser's veneer of Arab Nationalism were made clearer in retrospect. Ṣāliḥ's account of this class is telling:

> أما ميزتهم الوحيدة الحقيقية هنا على غيرهم من حيث "المبدأ"، تلك التي أضفت مشروعية على الاستيلاء، وهي اقتران صعودهم الاجتماعي بمشروع رأسمالي وطني طموح أسماه عبد الناصر "اشتراكياً" (علّه يخدع التاريخ أيضاً) فإنهم يتنصلون منها ومنه كنوع من أنواع الجرب (مبرهنين على صعوبة خديعة التاريخ إلى ما لا نهاية)، حتى العداء للاستعمار اكتشفوا أنه كان مصدر كل الكوارث، بعد أن اتضح أنه ليس مجانياً كصعودهم الطبقي.

> Their only edge was the 'principles' that gave the cover of legitimacy to their thieving. They had hitched their social climbing to an ambitious nationalist-capitalist project ('socialist' according to Nasser) but then they just washed their hands of the whole affair and of Nasser himself as though both were a kind of scabies (and they know that they can't deceive history for ever). They even 'discovered' that their antagonism to wards colonialism had been the source of all our miseries, since it had turned out to be so costly.[49]

[49] Ṣāliḥ, 60 ; Salih, 77.

As Ṣāliḥ continues, she emphasizes the rightward swing of the state's nationalism (and that of its intellectual client class) once Sadat managed to facilitate his Cold-War economic and geopolitical realignment on the heels of the October 1973 War – a moment of nationalist fervor.

> ولا غرابة أن جاءت نهاية المشروع الذي صنعهم – ولم يصنعوه – على أيديهم (قرر الرئيس ونفذوا، تماماً كما رباهم سلفه الاشتراكي في كل القرارات "المصيرية"، حتى "المعترضين" لم ينسوا أن يأخذوا "أموالهم" يستثمرونها في الخارج).

> I don't find it at all surprising that they themselves pulled down the whole edifice that had propped them up as a class in the first place. They executed Sadat's orders to the letter, as his 'socialist' predecessor had trained them to do, at all the fateful moments. Even the dissidents didn't forget to take their money with them to invest abroad.[50]

We understand from this account of the class of statist intellectuals the long-term political implications of privately motivated compromises with the regime:

> أعلنوا بشجاعة تليق بهم انتهاء عصر الأحلام الكبرى وتدشين عهد "الواقعية"، حيث لا أحلام لا هدف لا موضوع للحياة سوى التملك، مصدر الأمن والأمان وجائزة السباق بين الأفراد شعب لم يعد يجمعهم سوى صراع جهنمي من أجل البقاء.

> Far and wide they announced the end of great dreams and the beginning of the age of 'realism', where there are no dreams, no purpose, no meaning to life apart from material gain – the source of safety and security, the grand prize in a nightmarish collective struggle to survive.[51]

This self-preserving realism of the statist intellectual class was a legacy the Student-Movement Generation inherited to disastrous personal and social effect. Indeed, the older Sixties Generation's accumulation of wealth and status provided the family-based class structures of support upon which the Student-Movement Left could rely. This had the pernicious effect of imbedding hierarchies of class and social status within the social networks of the 1970s Left. In practical terms, by the 1970s – especially for those whose families were enriched by the

[50] Ṣāliḥ, 60 ; Salih, 77.

[51] Ṣāliḥ, 60-61; Salih, 77.

neoliberalizing infitāḥ - the politically compromising mantra of social advancement (now the de facto modus operandi of the state) afforded the defeated militants of the Student Movement the means to cultivate social status outside of militant politics. For those who remained politically active, their relationships grew increasingly alienating and toxic – marked by pervasive self-preserving bourgeois realism – while their politics grew further removed from both the right-wing political reality and the increasingly religious masses. Ṣāliḥ describes these class dynamics thus:

> إنما تشبثوا بحبل النجاة، حبل الملكية. فحين توقف هؤلاء عن النضال وجدوا المؤسسات التي تمردوا عليها من قبل في انتظارهم لتسندهم، الأسرة القادرة التي تحمي وتقدم العون المالي، وعلاقاتها المتنفذة التي تقدم إمكانيات العمل والسفر، الترف "ليرفه" عنهم بعد طول إرهاق، العلاقات العامة الناجحة التي تحيطهم بالاحترام، ولكن على أساس جديد الآن. فمحل النجومية السياسية، حلت النجومية الاجتماعية.

> Property was their lifeline. These former militants found the same institutions they had rebelled against waiting to embrace them with open arms: a family to protect them and give them financial support, a close-knit patronage network offering all kinds of opportunities for work and travel, the comfort and respect guaranteed by belonging to a flourishing and prosperous social group and countless little luxuries to make up for the past. But this process unfolded on a different basis than it did for their parents. In the lives of these young men and women, social distinction came to replace political distinction.[52]

At the heart of this shift is the collapse of the political ideas that had brought the Student-Movement Generation together. All that remained was the mantra of "self-realization (taḥqīq al-dhāt)," relationships built upon class and status, and the complex of private motives that drove people to militancy in the first place.[53]

Post-Infitāḥ Gender: Sex, Marriage, and Profit

[52] Ṣāliḥ, 61; Salih, 78.

[53] Ṣāliḥ, 65 ; Salih, 83.

Ṣāliḥ threads the gendered symbolism of iltizām through her overriding concern with the Left's compromises with neopatriarchal state power of "the July-revolution regime,"[54] by gendering the committed intellectual male – which she does on the first pages of *al-Mubtasarūn*'s 1991 core chapters, labeling him "muthaqqaf" and "multazim."[55] Indeed, Ṣāliḥ understands the continuities of the class of state intellectuals between the Nasser and Sadat eras as expressing a bourgeois morality, which was rooted not only in the class concerns explored above but also in fundamentally conservative notions of gender and institutions of family. This gendered bourgeois morality is implicated in the affected portrait of the Student-Generation Left that Sāliḥ paints. To begin, Ṣāliḥ draws an important distinction between the Sixties Generation and her own Student-Movement Generation when it comes to women, sex, and gender. The Student-Movement Generation espoused egalitarian principles in the realm of sexual relations and drew many young women into its political movement:

> كان جيل الحركة الطلابية هو أول جيل يساري يصدق في حلم الارتباط الحر، المتحرر من الحسابات الاجتماعية، المبني على الحب الشخصي فقط، والذي ينشأ الالتزام بيه بالآخر لا عن أشكال القسرية يفرضها المجتمع بل عن الرغبة في الاستمرار معاً.

> The student-movement generation was the first generation of leftists that really believed in the dream of freely chosen relationships stripped of social calculation, relationships built on love and on non-coercive forms of commitment.[56]

This was a marked shift from the Ṣāliḥ's description of the Sixties Generation's sexual mores:

> لم تشهد حقبتهم ثورة تحيط بالتساؤل العلاقة القائمة بين الرجل والمرأة في مجتمعنا، بينما اكتفى النظام الناصري بدعاية رزينة "لدخول المرأة مجال العمل" في إطار حلم للصعود الطبقي يدعوها "لتكافح مع زوجها حتى يصلا" (إلى مصاف البرجوازية بالطبع، فهذا هو الحلم الوحيد "المفهوم" حتى في علاقة الرجل والمرأة).

[54] Selim points out that Ṣāliḥ's use of "the July-revolution regime" insists upon military and political continuity between the Nasser and Sadat regimes: Salih, 17.

[55] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 25.

[56] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn,* 67; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 87.

> There was no radical questioning of sexual politics in their time. The Nasser regime made sedate calls for the integration of women into the workplace, but only in the context of its vision of the family's social mobility – a vision in which women were enjoined to struggle alongside their husbands with the ultimate aim of rising into the ranks of the bourgeoisie. It was the only ambition that made sense.[57]

Ṣāliḥ's account here makes plain the fundamentally conservative social binds inherent in Nasser's limited vision of women's liberation. Therefore, when the Student-Movement Generation's egalitarian idealism collapsed in the aftermath of the October 1973 War and infitāḥ, the goals of social mobility and wealth accumulation that had constrained the Sixties Generation's attitude toward women resurged. For the disappointed Leftists in post-infitāḥ Egypt,

> لم يعد هناك حلم مشترك، بل خوف مشترك، من الخواء الذي يحل بعد ضياع الأحلام، من عدم الأمان الاقتصادي، ومن الوحدة التي تكتسح مجتمعاً يبدو الجميع فيه منشغلاً بنفسه وقد فقد "الموضوع" مع ذلك، ليس لديه ما يتبادله مع بعضه البعض سوى الشكوى أحياناً والمنافع طوال الوقت، "الأفكار" فيه ترف غريب فاقد المعنى.

> There was no longer a common dream, only a shared fear of the void, of economic insecurity and of the loneliness that afflicts a society in which people turn inward, having once and for all lost the thread of the issues at stake – a society in which there is nothing to give and take but suspicion occasionally and utility, always, and in which thinking becomes a strange kind of vapid luxury.[58]

In short, the social and political alienation of infitāḥ alongside new anxieties and pressures of a neoliberalizing economy mounted a challenge to the Student-Movement Generation's previously egalitarian and rebellious approach to sexual relations.

Ṣāliḥ frames her analysis of her own generation's retreat to bourgeois marriage as symptomatic of their retreat from the egalitarian political (and sexual) ideals they once held. This was a form of surrender to the material anxieties and opportunities of infitāḥ, an elevation of

[57] Ṣāliḥ, 67; Salih, 86.

[58] Ṣāliḥ, 68-69; Salih, 88.

private advancement at the expense of collective social ambitions. Moreover, it is important to note the conflux of personal, social, and political-economic motives that occasioned this retreat to a logic of crass pragmatism. Ṣāliḥ traces this retreat to the loss of a collective political project in the wake of the October 1973 War and infitāḥ - the public clearly not politicized along class lines, the state's nationalism having turned decidedly right-wing, and Islamism growing ascendant. Additionally, by 1975 Sadat had begun arresting communists on a scale that would reach new heights in the wake of the 1977 Bread Intifāḍa. This drove communists underground and removed holdover Leftist elements of the Nasserist era that had sacrificed and compromised their way into the Sadat regime.[59] It was in this context of compounded political defeat and retreat that the conservative institutions of property and marriage – to say nothing of religion, which provided a new call to duty for some ex-Leftists – offered the appearance of material and moral security. However, the accumulation of wealth and status in marriage acted as a weak stand-in for the lost raison d'etre of these former militants. It did nothing to assuage their alienation. It merely introduced an alienating capitalist logic of competition and sense of precarity into the home. Contrary to marriage's promise of material and moral security, Ṣāliḥ describes spousal relationships as being warped and poisoned by the shifts – toward competition, material self-interest, and feelings of political impotence and defeat – that took hold in the 1970s:

> لقد تحولت العلاقة التي رجعت طائعة إلى القواعد الاجتماعية السائدة إلى "مؤسسة" يحتمي بها الزوجان من ضراوة الأوضاع المحيطة بها، ومن هواجسهما الداخلية التي يجددها الإحساس بالعجز وعدم الاتساق مع الذات، بأن ما يجمعهما الآن لا علاقة له بما كان يجمعهما ذات اليوم.
>
> The relationship falls back on dominant social norms and turns into an institution inside which husband and wife take shelter from the brutal world outside as well as from their private anxieties – anxieties constantly fueled by feelings of

[59] Samah Selim, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt* (London: Seagull Books, 2018), xvi.

> impotence and deception, by the knowledge that the thing that unites them has nothing to do with what first brought them together.[60]

She means here that self-interest and the quest for material and moral security took over marriage, obscuring any pretense of freely chosen love or mutual support. Competition was internalized such that husband and wife viewed each other as a tool for self-advancement. In this way,

> لقد تلاشى كل ما هو شخصي في الزواج، أصبح علاقة لا يهم فيها الشخص بل ذلك الذي يصلح للعب دور الزوج أو الزوجة داخلا الحسبة الأنانية لكم منهما، أصبح علاقة "مغتربة".

> Marriage becomes an impersonal affair. The person is only important insofar as they can play the role of husband or wife within the frame of the other's calculated self-interest. Marriage becomes an alienated relationship.[61]

Ṣāliḥ's account of this transition stands out for its attention to the twin roles of class relations and bourgeois morality. Because Ṣāliḥ thinks through each of these aspects in tandem, she manages to inflect her account with attention to gender and affect to class-critical ends. This is, of course, in contrast to traditional Marxist historical analysis often blind to the particularities of gender on the one hand,[62] and social or intellectual histories that emphasize the conservative ideological and cultural shifts of the 1970s without attention to the dramatic neoliberalizing economic transformations of infitāḥ and its context of authoritarianism on the other.[63] Herein lies Ṣāliḥ's historiographical intervention. By positing that bourgeois morality is an inextricable aspect of the class shifts inaugurated by infitāḥ - an aspect with uneven consequences for men and women -

[60] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 69; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 89.

[61] Ṣāliḥ, 70; Salih, 90.

[62] For example: Ghālī Shukrī, *al-Thawra al-muḍadda fī miṣr*, al-Ṭabʿa al-thālitha (Cairo: al-Ahālī, 1987).

[63] For example: Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Ṣāliḥ unpacks the compounded gendered alienation of these shifts within post-infitāḥ Egypt and the institutions of marriage and family.

For example, Ṣāliḥ argues that marriage was reduced to a market transaction under the thin veneer or distinctly gendered bourgeois morality:

> من صلبان الملكية، "الواقع" الوحيد الذي له قوة "الحقيقة" في دنيا البرجوازية، الذي عنده تلتقي كل الطرق، وتفترق. الزواج أو وجه الحياة المحسوب، هو الواقع في وجهه غير المحبب، لكن الذي لا بد منه.
>
> Property is the only truth in the world of the bourgeois, the fetish through which all roads cross. A well-contracted marriage is part of the necessary, if unpleasant, order of things.[64]

On its face, this description of the calculating logic behind marriage should apply equally to men and women alike if both parties to a marriage enter with their self-interest centered. Upon elaboration, however, Ṣāliḥ exposes how bourgeois morality is applied unevenly on men and women, creating a markedly unequal experience of marriage despite the husband and wife's shared calculating and self-interested motives. She writes:

> يبدو الجنس للبرجوازي غير مشبع في الزواج لأنه "محترم" – أي منافق – والاحترام ضروري مع ذلك، أو لأنه أحادي، مع أن البرجوازي هو أشرس المدافعين عن الأحادية "في الزواج"، عن كل حق بالطبع إذ كيف سيميز الورثة؟ فيصبح البديل الوحيد "الواقعي" لمتعة الزواج المخصية هو الدعارة (وإن تكن هذه في العادة تحسب على المرأة، بينما تحسب للرجل – هي نفسها – غزواً). الدعارة هي المرادف الوحيد الذي يعرفه، بل الذي يقدر دماغ البرجوازي (وفي ذيله البرجوازي الصغير) على تخيله "للحرية"، وإن تكن هي أيضاً هنا مخصية، ولو فقط لأنها مسروقة.
>
> It appears that the 'respectable' nature of sex in marriage doesn't satisfy the bourgeois male (though respectability in itself is of course de rigueur). And yet the bourgeois male is the fiercest champion of monogamy in marriage – and with good reason too, for he must be sure of his heirs after all. Whoring is the only real alternative to the castrated pleasures of marriage (though 'whoring' is usually what women do; men 'conquer'). Whoring is the bourgeois male's practice of the thing he names 'freedom' (much like his petty-bourgeois brother), an oddly neutered kind of whoring, because it is a form of theft.[65]

[64] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 80; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 100.

[65] Ṣāliḥ, 80; Salih, 100–101.

Here we ought not forget that Ṣāliḥ traces the issues of monogamy and 'whoring' to the self-interested well-contracted nature of marriage, which leaves no room for love or egalitarian ideals. As such, the relationship between husband and wife is unfulfilling and alienating on an interpersonal level. The double standard of monogamy lays bare how the bourgeois morality of marriage Ṣāliḥ discusses produces inequalities that only serve the bourgeois male. And yet, Ṣāliḥ does not idealize the male experience here. She reminds us that his freedom and pleasure are 'castrated' and 'neutered' by his calculated compromises. This is an important point because Ṣāliḥ's argument is not just that this bourgeois morality surrounding sex and marriage has mistreated and confined women, but also that it does a disservice to men. When addressing how personal responsibility is held as a constraint against women, Ṣāliḥ makes passing reference to past conceptions of manhood (al-rujūla). This is the same comment that resonates with Gana's argument that al-rujūla should be understood as a gender-neutral term – as opposed to masculinity (al-dhukūra) and femininity (al-unūtha) – to connotate personal, social, and even political virtures.[66] Ṣāliḥ writes:

> أما هو، فإن مسئوليته تتمخض في النهاية عن إنجاز آخر لفحولته، فيتيه برجولته (حقاً لا هزلاً). لقد كان القيم "المتخلفة" تصور إنساني رفيع للرجولة، لا يرجع للتخلف بل لكل الإرث الإنساني الذي انطوت عليه رحلة البشرية الباحثة عن جدارتها، فأسقط هؤلاء النبل من الرجولة، واحتفظوا بالتخلف.

> As for the man, his personal responsibility becomes an affirmation of his virility, and he struts and preens for all comers (literally and not jokingly). There was, in what we call our 'backward' values, a finer conception of manhood, one that was based in a rich legacy of ethical striving. Our generation simply dropped the nobility of the ideal and kept the backwardness.[67]

[66] Gana, "Bourguiba's Sons: Melancholy Manhood in Modern Tunisian Cinema," March 2010, 106–7.

[67] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 88; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 110.

As Ṣāliḥ sees it, the man's futile attempts to affirm his virility shows the castrating loss of manhood (al-rujūla) – which we should consider in relation to the egalitarian political ideals that marked Ṣāliḥ's generation.

Ṣāliḥ then threads her gender-conscious analysis of bourgeois (and masculine) morality through her Marxist analysis of the dynamics of marriage. She points out how men are granted the economic power to buy off sexual pleasure and social status through marriage to a woman:

> يأتي هنا في معقل الحرية "السري"، الذي لا تربط طرفيه وشائج الملكية أو أغلالها، ولا التمرد بطبيعة الحال، بل "التواطؤ" في صورة الاستغلال المتبادل بين الرجل والمرأة. والصيغة المعتمدة المعروفة، أو النسخة الأصلية التي تتفرع عنها نسخ كثيرة ومعقدة، كثرة وتعقيد أنماط الاستغلال المتراكمة خبرتها في تاريخ العلاقات البرجوازية، هي: الرجل ينفق والمرأة تعطي اللذة وتتبدد الملل، فتشتغل علاوة على ذلك مهرجة، إذ "يجب" أن تكون مسلية لتريحه من الحسابات التي هدت كاهله طوال النهار، وإلا فلماذا يرهق نفسه طوال النهار إن لم يكن لأجل أن ينفق ويتسلى. وتقوم هي بدورها، ويتحدد حدم الإنفاق بقيمتها الاجتماعية.

> The erotic experience is his private little fortress of freedom, built on the mutually agreed exploitation between man and woman, a dependable relation that takes a variety of complex and well-established forms. For example, he provides financial support and she provides pleasure and distraction. She is like a court jester. It's her job to entertain him, to provide relief from a long and profitable day's work. Now he naturally wants to spend money and amuse himself. She goes along with this, and how much he spends will be determined by the degree of her social value and utility.[68]

Ṣāliḥ elaborates on the woman's mindset here writing,

> اعتادت أن يكون لأنوثتها مقابل، مجرد واقعة الأنوثة تعطيها الحق في مقابل (ومن المشكوك أن تكون إحداهن سألت نفسها مرة لماذا؟)

> She's used to the idea that her femininity has an exchange value. The mere fact of being a woman gives her the right to a price, and it's doubtful whether she's ever asked herself why this should be so.[69]

Thus, Ṣāliḥ shows how the market functions of marriage, which deal in property, sex, and status, treat men and women differently. Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of the "patriarchal bargain," whereby

[68] Ṣāliḥ, 80-81; Salih, 101.

[69] Ṣāliḥ, 81; Salih, 101–2.

women – especially in periods of economic transition and anxiety like post-infitāḥ Egypt – negotiate their interests within patriarchy rather than revolt against it, speaks to Ṣāliḥ's point here.[70] The gendered distinction in the terms of this sort of negotiation that Ṣāliḥ highlights is part and parcel of bourgeois morality. It being impossible to thrive in such conditions, and women facing twin burdens of economic dependency and the double standards of bourgeois morality, Ṣāliḥ does not mince words:

زواج أم رذيلة، تتعدد الأسباب والموت واحد!

It all comes down to the same thing in the end: marriage or prostitution.[71]

In the context of iltizām's aesthetic legacy and the legacy of political opportunism and compromise with the regime, Ṣāliḥ's affected and gendered analytical approach in *al-Mubtasarūn* serves a her broader and more robust epistemological project whose sights are set on understanding Marxism not as an aesthetic or political dogma but as 'the quest for ethical knowledge.' As the above discussion of Ṣāliḥ's critique of the male intellectual and the sexist double-standards of bourgeois morality and attitudes toward sex and gender shows, she views gender as a particularly telling lens through which the ethical vacuity of her generation's compromising attitudes is exposed. Ṣāliḥ's attention to the intimate emotional and social experiences of individuals – men and women alike – is a methodological feature of her critical analysis that seeks ethical knowledge. It is not accessory but central to her repudiation of the compromised legacy her generation inherited and the aesthetic ideology of iltizām.

Militant Kitsch

[70] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (September 1988): 274–90.

[71] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 81; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 102.

I have begun to frame Ṣāliḥ's quest for ethical knowledge, as it evolves through the textual layers of *al-Mubtasarūn*, in opposition to iltizām and the compromised inheritance of the Egyptian Left. The foil for this quest that Ṣāliḥ introduces in her 1996 preface is her theory of militant kitsch, which she borrows from Milan Kundera, an example of how the evolving layers of her thought resonate with post-1991 Leftist self-critiques globally. Ṣāliḥ cites Kundera's existential vocabulary to explore how kitsch mediates the militant's experience of the world. She writes,

> فلم أقدم للقارئ حتى الآن تعريفه الخاص للكيتش، والذي يقع بالضبط عند نقطة التماس بين "النداء العام" (أو نداء الواجب) وبين الدوافع الخفية، ومن ثم يفسر لقاءهما إنه: "الوفاق التام مع الوجود". الوفاق التام كرغبة محرقة عند أناس يشعرون بالضبط بعدم الوفاق مع أنفسهم ومع العالم – كأنهم خلاصة لإحساس أشقائهم البشر بالنقص الكامن دوماً في الكائن الإنساني (ربما خفته التي لا تحتمل)، والساعي أبداً للاكتمال (الثقل يمنحه جذوراً، وربما استمرارية قد تتغلب مرة في صراعه الابدي ضد الموت)، تلك الثغرة في الوجود الإنساني، التي من توترها بين الحلم والواقع – بين الأمل في الوفاق التام والعجز عنه – تصنع المواهب الكبيرة، وأيضاً كل أنواع الإحباط والفشل والجريمة.

> The specificity of Kundera's definition of kitsch falls exactly at the meeting point between 'the public call' (or the call to duty) and private motivation. This is what he calls 'the categorical agreement of being – the burning desire of those who live in discord with themselves and the world projected into an abstraction of human lack and incompleteness (the unbearable lightness of being). They desperately seek wholeness – a weight to root them in the world, or a sense of continuity in the face of death. They are obsessed with the crack in human existence that hovers between dream and reality, hope and impossibility and produces great genius as well as despair, failure and many varieties of crime.[72]

She continues,

> غير أن لحلم الوفاق التام – ككل أوضاع وصور الوجود الإنساني – معضلاته (أو "تناقضاته" إن استخدمت تعبيراً هيجلياً – عميقاً جداً بالمناسبة)، فلكي يثمر حقاً ينبغي أن تصدقه بما يكفي كي تقامر – تقامر حتى بوجودك كله في لحظة، وهو بالضبط ما يفعله المناضلون في فحظة انتشاء بإمكانية "تجاوز" الوجود الفردي والمصير الفردي (ولقد عرفنا كلنا – حتى أسوأنا – حلاوة هذه اللحظة، إنها لحظة حرية، لحظة خفة لا تكاد تحتمل، من فرط جمالها). ولكنك فو صدقته إلى حد بلوغ حالة من "الوفاق التام" بالفعل – الوفاق التام مع الذات، أو مع الكيتش الذي اخترته لنفسك، فقد دخلت رأساً دائرة ملؤها الشر بل الجنون. حينئذ تفقد التسامح، لا تعود مستعداً لقبول أي تناقض مع الكيتش – إذ لا يعود البشر بالنسبة لك عوالم حية، أي متناقضة.

[72] Ṣāliḥ, 12; Salih, 11.

> ‘The categorical agreement of being’ carries a fundamental contradiction. In order for it to be generative, it requires a dangerous leap of faith, summoned at a moment’s notice: the euphoria of transcending the necessity of being. We have all known – even the worst among us – the sweetness of this moment: a moment of pure freedom, of unbearable lightness. And this is where the danger lies. Enter the mythical circle of collective salvation – worship its kitsch and madness beckons. You will not allow a word spoken against your piety; you refuse the human being as a world unto herself, alive with contradictions.[73]

There are several points to make about Ṣāliḥ’s citation of Kundera in this passage. First, Ṣāliḥ’s interpretation of kitsch echoes her discussion of communism offering her a way of existing in a cruel, unjust world. Both kitsch and the ethical knowledge Ṣāliḥ sought in communism mediate one’s being in the world. Putting it succinctly in that 1988 letter, she declared,

علاقتي بالشيوعية هي نفسها مشاكل علاقتي بالحياة...

> My relationship to communism and my relationship to life are one and the same thing, and both equally problematic.[74]

The problematic element Ṣāliḥ isolates in militant kitsch – and this is the second point to unpack – is kitsch’s fragility, which is rooted in the leap of faith (in communism, Islamism, etc.) it requires. In this way, kitsch produces dogmatic conformity and squashes critical curiosity. It is inhospitable to individual difference. This problem is compounded when this brittleness of kitsch – the faithful certitude it requires – is exposed in defeat or despair. For the militant, this is not only an ideological or aesthetic issue, but an existential one that touches on her very mode of being in the world and among others.

Because Ṣāliḥ views militant kitsch as ideological and existential, she uses it as a prism through which to addresses the questions she had dismissed in the 1988 letter: Why did she

[73] Ṣāliḥ, 12; Salih, 11–12.

[74] Ṣāliḥ, 102; Salih, 124.

become a communist? What did communism mean to her? In this 1988 letter, Ṣāliḥ divulges that she had written an answer to these questions to a friend previously:

> بعبارة مؤثرة قلت فيها ما معناه، إنها كانت تضفي الانسجام على عالم لم يبدُ لي أبداً عادلاً ولا منطقياً.. كانت في الحقيقة "بديل" عن العالم الواقعي اللي كان مصدر عذاب غير مفهوم وبالتالي لا حدود له.. وربما ليست مشاكل علاقتي بالسياسة سوى مشاكل علاقتي بالعالم الواقعي عينها.

> What I said then was that communism gave order and intelligibility to a world that never appeared to me to be just or logical, a place of boundless suffering. Maybe my problem with politics was finally nothing more than my problem dealing with everyday life in the real world.[75]

Writing eight years prior to her 1996 preface on militant kitsch, Ṣāliḥ was already remarkably attune to the ethical, personal, and social roles of communism. Communism is not a theoretical abstraction for Ṣāliḥ; communism and its ethics are bound up in quotidian social interactions. Further on in this letter, Ṣāliḥ poses a related question that sheds light on what she sought in communism when she became a militant. This is important because it further elaborates upon the existential relationship between knowledge and action that Ṣāliḥ sees as central to Marxism's role in her quest for ethical knowledge. She writes,

> إنما بابني علاقتي بالحياة على أساس إيه، فين الرابطة الحقيقية بالبشر؟.. واضح إن الرابطة دي عشان تظل حقيقية لا يمكن أن تبقى أسيرة حيز "المعرفة" ولازم تدخل حيز "الفعل"، وأظن إن في مكان ما من الحيز ده، مقتلي.. ولكن حتى من غير هروبية، لا يمكنك أن تفهم حقاً دون أن تفعل (ده بقى أنا واثقة منه بالتجربة) أن توسخ يديك بالحياة اليومية بالذات، أن تكتشف فيها بالذات المعنى المطلق، لانه من غيرها بيبقى معنى محلق، بذلك هش..

> What I'm really struggling to understand is the basis of my relationship to this life. What is it that truly connects me to other people? 'Knowledge' isn't enough here; action – the space of action – is everything. I suspect that my death lurks in some corner of that space. But all the talk about escapism aside, you can never truly understand without doing (of this you see, experience makes me sure), without dirtying your hands in the everyday, without discovering its categorical meaning, because without this meaning life becomes an equivocal and therefore a fragile and tenuous thing.[76]

[75] Ṣāliḥ, 97-98; Salih, 118.

[76] Ṣāliḥ, 100; Salih, 122.

Ṣāliḥ's language here is abstract, but she is writing in the context of her retreat from militant politics in the mid-1980s. She is grappling with a new relationship to communism and life, one detached from militancy. The pretext of her question about relating to others is communism. Her answer that knowledge must be met with action is an expression of how she sees communism as a form of ethics rooted in experience. As Ṣāliḥ's writing reveals, this active ethics is curious, critical, and engaged. However, the question of why she became a communist haunts her, for it casts doubt upon the purity of her ethical commitments. By raising Kundera's notion of kitsch as that which links private motives and 'the public call,' Ṣāliḥ frames kitsch with the individual and social experience of political militancy and leans into her doubts regarding personal motives. This is notably similar to the gesture she makes vis à vis Marxism as a quest for ethical knowledge in her 1988 letter. Both kitsch and Marxism are grounded in the individual's experience and mode of being in the world.

More than pure ideology, militant kitsch deals with aesthetics as a form of social and political experience. This is why it proves so fruitful a lens for Ṣāliḥ to think through communist ethics and why I propose we consider iltizām – an ideological aesthetic theory and praxis – as a form of kitsch. Ṣāliḥ argues that through militant kitsch – slogans, aesthetics, etc. – theory and ideology are integrated into the individual militant's life and made meaningful. Through kitsch, the collective dream or delusion is made to feel immanent and true. As Ṣāliḥ describes,

> غير أن الكاتب يستخدم الكلمة هنا في سياق خاص – فيما يبدو لي – سياق يشير إلى نوع من أنواع الرومانسية والعاطفة "المستبدة". وليتقبل القارئ مؤقتاً تصوري الخاص عن استخدامه لهذا التعبير في الرواية، والذي يجعله مرادفاً "لحلم الخلاص الجماعي".
>
> Kundera uses the word in a specific sense, however – as a type of violent sentimentalism embodied in the collective dream of salvation.[77]

[77] Ṣāliḥ, 11 ; Salih, 10.

Though she does not say so explicitly, this specific use of kitsch directly implicates iltizām. Iltizām was an aesthetic ideology with political and existential weight among its practitioners, strikingly similar to Ṣāliḥ's understanding of militant kitsch. In fact, we should consider iltizām a form of militant kitsch both for the way it made the idealized forms of national liberation and socialism immanent in literature and for the way it functioned as a form of aesthetic hegemony amongst the literary Left of Nasserist Egypt. By making this comparison explicit, I seek to show how Ṣāliḥ's theory of militant kitsch intervenes in the intellectual history of iltizām's legacy and its manifold impacts upon literary aesthetics, politics, and especially the lived experiences of multiple generations of militants.

When Ṣāliḥ discusses what comes after militancy, in her case as a communist but also for Islamists, she points to the looming existential crisis whose origins lie with kitsch uniting the militant's private motives with the public call. When the public call is no longer certain, kitsch unravels and the specter of private motives remains. Private motives haunt because they are unresolved and cast a devastating doubt upon the militant's committed past. Ṣāliḥ writes,

> (أعتقد أني أفهم الآن شعور عضو الجماعة الدينية السابق، إزاء الخلافات الفقهية "مثلاً" بين إخوانه القدامى، لقد سقط الكيتش، وبقي وجهاً لوجه مع دوافعه الخفية). غريب أن تنتبه دفعة واحدة، تتذكر في لحظة، أن المشوار الذي قطعت العمر فيه بدأ دون حب لموضوعه الفعلي، المعلن، المشترك (النضال السياسي)، بل تحت عبء باهظ بالإحساس "بالواجب". أحقاً! (نداء الواجب)؟ تقول الرسالة أشياء أخرى مع ذلك. غير أن الكيتش نفسه ذلك الذي يقبع في مكان ما بين الدوافع الحفية ونداء الواجب – حكاية أخرى. فخلف كلمات السياسة والتاريخ، الوطن والطبقة, النضال والشعب تقبع مفاتيح أخرى لا تتصل بكل تلك الكينونات المفترضة إلا بقدر ما هي وسائط لإشباع مسعى يرجع لأول الصبا.

> I think I can now understand the feelings of the ex-Islamist towards the theological disputes of his former brothers. Kitsch has fallen away and he stands face to face with his private motivations. It's strange to suddenly realize that the journey you spent your entire life making with no real love for its actual, declared, shared object (political militancy) but, rather, with the unbearable weight of 'the call of duty' – though the letters [from 1985 and 1988] perhaps say otherwise. Other meanings lie behind the words politics and history, nation and class, struggle and the people.[78]

[78] Ṣāliḥ, 14; Salih, 14.

This passage from Ṣāliḥ's 1996 preface is of central importance to approaching *al-Mubtasarūn* as a layered text because it invites us to critically read the political and the personal – or, differently, the theoretical and the affected – in tandem, to toggle between the poles of public call and private motives once united by kitsch. By highlighting the fragility of kitsch and the crisis of its collapse, Ṣāliḥ clarifies the ethical knowledge she sought in communism by distinguishing it from kitsch. This ethical knowledge amounts to a project of continuous critique – that gesture anathema to kitsch. Closing out her 1996 preface, Ṣāliḥ makes the stakes of her ethical project plain:

> وليست مصادفة أن أول عبارة في هذه السطور تتكلم عن "الأخلاق"! الأخلاق كسبيل ينظم فوضى الحياة – قسوتها "غير العادلة" – أمام روح تشعر شعوراً جازماً بنقصها الخاص، بعجزها. ومن ثم تلتقط بلياقة خاصة – لياقة المجروحين – صور اللاعدالة في الحياة، ما لا يجب أن يكون، وتبحث بلهفة مفهومة عن العدل وعما يحب أن يكون، عن حلم يضع بين يديها كل هذا. بالنسبة لهذه الروح تصبح "رحلة السياسة والنضال" ذريعة لتحقيق مسعاها الأصلي – هذا على الأقل ما يتبين حين يسقط الكيتش وتبقى وجهاً لوجه مع ذاتها، حيث تصبح المعرفة الأخلاقية – إن جاز هذا التعبير – سلاحاً يكاد يكون خبيثاً لتجاوز خبرات الألم، تجاوز يُنجز ويُخترق باستمرار، ويصنع أثناء ذلك رغم كل شيء ما كان يسعى وراءه منذ البداية، معرفة، معرفته الأخلاقية. وتلك بالضبط هي المعرفة المنطوقة هنا خلف السطور، خلف أحاديث السياسة والطبقة، وحتى خلف صور "البورتريه" الشخصية العديدة المدمجة في نماذج مجردة، معرفة نتنزع بضراوة تقريباً من كل هؤلاء، نوعاً من العدالة تعلمت اكتشافه بقدر ما طلبته. لذلك، وبينما يستقر الشكل الهنائي لهذا الكتيب – الذي حار الأدباء بصفة خاصة في تصنيفه – على نوع من أدب الاعترافات، أقترح على القارئ – بجد – أن يقرأ ما يلي كلغز كلمات متقاطعة، مفتاحه هنا في هذه المقدمة!
>
> The book is deeply preoccupied with ethics: ethics as the incomplete and impotent self's means of regulating the chaos of life, a self that gleans the world's injustice – that which must not be – and goes forth on a passionate quest for justice and that which must be, with the special sensitivity of the wounded…Such treasure! For this self, denuded of kitsch and standing alone, the militant's journey becomes a quest for ethical knowledge, an overcoming that is constantly creative and penetrating. This is the knowledge that I tried to seek here between the lines, behind the talk of class and politics, and behind the portraits of individuals presented as abstractions; knowledge snatched with a kind of ferocity from the certitudes of the past, a type of justice that I have learned to discover to the extent that I have pursued it. For this reason, I offer the reader this book – which here settles into its final form – as something like a crossword puzzle whose solution lies here in this preface.[79]

[79] Ṣāliḥ, 14-15 ; Salih, 14–15.

As I have argued above, these stakes of *al-Mubtasarūn* – to pursue ethical knowledge as a way of understanding, improving, and inhabiting the world – confront the legacy of iltizām as a form of militant kitsch that prized dogma and ready-made answers to ethical and political curiosity. These stakes clarify how the aesthetic ideology of iltizām colored how a generation of the Egyptian Left represented their world and understood its politics, and how this particular form of militant kitsch was inherited by generations to come, including Ṣāliḥ's Student-Movement Generation. I contend that Ṣāliḥ's theorization of the existential crisis resulting from kitsch's collapse holds great potential for considering the aftermath and afterlives of iltizām in the literary field. This is not only because so many giants of Egyptian literature share a Leftist political legacy, but more importantly because Ṣāliḥ's understanding of kitsch insists that we think the personal and political in tandem – precisely the challenge (still) confronting literature since the aesthetic hegemony of iltizām began to crack.

Inheritance and Legacy: Language and Genre

Ṣāliḥ's repudiation of the kitschy legacy of iltizām and her quest for ethical knowledge display her concern for political-literary lineage and inheritance. These past- and future-focused concerns direct *al-Mubtasarūn*'s language and questions of its genre, aspects of her writing that she addresses directly in her 1991 introduction. The nature of *al-Mubtasarūn*'s language and genre reflect Ṣāliḥ's objective in writing: to convey and critique her own generation's experience that future generations might reject its legacy. Her language belies an embodied and gendered critical methodology in stark opposition to the male-dominated intellectual symbolism she critiques and which dominated the literature of iltizām. Preparing the reader for the affected, personal, and at times didactic tone her writing takes when addressing concerns of history and

politics, Ṣāliḥ clarifies that the immediate subject of the book is neither history nor politics, writing:

> موضوع هذا العمل إذن ليس التاريخ ولا السياسة حتى حين يتعرض لهما، وإنما تتبع خبرة ومسارات جيل له ملامح متميزة عما سبقه من أجيال نشطت في الحياة السياسية والفكرية، ومن هنا الإشارات للمناخ الذي عاشه، وإلى نظرته وفهمه للظروف السياسية التي كان يتحرك فيها، ومن هنا تخصيص أجزاء عن مصائره الشخصية بعد هزيمته، لذلك من الضروري أن أوضح هنا أن هذا العمل ليس توثيقاً تاريخياً ولا جدلاً سياسياً وإنما هو رؤية شخصية للأحداث التي عاشها جيل أنتمي له.

> Rather, the book traces the experience and trajectory of a generation with features quite different from those of its political and intellectual predecessors. Various sections of the book examine the context in which this generation took root, its vision and understanding of the political circumstances in which it moved, and the unfolding of personal destinies in the wake of its defeat. For this reason I find it necessary to clarify here that this work is neither a historical document nor a political polemic but, rather, a personal view of the events that created and shaped my generation.[80]

The fact that *al-Mubtasarūn* is neither a traditional history nor a political polemic perhaps explains why Ṣāliḥ has lived on primarily as a tragic or delusional character in the Egyptian Left's literary imaginary rather than as a writer and theorist who staged critical interventions into the history and literature of the Egyptian Left.[81] The difficult truths of her personal experience in the Student Movement – the manipulative relationships, the tolerated sexism, the egos, and the emotions – are discounted as sources of critical knowledge when it comes to telling the movement's history and politics, a pushing aside wrongly justified (implicitly or explicitly) by her mental illness and suicide. To ignore these difficult aspects of gendered personal experience produces a masculinist historical narrative. It also discounts the role that individuals (not only women) and groups play in shaping history, to suggest that their actions and choices matter little. Ignoring the personal experience of history would amount to simply dismissing past political

[80] Ṣāliḥ, 21; Salih, 19–20.

[81] See: Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999); Raḍwā ʿĀshūr, *Faraj* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2008); Yūsuf Rakhā, *al-Tamāsīḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-sāqī, 2013).

projects and ambitions as illusions, a grave emptying of political and social life from the past. Thus, Ṣāliḥ's personal approach to writing adjacent to politics and history stems in part from the shortcomings of those genres in expressing the difficult affective and relational dimensions of lived experience in the Student Movement. Her approach carries a political message of historiographical import. She insists that these overlooked aspects of her generation's experience be transmitted to younger generations who never had such radical political ambitions:

> ولكنه أقسى كثيراً، فيما أظن، حظ أجيال لم يتح لها أبداً أن تعرف أحلاماً كبيرة، ومن أجل هذا كتبت عن حلمنا المجهض، لأنه لم يكن سراباً كله كما يلذ لكثيرين منا الآن أن يصفوه ليذلوا ماضيهم – إمعاناً في رد فعل على غرورهم السابق فيما أحسب، ولكنه كان تاريخاً أيضاً وبالنسبة لي فقد احتفظت من هذا التاريخ بذكرى زمن شهدت فيه شعبنا ومثقفينا أحياء ما يزالون – رغم المواجع، وبيقين: أن هناك أياماً أخرى في التاريخ، غير مظلمة.

> But what's much crueller, I think, is that the generations that came after ours never had the chance to know such vast ambition. This is why I've chosen to write about our aborted ambition. Because it was not just a mirage (as many of us today like to describe it in order to mortify the past, a kind of reaction against our youthful arrogance, I suppose). It was also a history with real effects, and I find it strange that we should squander our insights into this history just because we ourselves were defeated with humiliating ease. The memories I have preserved of this time bear witness to the vital life-worlds of our people and our intellectuals, and this in spite of the pain of remembering, I do believe in the end that history is not quite so dark.[82]

The issue of intergenerational inheritance lies at the center of Ṣāliḥ's project and is inextricable from how her writing's form and affected quality. These aspects of her writing urge the reader to critically break with Egypt's Leftist inheritance. Given how thoroughly Ṣāliḥ blames her own generation's failures on their too willing inheritance of the Sixties Generation's catastrophic compromises with Nasser's regime and nationalism broadly speaking, it is not surprising that she defends her affected tone on the grounds that her account must resonate with future generations and guide them to reject what she sees as a toxic inheritance. She writes:

[82] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 20; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 18.

لا ينفي ذلك أن ما يلي قد يكون مشتملاً على بعض التجني، غير أن هاجساً أساسياً من هواجسي لدى كتابة هذا العمل كان أن أقدم للأجيال التالية التي قد تشغلها تجربتنا، تراثاً يجب أن يجحدوه، وفي هذا فيس لدي فصال.

> It may be that the voice of the victim haunts the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, one of my major concerns in writing the book was to draw for future generations the portrait of an inheritance that they must repudiate, and in this I am not prepared to compromise.[83]

Perhaps because of this affected tone, Ṣāliḥ's language is rather idiosyncratic. On the level of diction and sentence structure, *al-Mubtasarūn* is not a simple read. Ṣāliḥ's sentences often interrupt themselves and are littered with asides and qualifiers. A previously cited sentence from Ṣāliḥ's 1991 introduction captures this phenomenon:

"ولعل السذاجة في هذا الحلم تثير الآن الابتسام – ربما من أبناء جيلنا أكثر من أي حد آخر – ولكنه أقسى كثيراً، فيما أظن حظ أجيال لم يتح لها أبداً أن تعرف أحلاماً كبيرة، ومن أجل هذا كتبت عن حلمنا المجهض، لأنه لم يكن سراباً كله كما يلذ الكثيرين من الآن يصفوه ليذلوا ماضيهم – إمعاناً في فد الفعل على غرورهم السابق أن نهدرها لأننا نحن هزمنا بسهولة أهانتنا."[84]

Curiously, this self-interrupting cadence evokes speech even as Ṣāliḥ writes in a formal register. Selim splits some of these interruptions into stand-alone sentences in her English translation. This is likely a way of following the spoken cadence of the Arabic, which is what makes the Arabic comprehensible. The result is both faithful to this stylistic aspect of the Arabic and certainly a more legible English translation than one continually interrupting itself – something Arabic syntax tolerates more readily than English. Even so, the asides and interruptions in Selim's English translation remain a notable feature of the text:

> The naivety of this striving now provokes a smile – from my own generation more than any other. But what's much crueler, I think, is that the generations that came after ours never had the chance to know such vast ambition. This is why I've chosen to write about *our* aborted ambition. Because it was not just a mirage

[83] Ṣāliḥ, 21-22; Salih, 20.

[84] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 20.

> (as many of us today like to describe it in order to mortify the past, a kind of reaction against our youthful arrogance, I suppose).[85]

Lastly, the letters in the appendix of *al-Mubtasarūn* are written in Egyptian vernacular (ʿāmiyya) and read more smoothly, offering a clearer sense of the spoken, dialogic tone that lurks behind Ṣāliḥ's more formal writing. Even on the level of sentence structure, Ṣāliḥ pushes against the disaffected conventions of historical writing, introducing aspects of dialogic, interpersonal speech in order to affect her readers more profoundly and emotionally.

Arwā Ṣāliḥ on Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm

Arwā Ṣāliḥ's essays on Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's fiction allow us to see her approach to literature and criticism as an extension of the fiercely political, personal, and analytical perspectives she brings to *al-Mubtasarūn*. They also justify and add context to my reading of Ṣāliḥ's in an explicitly literary light. Ṣāliḥ's collection of essays of literary criticism entitled "Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm: Witness to All the Ages (Shāhid li-kull al-ʿuṣūr)" was published by her friends after her death in *Saraṭān al-Rūḥ* (Cancer of the Soul, 1998). Despite their posthumous publication, these essays offer us a window into Ṣāliḥ's critical mind and her thoughts on Ibrāhīm, who, like Ṣāliḥ, avoided the state-cultural apparatus and forged his own path of political and institutional independence. In terms of understanding the evolution of Ṣāliḥ's thought, these essays of literary criticism are especially valuable given that much of her writing was lost before it could be published. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ṣāliḥ's literary criticism repeats key themes from *al-Mubtasarūn:* confronting reality, Leftist defeats, the Nasserist legacy, estrangement in post-infitāḥ neoliberal capitalism, and the troubled figure of the Leftist writer and intellectual. Her

[85] Salih, *The Stillborn*, 18.

reading of Ibrāhīm's fiction is rigorous, rooted in political economy and the history of the Egyptian Left, and deeply critical of the social and political transformations that took place in the wake of Nasserism and Sadat's neoliberal opening, infitāḥ. As in *al-Mubtasarūn*, Ṣāliḥ is particularly attentive to the gendered dimensions of these transformations.

A recurring comparison that motivates a major line of Ṣāliḥ's literary criticism is her juxtaposition of committed (multazim) – and male – socialist-realist authors alongside Ibrāhīm's alienated modernism. Ibrahīm's works were – from the very beginning with *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* – a bold departure from the formulaic socialist-realist representations of a revolutionary society. Sāliḥ astutely notes that revolution had given way to a regime of institutions and ready-made answers:

> وإنما هيمنة إجابات مقررة سلفاً على هذه الأسئلة، إجابات تكتسب قوة الحقائق المطلقة التي لا ترقى إلى الشك لأنها صادرة عن "مؤسسات" كانت منذ قليل "ثورات".[86]

> The hegemony of premade answers to these questions, answers that took on the force of absolute truths unchecked by doubt because they were promulgated by 'institutions' which were not long ago 'revolutions.'

Much of her analysis of Ibrāhīm's fiction focuses on how he confronts this reality of state hegemony in his novels. Indeed, Ṣāliḥ frames Ibrāhīm as a turning-point in Arabic literature which had been primarily concerned with discovering the self and the other, or "the external world" (al-ʿālam al-khārijī) as she terms it.[87] According to Ṣāliḥ, Ibrāhīm is notable because his fiction is an attempt to discover truth, specifically the truth of how he relates to the external world.[88] This is a subtle but important distinction in her approach to Ibrāhīm's literary project, its

[86] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, *Saraṭān al-Rūḥ*, 86.

[87] Ṣāliḥ, 65.

[88] Ṣāliḥ, 65.

relationship to the legacy and history of the Egyptian Left, and the critical function of literature. Ṣāliḥ puts her finger on the problematic facing the Egyptian Left in the wake of Nasser's 1959-64 imprisonment of the communists (including Ibrāhīm) and the 1967 defeat: the shattered belief that the state would deliver revolutionary socialist change. Indeed, Ṣāliḥ articulates the question that occupied people's minds:

> لماذا ترتبط الإنجازات بقمع الناس، ولماذا يدعمه الاتحاد السوفييتي رغم ذلك، وما هذا الذي يجري في الاتحاد السوفييتي – ممثل الاشتراكية الأكبر والصديق الأعظم للشعوب؟[89]

> Why were [Nasser's] accomplishments linked to oppressing the people? And why did the Soviet Union support him anyway? And what was going on in the Soviet Union, the largest representative of socialism and best friend to the nations?

If writers, intellectuals, and political militants faced this question honestly, understanding the truth of their relationship with the state, society, and the broader world would become urgent and potentially implicating. The stakes of this relationship could not have been more existential for the Left because of their entangled relationship with the Nasserist regime. Moreover, these issues would only become more fraught – ignored but not resolved – after infitāḥ and the state's wholesale retreat from socialism and its pursuit of a neoliberal agenda.

Ṣāliḥ sees Ibrāhīm's insistence upon discovering truth through his literature not merely as shaping the way individuals – especially Leftists – conceive of their relationship to state and society. She also sees it as driving his literary aesthetics and form. Commenting upon Ibrāhīm's novel *Najmat Aghusṭus* (August Star, 1974), Ṣāliḥ contends,

> فهو لا يروي حكاية عن أحد، بل يشهد على عصر دون أي تذرع بالحكايات من البداية.[90]

> He does not narrate a story about anyone. Rather, he bears witness to an era without the pretext of stories from the outset.

[89] Ṣāliḥ, 86.

[90] Ṣāliḥ, 76.

I'd point out that the plot arc of conventional stories requires conflict, but the Nasser era was marked by hegemony. This hegemony produced political and aesthetic exhaustion – a recurring affect in Ibrāhīm's fiction – that resulted from political capitulation, not struggle, and reproduction of the dominant aesthetic forms in literature. Against this stagnation, Ibrāhīm transformed the form and function of literature from being centered around conflict (which was suppressed in the Nasser era) to exposing the contradictions of state-driven consensus. Ṣāliḥ sees Ibrāhīm as disrupting the dominant Nasserist illusion of consensus

> حيث كل شيء على ما يرام وحيث الجميع مخصيون[91]

> wherein everything is fine and everyone is castrated.

He does so by exposing the contradictions at the heart of one of Nasser's greatest achievements, the Aswan High Dam, which extended Egypt's control over the Nile while displacing tens of thousands of Nubians in Egypt and Sudan. One way Ibrāhīm exposes shortcomings, contradictions, and dissatisfactions is through interrupting the novel's dominant "reporting narrative" (al-sard al-tasjīlī) with aspects of affective and political alienation.[92] These include, to quote Ṣāliḥ, an omnipresent invisible heaviness (thuql ghayr marʾī)" that follows everyone, "an always lingering sexual appetite (al-jawʿ al-jinsī al-mukhayyim dāʾiman)," and the fact

> بأن الإشباع مفتقد، بأن شيئاً ما مهماً ناقص، مع أن العمل جار على قدم وساق في الصرح العظيم[93]

> that satisfaction is lost, that something important is lacking, despite the work on the great structure [the Aswan High Dam] being completed by leaps and bounds.

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[91] Ṣāliḥ, 76.

[92] Ṣāliḥ, 70.

[93] Ṣāliḥ, 70.

Here Ṣāliḥ reads the supposedly objective reporter's narrative as being interrupted by the multiple forms of alienation that animate Ibrāhīm's literary critique of the Nasser era, namely sexual impotence and frustration and the fundamental contradiction between the regime's grand socialist projects and rhetoric and the miserable conditions of the workers whose labor built the Aswan High Dam and who should have been the primary beneficiaries of Nasser's socialism. Ṣāliḥ thus links personal-sexual alienation to the social-political alienation of the workers and highlights how Ibrāhīm's journalist-protagonist is left to discover the truth – that core critical function she identifies in Ibrāhīm's literature – of the regime's contradictions, which she identifies as:

> الظل الجاثم فوق الجميع وفيما بينهم يسمم الجو الاحتفالي ويطعن في مصداقيته[94]
>
> the oppressive shadow above everyone, poisoning the celebratory atmosphere and piercing its credibility.

I wish to underscore the aesthetic and political lines of continuity between Ibrāhīm's earliest writings in *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *67* and Ṣāliḥ's reading of his works from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Alienation drives sexual impotence and frustration in Ibrāhīm's early novellas and casts doubt upon the regime's credibility by asking people to ignore the suffering of the poor in light of the regime's accomplishments. This alienation is a socially mediated phenomenon distinct from the disillusionment Ṣāliḥ loathes. Alienation exists in Ṣāliḥ's analysis on a variety of levels. The intellectual's alienation from a reality – distorted and idealized in state propaganda, contradictory in its actual incarnation – in conflict with his political ideals causes him to question his relationship to the supposedly socialist state and his role in an alienating society. For the writer – or, in the case of *Najmat Aghusṭus*'s protagonist, journalist – this

[94] Ṣāliḥ, 70.

alienation is made more acute because it challenges his essential function as a reporter of truth. He risks becoming alienated from his own sense of professional ethics and complicit in the regime's distortions. The lack of direction, clarity, and political purpose at the heart of this alienation is manifest in literature through symbolic castration – a term that appears in Ṣāliḥ's criticism to describe Leftists under Nasser[95] and social relations writ large in the wake of infitāḥ's neoliberal opening[96] – and sexual frustration. The intellectual is uninspired and unfulfilled. For the workers – a perspective that ironically does not always appear in Ibrāhīm's literature, for the Leftist intellectual is estranged from the masses – their alienation is their estrangement as wage laborers compounded by the unfulfilled promises of socialist liberation.

Ṣāliḥ's focus on alienation – a critical position for Edward Said – is distinct from the disillusionment she loathes.[97] Disillusionment entails seeing the folly of one's former ways. In the case of Ṣāliḥ and her fellow Leftists, it would mean relinquishing socialist ideals. Ṣāliḥ, in *al-Mubtasarūn* and in her literary criticism in *Saraṭān al-Rūḥ*, is careful to emphasize her enduring belief that socialism might offer the ethical knowledge she needs to confront an unjust world. In her 1985 letter in *al-Mubtasarūn*, Ṣāliḥ clarifies how her enduring hope in Marxism is related to her disgust for how quickly her peers donned the mantle of disillusionment and adjusted to – rather than resisting – Egypt's neoliberal reality:

> مش من الماركسيين اللي بيسموهم "disillusioned"، الناس دي باحتقرها من قلبي، دول مش تخلصوا من الوهم، هم عمرهم ماعرفوا اللي كانوا بيتكلموا عنه من الأصل، عمرهم ماحسوا بيه ولا حاولوا يتمثموه، ولا كان بالنسبة لهم معاناة اكتشاف، إنما مفتاح سهم لغزو الدنيا، وللتعالي على خلق الله اللي مش من فصيلة المثقفين (من حسن حظهم طبعاً) زي أصحابنا الأيدولوجيين اللي الواحد ضيع وسطهم أهم سنين العمر..أنا مؤمنة إيمان عميق بصحة الماركسية، وبصحة مواقفها إجمالاً في الحياة وفي الفن كمان (حاجة بذيئة قوي

[95] Ṣāliḥ, 76.

[96] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 80.

[97] See: Edward W. Said, "Introduction: Secular Criticism," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1–30.

الدفاع عن فن مش طالع من الحياة ومش راجع لها! أنا شايفة بوضوح في وجهة النظر دي، مزاج طبقة شبعانة موت بقت معادية للحياة (!)..الطبقة المالكة، الله يجحمها في كل مكان زي ما هي كابسة على نفس العالم كلها، وعايزة تموتها معاها كمان!).. وبنفس القدر عندي استعداد كامل "لمراجعة" أي فكرة فيها لارتكاب هذا "المروق" الأيدولوجي ، خلاص ما باكلش من الإرهاب "الديني" بتاع المتشيعين اليساريين اللي جهلهم بالماركسية يعادل جهلهم بالحياة، لإنه باختصار نابع منه.

> I'm still not one of those so-called 'disillusioned' Marxists. I despise those people from the bottom of my heart. It's not that they were finally disabused of their fool's paradise; it's that they never knew what they were talking about in the first place. They never felt it or tried to live the truth of it. They never experienced the hardship of discovery. For them – those dogmatic friends with whom we wasted the most important years of our lives – Marxism was just an easy key to conquest. I still believe deeply in the truth of Marxism. In art as in life, it's obscene to try to defend the ivory tower. That's the attitude of a class sated by death: the owners, enemies of life – may God damn them in every place – hell-bent on their own extinction and everyone else's! At the same time, I'm completely prepared to commit heresy and rethink Marxism from scratch. I'm done with the theological orthodoxy of pseudo-communists whose ignorance of Marxism is equal to their ignorance of life.[98]

This passage highlights tensions common among the Left stemming from the incompatibility of socialist ideals with the reality of political oppression, state propaganda, and an increasingly consumerist society. These tensions produce the very alienation that Ṣāliḥ analyzes in Ibrāhīm's fiction. Alienation prompts a crisis for those socialists whose convictions demand alternative or changed way of engagement and being in society, ways that are politically unfeasible in the present order. For those former Leftist intellectuals who could write off their militant pasts and make the shift to the neoliberal era, embrace the nihilism of consumption, and view social relations through a coldly calculating lens of wealth and status accumulation, their ability to integrate alienation into their compromising way of life rendered its existential crises mute at the price of emptying their political convictions of all meaning. They might not be dogged – as Ṣāliḥ and Ibrāhīm's protagonists are – by the contradictions of life in an authoritarian neoliberal state

[98] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 112; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 136–37.

so long as they choose to deny or delegitimize those contradictions by wrapping themselves in disillusionment.

This is the challenge of Ibrāhīm's eponymous protagonist in *Dhāt* (1992), who is crushed in the post-infitāḥ imperative to climb the socio-economic ladder despite the estrangement and vacuity of middle-class society. Ṣāliḥ describes infitāḥ's neoliberal transformation of the middle-class as sending Dhāt into

> غيبوبة من اللامبالاة، تغرق فيها نفسها في الاستهلاك، ربما تنسى أن حياتها باتت بلا هدف، وأن وسائل العيش تحولت إلى غاية لهم وأنها كانت لها ذات يوم ذكريات لحياة حميمة – غير متشيئة – حياة لها ملامح مخصوصة ومتفردة، وكان لها أيضاً كرامة – قبل أن تباع بالجملة في الخليج وكانت على محو ما فاعلة.[99]

> a coma of not giving a care, drowning herself in consumerism, perhaps forgetting that her life has ended up without direction and that making a living has become an end unto itself, perhaps forgetting that she one day had possessed an intimate life – not reified – a life with distinct and individual features, that she had also possessed dignity – before being sold wholesale in the Gulf, and that she had been had been active in a certain sense.

Here we can read into Ṣāliḥ's literary criticism a level of identification with Dhāt, Ibrāhīm's protagonist alienated from self and society in the wake of infitāḥ. Ṣāliḥ explains her feeling of alienation in her personal writings when her family and friends' nickname for her as "the miracle child (al-ṭifla al-muʿjiza)" turned into a form of cruel mockery:[100]

> وإذ لم أفهم عرفت لأول مرة شعوراً كانوا يتحدثون عنه أمامي، الاغتراب، شعوراً مباشراً تماماً بالعجز عن التواصل مع الآخرين، وقضيت العمر أحاول الإفلات من هذا الشعور.[101]

> Even if I didn't fully understand it, I knew for the first time that feeling they spoke about in front of me – alienation – a feeling of direct and total inability to communicate with others. I spent a lifetime trying to escape that feeling.

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[99] Ṣāliḥ, *Saraṭān al-rūḥ*, 104.

[100] Ṣāliḥ, 27.

[101] Ṣāliḥ, 27.

Ṣāliḥ immediately links her experience of social alienation, which stemmed from her resilient political commitments despite those around her mocking them as miraculous or childish, to her experience of being used or "consumed" (istahlakūnī) by her friends.[102] We would be remiss not to also highlight the gendered aspects of Ṣāliḥ's alienation: the infantilization carried by her nickname and the sexual undertones of how she was consumed as an object of gossip among the Left. We consistently see in Ṣāliḥ's writing – in her introduction to her Arabic translation of Tony Cliff's *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation*,[103] in her critique of sex and marriage in *al-Mubtasarūn,* in her letters in *al-Mubtasarūn*'s appendix, and in her literary criticism in *Saraṭān al-Rūḥ* - the way that capitalist consumption permeates gendered social relations and animates her understanding and experience of alienation in Neoliberal Egypt.

Secular Criticism

I'd like to explicitly link Ṣāliḥ's critique of iltizām to a theoretical frame I have referenced on several occasions throughout this chapter: Edward Said's writing on secular criticism. I cite Said to clarify the significance and critical impact of *al-Mubtasarūn*, Ṣāliḥ's critical method, and her position toward political and cultural powers. Said's introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic* outlines his understanding of secular criticism, and it contains several important notions that are immediately relevant to how I understand Ṣāliḥ's writing as a critique of the Egyptian Left's legacy. Said opens by insisting upon the worldliness of texts, writing, "Texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny

[102] Ṣāliḥ, 27.

[103] Arwā Ṣāliḥ, "Nisāʾ…wa-rijāl…wa-thawarāt" in Naqd al-Ḥaraka al-niswāniyya by Tony Cliff, translated by Arwā Ṣāliḥ (Cairo: al-Ahālī, 1991), 23-25.

it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted."[104] His gesture here is to reassert criticism into the worldly and the political in response to depoliticizing intellectual trends, namely poststructuralism. It is a defense of the human subject of history. For the Egyptian literary Left, this assertion of texts' worldliness and their engagement in history might seem to go without saying. However, in light of the Egyptian Left's major political defeats that paved the way for infitāḥ's neoliberal opening and the scaled-back political stakes of literature, it cannot be taken for granted. Said's forceful claim of the text's worldliness is important for articulating a horizon of critical engagement in spite of – even because of – political defeat. Said's argument is especially meaningful given the neoliberal historical and political context of the urges to withdraw criticism from the world of politics. In light of the near contemporaneity of the neoliberal turn in the United States (from where he writes) and Egypt, Said's emphasis upon this political and historical context is tellingly relevant to our own understanding of critique in the Egyptian context. He writes,

> It is no accident that the emergence of so narrowly defined a philosophy of pure textuality and critical noninterference has coincided with the ascendancy of Reaganism, or for that matter with a new cold war, increased militarism and defense spending, and a massive turn to the right on matters touching the economy, social services, and organized labor. In having given up on the world entirely for the aporias and unthinkable paradoxes of a text, contemporary criticism has retreated from its constituency, the citizens of modern society, who have been left to the hands of 'free' market forces, multinational corporations, the manipulations of consumer appetites.[105]

[104] Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 4.

[105] Said, 4.

Criticism must then engage the world in this humanist yet political-economic sense that Said articulates.

Said's second assertion, potentially weightier as it pertains to the Egyptian literary Left, relates to alienation and exile. Said characteristically privileges exile and alienation as providing the perspective and distance necessary to cultivate what he terms "critical consciousness."[106] The critical function of exile and alienation lies in one's simultaneous belonging and unbelonging to the object or culture of critique. We see a version of this sense of exile in the authors who constitute the literary Left of Neoliberal Egypt. Some lived periods of physical exile, especially during the Sadat years.[107] More important, however, was their shared experience of alienation vis à vis Egyptian culture whose power – as Said reminds us – is articulated by the "quasi-theological" order and influence of the state.[108] The literary Left of the 1970s waging its critique in opposition to, rather than in collaboration with or allegiance to, the state's politics and cultural apparatus was a major break from Nasser's hegemony. It was also distinct from the secular state-intellectual alliance that would (re)emerge in the 1990s in opposition to Islamism. Ṣāliḥ stands out for having never made the political compromises with the state that were commonplace among the secular Left of the 1990s, when she was publishing. Indeed, career-driven pragmatism and compromise with an authoritarian, right-wing regime were major reasons for Ṣāliḥ's disgust with her own generation and her former colleagues. Even after Ṣāliḥ retreated from militant politics, her writing – as we read in *al-Mubtasarūn* – remained aligned with Said's conception of

[106] Said, 5.

[107] These include Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, Salwa Bakr, Alfred Faraj, Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Ḥijāzī, Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, Luṭfī al-Khūlī, Rajāʾ al-Naqqāsh, Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī, and Ghālī Shukrī.

[108] Said, 10–11.

critique being defined by opposition. Moreover, Ṣāliḥ's sustained critical opposition to the state and its projection of an almost sacred culture is a major reason why her intervention upon the lineage of Egyptian Left is so important to the intellectual, political, and literary history of modern Egypt. What emerges out of this opposition is a sort of confrontation – a coming face to face – with the state and state culture. Said captures this relationship in his description of the task of criticism. He writes, "To stand between culture and system is therefore to stand close to – closeness itself having a particular value for me – a concrete reality about which political, moral, and social judgements have to be made and, if not only made, then exposed and demystified."[109]

The oppositional perspective of Said's secular criticism demands the same freedom and independence which lie at the core of iltizām's source of theoretical inspiration – Jean-Paul Sartre's littérature engagée. Littérature engagée was grounded in the freedom (and, thus, independence) of the writer and his direct line of communication with the similarly free reader. He writes, "The author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal."[110] This relationship between writer and reader, built upon mutual recognition of and dependence upon the other's freedom, is the site of creation and meaning. However, this emphasis on individual artistic and intellectual freedom was severely diminished in the theory and praxis of iltizām, especially in Nasserist Egypt. Di-Capua writes, "Following its early articulation by Suhayl Idris [the Lebanese translator

[109] Said, 26.

[110] Sartre, *"What Is Literature?*, 58.

of Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*], iltizam emerged as a doctrine of cultural action: a framework of thought that could organize, systematize, and rationalize the quest for postcolonial culture."[111] Di-Capua argues that Al-ʿĀlim and Anīs "made a deliberate attempt to appropriate Sartrean iltizam and submerge it in the Marxist-Leninist schema."[112] The result was a more prescriptive and politicized notion of literature heavily influenced by Soviet socialist realism. Iltizām became wedded to the Nasserist state (the leading voice of anti-colonial struggle throughout the Arab world) and functioned almost as a form of propagandist literature. This development is important for understanding the eventual bankruptcy of iltizām, an aspect that comes through in Ṣāliḥ's biting analysis of Egyptian literature and intellectual life. Inextricably linked to the state, the forms of committed literature (al-adab al-multazim) – and Leftist politics – were doomed to collapse when Nasserism fell precisely for their closeness to state ideology.

Ṣāliḥ's critique of the committed intellectual is grounded in her intimate understanding of political history and her oppositional position. She understands the Egyptian Left as having been fundamentally ineffectual in post-infitāḥ politics because it blindly drank the 'poisoned milk' that was the Sixties Generation's compromised legacy. Ṣāliḥ suggests that the Left was similarly impotent under Nasser – they were all too content to sing 'half a song.'[113] The lineage of iltizām, which was built upon this compromise, entails a belief in literature's political potential that cannot be separated from the committed author's dependence upon the state. Indeed, closeness to state power fosters such a belief. Whether the committed authors' belief in their literature's

[111] Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 78.

[112] Di-Capua, 85.

[113] Ṣāliḥ, *al-Mubtasarūn*, 26; Salih, *The Stillborn*, 24.

revolutionary politics was justified or delusional is an open question. Regardless, Ṣāliḥ's point in critiquing iltizām's compromised legacy does not hinge on this question of delusion. She is more upset with the fact that the Left capitulated to infitāḥ and abandoned militant political engagement. For Ṣāliḥ, to give up politics in one breath and claim political engagement in the intellectual or literary field in the next is absurd on its face. This is how iltizām became the aestheticized phantom shell of political engagement, a refuge of sorts. This oversized and outdated sense of iltizām rings hollow and regressively self-serving to Ṣāliḥ. Overcoming it is a central part of her polemical critique.

Conclusion: Principled Despair

Arwa Ṣāliḥ lived during an important transition period in Egyptian history: the transition from Nasser's state socialism through Sadat's neoliberal turn. This transition had catastrophic consequences for the Egyptian Left as the Cold-War political map Ṣāliḥ's Student-Movement Generation had inherited from the Nasser era was pulled out from under them. They also inherited a compromising spirit – compromising class struggle for the national struggle, eventually compromising political principle for a piece of the post-infitāḥ pie. On the literary front, the aesthetic ideology of iltizām expressed – in its symbols and state-sponsored institutions of cultural production – the poisoned inheritance of political compromise that Ṣāliḥ argues her generation too easily accepted. By positioning herself in critical opposition to this compromised inheritance of the Egyptian Left and its post-infitāḥ legacy, Ṣāliḥ grounds her writing in the embodied gendered affect that comes from the personal experience of political militancy. This perspective allows her to charge her Marxist analysis of class politics and bourgeois morality with a profound attentiveness to gender. For Ṣāliḥ, gender is neither the central object of her

analysis nor a mere afterthought. It is part and parcel of her critical methodology. The gendered affect that colored her experience of political militancy and that lies between the lines of her writing is a form of knowledge that guides her critique. Gender inflects the tone of principled despair that dominates her work and is thus integral to her epistemological project. This principled despair is how she keeps her gaze focused on the horizon of critique, her quest to discover in Marxism the ethical knowledge of how to exist in a cruel and unjust world.

Chapter 4: The Language and Politics of Nādiya Kāmil's Intergenerational Storytelling in *al-Mawlūda*

Introduction

In this chapter I explore how language and intergenerational storytelling in Nādiya Kāmil's *al-Mawlūda: riwāyat Nāʾila Kāmil al-mawlūda Mārī Ilī Rūzintāl* (Née: The Story of Naela Kamel née Marie Elie Rosenthal, 2018) intervene in politics. I begin from Kāmil's notion of home and show how her intergenerational narrative storytelling produces a sense of home which is both expansive enough to cross the international boundaries of her mother's political and family networks across the Mediterranean region and intimate enough to engender a sense of familial and local belonging. I contend that Kāmil's artistic choices – language, form, and especially her robust commitment to intergenerational dialogue – become political choices in how they produce this sense of political and familial home. Specifically, her choice to write *al-Mawlūda* in her mother Marie's Egyptian-Arabic voice offers a mode of dialogic storytelling charged with intimate familial bonds. Given Marie's lifelong communist commitments, this familial bond is also political, offering a sense of belonging to the Egyptian and international Left. Rooted in commitment, Marie's account of twentieth-century Egypt stands starkly against the nostalgia for colonial cosmopolitanism. Instead, Marie's Egyptian-Arabic voice proclaims an anticolonial politics of class and national liberation while simultaneously destabilizing the contours of the nation. This is achieved by Kāmil's displaced and intergenerational narration, use of Egyptian ʿāmiyya, and by virtue of Marie's position as a working-class khawāga (resident 'foreigner') of Jewish and Italian parentage. Moreover, the intergenerational impulse of Kāmil's project – an impulse which is inseparable from the book's narrative voice and form – invites readers, through the figure of Nabīl (Marie's Palestinian grandson), to mourn Marie's (and the

Egyptian Left's) political commitments and grapple with how to move forward from decades of successive political defeats. Kāmil invites a contemporary readership to find a home in Marie's political commitments and imagine a future through them.

An Intergenerational Story about Home

Nādiya Kāmil introduces her 2018 book *al-Mawlūda* by clarifying how and why she came to write her mother Marie's life story from her mother's perspective, how she tried as best she could to put her mother's Egyptian-Arabic voice upon paper. Marie lived a remarkable life; she was born in Cairo in 1931 to a Jewish father and an Italian Christian mother, survived the Second World War, became a communist, was imprisoned on several occasions, and pursued a lifelong engagement with Egypt's cultural and political Left. However, despite the vibrancy of her story, she had tried and failed to write her memoir countless times before. Kāmil tells us that each year,

> تمسك أمي بمفكرة العام الجديد، وبنظرة كلها عزيمة تُقَرّر مجددًا أن تكتب مذكراتها. محاولات قصيرة غير مكتملة، ومتكررة كأي طقس. لا بأس من تكرار المحاولة، فنظريًّا هناك دائمًا احتمالات أخرى.[1]

> My mother holds the new year's notebook and with a look of complete determination, she resolves once more to write her memoir. Short, unfinished attempts, repeated like any ritual. There is no harm in continuing to try, because in theory there are always different outcomes.

This time, however, with Kāmil as listener, interlocutor, and writer, the mother-daughter pair were able to jointly chronicle Marie's life experiences. Kāmil sets the scene, writing:

> ولكن يبدو أن نواميس الكون انسجمت مع روايتنا، أخيرًا، وبدأت تظهر علامات تسونامي من الحكي.[2]

> But it seems that the forces of the universe have finally harmonized with our story, and the signs of a tsunami of storytelling have started to appear.

[1] Nādiya Kāmil, al-Mawlūda: riwāyat nāʾila kāmil al-mawlūda mārī īlī rūzintāl (Cairo: al-Karma li-l-nashr, 2018), 8.

[2] Kāmil, 8.

Marie was an aging grandmother; the year was 2001; and the world was falling apart. Referring to Marie's Palestinian grandson, Nabīl, Kāmil writes:

كان نبيل الصغير يكبر وسط عائلات مشتتة ومهزومة، والمشاهد تنهار أمام عينيه. ربما كان نبيل؟[3]

> Little Nabīl was growing up among scattered and defeated families. The scenes were falling apart before his eyes. Maybe it was Nabīl?

Maybe it was Nabīl who caused Marie to finally record her life story, Kāmil asks herself. Yes, she ponders,

ربما أصابنا أمل أن يجد نبيل "الحدوتة" عندما يحتاجها.[4]

> Perhaps we were struck by hope that Nabīl might find The Story when he needs it.

From this inception, *al-Mawlūda* is an intergenerational work or, as Kāmil calls it in her introduction:

مشروع عن "البيت" - بيتنا[5]

> a project about "home" - our home.

Moreover, in *al-Mawlūda*, home is an expansive, always intergenerational concept.

Kāmil's writing in Egyptian ʿāmiyya (colloquial Arabic) is the defining formal aspect of *al-Mawlūda*. This spoken register of language grounds the work in both the intimacy of the domestic sphere – particularly the orality of intergenerational storytelling – and the locality of Marie's twentieth-century Cairo. Marie's first-person narrative voice, which Kāmil pens in Egyptian ʿāmiyya liberally interspersed with Italian, French, and English loan words, is the beating heart of the book. By writing in ʿāmiyya, she chooses to forgo the rhetorical prestige of

[3] Kāmil, 9.

[4] Kāmil, 9.

[5] Kāmil, 7.

formal literary language in favor of the cultural and personal intimacy most authors reserve for dialogue. Kāmil's bold break with Arabic literary form and register, i.e., how she forgoes the learned and standardized language of writing – fuṣḥā (Modern Standard Arabic) – in favor of Egyptians' spoken mother tongue of emotions, memories, music, and daily life, creates a profoundly oral and familiar experience for the reader. It renders the entire narrative dialogic. This narrative register and the Marie's lifelong political and cultural engagements with the Egyptian Left have the combined effect of blending the domestic and familial with the public and political. The intergenerational arc of Kāmil's work carries implicit and explicit critiques of the nation and twentieth-century politics based on the contours of Marie's marginal identities as a working-class woman and a khawāga of mixed Italian and Jewish parentage, her Leftist politics, and her political and personal life choices: to stay in Egypt, to marry Saʿd Kāmil (a Leftist from a prominent family), and to embed herself in Egyptian public life when other khawāga exited Egypt in droves following the regional aftershocks of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Free Officers' Coup in 1952, and the Suez Crisis in 1956. I will argue that language and narrative form in *al-Mawlūda* reflect and facilitate how Kāmil presents political hopes, defeats, and commitments as part of an inheritance to be reanimated and reimagined by later generations.

Beyond the emotional way *al-Mawlūda*'s language affects readers, it also creates a unique relationship between Kāmil as author, Marie as narrator/protagonist, and the reader as active witness. The orality of Marie's narrative voice allows the reader to imagine her as the actual author of the book and serves to elide Kāmil's authorial role. This produces the impression of fidelity to Marie's words. I find it helpful to consider the author-narrator-reader relationship through several illustrations. The first illustration, narration as documentary film, emerges from

Kāmil's own career as a filmmaker and her documentary film, *Salaṭa Baladī* (2007), whose content overlaps with that of *al-Mawlūda* and shares the themes of family history, Egyptian identity, and intergenerational storytelling. We might even follow Kāmil's own description of *al-Mawlūda* as a "documentary novel" with Marie as its primary subject.[6] Notably, this framing is natural not only given Kāmil's profession as a documentary filmmaker but also her process in writing the book: she recorded hours of interviews with her mother and others, referenced books, articles, photos, and her own memories to craft Marie's narrative voice and story.[7] In this way, her authorial role is akin to the filmmaker who arranges others' images and voices in a compelling sequence, cutting and layering perspectives and narrative arcs. The reader fills the role of viewer, of course. While this documentary comparison might be fruitful for theorizing the nature of authorship in *al-Mawlūda*, I do not find it particularly illuminating for understanding the reader's role, which is rather distinct from that of the film viewer. Given the idiosyncrasies of *al-Mawlūda*'s narrative voice, the reader wrestles with each word, has the freedom to read slowly or quickly, and creates a unique sound for Marie's narrative voice in his or her mind – all much more difficult tasks for the film viewer.

The second illustration, narration as recounting family memories, is more productive for theorizing how *al-Mawlūda*'s language invites an active role for readers. It would be tempting to imagine *al-Mawlūda* as a grandmother's (Marie) account of her life stories to her daughter (Nādiya Kāmil) or grandson (Nabīl), however this framing gives perhaps too much authorship

[6] Nadia Kamel, "Communism in Style," trans. Brady Ryan and Essayed Taha, *Words without Borders*, March 2020, https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/march-2020-womens-life-writing-in-arabic-communism-in-style-nadia-kamel.

[7] See: Nāʾil al-Ṭawkhī, "Nādiya Kāmil: hakadhā jarā iḥyāʾ ṣawt *al-Mawlūda*," *Madā Maṣr*, June 18, 2018, https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2018/06/18/feature/الثقافة/الحوار-نادية-كامل-هكذا-جرى-إحياء-صوت-المولودة.

and autonomy to Marie (our narrator) and discounts the actual authorial role played by Kāmil. Therefore, I would like to propose a more complex scenario of intergenerational family memory and storytelling by which our (deceased or absent) grandmother's stories are told by her daughter to the grandson. If we readers position ourselves as the grandson, the receiver of these stories, we might respond to them with questions, comparisons, and complex emotions that grow out of the knots of intergenerational family relationships and the passage of history. Confronting the knots of received and retold memories, we question where Marie's voice ends and Kāmil's begins. It is impossible for us to untangle the life story of our grandmother from the tongue of her daughter. These layers of authorial ambiguity and active reception decenter the individual agent – whether she be author or narrator – and foreground an active reading practice rooted in familial (social, collective) dialogue and remembrance. I contend that this active, dialogic response from the reader is the result of *al-Mawlūda*'s intergenerational narrative form, i.e., Marie's displacement and Kāmil's intermediary authorial role hand in hand with the social, intimate, and oral qualities of ʿāmiyya. These formal and aesthetic aspects of *al-Mawlūda*'s narrative language (alongside its provocative real-life plot) invite the reader to make a social, familial, and political 'home' in this chain of transmission. Kāmil transmits a domesticated and novel account of Leftist political history to the next generation of readers who in turn might imagine an alternative and liberated future through this narrative political inheritance.

Just as language and form intersect in *al-Mawlūda* with implications for how we approach the above questions of authorship, narration, and readership, their intersection also weighs upon the question of the book's genre. There are many aspects in which *al-Mawlūda* resembles autobiography: Marie's narration of her own life, elements of an "autobiographical pact" established with readers, and concern for the intersection of Marie's personal life with the

broader story of the Egyptian public and its collective politics.[8] The major break with autobiography, of course, stems from the fact that Nādiya Kāmil, not Marie, is the book's author. Thus, *al-Mawlūda* falls between what Philippe Lejeune theorizes as autobiographical and fictional pacts.[9] Because Nādiya Kāmil is clearly the author, while Marie is the protagonist and narrator, the book announces a fictional pact. Yet, Kāmil's introduction, which she wrote in her own voice, announces her fidelity to Marie's voice and perspective on her life and times. Moreover, Marie's first-person narrative voice, which occasionally addresses Nādiya Kāmil as "you," reminding us now and again of Kāmil's in-between listener-author role, colors the text with a strong sense of the autobiographical. The fact that this "contractual effect" of autobiography is "a mode of reading as much as it is a mode of writing" invites us to take seriously the fact that *al-Mawlūda* is read with autobiographical investment from reader and author/narrator, even if Kāmil's process of writing required elements of biography to animate the text with her mother's voice.[10]

Kāmil is not the first author to write from this involved and in-between perspective. Natalia Ginzburg was a twentieth-century Italian writer whose work – especially her 1963 *Lessico famigliare* (Family Lexicon) – similarly disrupts boundaries of authorship, narration, and readership and links the domestic and familial spheres to public Leftist politics. Ginzburg scholars argue that this mode of narration is a way of recovering and reconstructing historical

[8] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[9] Lejeune, 14–15.

[10] Lejeune, 30.

memory,[11] giving way to what Versuka Cantelli describes as a "family historical novel."[12] Several points should be made straight away in applying Cantelli's work on Ginzburg to Kāmil. First, it is worth noting that the term novel, however it may be qualified, is a strange descriptor of *Lessico famigliare* and *al-Mawlūda* alike. Nevertheless, Kāmil seems to invite something of the sort by including riwāya (the Arabic term that has come to mean novel but which also evokes a broader tradition of narrative storytelling) in *al-Mawlūda*'s subtitle. The second point is that in the case of *al-Mawlūda*, intergenerational narration is not merely of a historical or memorial quality; it also explicitly recovers and reconstructs past politics. With this said, Cantelli's frame is quite helpful for exploring the implications of these questions of genre. She contends that the familial and intergenerational aspects of this mode of narration subvert the individualism of autobiography, rendering the story inherently social and publicly shared.[13] Teresa Picarazzi, for her part, sees these aspects as proper to women's autobiographical writing at large, arguing that the subgenre "considers intersubjective and relational gender and voice, and embeddedness in an other."[14] Indeed, in Kāmil's case, Marie's narrative voice is matrilineal in the literal sense that the line of narrative transmission passes from mother to daughter and ultimately to the reader. I posit that the intimacy and familiarity of this line of transmission allows Kāmil to root Marie's politics in a space – the home – which is at once shared by all Egyptians and perceived as lying outside or beyond politics. In this sense, her blurring of authorial, narrative, and generic

[11] Veruska Cantelli, "The Maternal Lineage: Orality and Language in Natalia Ginzburg's Family Sayings," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 18, no. 2 (2017): 184.

[12] Cantelli, 196.

[13] Cantelli, 181.

[14] Teresa Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire: Natalia Ginzbourg's Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 26.

boundaries makes space for even the apolitical reader to discover a political lineage in the most private and intimate of spheres.

I have so far focused on Kāmil's intergenerational narrative form and expansive notion of home as intervening in the political history of Egypt's Left. It merits explaining the gendered linguistic aspects of this intervention. While gender may seem self-evident as Kāmil writes in her own mother's voice, gender permeates *al-Mawlūda*'s language and politics in more fundamental ways that are only indirectly related to the author and narrator's sex. The matrilineal narrative and generic disruptions of historical and political memory explored above are permeated by gender, specifically by the mother-daughter bond that drives the narration. In a related way, gender also inflects the very language of Kāmil's intervention. Fuṣḥā is nobody's mother tongue. It is instead the learned standard language of literature, formal media, and academia. The Arabic mother-tongues are the colloquial varieties (ʿāmiyya or dārija, the dialects or vernaculars), which vary tremendously depending on region, social class, etc. To follow the gendered phrase 'al-lisān al-umm' (mother tongue), we might consider ʿāmiyya – the dominant narrative language of *al-Mawlūda* – explicitly feminine, as opposed to the masculine fuṣḥā.[15] This is, of course, not to say that women do not write in fuṣḥā or that men do not speak ʿāmiyya – of course they do. But the realms of education, news media, and literature have been historically dominated by men to an extent that justifies gendering as masculine the discursive language of these fields. By the same token, we might gender as feminine the domestic, emotional, and intimate aspects of spoken Arabic for the way women have been tasked with domestic life, moral and emotional

[15] I follow Yasir Suleiman's very productive rethinking of Arabic diglossia through Arabic speakers' perceptions of their language, what he terms 'Arabic folk linguistics.' He labels ʿāmiyya 'the mother tongue / al-lisān al-umm' and fuṣḥā 'the native language / al-lugha al-umm'. See: Yasir Suleiman, "Arabic Folk Linguistics: Between Mother Tongue and Native Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics*, ed. Jonathan Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

development, and solidifying familial and social bonds. From this starting point, it is not difficult to see how Kāmil's use of ʿāmiyya to narrate her mother's memoirs might be read as an artistic choice to avoid the masculinist tenor and epistemology of formal history, politics, and literature. Her narrative language introduces an alternative manner of approaching these genres of writing, one which emerges through the emotional, relational, and memorial investments of intergenerational dialogic speech. This is a distinctly feminine – even feminist – approach to literary language that intervenes not just in the content of historical and political memory and inheritance but also in the method of telling – and thus knowing and creating – history. For example, Marie recounts her childhood memories of learning about Garibaldi's Redshirts from her mother, not as textbook history but as part of a familial and political lineage:

> أمي ذاكرت لي التاريخ بحُب، نقعد ساعات طويلة بعد المدرسة على الكنبة إياها أنا أقرا وهي تطبخ، ومع الوقت تحولت دروس التاريخ إلى مصدر إلهام لأمي، فكَّرتها بالأوضاع في إيطاليا قبل ما تيجي مصر. وابتدت تحكي لي على حروب الاستقلال والوحدة من وحي مُقرَّر السنة الدراسية من وجهة نظرها هي. البطل الكبير بتاعها اسمه "جاريبالدي". أبوها كان جندي في جيش "جاريبالدي"، "Camicie Rosse" – "القمصان الحمر" – بيسموهم كدا، وانضم لحزب "جاريبالدي" الاشتراكي في قريته. في كتاب التاريخ في المدرسة ما كانش مكتوب إن "جاريبالدي" اشتراكي، في المدرسة بيسموه "البطل القومي تحدّى الاحتلال"، كنا أيام الفاشية في إيطاليا، وحكم موسوليني بيكره الاشتراكية ويعاديها بكل الطرق.[16]

> My mother reviewed history for me with love. We'd sit on that couch for many long hours after school. I'm reading. She's cooking. With time, the history lessons turned into a source of inspiration for her. They reminded her of the situation in Italy before she came to Egypt. She started telling me stories about the wars of independence and unification – inspired by the curriculum, but from her own point of view; her big hero was Garibaldi. Her father was a soldier in Garibaldi's army – *Le Camicie Rosse* – the Redshirts – that's what they're called. And he joined Garibaldi's Socialist Party in his village. The history book didn't say that Garibaldi was a socialist. At school they called him 'a nationalist hero who defied the occupation.' We were in the days of Fascism in Italy, and Mussolini's rule abhorred socialism and was fighting it at every turn.

Kāmil's narrative relies on multiple iterations of familial and political bonds between mother and daughter to tell a situated history of the Left, first in Italy and then in Egypt. These familial and

[16] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 35.

political bonds, in *al-Mawlūda*'s twin contexts of Marie's life and the contemporary inheritance of twentieth-century Egyptian and Leftist histories, also stitch together individuals and communities in national and international political contexts. In short, Kāmil's gendered and intergenerational narrative approach to history and politics reverberates upon the present and future. It reroutes the bonds and boundaries of the Egyptian nation through the least likely of characters – a working-class Leftist khawāga – and invites readers to see themselves and their future in this lineage, and to move forward from decades of successive Leftist political defeats.

Politics across Generations

Beyond language, the intergenerational quality of *al-Mawlūda* is most pronounced (and complex) in politics. Marie, like so many Egyptians of her generation, was politicized after the Second World War. First in an anti-fascist Italian youth group, then – after virtually all her Italian comrades left Egypt in the aftermath of 1948 – in a communist cell of HADITU (al-ḥaraka al-dīmuqrāṭiyya li-l-taḥarrur al-waṭanī, The Democratic Movement for National Liberation), Marie's teenage years of political militancy and eventually imprisonment were the prelude to her lifelong engagement in Egyptian public life. Her earliest political convictions – national liberation and socialism, which she learned first from her Italian mother's stories of her family fighting with Garibaldi's Redshirts – might in hindsight seem peculiar for a khawāga. The khawāga of various European origins are often seen as having profited from the colonial-capitalist system of Capitulations and Mixed Courts which constituted a parallel system of law and taxation for foreigners. While this is true in an aggregated and abstract sense, such generalities can obscure the reality of working-class khawāga like Marie and her family. This narrative also covers over important aspects of history like the fact that the earliest trade-union

and communist organizing in Egypt was led by disproportionately Jewish khawāga workers and organizer-intellectuals.[17] As Marie narrates in *al-Mawlūda*, HADITU and other early communist organizations, were firmly aligned with the Egyptian nationalist cause. They saw national liberation from colonial-capitalist rule as a necessary step toward class liberation. Marie narrates:

> دخلوني في منظمة "حدتو" وعرفت بقى إنها اختصار ل"الحركة الديمقراطية للتحرر الوطني"، مافيش كلمة شيوعية في الاسم فشرحوا لي إنهم "منظمة شيوعية في الأساس ولكن المرحلة في مصر هي مرحلة تحرر وطني من الاستعمار"، اللي عايزة أقوله ان ما كانش ممكن يصيبوا وجداني اكتر من كدا، أصل التحرر الوطني دا اللي كنت بادرسه في كتاب التاريخ مع أمي.[18]

> They let me in HADITU, and I learned that it's an acronym for "al-ḥaraka al-dīmuqrāṭiyya li-l-taḥarrur al-waṭanī." The word 'communism' isn't in the name, but they explained to me that they are "a communist organization first and foremost, but the stage in Egypt is one of national liberation from colonialism." What I want to say is that they couldn't have tugged at my heartstrings any more than that. National liberation – that's what I used to study in the history book with my mother.

Much changed in Egyptian politics after Marie's teenage years. The Free Officers' Coup in 1952 brought Nasser's nominally socialist and Arab nationalist government to power. Marie's relationship with this political shift was fraught on multiple levels. Like other Leftists, she viewed Nasser with a level of admiration for his anticolonial policies, but she struggled to come to terms with his authoritarianism and early assaults on organized labor (in Kafr Dawwar) and communists, which ultimately resulted in her imprisonment and that of her entire social circle on multiple occasions, spanning many years. Marie describes the political debates and crises on the Left during the early Nasser years:

> بلاحظ دلوقت وانا باحكي إني كنت شديدة التردد في ممارسة التكتل ضد بعض على أساس المواقف السياسية. انقسامات الحركة الشيوعية كانت بتدور حول أسئلة من نوع "وطني ولا ماركسي صِرف؟" وحول "حركة الجيش، ثوار وطنيين ولّا مؤامرة؟" "نؤيد النظام بالرغم من وجودنا في السجن ولّا نكافح

[17] Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882 - 1954*, Princeton Studies on the Near East (London: Tauris, 1988), 313.

[18] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 73.

ضدهم ونعتبرهم عملاء للاستعمار؟". بس الاختلاف على الأسئلة دي كان بيؤدي لقطيعة واتهامات وانا كنت بانفر من الطريقة دي بشكل عفوي.[19]

> I'm noticing as I tell this story that I was deeply skeptical of forming factions against each other based on political positions. The fracturing of the communist movement resolved around questions like "Is he a nationalist or pure Marxist?" and "The army: nationalist revolutionaries or conspirators?" and "Should we support the regime despite being in prison, or do we struggle against them and consider them agents of imperialism?" But our differences over these questions led to factions and accusations, and I naturally tried to avoid that.

Similarly, Marie supported Egypt's national liberation from British colonial rule and lingering military occupation. But the state's campaign of deporting khawāga, especially Jews and politically active khawāga like Marie, was an ongoing existential, social, and familial crisis for her. (Her quest for Egyptian citizenship is a major sub-plot of the book.[20]) Amidst these profound political and personal reasons for Marie and her comrades to reject the Nasser regime, her criticisms are remarkably ambivalent and indirect – characteristic of her generation of Leftists. That Saʿd's role in Nasser's Ministry of Culture comes after Nasser's mass arrests of the communists (including him and Marie) is not lost on the reader. Yet, any ambivalence or compromise marking the Left's relationship with the Nasser regime was quickly replaced by pure antagonism during the Sadat years and his neoliberal opening of infitāḥ. Marie recounts how this hostile relationship was driven by politics but was articulated in personal ways, such as Saʿd being blacklisted from publishing and journalism:

من أوائل الإجراءات اللي خدها السادات لما جه الحكم فيما يخص الصحافة منشور إن سعد كامل ممنوع من الكتابة...وستمر المنع دا لغاية ما السادات اتوفى، لغاية ما اغتالوا أنور السادات.[21]

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[19] Kāmil, 207.

[20] Marie's struggle on this front was twofold: First, she – like many Egyptian Jews – struggled to prove that her parents and grandparents were born in Egypt. Second, the Egyptian government (under the monarchy and Nasser alike) regularly deported Jews who were arrested as political prisoners. Marie was spared this fate because she lacked citizenship to any country, so there was no clear place to which she might be deported.

[21] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 377.

> Among the first actions Sadat took relating to the press when he came to power was a memorandum that Saʿd Kāmil is forbidden from writing…and that ban lasted until Sadat passed away, until they assassinated Anwar Sadat.

In tracing these historical shifts, *al-Mawlūda* follows a series of what David Scott calls historical "aftermaths" of anti-colonial and socialist politics that aligned with Marie's life and convictions.[22] Nādiya Kāmil (b. 1961) came of age amidst the collapse of these projects and the beginning of the neoliberal post-infitāḥ era, which realigned Egypt with US-backed capitalism, capitulated to Israel, and inaugurated an era of ascendent Islamism and conservative, militarized nationalism. A second aftermath – this one unspoken – occasions *al-Mawlūda*'s narrative as Marie's death in 2012 coincides with the unravelling and undoing of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Thus, what I seek to make plain is the tension – familial and political – inherent in remembering Marie for her political convictions while also offering her story to Nabīl and his millennial generation, whose world wants little to do with Marie's politics. In this sense, Kāmil's work grapples narratively with these intergenerational political tensions captured in Scott's notion of aftermaths and "the temporal disjunctures involved in living *on* in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past."[23] Kāmil's intergenerational narrative impulse is part and parcel of domesticating the major political questions of Egypt's twentieth century and Marie's life: how to move forward from unceasing Leftist defeats?

Like virtually everything in *al-Mawlūda*, this issue of outliving the viability or relevance of one's commitments is articulated through relationships, especially family relationships. This is

[22] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 2.

[23] Scott, 2.

a major aspect of Kāmil domesticating politics, by which I mean bringing politics within the scale of the home and into the emotionally charged dynamics of familial relations. Take the example of the major social rupture in Marie's adolescence: the fallout of 1948 and the departure of the khawāga, especially the Italian and Jewish communist communities to which she belonged. Centrally, their departure was driven by their belief that khawāga could no longer work for socialism or national liberation in Egypt because, as Marie tells it,

> مهما يقولوا عن نفسهم إنهم وطنيين ومصريين، مفيش مصداقية بعد عللي حصل في فلسطين، وقرروا في المؤتمر إن كل واحد يروح لبلد أصله علشان يكملوا الكفاح بشكل يكون في مردود، يعني مش كفاح ع الفاضي. اللي له أصل طلياني يروح إيطاليا، أصل فرنسي لفرنسا، ولكن كان فيه أرمن مثلًا يروحوا فين دول؟ يمكن الاتحاد السوفيتي على أساس إن جزء من أرمينيا كان تبع الاتحاد السوفيتي؟ وبعدين كان فيه يهود مصريين ملهمش أصول أوروبية يروحوا فين دول؟ حتى اللي لهم أصل يوناني مثلًا كان عندهم مشكلة لأن كان حصل انقلاب فاشيستي في اليونان بقيادة تلات جنرالات جيش، فكان خطر على الشيوعيين اليونانيين المصريين إن يروحوا اليونان. على أي حال الطلاينة قرروا يمشوا من مصر وابتدوا يعملوا أوراقهم.[24]

> Whatever they might say about themselves being nationalists and Egyptians, they had no legitimacy after what had happened in Palestine. So, they decided at the conference that everyone would go to the country of their origins to continue the struggle where it would have an impact – not just struggling in vain. Whoever had Italian origins would go to Italy, French origins to France. But there were Armenians, for example – where should they go? Maybe to the Soviet Union because part of Armenia was in the Soviet sphere? And then there were Egyptian Jews without European origins – where were they supposed to go? Even the people with Greek origins, for example, they had a problem because there had been a Fascist coup in Greece led by three army generals, so it was dangerous for the Greek-Egyptian communists to go to Greece. In any case, the Italians decided to leave Egypt, and they started getting their papers in order.

Marie's teenage loss of her social and political community was occasioned by a geopolitical force far greater than their activities organizing against fascism and fighting cholera in Cairo's poor neighborhoods. In her recollection of the event, she explains staying in Egypt as a decision

[24] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 76.

of conviction, a way of persisting despite what her peers understood as a historical impasse and defeat:

> أنا من وقت ما قلت لأصحابنا الطلاينة "أنا مصرية وحاقعد في مصر، مش حامشي" خلاص كان قرار أنا خدته، ما اتعيرتش ولا ثانية واحدة من سنة 1948، وأثناء كل الأحداث اللي حصلت بعد كدا الاقتناع دا كان موجود بعمق في قلبي لعاية الآخر. ومسألة إنهم بيرحلوا الأجانب والخواجات ماكانتش في ذهني، باقول لنفسي "دا ما بينطبقش عليَّ، معنديش الجنسية الإيطالية ولا أي جنسية تانية، اتولدت في مصر وابويا اتولد في مصر، أهلي عايشين في مصر".[25]

> From the moment I told our Italian friends, 'I'm Egyptian, and I'm staying in Egypt. I'm not leaving,' that was it. It was a decision I made, and I haven't changed my mind for one second since 1948. And throughout all that's happened since then, that conviction has stayed deep in my heart all the way to the end. And the government deporting the foreigners and the khawāga wasn't on my mind at all. I would say to myself, 'That doesn't apply to me. I don't have Italian citizenship or any other citizenship. I was born in Egypt, my father was born in Egypt, and my parents live in Egypt'.

While here Marie retrospectively glorifies her decision to declare herself Egyptian and remain in Egypt, we ought not belittle the sea change this marked in her social world. Indeed, at this moment she was transferred from the Italian HADITU cell to the Egyptian one because she was the sole Italian left. Shortly thereafter she was imprisoned, and her world turned upside-down once again. Thus, Kāmil does not present historical-political shifts only as ideological or political changes but as emotionally weighty family events and social ruptures.

A second aftermath, this one more faithful to Scott's notion, is found when Saʿd, Marie's husband, comes to terms with the 1967 defeat, which ushered in a dramatic shift in Egyptian political culture and terminated his ascent through Nasser's Ministry of Culture. Sadat's presidency was particularly catastrophic for the Kāmil household. Saʿd's career in journalism – to say nothing of his bureaucratic post – was upended by changing political winds. He was blacklisted from publishing in newspapers and pursued by secret police for his outspoken

[25] Kāmil, 152.

politics. Kāmil records the massive political shifts in Marie's narrative, but most touching for the reader is how she frames this period in terms of familial relationships and emotions. Saʿd's uncompromising positions were, what Kāmil (through Marie's narrative voice) describes as:

> حركة من الحركات اللي أنا باسمّيها نبقى واقفين عند المبدأ، أفكارنا تكون هي هي، من غير ما يكون عندنا شيء من الخطة للتعامل مع الوضع.[26]
>
> One of those moves I'd call getting stuck on principle, our ideas as they are, without any plan to engage with the reality of the circumstance.

Standing on principle pushed Saʿd further into social, professional, and political isolation. Saʿd's troubles morphed into a depression spanning the Sadat years. Kāmil describes Saʿd's depression as a response to the political malaise and the collapse of the revolutionary socialist project that had defined his political and cultural engagements until that point. Importantly, however, this account is mediated through Marie's relationship with Saʿd. Marie narrates:

> وصل لدرجة إن ابتدى يعيط، ييجي بعد الضهر ويعيط:
> - مش عارف اعمل ايه يا ماري، مش عارف اعمل ايه.[27]
>
> It reached the point where he'd start to cry. He'd come to me in the afternoon crying, 'I don't know what to do, Marie. I don't know what to do.'

Ultimately, she says,

> حصل فتور بيني وبين سعد. بطّلنا نحب بعض بصحيح.[28]
>
> A cooling off occurred between me and Saʿd. We stopped loving each other, really.

Kāmil articulating Saʿd's depression through their home's family relationships emphasizes not only the depth of his despair toward the increasingly hopeless political situation in Egypt, but

[26] Kāmil, 389.

[27] Kāmil, 395.

[28] Kāmil, 402.

more importantly the way political disappointment and despair were domesticated and brought into family life. Saʿd's depression took over the family home and became the atmosphere of Kāmil's youth. This is a central aspect of how I understand Kāmil's work generationally: she transmits her parents' generation's experience of political vision, struggle, hope, and defeat to a generation that has known mostly political despair.

The chain of transmission from Marie, through Nādiya Kāmil, and ultimately to Nabīl and the reader, begs the question: how does Nabīl – how do we – inherit this loss across generations? One consequence of Kāmil's narrative perspective, i.e., giving voice to her mother's view of Egypt's twentieth century, is that the energy, hope, and disappointment of her parents' political struggles are not taken for granted or elided from the story. On the contrary, they – more than the events themselves – are the story and are celebrated as such. Despite Marie's objective marginality in Egyptian society – a poor khawāga and a woman without much social or political capital – her lifelong engagement with Egyptian public life injects her family history and unique perspective on Egypt's twentieth century with the energy of her generation's political commitments. Such a politically engaged perspective is in tension with the often apolitical commemorative tendency of memory and remembrance, whereby we commemorate victims whose political struggle is already defeated rather than honoring them by seeing their politics as historically contingent and ongoing.[29] By invigorating her family's story with their political commitments, Kāmil highlights the resilient politics of the margins. In recognition of the marginality of the Egyptian Left after 1967 and especially after 2011, Kāmil illustrates the necessity of political struggle – even in defeat – to her family's sense of being and belonging.

[29] Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, New Directions in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 57.

It should be emphasized that the depressive post-infitāḥ environment is the domestic atmosphere and political-historical context of Nādiya Kāmil's childhood. There are fleeting moments in *al-Mawlūda* when we glimpse a soft-spoken or oblique recognition between Marie and Nādiya Kāmil – mother and daughter, narrator and author – that this was a dark time which perhaps harbored shared difficulties not directly of a political nature but having to do with Saʿd's all-consuming depression. For example, Marie addresses Nādiya Kāmil:

> اللي كان شاطر هو إنتِ، وفي وقت معيّن كلمت صاحبتك أماني الرشيدي، أظن في التمانينات، وأماني ادِّت له لأول مرة علاج ضد الاكتئاب، مش مجرد منومات ومهدئات، لكن بعد ايه؟ مش أقل من 20 سنة بدون مساعدة، كان وصل لدرجة كبيرة من النزول.[30]

> You were the one who was good [at handling Saʿd's depression]. At a certain point you talked to your friend Amānī al-Rashīdī – I think in the eighties – and Amānī, for the first time, got him treatment for depression, not just sleeping pills and relaxants. But after what? Not less than twenty years without any help. He'd fallen so low.

And later:

> بتحضروا الخناقات. كنا بنتخانق كتير قوي أنا وهو.[31]

You [Nādiya and Dīna] were there for our fights. We would fight a lot, he and I.

These are among the few moments in the text when Marie's narration references Kāmil as the receiver of her story and a member of the family who witnessed many of these events first hand. Thus, in reading between the lines of narrator and author, mother and daughter, we ask: with which of Kāmil's own investments – political, emotional, familial – has she perhaps inflected Marie's narration? It is in these poignant moments when Kāmil's presence as a member of the family and participant in this family history is referenced that our awareness of how *al-Mawlūda* transmits familial and political commitments through generations is most focused and attuned to

[30] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 395-96.

[31] Kāmil, 403.

the fact that the narrative we read is not pure autobiography but mediated by an author intimately invested in the story.

This intimacy is part of *al-Mawlūda*'s appeal and strength. Beyond the pleasure of reading an emotionally complex, intergenerationally mediated narrative of such depth, this narrative form functions critically by transmitting political commitments from one generation to the next. The narrative we find in *al-Mawlūda* is transparent about its own investments, which are precisely what render Marie's story so compelling and profoundly affecting. Because of *al-Mawlūda*'s autobiographical air – and Kāmil's personal investments in Marie's narrative – the reader cherishes the potentially distorting effects of narrating history in the first person, even and especially because this narrative passes through a daughter's authorial filter. Arguably this familial narrative may be preferable to the faults of mainstream (often nationalist and masculine) historical narrative: false notions of neutrality, focusing on a narrow set of historically 'relevant' actors and events (what Hoda El Sadda chronicles as the masculine and national 'major issues' [al-qaḍāyā al-kubrā]) [32], and marginalizing the voices of defeated political and social movements and classes. What is perhaps the most important point of contrast between these methods of narrating history, from a theoretical perspective at least, is how personal experience, affect, and commitment produce familial and political history in Kāmil's narrative. What I mean is that the very lived experiences of political engagement, complete with the subjective distortions of memory, affect, and a range of emotional-temporal lenses through which they might be processed, e.g., doubt, regret, pride, etc., are utilized to articulate an engaged understanding of history and transmit it across generations. Moreover, it is precisely the invested and partial aspects of this narrative which render its commitments transmissible intergenerationally. Simply,

[32] El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel*, 145.

history which affects, pulls at conviction, and moves our sense of belonging is uniquely compelling.

Given Marie's lifetime of profound political commitments and the affected aspects of her narrative voice rooted in personal experience and relationships, we might expect her perspective to be marked by partisanship or ideological slant. Instead, without ceding Marie's socialist commitments, Kāmil uses the intergenerational and dialogic nature of *al-Mawlūda*'s narrative to reflect on the political changes that occurred over the course of Marie's life, most notably the neoliberal turn of infitāḥ and the collapse of the Egyptian and global Left. These shifts, which are experienced differently by successive generations (Nādiya Kāmil came of age in the post-infitāḥ 1970s and 1980s, while Nabīl grew up in the wake of 9/11), serve as openings for Marie (or, alternatively, Kāmil) to introduce retrospective doubt into her political commitments and personal choices. The issue of Marie cutting off communication with her Israeli family, for example, becomes a major concern as she looks back on her life and ponders how she will be remembered by her Palestinian grandson:

> أنا حاسة إن لازم أقول له الكلمتين دول علشان أنا عاوزاه يحبّني وما يفهمنيش غلط وإن لما يكبر يكون عنده إحساس باللطف تجاهي زي الجدات التانيين...لكن ممكن إحساس نبيل ما يكونش لطيف لما يكبر. هو ما يعرفش إن أنا عندي أصل يهودي وما بيقولش "ضد الإسرائيليين" أو "دول إسرائيليين"، هو بيقول "يهود" أو "اليهود" وهو بصحيح الإسرائيليين دول يهود وصحيح عمالين جرايم وبيعملوها من زمان ضد الفلسطينيين، فطبيعي إن لما يكبر يكون صعب عليه إن يكون فلسطيني بإحساسه الصادق بحقوقه وفي نفس الوقت يكتشف إن أنا من أصل يهودي، ودي صدمة مش حلوة.[33]

> I feel like I need to say these things to him because I want him to love me. I don't want him to misunderstand me. And when he grows up, I want him to feel kindly toward me like with other grandmothers… But maybe Nabīl's feelings won't be so nice when he gets older. He doesn't know that I have Jewish heritage. And he doesn't say 'against the Israelis' or 'they're Israelis.' He says, 'Jews' or 'the Jews.' And he's right: those Israelis are Jews. And, true, they're committing crimes – and have been for a while – against the Palestinians. So, it's natural that when he grows up it would be hard for him to be Palestinian, with his just sense

[33] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 544.

> of his rights, and at the same time discover I have Jewish heritage. That's a shock, and not a nice one.

More to the point, she ponders whether she will be the politically inconvenient family member whom he would rather forget:

> لو كنت فضلت متعاطفة أو مشغولة بالقرايب اللي في إسرائيل يمكن دا كان ممكن يعمل لي مشكلة نفسية، مشيت بعواطف ورأي البيئة اللي عشت فيها والطريق اللي انا اخترته بين السجون والكفاح، أنا بالطريقة دي ما حستش بمشكلة ودا ممكن يحصل لنبيل تجاهي.[34]

> If I'd continued to empathize with my relatives in Israel or kept up with them, perhaps that would have caused a psychological problem for me. So, I went with the emotions and the opinions of the environment I lived in, and the path I chose, between prison and struggle. This way I didn't sense any problem. And that might happen to Nabīl with me.

Implicit in this passage is the question of whether family ought to be held sacred from the imperatives of political commitment, in Marie's case anti-colonial and socialist political commitments. To what extent ought individuals be held responsible for the policies of states to which they belong and, to varying degrees, support? What is notable in this example is that Marie does not express doubt regarding the justice of her political principles but regarding the cost she paid for her fidelity to them. This cost, expressed belatedly, is wrapped up in her role as a grandmother to a stateless Palestinian (her daughter, Dīna, married a Palestinian) in a radically changed geopolitical moment: Israel is now an established regional power, Palestinian statehood grows increasingly hopeless, and the Cold War has given way to American-capitalist hegemony.

I posit that Kāmil's narrative accomplishes through this retrospective shadow of doubt something more nuanced than the post-1991 turn to liberalism experienced by disillusioned Leftists the world over. What I read in the cracks of Marie's doubt and in *al-Mawlūda*'s distinctly oral narrative voice is an invitation to dialogue, to respond to Marie's choices and late-

[34] Kāmil, 545.

in-life second thoughts. This is a critically important function of *al-Mawlūda*'s narrative voice, which actively engages generations of readers who have never held Marie's political ideals nor paid such a high personal price for commitment to them yet who have been profoundly shaped by the political trajectory of Neoliberal Egypt: militarized nationalism, authoritarianism, crony capitalism, and ascendant Islamism. In short, I believe this doubt regarding the personal (specifically familial) price of Marie's political convictions acts as a first step toward narrative mourning, a process whose political dimensions I will explore below.

Mourning Politics through Intergenerational Narrative

By tracing a genealogy of political commitment from the margins and inscribing it within her family's sense of belonging to one another and to their home in Egypt, Kāmil offers a way of thinking politics intergenerationally, even and especially defeated politics. This is crucial in an era where the global Left is at a loss of direction and vision because the language of class-based politics seems so out of step with the contemporary politics of identity the world over. Domesticating politics within a narrative of family belonging and intimate yet expansive notion of home is important primarily because it allows us to see ourselves not as the products of an inevitable historical progress, but in a lineage of contingent historical struggle based in individual and collective commitments and actions. As the world grows more intrenched in neoliberal institutions, identity politics, and militarized nationalisms, values of equality and economic justice are increasingly marginalized or ignored by liberals and discredited as Soviet-style authoritarianism by the right. This is all too plain in contemporary Egypt. Thus, there is something profound in making Marie's outdated political struggle part of the family's vital narrative of home. If *al-Mawlūda*'s contemporary political relevance seems ambiguous or even

absent, this indicates the deep crisis the Left faces in Egypt and globally. It is telling that the inspiring spirit Kāmil seeks to plant in rising generations is that of her deceased mother: a political spirit to be mourned. Evident in this fact is the tough reality that the future of Leftist politics – especially in Egypt – is at an impasse. The horizons of political action are painfully restricted. Kāmil's hope rests on us, like Nabīl, finding Marie's story (and politics) when we need it. Hers is a hope that when the horizon of the future opens, Egyptians will see themselves as belonging to a lineage of political struggle.

In Scott's discussion of aftermaths, he turns to Freud to highlight the way political ideals might be experienced psychically as a loss, prompting the work of mourning: "Mourning can be a response not only to the death of a person, but also to the loss of ideals that, as [Freud] says, have *taken the place* of a loved one."[35] Here, Scott highlights the somewhat paradoxical way that "political ideals are founded on object loss" and are inherently "personified, already invested in the body of an individual."[36] For Egyptians and Arab nationalists, the figure of Nasser is most relevant to this discussion. His image, charismatic voice, and notorious (and unfulfilled) resignation speech in the wake of the June defeat – perhaps the most listened-to political speech in Arab history – are inextricably linked to his political ideals and their decline. Indeed, Egyptian presidents since Nasser – whether they like it or not – face comparison with him not just because of his charisma, but because any claims to nationalism are inextricably bound to his person.[37] Similarly, the Egyptian bureaucratic and military state, despite fifty years of neoliberalism, is

[35] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 100.

[36] Scott, 100.

[37] See: Omar Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

still a living vestige of the Nasser era. For Scott, the process of mourning, what he also terms "reparative remembering," takes place on the field of "memory traces."[38] Mourning is how

> the mourner both *lets go* and *internalizes* the lost object. Each such memory trace, through which the loved person or ideal is imagined with all the complex associations of hope and disappointment, is called up…to facilitate the withdraw of desire and, perhaps, even the formation of new personal and political attachments.[39]

Critically, this is not a mode of forgetting, but rather a way of actively remembering and working through political and personal loss. Furthermore, mourning is distinct from melancholia. For Scott, mourning includes the horizon of a future with new personal and political formations. Indeed, this future horizon is important; without it the internalization of the lost object Scott describes would function more like melancholia.

Kāmil's intergenerational impulse and domestication of political ideals dovetail with Scott's notion of how mourning bridges the personal and political. Notably, Kāmil's narrative does not link socialism and national liberation to Nasser, but to the more marginal and quotidian figure of her mother Marie. This is in keeping with her domesticating gesture of cutting down political formations and ideals to smaller and looser frames approaching the familial. It is thus not surprising, though still provocative, that the personal figure of lost political ideals should be her khawāga mother rather than the towering president who oversaw her imprisonment.
This displacement of attachments from Nasser to Marie – exemplary of how political ideals and commitments are communicated and transmitted in a family narrative – accomplishes several rather radical reformations of political lineage and perspective, precisely the future horizon Scott points to when he references the potential of mourning to form "new personal and political

[38] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 101.

[39] Scott, 101.

attachments."[40] First, Kāmil identifies political ideals not with the Nasserist state, but with the class of artists, writers, and activists her parents kept as comrades. The importance of this shift cannot be overstated in a context where the Egyptian state continues to detain artists, writers, and activists in the name of the nation's security and morality. Second, delinking Leftist political commitments from the intellectual history of iltizām in Egyptian literature and its compromised subservience to the Nasserist state accomplishes a critically important step in liberating Leftist politics and aesthetics for future generations' political and artistic formations. By recovering Leftist politics from the state and inscribing them in Marie's person, Kāmil makes them mournable in the present context. This is a countercultural and oppositional gesture because in the wake of 2011, especially for young people, the history and politics of the fifties and sixties – with Nasser dominating public life, with politics and culture intertwined with state ideology and institutions, and with independent politics leading to prison – are not losses to be mourned. By first documenting her family's role in Egypt's independent Left and then linking her mother to political ideals traditionally claimed by the Nasserist state, Kāmil domesticates politics and prepares even the skeptical reader for the task of mourning and the political horizon of the future.

Lastly, by reframing the history of lost political ideals in the figure of Marie – a deceased grandmother, a figure particularly well suited to be mourned – Kāmil avoids the trap of melancholic nostalgia. As Scott reminds us, "it is this practice of reparative remembering that appears blocked or disabled in melancholia," and therefore, "the melancholic dwells on the past with pathological nostalgia."[41] While melancholia can in some ways serve to confront the reality

[40] Scott, 101.

[41] Scott, 101.

of historical defeat and loss, it becomes unhealthy and unproductive when the subject cannot move beyond that past loss to confront the present or the future.[42] This melancholia is in fact rather widespread in contemporary Arab and Egyptian cultures: Salafis' embodied identification with a bygone era of early Islam, some Leftists' identification with the Nasser era's revolutionary politics,[43] and many secularists' fixation on the cosmopolitanism of the colonial era. I argue that *al-Mawlūda*'s domesticating frame at once lets go of and reinvests in the grand twentieth-century politics that animated Marie's life. This is precisely the work of mourning. I want to be careful to distinguish Kāmil's project in *al-Mawlūda* from the significant impasses of Marie's life story. Marie's unresolved relationship with her Jewish family and her repeated failed attempts to write her memoir run parallel to her and Saʿd's generation's rather melancholic political outlook, characteristic of the old nationalist Left. But Kāmil's work is framed intergenerationally and speaks beyond Marie's individual or generational position. In this way, Kāmil works through and mourns her mother's life and politics. Furthermore, Nabīl and the horizon of the future make space for the use of those mourned personal and political attachments in still unknown formations suitable for the challenges of Egypt's post-revolution generation. This is the broader political hope behind Kāmil's desire that "Nabīl might find 'the Story' (al-ḥaddūta) when he needs it."[44]

A Shifting Nation and Cosmopolitan Specter

[42] See: Nouri Gana, "Jihad on the Couch," *Psychoanalysis and History* 20, no. 3 (December 2018): 378–79, https://doi.org/10.3366/pah.2018.0274.

[43] See: Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, "al-Riwāya al-tārīkh wa-l-siyāsa fī miṣr maʿ Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm," August 11, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dt-LYa2r8TY.

[44] Kāmil, *al-Mawlūda*, 9.

As Kāmil intimates in her introduction to *al-Mawlūda*, her hope is that if the figure of the nation is to have any liberatory potential in this generation, it will necessarily find expression in an intimate yet expansive mode of belonging to home. It is important to note that Kāmil's narrative redirection of the nation is not a wholly anti-nationalist position. Indeed, for all the ways that Kāmil manages to reroute the Egyptian nation and nationalism through Marie's life and person, her authority to do so is buttressed by Marie's nationalist political convictions (even if she opens the door to doubting or qualifying them by the end of the book) and her Egyptian-Arabic narrative voice. Indeed, that Marie narrates her life in her chosen language (Egyptian Arabic) rather than her natal tongue (Italian) sets *al-Mawlūda*'s tenor and establishes her belonging to Egypt and claims on Egyptian identity. While some may argue that this linguistic belonging is properly Nādiya Kāmil's (as the author) rather than Marie's, it merits pointing out that the fact that Kāmil was born in Egypt and into Egyptian Arabic as her mother tongue is further proof of Marie's lived commitment to buck the trends of history and assert her belonging to Egypt despite concerted efforts by Zionists and the Egyptian state alike to cast the likes of her out of the Egyptian nation and into the Israeli one.

The nation as articulated in *al-Mawlūda* critiques the Arabic term 'umma' (nation), not by disputing national bonds but by redirecting them through the near homophones 'umm' (mother) and 'umūma' (motherhood). I'd like to propose this unorthodox maternal valence of 'umma' in keeping with the domesticating, intergenerational impulse I find at the core of *al-Mawlūda*. Moreover, this maternal lens helps us highlight the social aspects of 'umma' that stand in contrast to terms such as 'waṭan' (nation, homeland, fatherland) and 'dawla' (state). Through my reading of Kāmil's notion of the domesticated nation, my notion of the maternal 'umma' conveys shared commitments and bonds before and beyond ties to territory (as with 'waṭan') or

to a sovereign bureaucratic power (as with 'dawla'). For Kāmil, these bonds reflect domesticated – or maternal – politics. According to this maternal sense of 'umma', belonging is not grounded in land or sovereign power but shared political conviction and commitment. As the international network – stretching the Mediterranean basin – of Marie's familial and political relationships illustrates, this is simultaneously an order of communal belonging expansive enough to crisscross national borders and intimate enough to foster a sense of family. By reading Kāmil's approach to the nation and nationalism through this rather heterodox notion of 'umma', I seek to foreground communal and political bonds and avoid other more conventional terms for the nation and its violence including 'al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya' (Arab nationalism) and 'waṭaniyya' (patriotism, nationalism).

This approach to the nation, which is unorthodox and revisionist but not a full-throated disavowal, is also a critique of cosmopolitan nostalgia. Cosmopolitanism denotes, in its conventional usage, a bourgeois class position. Perhaps for this reason, Kāmil makes no reference to cosmopolitanism in *al-Mawlūda*. Nevertheless, scholars and readers of Egyptian literature are consistently invested in this question of cosmopolitan Egypt, implicitly or explicitly understood as the colonial, pre-Nasser period.[45] There are valid reasons for this scholarly and political interest, but they are largely reactions to what followed the colonial-cosmopolitan period and shapes our present: a totalitarian military regime and Islamic fundamentalism. In the case of the Jews of Egypt (and other Arab states), we might posit that Zionism and later Israeli citizenship provided a new mode of being and belonging circumscribed by militarized ethnoreligious nationalism. Thus, Israeli statehood and citizenship also occasioned a Jewish loss:

[45] See: Deborah A. Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt: Literature, Culture, and Empire*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures 21 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009); Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism*.

the loss of a minoritarian and cosmopolitan modus vivendi. Kāmil is acutely attuned to this dynamic, speaking to her Jewish relatives about the days "when you used to be cosmopolitan" in her documentary film *Salaṭa Baladī*.[46] This comment shows an understanding of cosmopolitanism rooted in social relations and behavior, not simply time and place. In a similar vein, the pre-1952 past offers a different Egypt and Egyptian life to readers and critics. This lost Egypt allows readers to imagine a different way of being. For contemporary Egyptian readers, this cosmopolitan past plays a critical function in the context of increasing neoliberal hegemony, authoritarian military rule, and Islamist dominance in many spheres. It acts as an escape, a way to imagine being in and of Egypt otherwise. In other words, this lost cosmopolitan Egypt plays its critical function because the total absence of Leftist politics or revolutionary impulse in the present. Nostalgia fills in where future-oriented political desire is absent.

The case of *al-Mawlūda* is clearly different from the escapist – if understandable – nostalgia for cosmopolitanism. As I have argued, Kāmil offers up Marie's political commitments not to be consumed with nostalgia-tinted glasses but to be mourned to yet unknown though expressly political ends. We find this in *al-Mawlūda*'s intergenerational thrust, which Kāmil introduces in her preface through the figure of Nabīl. She highlights its political and familial trajectories throughout the narrative and reinforces them through Marie's letter to Nabīl at the end of the book. Marie's narration (as penned by Kāmil) is explicitly concerned with family legacy and political inheritance, yet her narrative account of the twentieth century goes beyond family history. Marie's Leftism is central to *al-Mawlūda*'s intervention in the historiography of Egypt's twentieth century, especially where the khawāga are concerned. It is precisely Marie's political commitments, which are Leftist yet also rooted in Egyptian nationalism – typical of the

[46] Nadia Kamel, *Salaṭa Baladī*, 2007.

anticolonial moment – that distinguish her story from narratives of apolitical or patently colonial cosmopolitanism. This is precisely the historical nuance and situatedness that leads Hala Halim to push for a conception of cosmopolitanism that grapples with the "phenomenon of radicalism that is both *national* and supra- or inter-nationalist without the mediation of states or international organizations but as underwritten by radical solidarities."[47] It is telling that the immediate context Halim draws on to make this forceful claim to direct cosmopolitanism through national political frames – specifically in the Global South – is the global reverberations of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. 2011 was a moment when political radicalism of a national yet more-than-national character had tangible effects within nation-states and beyond them. This recalls the postwar moment of decolonization that swept Africa and Asia throughout the 1950s and 1960s, when anticolonial politics were national yet decidedly more than national, as is apparent in examples from Algeria to Vietnam. Given Marie's belonging to this generation of national yet beyond-national Leftist politics, Kāmil's recourse to her mother's life and this past era of Egyptian history is an avenue to recover and reimagine Leftist politics in the present. This is a political function which nostalgia plainly lacks.

Despite scholarly critiques of the Eurocentrism integral to many genealogies and formulations of cosmopolitanism,[48] the impulse to critique the violence of contemporary Egyptian nationalism, in its militarist, neoliberal, and Islamist incarnations, remains compelling and urgent. The difficulty of imagining a radically different future, especially after the 2013 military coup, constrains the critical imagination and pushes us back to history. And so, the cosmopolitan specter persists. In such a context, recovering past Leftist political and social

[47] Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism*, 9.

[48] See: Halim, 5–11.

commitments of socialist internationalism, class liberation, and struggle against empire is urgent. This is precisely the political and historiographical power of the sense of lineage and home created in *al-Mawlūda*. With these political commitments centered, Kāmil's intergenerational narrative forces us to reconsider nationalism, socialism, and our own neoliberal politics of identity from Marie's uniquely marginal yet engaged perspective. Her narrative voice invites us to find a home in Marie's political lineage, to critically and imaginatively engage in politics beyond the limits of melancholic nostalgia, and to mourn defeated politics so that they might serve us in a more just and liberated future.

Chapter 5: Aesthetics from Hell in Muḥammad Rabīʿ's *ʿUṭārid*

Introduction

Muḥammad Rabīʿ's dystopian 2015 novel, *ʿUṭārid* (Otared), is a prominent example of the post-2011 turn toward speculative fiction. In *ʿUṭārid*, Rabīʿ accelerates the postrevolutionary violence of Neoliberal Egypt through grotesque and abject aesthetics of political despair and violence, especially sexual violence. The novel's aesthetics mark the extreme culmination and exhaustion of the critical sexual-political symbolic vocabulary inaugurated by Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa.* In Rabīʿ, we encounter grotesque symbolic recourse to the body and sex, desire and despair, disgust and exhaustion as vehicles for his political critique of neoliberalism in Egypt. My juxtaposition of *ʿUṭārid* and *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* underscores the continuity of authoritarian military rule in Egypt (before and after infitāḥ and the pivot to neoliberalism) and its role in forging the symbolic and aesthetic economy through which neoliberalism was – and still is – depicted and critiqued. While *ʿUṭārid* is a critical text that goes beyond simply representing authoritarian violence in the wake of Egypt's 2011 Revolution, I read its grotesque aesthetic project as an extreme acceleration of the contours of neoliberalism in Egypt – state violence, abject inequality, rogue police officers, and the inadequate cover of bourgeois respectability. Furthermore, by reading Rabīʿ's critique of neoliberalism in terms of abject and accelerationist aesthetics, I place him in conversation with theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, and Bataille. I argue that these aesthetic aspects of *ʿUṭārid* render the stakes of Rabīʿ's political critique intelligible in terms of visceral senses and embodied affect. By framing Egypt's past, present, and future, as an eternal hell, Rabīʿ allows us no hope for escape from *ʿUṭārid*'s horrific onslaught of aesthetic excess.

Opening

The grotesque opening passage of *ʿUṭārid,* which precedes the novel's main 2011 and 2025 timelines, foreshadows the abject aesthetics, sexualized violence, and politicized despair that run through the novel. The first-person narrator, Captain Ahmed Otared, conjures the scene of a butcher's shop around Eid al-Adha and describes the blood spattered on the wall as if it were a work of fine art:

> ...الشكل الكلاسيكي لخط السائل الطائر. هذا الشكل الذي كان سيضيع إلى لأبد، تمّ الحفاظ عليه مرسوماً على الحائط.

> …the classic profile of airborne liquid, a shape about to be lost forever and then preserved, a stroke upon the wall.[1]

This description of gore is excessive. It is also beautiful in terms of language and style. This tension between grotesque violence and how Rabīʿ aestheticizes it in descriptive language runs through the novel. Just after the above description of blood, the narrator injects another almost parodying description with a dose of the erotic, declaring:

> يُقال إنَّ بعض الناس يعتبرون اللّحم الطازج محرّكاً للطاقة الجنسية، وتبدو الطقوس كلُّها مثيرةً حقاً: الذبحُ، ورائحةُ الدم المختلِطة برائحة الروَث، وسلخُ العجل، ثم تعليقُ الذبيحة وتقطيعها، ومشهدُ العشرات الواقفين في انتظار قطعة لحم، ومشهدُ الأطفال على الجانب وهم يأكلون قطعاً من الكبد النيء الذي لا يزال ساخناً طرياً، وتعجلُ الواحد وهو يُمسك بالكيس البلاستيك الممتلئ باللحم وهو يرحل مبتسماً...

> They say raw meat stimulates the sex drive, or so I've heard, and certainly the rites have something rousing about them: the slaughter, the mingled stench of blood and dung, the skinning, the carcass hung up and butchered, the sight of dozens standing waiting for a cut of meat, of kids off to one side eating lumps of raw liver still hot and soft, of a man rushing off with his plastic bag full of meat and smiling as he goes…[2]

[1] Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid: riwāya,* al-ṭabaʿa al-thālitha (al-qāhira: Dār al-tanwīr, 2015), 5; Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, trans. Robin Moger (Cairo: Hoopoe, 2016), 1.

[2] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 5-6; Rabie, *Otared*, 1.

He then transitions from this scene of festive slaughter to a parallel one noted for the human source of blood:

هذه المرة انبثق من وريد شابّ في السادسةَ عشرةَ.

On this occasion, it had come from the artery of a sixteen-year-old boy.[3]

The first details of this crime scene tell us that a father butchered and cannibalized his family. Given the reference to Eid al-Adha just lines above, we should not overlook the parallel Rabīʿ implicitly draws between this murder and the specter of Abraham sacrificing his son (had he not been called off before completing the deed). This account of familial murder is immediately followed by descriptions of Captain Otared's fellow police officer in fear. After comprehending the other officer's terrified expressions as a profound fear, Captain Otared concludes that:

لوهلة انتقل جزء من خوف الضابط إليّ، وبدا أنّ الخوف سيقيم طويلاً هنا.

Some of his fear transmitted itself to me and I understood that fear would be with me for a long time.[4]

After this foreshadowing of a terrified (and terrifying) police force, Rabīʿ pens the first of countless disturbing scenes of abject violence, filth, and abuse of all kinds. He describes a grandfather's corpse lying beside his son, who cannibalized his own family:

الرجل يأكل بالمعلقة من الطبق بنهم، كانت الرائحة قاتلة، عفنٌ وخراءٌ ولحمٌ مطبوخ وقيء، ولمحتُ الخراء متجمّداً على الكرسي تحت الميت، وعلى الأرض قرب قدميه، والآخر قد فرغ من الطعام ووضع الطبق إلى جانبه وتابع مشاهدة الفيلم.

The other man [the murderer] was wolfing from his plate with a spoon. The smell was deadly – rot, and excrement, and cooked meat, and vomit – and I noticed hardened lumps of shit beneath the dead man, on his chair and the floor at his feet, even as the other finished his meal, laid the dish down beside him, and went on watching the film.[5]

[3] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 6; Rabie, *Otared*, 2.

[4] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 7; Rabie, *Otared*, 3.

[5] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 7; Rabie, *Otared*, 3. Translation modified.

He continues by describing the kitchen:

كانت فوضى عارمة في المطبخ، قدورٌ، وأوعية ملقاة على الأرض وفوق الطاولة، ورائحةٌ منتّنة، وبقعُ قيءٍ منجمّدٍ على الأرض، وخراءٌ في كل مكان.

The kitchen was in a state of chaos: pots and bowls all over the floor and table, a putrid stench, patches of dried vomit on the floor, and shit everywhere.[6]

In this context of fear, abject filth, and violent chaos, Captain Otared begins to lose consciousness because:

كان الغثيان تملَّكني تماماً

The nausea was overwhelming.[7]

As Rabīʿ did with the abject crime scene and Captain Otared's foreboding fear, he again links Captain Otared's physical and emotional state to his career as a police officer. The house full of slaughtered corpses:

استدعت، بكلّ أسفٍ صورَ كلّ جثمانٍ رايتُه منذ أن عملت في هذه المهنة: الوجوهَ البائسةَ والأفواهَ الفاغرةَ والأعينَ نصفَ المنغلقة مستسلمةً للموت.

brought back every corpse I'd ever clapped eyes on since starting in this job: wretched faces, slack mouths, half-closed eyes surrendered to death.[8]

Then, in something of a dream state, Captain Otared gazes at the night sky and sees the faces and names of the victims. Shockingly and inexplicably, he also sees himself named as the murderous father. He interprets this vision in a way that prophesies how his relationship to death, murder, and policing will change in the rest of the novel's speculations into post-revolution Egypt. Captain Otared narrates:

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[6] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 8; Rabie, *Otared*, 4.

[7] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 8; Rabie, *Otared*, 4.

[8] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 8; Rabie, *Otared*, 4..

لكنّي كنت أعرف أنّ هذا خبر قتلي لهنّ، ولم أعلم أبداً لِمَ كنت واثقاً إلى هذا الحدّ أنّي سأقتلُهم قريباً، وأنّي سوف أُغيّر مصيرَهم إلى مصيرٍ أفضلَ ولو كان موتاً. ثم رأيتُ أنّي سأقتل الكثيرين، وأنَّ عدداً هائلاً من الناس سيُقتلون لكنّي لن أشترك في قتلهم، ورأيتُ أنّ الناس ستقتلُ أبناءها وستأكل لحومهم، ورأيتُ أنّ الرجل القاعدَ يأكل الطعامَ، ويتفرّج على التلفزيون قد حطَّم آخرَ الأختام وأطلق العِنان لكلّ ما سيحدث. رأيتُ كلَّ هذا ولم أفهم أيَّ شيء.

I knew that this was an item about how I'd murdered them, without the faintest idea who they were or why I was certain that I'd killed them and had changed their fate for a better one, even if it had been death. Then I saw that I would kill many people, and that a great number of people would be killed in whose deaths I'd play no part. I saw that people would kill their children and eat their flesh, and I saw that the man sitting, eating and watching television had broken the last of the seals and set loose everything that would later come to pass. All this I saw and I understood nothing.[9]

Several key shifts occur in this passage: Captain Otared identifies as the killer, and killing ceases to nauseate him and instill fear in him; he views killing as a form of liberation; and his narration moves into a prophetic and speculative mode set on the future yet to come. Captain Otared previews the hopeless hellscape that post-revolution Egypt will become and sees himself as a sort of liberating angel of death. Over the course of the novel, this is a shift that will come to pass within the security and police forces at large.

The opening passage closes with the trial of the man who butchered his family and the public's reaction to it. The man's explanation of his motive for murder is patently absurd:

قال الرجل إنّه قتل عائلته لأنه خسر أموالاً كثيرة في البورصة ولا سبب غير ذلك.

He said that the only reason he had murdered his family was that he'd lost a lot of money on the stock exchange.[10]

And while this explanation is incredible, the public's shock at his crime is similarly connected to the murderer's wealth. Rabīʿ writes:

تعجّب الناسُ، كلُّهم تعاطفوا مع القاتل، قاتلُ أسرته هذا رجلٌ من الطبقة المتوسّطة، ميسور الحال، يعمل في وظيفة مرموقة، لا يتعاطى المخدّرات، يدخّن السجائر فقط، يملك شقّة كبيرة في حيّ راقٍ، ويملك سيّارتين،

[9] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 8-9; Rabie, *Otared*, 4-5.

[10] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 12; Rabie, *Otared*, 8. Translation modified.

وأبناؤه يدرُسُون في مدارسَ أجنبية، وابنته الكبرى تخرّجت من جامعة حاصَّة بتفوّق. هذا المثل الأعلى للطبقة المتوسّطة السعيدة، الرجل ذو المستقبل المؤمَن، ويحسدُه الكثيرون على حياته المستقِرَّة وعائلته الجميلة.

> People were confounded. They all felt for the killer. This was a man of the bourgeoisie: comfortably off, a respectable man, didn't take drugs (just smoked), owned a large apartment in a classy neighborhood and two cars, his children at foreign schools and the eldest daughter graduated with honors from a private university. He was the beau ideal of the contented middle class, a man with a secure future, envied by many for his stable life and beautiful family.[11]

For the onlooking public, his material success in Neoliberal Egypt renders his grotesque violence dumbfounding. It is only a figure of the lower class, the tea boy, who speaks the truth of the man's fall into murder. He delivers Captain Otared his coffee saying:

هذا فنجان قهوة مخلوطة بالأمل.. الأملُ مهمٌ.. الرجل القاتل عائلتِه فقدَه.. لهذا قتلهم..

> That's a cup of coffee with hope stirred in. Hope's important. That guy who murdered his family lost hope, that's why he killed them…[12]

Losing hope is the simple premise that Rabīʿ takes to the furthest of aesthetic extremes. What is more, the contexts – narrative, aesthetic, and historical-political – of this hopelessness are quite significant. Our protagonist and narrator of this opening scene, Captain Otared, bears the Arabic name for Mercury, the god of commerce and the guide of souls to the underworld. Both the economic and hellish qualities of Mercury are significant in how I situate *ʿUṭārid* in terms of symbolism and political critique. As explored above, that the murderer of the opening scene is a bourgeois father makes his crime particularly incomprehensible for the public. Captain Otared's narration signals that he, more than the public, understands the absurd violence that lies beneath the veneer of respectable bourgeois life. This shift in his understanding accompanies his growing identification with the murderous father and, notably, his loss of hope. Lost hope results

[11] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 12-13; Rabie, *Otared*, 9.

[12] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 14; Rabie, *Otared*, 11.

in Captain Otared's twisted belief that he liberates his victims from the hell that Rabīʿ describes as Neoliberal Egypt by killing them. I read this loss of hope and its result of absurd violence in terms of political economy – the neoliberal logics of inequality and directionless consumption and the military-led authoritarianism inextricable from the Egyptian iteration of neoliberalism.

In this sense of multifaceted political critique, I place Rabīʿ in the literary-critical lineage of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's hyper-present physiological aesthetics of exhaustion. However, Rabīʿ's project is much more extreme than Ibrāhīm's. It expresses the accelerated pace of Egypt's neoliberal trajectory since *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*. Rabīʿ writes five decades after the publication of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*. So, whereas Ibrāhīm's critique – centered around the aesthetics and politics of impotence and the emptiness of bourgeois life – is directed at the still-incomplete pivot toward neoliberalism in Egypt (which entails authoritarianism and capitalist consumerism), Rabīʿ reveals the profound violence beneath the surface of Egypt's already established neoliberal-authoritarian order. The aesthetic language of lost hope that Rabīʿ introduces in this opening passage is central to his critique of Neoliberal Egypt's normalized violence. Indeed, the absurd gore and aestheticization of violence Rabīʿ returns to throughout his novel are heightened to provoke a reaction in the reader who has grown accustomed to the 'usual' level of violence and disgust. By way of abject and revolting descriptions of all manner of bodily fluids and by desensitizing the reader's response to violence through descriptive excess, Rabīʿ makes his political critique in a lineage of politically symbolic aesthetics – specifically sexual-political symbolism – in Arabic letters. Indeed, after reading *ʿUṭārid*, Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī's complaints about Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's physiological description of masturbation disturbing his sensibilities of taste seem laughably quaint.

The aesthetic themes – abjection, disgust, and gory violence – presented in the opening passage connect the temporally distinct plot lines of the novel. The opening passage of *ʿUṭārid* is the only section not explicitly dated, though we understand it to foreshadow the violence that would take place in 2011 and its aftermath. Another stand-alone section lies at the heart of the novel; it is dated 455 AH and describes the apocalyptic final days of Fatimid Cairo with striking thematic parallels to the other portions of the novel including a loss of senses, hopelessness, the invocation of eternal hell, and eating one's children. This 455 AH central passage is surrounded by two sections that take place in 2011. In these sections, the hopes of the 2011 revolution are obscured by violence. The major plot line of these sections follows a schoolteacher, Insāl, who has taken in a young girl Zahra whose father was killed in the street violence surrounding the revolution. As Insāl and Zahra visit morgue after morgue in search of the father, Zahra is taken by a mysterious condition that slowly erases and closes off the features – mouth, eyes, ears – of her face, handicapping her senses. Finally, the outer ring (also two sections – one immediately following the undated opening passage and one at the end of the novel) takes place in 2025 and follows Captain Otared, who narrates the undated opening passage described above. (Captain Otared's 2025 plotline is essentially unconnected to the 2011 plotline of Insal and Zahra.) In 2025, Egypt is occupied by the Knights of Malta and violence and despair reach a gruesome pitch. Captain Otared joins the resistance, which merely acts to protect and serve the state through assassinations. With time, his role as a sniper for the resistance loses even this sense of purpose, and Captain Otared is driven to murder at random, fulfilling his prophetic vision of liberating souls from the present hell of Egypt by killing them.

An Erotic Economy of Flesh and Desire

In *ʿUṭārid*'s opening passage, Rabīʿ's revolting aesthetics link his novel's political critique to Georges Bataille's economy of eroticism. Our narrator describes the Eid al-Adha holiday as:

> فرصةٌ طيّبةٌ لتحطيم النظام الغذائيّ وللاسترخاء والتعرُّف على ما يحدث في الريف، وأيضاً لفَهم العَلاقة بين اللحم والجنس.
>
> A fine opportunity to derail your diet, kick back, and find out what's going on out in the countryside; to ponder, too, the relationship between flesh and sex.[13]

This comment comes in the context of the narrator's discussion of slaughter and raw meat stimulating the sex drive, which he characterizes as a mingling of vitality and disgust, blood and dung. These comments, especially when taken alongside the opening scene of cannibalistic murder, uncannily evoke Bataille's discussion of the three luxuries of nature: eating, death, and sexual reproduction.[14] Each of these luxuries passes through the physicality of the human form or, in Rabīʿ's vocabulary, human flesh. The father's cannibalistic murder in *ʿUṭārid* shatters the moral boundaries and taboos surrounding these three luxuries – eating, death, and sexual reproduction – and marks Rabīʿ's aesthetic project with provocative transgression. Murder and physical contact with the corpse are clear transgressions of what Bataille describes as prohibitions surrounding death.[15] Cannibalism is a double violation of prohibitions surrounding the corpse and eating alike. What is less immediately clear, however, is how this is a violation of what Bataille categorizes as limits and prohibitions that distinguish human sexuality from mere animal impulse and thus grant it moral value.[16] Put another way: how is this a specifically sexual

[13] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 6; Rabie, *Otared*, 2.

[14] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 1988, I Consumption: 33.

[15] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 1991, II History of Eroticism: 79.

[16] Bataille, II History of Eroticism: 54–55.

transgression? Bataille theorizes that sex and excretion (blood and various bodily fluids and excreta feature prominently in Rabīʿ's disturbing descriptions throughout *ʿUṭārid*) are linked in that they both point to the human shame toward the physical filth of our birth and origins – menstrual blood, urine, feces, etc.[17] Such excreta are therefore integral to Bataille's understanding of human sexuality. The shame evoked in this discussion of sexuality is a negation of our very corporeal and reproductive nature and is thus linked to the prohibitions that police eroticism, eroticism being – for Bataille – that which invites us to return to the allure of these negated natural elements.[18] Through the prohibitions surrounding eroticism, Bataille asks us to consider shame and erotic desire in tandem. Moreover, because sex is inseparable from the corporeal cycles of life and death, Bataille gestures here toward an erotic economy that unites death and shame, life and death, beauty and abjection. We should also note the importance of religion – highlighted in Rabīʿ's reference to the ritual sacrifice of Eid al-Adha – in Bataille's understanding of sexual prohibition. He sees religion as a giving a "particular form (the prohibition on nudity) to the general prohibition on the sexual instinct, saying of Adam and Eve that they knew they were naked."[19] It is this erotic economy forged by the human shame of prohibition that Rabīʿ politicizes through violent and aesthetic excess.

Representing grotesque sexual violence in alluring language is a primary way Rabīʿ aestheticizes the multifaceted erotic economy discussed above. I view this aesthetic project and the overt way Rabīʿ charges it with political symbolism as drawing upon Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's aesthetic deformation of progressive, liberatory sexual-political symbolism. In the wake of

[17] Bataille, II History of Eroticism: 63.

[18] Bataille, II History of Eroticism: 78.

[19] Bataille, II History of Eroticism:53.

Nasser's imprisonment of the Egyptian Communists and the 1967 defeat, sex lost its logic of progress and development. Instead of progressive romance, impotence, sexual violence, prostitution, masturbation, sexual harassment, and homosexuality came to represent the political and social corruption, deviance, capitulation, and apathy increasingly endemic in post-infitāḥ Egypt. In *ʿUṭārid*, Rabīʿ's gory and excessive descriptions of violent sex acts, prostitution, and sexualized gore bleed into each other. Descriptions of bodily fluids mingle with descriptions of destitution, poverty, violence, and pursuit of power. Because of this layering, the politically symbolic dimension of these revolting aesthetics is made explicit and overt –more so even than in Ibrahim's most obvious symbolic use of sexual violence to critique capitalism and neocolonialism in *Sharaf* (Honor, 1997). In one instance, Rabīʿ describes a scene of Captain Otared unable to perform sexually with a prostitute, echoing that infamous one from *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa*. However, the aesthetics of Rabīʿ's scene and its political context are markedly more dramatic and disturbing. Captain Otared has just murdered an officer in front of the prostitute and is covered in the dead man's blood. He threatens the prostitute at gunpoint and demands that she perform oral sex on him. He is, however, too exhausted – exhaustion being a key affect for both Ibrāhīm and Rabīʿ. Bored, Captain Otared realizes:

> ولم أفعل أنّ ما أفعله يُهينها في شيء بسبب ردّ فعلها الطبيعي هذا، ولم أجد ما فعلته مهيناً من الأصل، ولم يكن للإهانة معنى بعد قتلي الرجل وغرقي في دمه.

> I couldn't think of anything to do that might humiliate her further. Now I'd killed a man and was soaked in his gore, humiliation didn't seem to mean very much.[20]

As he leaves, he catches a glimpse of a café television broadcasting coverage of the new bill to legalize prostitution. The reader needn't imagine prostitution being symbolically charged with

[20] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 83; Rabie, *Otared*, 85.

colonial power relations or remember the context of the occupying Knights of Malta and the capitulating Egyptian state and public, for Captain Otared's narration makes the link overt:

> ...نعم، سُكتب في البطاقة الشخصية "المهنة: عاهرة." نعم، كلّ هذا بيبب الاحتلال، نعم كلّ هذا بسبب الجيش المتخاذِل، نعم كل هذا بسبب المقاومة المتهوّرة، نعم كل هذا بسبب الساورا، نعم نحن شعب معرَّص، نعم، لغ حلّ إلّا الدعارة...
>
> There'll be ID cards with 'Profession: Prostitute' on the back; it's all because of the occupation, see; yeah, all the fault of the limp-wristed army, the reckless resistance, the 'reverlooshun'; yes, we're a nation of pimps; prostitution is the solution.[21]

Links to violence, sex, and abjection are recurrent throughout *ʿUṭārid*'s 2025 plot line, but they are sometimes disturbing in shockingly creative ways. They paint a picture of a society severely warped by violence of the most systemic nature and produce a sense of sexuality that is inextricable from that violence. In one such scene, Captain Otared encounters a new form, electronic music, which he mistakenly assumes to be the sounds of animals copulating. Instead, he learns the true nature of the 'music':

> هذه أصوات حيوانات تُقتل
>
> Those are the sounds of animals being killed.[22]

Captain Otared then reflects upon his misassumption, again drawing out the link between death and sex:

> وتعجَّبتُ كثيراً حينما أخبرني بما كنتُ أفكّرُ به للتّوّ. سمعتُ ما يمكن أن يكون حشرجات الموت وصراخ الجماع، ويبدو أنّ الصوتَين متشابهان كثيراً، ولا أعلم كيف علمتُ أنّ هذه صرخات الموت.
>
> I was amazed by how wrong I'd been. I heard what could have been the screams of the dying or cries of sexual congress – it seems the two sounds are similar. And I'm not sure how I knew that these were cries of death.[23]

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[21] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 84; Rabie, *Otared*, 86.

[22] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 77; Rabie, *Otared*, 79.

[23] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 77; Rabie, *Otared*, 79. Translation modified.

Captain Otared's unsettling conclusion regarding the nature of the cries proves even more relevant as he learns that the music was inspired by the notorious slaughter of all Egypt's pigs during the 2009 swine flu outbreak. This is a real-world historical detail that Rabīʿ added to his fictional account of workers being forced to bludgeon the pigs to death, striking them and weeping. However, the scene quickly takes a grotesque and darkly erotic turn:

> ثم توقَّف العاملين عن البكاء واستسلموا تماماً لنشوة القتل، ثم شيئاً فشيئاً أخذوا يصرخون من شدة النشوة، ويشتمون الخنازير بألفاظ وكلمات قذرة، قال أبادير إنّه رأى أحدهم وهو يضرب أحد الخنازير بعنف بالغ، كانت جمجمته قد تحطّمت تماماً، ولم يكن هناك أيُّ داعٍ للاستمرار في فرم العظم واللحم، وعندما توقّف الرجل عن الضرب واستدار إلى أبادير، لاحظ أنّ بقعةً ضخمة من البلل قد غطت بنطاله حتّى الركبتين وقميصه حتّى البطن، كان الرجل قد قذف في بنطاله. وقرب النهاية سجل أبادير صوت خنزير ملقى على الأرض وهو يردّدُ هامسا بعربية صحيحة "ماء...عطشان..." وختم بهذا التسجيل قطعته الموسيقية التي سمعتها للتّوّ.

> The workers stopped crying and just surrendered to the killing frenzy. And then, slowly but surely, they started screaming from sheer euphoria – the dirtiest insults and abuse directed at the pigs. Abadir said he saw one of them hammering at a pig with the most incredible violence. The pig's skull had already been completely smashed in, and there was just no need to go on pulping the flesh and bone. When the man stopped and turned around, Abadir saw this huge damp patch on his trousers from his crotch down to his knees, and on his shirt up to the belly. The guy had come in his pants. Near the end, Abadir recorded a voice muttering in perfect Arabic, 'Water…I'm thirsty…,' and he used that recording to end the track you've just heard.[24]

The electronic music was made to replicate this experience of erotic violence so that it could be consumed in ordinary, quotidian settings. Such juxtaposition of senseless violence giving way to ejaculation and simple thirst is made even more striking by how recording facilitates its distribution, repetition, and consumption over and over again. This scene immediately calls to mind Captain Otared's musings regarding the relationship between sex, violence, and flesh that opened *ʿUṭārid* and which find echo in Bataille's writing on eroticism and taboos of sex and corpses. Moreover, by framing this incident not as a one-off linked to an absurd mass slaughter

[24] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 78; Rabie, *Otared*, 80.

of swine but as an entertainment commodity recorded and repeated through individual and collective consumption, Rabīʿ places the eroticism of this violence (and the violence of this eroticism) within the frame of production and consumption.

Abjection and Violence

Rabīʿ links *ʿUṭārid*'s grotesque and sexualized violent aesthetics to the stark economic inequalities of Neoliberal Egypt most directly through his depiction of the garbage man who rapes a young girl, whom we later learn is named Farīda, in the 2011 section of the novel.[25] Rabīʿ prefaces his narration of this sexual violence with descriptions of massive piles of trash and refuse, symbolic both of the characters' abject poverty and of the breakdown of systems and order that emerged out of the 2011 Revolution.[26] He writes:

> في شارع عريض قريب من بيت إنسال، علت أكوامٌ من الزبالة. تراكمت لتكوّن أهراهماً عديدة، كانت هذه الأهرام نتاج شهور طويلة من إضراب الزبّالين عن العمل. في البداية تكوَّنت كومة بسيطة في منتصف الشارع، وهكذا، صار كلّ مَن يرمي قذارته يقذفها إلى أعلى الكومة، وارتفعت الكومة حتّى كوَّنت تلاً عالياً يضاهي في ارتفاعه أهرامات الجيزة. ثم ظهر هرمٌ ثانٍ، وثالث ورابع، وارتصّت سبعة أهرامات في منتصف الشارع، وسُمي شارع الاهرام. ولسبب ما نسي الناس أنّهم هم من أنشؤوا تلك الأهرامات من الزبالة.

> In a wide street near Insal's home, heaps of refuse rose up in piles to form a clutch of pyramids, the product of the trash collectors' months-long strike. At first, a little mound took shape in the middle of the road, and then everyone who threw out their garbage would launch it to the top of the mound, and the mound grew taller until it had become a great hill as high as the Giza pyramids. Then a second pyramid appeared, and a third, and a fourth, and then there were seven pyramids stacked down the road's center and it was dubbed Pyramids Street. And for some reason, people forgot that it had been they who had built them.[27]

[25] Farīda's character is significant not only because she is the object of the most grotesque sexual violence, but also because she is the most notable character to cross over between the novel's 2011 and 2025 timelines. She embodies the continuity of obscene and sexualized violence Rabīʿ weaves into the fabric of *ʿUṭārid.*

[26] There is a similar depiction of heaps of trash being charged with revolutionary sexual-political symbolism in the Tunisian author Ayman al-Dabbūsī's 2016 novel *Intiṣāb Aswad* (Black Erection). Al-Dabbūsī's novel is far more celebratory of the chaotic and liberatory – yet inevitably temporary – state of revolution.

[27] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 156; Rabie, *Otared*, 169.

We should note that garbage here is not only symbolic of poverty and systemic failure of social services; it is also a key marker of abjection. Julia Kristeva defines abjection as not simply the unclean, but that which disrupts the moral and aesthetic system that orders cleanliness and uncleanliness:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior….Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.[28]

Piles of trash, the literal refuse of consumption, disrupt order and display the breakdown of systems. Yet piles of trash are in fact an essential aspect of Cairene life working in its characteristically dysfunctional way, in this case through the labor of garbage people (zabbālīn), who form an underclass of workers tasked with dealing in the city's waste.[29] Trash is an aspect of the city's environment that Rabīʿ has specifically cited in reference to his creation of ʿ*Uṭārid*'s apocalyptic hellscape. He views the ubiquitous trash on Cairo's streets as evidence that it is:

دائماً مدينة نصف منهارة

[28] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

[29] This phenomenon of a class of garbage people processing Cairo's massive amount of trash has piqued a remarkable amount of international interest, resulting in perennial human-interest stories, internationally funded NGOs, and religiously inflected poverty tourism. (Many of the zabbālīn are Christian.) See: Peter Hessler, "Tales of the Trash: A Neibhorhood Garbageman Explains Modern Egypt," *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/13/tales-trash; "Learning and Earning in Cairo's Garbage City, Egypt" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, November 20, 2015), https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/learning-and-earning-cairos-garbage-city-egypt; Sarah Marzouk, "A Brief History of Cairo's Garbage City," *Culture Trip*, January 26, 2017, https://theculturetrip.com/africa/egypt/articles/a-brief-history-of-cairos-garbage-city/.

always a semi-collapsing city.[30]

Thus, what is important for our understanding of trash and abjection in the novel is how Rabīʿ understands abjection to be a systemic aesthetic aspect of the hell he creates out of *ʿUṭārid*'s Cairo. No less significant in terms of defining abjection and its relationship to the novel is the shared occurrence of 'the shameless rapist' and 'the killer who claims he is a savior' in Kristeva's definition of abjection and in *ʿUṭārid*'s cast of characters.

After setting the scene of abjection, Rabīʿ then introduces the reader to the wretched and disgusting garbage man who lives in the mounds of trash, scrounging them for edible scraps. Two young girls – perhaps orphaned or abandoned – then join him. Even before Rabīʿ narrates the scenes of sexual violence perpetrated by the garbage man, the horrid conditions of his and the girls' life – rotting garbage and abject poverty – are apparent. It is presumably this destitution which leads Insāl to link the garbage scene at hand to Zahra, the orphaned girl he has taken in who has been stricken by the mysterious condition that seals off her eyes, mouth, and ears:

فكّر إنسال، إنّ قتل الفتاتين وزهرة ورجل والزبالة لن يحسّن العالم، لكنّه سيريح الكثيرين.

> Insal thought to himself that killing these girls, and Zahra, and the garbage man would not make the world a better place, but it would bring relief to many.[31]

Here Insāl echoes Captain Otared's notion that killing might offer escape from an unjust and hellish life. Not only does this reference to killing as a form of salvation hearken back to the novel's opening scene of cannibal murder; it also foreshadows the extent of aestheticized violence to come.

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[30] Muḥammad Rabīʿ quoted in Maḥmūd Ḥusnī, "*Uṭārid*..al-lāhūt ḥayna yakūn ʿadamiyyan," *Mada Masr*, June 24, 2016.

[31] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 159; Rabie, *Otared*, 172.

Immediately following this remark, Rabīʿ describes the garbage man's rape of a young girl. This description of child rape beside a pyramid of garbage is significant because it blends the most extreme example of Rabīʿ's deformation of progressive sexual-political symbolism with his signature aestheticization of violence and abjection. It is unsettling to read:

> كانت رائحة العفن حاضرةً في المكان بشدّة، وصوت سيّارات قليلة تمرُّ فوق رأسه على الكبرى، وأنين الفتاة الكبيرة يأتي من تحت جسده المتعرّق، لم يضاجع رجل الزبالة طفلة من قبل، لم يختبر هذه النعومة والرقّة من قبل، كذلك، لم يعتد أن تبكيَ امرأة تحت بكاءً مكتوماً خفيضاً هكذا.

> There was a powerful stench of rot, the sound of cars overhead on the overpass, and from beneath his fetid body, the moans of the older girl. The garbage man had never slept with a child before. Had never experienced such softness and delicacy. He wasn't accustomed to have the woman under him give such gentle, muffled sobs.[32]

Part of how this passage – and much of *ʿUṭārid* – disturbs the reader lies in the clash between the aesthetic beauty Rabīʿ's descriptions evoke through his narrative style (especially the almost poetic rhythm of his sentences) and the graphic and violent content he describes. Yasmine Seale describes this function of Rabīʿ's narrative aesthetics as "the ennoblement of evil through formal beauty."[33] This aesthetic tension is central to how the seemingly endless descriptions of violence in *ʿUṭārid* compel the reader further along despite the disgust and despair they produce. This compulsion to proceed onward despite disgust and despair is acted out by Insāl. Insāl considers death as way to relieve Zahra's suffering yet nevertheless continues to help her find her father's corpse and then survive her incomprehensible sense-depriving physical transformation. Through Rabīʿ's narration and the allure of his narrative language, we and Insāl are led onward toward accelerating aesthetic and physical violence.

[32] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 159; Rabie, *Otared*, 173.

[33] Seale, "After the Revolution: Three Novels of Egypt's Repressive Present," 87.

Accelerationist Aesthetics as Critique

This sense of acceleration produced by Rabīʿ's narrative aesthetics is important in part because it moves beyond simple representation and is a central aspect of *ʿUṭārid*'s critical function as a work of speculative fiction. More specifically, despite how the novel can be read as highlighting "that for many, the world is already a dystopia," the accelerationist affect and aesthetics of *Otared* are precisely what push the novel beyond merely representing the dismal realities of post-revolution Egypt, toward a more speculative, imaginative, and critical engagement with violence, neoliberal social and economic fracturing, and the logical consequences of restoring the police state.[34] Therefore, my analysis of *Otared* focuses less on how Rabīʿ might make legible and thus grievable – to use Butlerian terms – the forms of precarious life in Neoliberal Egypt,[35] and more squarely upon how on the novel surpasses representation for critique. The aesthetic allure of Rabīʿ's prose and the novel's accelerating pace of violence propel the reader onward without ever granting the release or closure that might be possible through some resolution or even death. How should we understand this accelerationist aesthetic and how does it offer a critique of Neoliberal Egypt and its violence?

Accelerationism is a relatively new term, which was first coined by Benjamin Noys in 2010 to describe the post-1968 turn in French philosophy among thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus*, 1972), Lyotard (*Libidinal Economy*, 1974), and Baudrillard (*Symbolic*

[34] Seale, 85.

[35] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). This characterizes Walaa Said's approach to the novel. See: Walaa Said, "The Metamorphosis of the Significance of Death in Revolutionary Times: Mohammad Rabie's *Otared* (2014)," in *Re-Configurations*, ed. Rachid Ouiassa, et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2021), 233-245)

Exchange and Death, 1976) who engage in a form of la politique du pire that builds upon Marx's statement that "the *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*,"[36] and posit that revolution must go through capitalism.[37] In Noys's formation, these authors conjecture that "if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalize capitalism itself: the worse the better."[38] He names this tendency accelerationism, though the thinkers he describes would not have used such language. They were synthesizing the works of Marx and Freud and were deeply invested in Marxism, even if they came to express it in a heterodox manner often inflected with the psychoanalytic. Clarifying the accelerationist case, Noys argues, "What the accelerationists affirm is the capitalist power of dissolution and fragmentation, which must always be taken one step further to break the fetters of capital itself."[39] Noys coins accelerationism to label a radical Left-wing philosophical tendency he sees as too accepting of capitalist logic, not adequately confrontational. Others seek to extend this accelerationist political project into the twenty-first century, most notably Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, authors of "#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics."[40]

While such intra-Left political debates are increasingly relevant in an era of intensifying mechanization, capitalization, and algorithmic expansion into vast aspects of life, it is important to distinguish between accelerationism as a political strategy and accelerationism as an aesthetic

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[36] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (New York: Penguin, 1992), 358.

[37] Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 5.

[38] Noys, 5.

[39] Noys, 5.

[40] Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," 2013.

phenomenon. The scholarship of Steven Shaviro is most clear in this regard. Shaviro reminds us that the foundational accelerationist texts of the 1970s "can all be read as desperate responses to the failures of political radicalism in the 1960s (and especially, in France, to the failure of the May 1968 uprising)."[41] Shaviro goes on to identify the political strategy of accelerationism – pushing the contradictions of capitalism to their limits – with neoliberalism and the policies of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Deng Xiaoping. He argues that this accelerationist political strategy is not viable because "like it or not – we are all accelerationists now. It has become increasingly clear that crises and contradictions do not lead to the demise of capitalism. Rather, they actually work to promote and advance capitalism, by providing it with fuel."[42] He concludes that "accelerationism in philosophy or political economy offers us, at best, an exacerbated awareness of how we are trapped."[43] Accelerationist aesthetics like those I identify in *ʿUṭārid*, which feature intensified horrors, accelerating disasters, and which propel us onward through disgusting excess, are an example of what Shaviro calls "a form of enlightened cynicism" – or, conceived otherwise, a form of principled pessimism.[44] The fact that these examples of accelerationism in art and literature do not offer escape from disaster functions as a mode of "aesthetic inefficacy," meaning that "they do not offer us the false hope that piling on the worst that neoliberal capitalism has to offer will somehow help to lead us beyond it."[45] It is precisely in this aesthetic inefficacy that accelerationist speculative works like *ʿUṭārid* function

[41] Steven Shaviro, "Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption," *E-Flux*, no. 46 (June 2013).

[42] Shaviro.

[43] Shaviro.

[44] Shaviro.

[45] Shaviro.

critically by animating the neoliberal futures haunting the present. By refusing closure or escape from aesthetic onslaught, Rabīʿ forces the reader to confront the present disaster. By coloring the aesthetic world of his novel with despair rather than false hope, he redirects any aspirations of resolution or resistance from the aesthetic or literary realm to the sphere of politics proper.

There are several important qualifying points I'd like to make regarding my reading of *ʿUṭārid* through accelerationism's heterodox Marxism, which was born out of a rather particular historical moment in Paris. First, these politically accelerationist philosophical texts preceded the accelerationist aesthetic. This is unusual – as theory often describes extant artistic and social phenomena – and highlights the extent to which accelerationism was a form of philosophical and political speculation during a fraught historical moment. During the late-1960s and early-1970s, France and Egypt shared an important political feature: the waning influence of the Left and its student protest movements (which peaked in 1968 in France, and in 1972 in Egypt). During this time, Egypt's situation in its pivot toward increasingly neoliberal forms of capitalism was more complicated. Following Sadat's infitāḥ and the Camp David Accords, the consequences of Egypt's pivot were as much issues of geopolitics as they were of political economy. Perhaps for the ways the neoliberal pivot of infitāḥ returned Egypt to a path of dependence upon foreign capital, foreign invasion and the external/foreign nature of technological and economic development are outsize aspects of the Arabic accelerationist aesthetic and the broader genre of Arabic speculative fiction.[46] Despite this element of uniqueness in the Egyptian case, there is a significant parallel between the genealogies of accelerationism in Egypt and France in that the

[46] Other examples of this tendency toward emphasizing foreignness or invasion include Mousa Ould Ebou's *Barzakh / Madīnat al-riyāḥ* (1994/1996), Wasīnī al-Aʿraj's 2084: Ḥikāyat al-ʿarabī al-akhīr (2016), Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq's *Yūtūbiyā* (2008), and Ahmed Kaki's short story "Operation Daniel" (2016).

disappointments of 1968 give way to the accelerationist chapter of French Marxism, while an even more dramatic series of revolts and disappointments – the Arab Uprisings – brought the Arabic accelerationist aesthetic into the literary mainstream.[47]

Political disappointment colors the Arabic accelerationist aesthetic in slightly different political hues because the experience of neoliberalism in post-infitāḥ Egypt is inextricable from authoritarianism and Islamism. The notion that we are all accelerationists because we are all 'trapped' in neoliberal spirals needs to be made particular. Our various neoliberal entrapments differ by context. Authoritarianism and Islamism are not external to Egypt's neoliberal logics; they color and accentuate it. Therefore, we should read the seemingly senseless but increasingly conspiratorial killings perpetrated by *ʿUṭārid*'s protagonist, Captain Otared, as critical of the ways neoliberalism in Egypt is policed by authoritarian violence.[48] Similarly, it is fitting that the dystopian acceleration of Egypt's distinct neoliberal logic should feature grotesque depictions of economic inequality and specters of foreign invasion and occupation by powers like the Knights of Malta.[49] Inequality and foreign military and economic influence are key characteristics of

[47] In the wake of the Arab Uprisings, there has been a flourishing of Arabic speculative fiction, much of which boasts the accelerationist aesthetic explored here. Examples range from middle-brow yet commercially successful and prolific authors like Egyptian Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq, to younger newcomers like Egyptians Muḥammad Rabīʿ, Aḥmad Nājī, and Basma ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, Kuwaiti Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī, and Palestinian Ibtisām ʿĀzim, to well-established authors like Palestinian Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh and Algerians Wasīnī al-Aʿraj and Francophone author Boualem Sansal. Many of these authors' works have been recognized by international literary prizes, facilitating wider reception and translations, including anthologies like *Iraq +100* originally published in English translation.

[48] Mitchell, "Dreamland."

[49] Sarah Marusek notes that Imīl Habībī makes reference to the Knights of Malta in comparison to the Israeli state's security forces in his 1974 *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-gharība fī ikhtifāʾ Saʿīd Abī al-Naḥs al-Mutashāʾil* (The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist). Habībī recounts a story from *Candide* of how the Knights of Malta "thrust their fingers into the part of our bodies which most women allow no instrument other than a medical syringe to enter…to discover whether we had concealed any diamonds. This is an established practice since time immemorial among civilized nations that scour the seas. I was informed that the very religious Knights of Malta never fail to make this search when they take Turkish prisoners of either sex" to sarcastically joke that the Israeli officers are plagiarizing *Candide* when they strip search Palestinians (74).

Egypt's post-infitāḥ neoliberal trajectory. What is more, Rabīʿ distorts Islamists' backwards-looking nostalgia for early Islam with his novel's apocalyptic scene from 455 AH. Instead of looking to the religious past for an escape or solution to the discontents of the presents (as is typical of contemporary Salafism), Rabīʿ reimagines the past as a hellish eschatology with striking similarities to his speculative depictions of the present and future. The parallels between this 455 AH hellscape and that of AD 2025 are multiple and overt, including proclamations like:

أنتم مَن عاشوا على الأمل ولا أمل.

You lived in hope, and hope there is none.[50]

And:

لا مُخلّص اليوم...نحن في الجحيم.

There shall be no deliverance this day! We are in hell![51]

Moreover, Rabīʿ describes this past hellscape with several shared details from his twenty-first century timelines, most notably the reference to cannibalizing one's children that opens the novel. He describes writes in his rendition of the AH 455 hell:

ثم تجوعون فتأكلون جيف الكلاب.. ثم تموتون فتأكلون جثامينكم.. ثم تيأسون فتأكلون أبناءكم..

You shall grow hungry and eat the flesh of dogs, then you shall die and devour one another's corpses, then you shall despair and eat your children.[52]

Not even the past offers refuge from the totality of Egypt's neoliberal hell and its accelerating escalation toward apocalyptic ruin.

[50] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 191; Rabie, *Otared*, 208.

[51] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 193; Rabie, *Otared*, 210.

[52] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 196; Rabie, *Otared*, 213.

The critique in Rabīʿ's accelerationist aesthetic must be understood in the broad context of speculative fiction and the specific context of postrevolutionary Egypt. In both contexts, we can easily read *ʿUṭārid* as an example of how Seale describes works of dystopian literature: "Their implied tense is the future perfect: this is what will have happened, they warn, if we don't pay attention."[53] The reality of post-2011 Egypt is already so grotesque (and the state's aesthetic dehumanization of citizens already operative in smoothing over acts of state violence like the 2013 massacre of Muslim Brothers at Rābiʿa Square) that accelerating such aesthetics and violence becomes a way to move beyond merely representing this political violence. The difference is a matter of intensity and degree.

Another more complex aspect of Rabīʿ's critique needs to be situated in terms of neoliberal aesthetics. In exploring recent dystopian Arabic literature and art, Sarah Marusek argues that neoliberal policies normalize historical injustice and inequality, neutralize politics and shift responsibility to the individual, while encouraging escapist consumption.[54] We would be remiss not to associate accelerationist aesthetics with this push toward escapist consumption, for the propulsion to continue reading *ʿUṭārid* – a form of consumption – despite its aesthetic violence is part and parcel of the accelerationist aesthetic at play. Rabīʿ's critical innovation on this front is to draw upon a politicized concept of hell as a means to critique the dehumanizing neoliberalism upon which his accelerationist aesthetic rests.

Hell

[53] Seale, "After the Revolution: Three Novels of Egypt's Repressive Present," 85.

[54] Sarah Marusek, "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow: Social Justice and the Rise of Dystopian Art and Literature Post-Arab Uprisings," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, December 12, 2020, 17, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1853504.

Yasmine Seale reminds us in a discussion on the limits of dystopia, "Hell tends to be another word for 'dehumanization.'"[55] This juxtaposition of hell and dehumanization is central to my reading of *ʿUṭārid* because accelerationist philosophy and aesthetics draw heavily upon the mechanical, the technological, and the non-human. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 1972 *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* introduces an opaque set of vocabulary for considering desire, politics, and capitalism. This vocabulary – including terms like 'body without organs,' 'materialist psychiatry,' 'coding flows,' and 'deterritorialization' – consistently moves away from the human as a productive or desiring force, toward understanding production and desire through mechanized abstractions parallel to the trajectory of capitalist expansion and intensification.[56] The implications of Deleuze and Guattari ascribing desire and production to capital become evident when they answer their own question, "Which is the revolutionary path?"[57] Not to withdraw from the world market or to confront the injustices of capitalism, they say, "but to go further, to 'accelerate the process,' as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet."[58] Deleuze and Guattari do not see hope in human or proletarian resistance to the mechanizations and deterritorialized flows of capital. They find hope in accelerating these very functions of capital until they eventually prove liberatory. In a similar post-human vein, Jacque Camatte, writing in 1973, argues that capitalism has sidelined humanity and that humans are increasingly irrelevant to both capitalist production and scientific knowledge. "Capital has run away from human and natural barriers; human beings have been

[55] Seale, "After the Revolution: Three Novels of Egypt's Repressive Present," 85.

[56] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

[57] Deleuze and Guattari, 239.

[58] Deleuze and Guattari, 240.

domesticated: this is their decadence…Present day scientific analyses of capital proclaim a complete regard for human beings who, for some, are nothing but a residue without consistency."[59] Put another way, he describes the proletariat as "merely an object of capital, an element in its structure."[60] Thus, insofar as hell conjures images of dehumanization, it serves as warning – rich with eschatological depth – against this accelerationist tendency to forgo resistance and hasten the capitalist apocalypse.

Characters in *ʿUṭārid*, especially the titular narrator and protagonist, Captain Otared, make frequent reference to Egypt as a living hell, whether in 2011, 2025 or 455 AH. Rabīʿ's hell is earthly but drawn from the Islamic and Christian conceptions of hell as a punishment for sinners and nonbelievers. The flashback to a past Egyptian hellscape from 455 AH, complete with themes and images (hopelessness, cries for death as an escape from hell, eating children, etc.) linking it to the primary twentieth-century timelines of the novel, illustrates hell's permanence on Egyptian soil. Walaa Said argues that this eternal hell-on-earth negates any impulse to read *ʿUṭārid* as affirming revolution. "This dystopian construction completely dismantles the uprising's status as a glorified act of resistance, rendering it absurd, as no revolutionary acts are expected in a traditional, theological hell."[61] There is a strong and disturbing resonance between Rabīʿ's deployment of hell in *ʿUṭārid* and the accelerationist

[59] Jacques Camatte, "Decline of the Capitalist Mode of Production or Decline of Humanity?," in *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic Media Ltd, 2014), 145.

[60] Camatte, 145.

[61] Walaa Said, "The Metamorphosis of the Significance of Death in Revolutionary Times: Mohammad Rabie's Otared (2014)," in *Re-Configurations*, ed. Rachid Ouaissa, Friederike Pannewick, and Alena Strohmaier, Politik Und Gesellschaft Des Nahen Ostens (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2021), 239, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31160-5_15.

relationship to capitalism: for both hell and capitalism, there is no outside to which we might take refuge. We are trapped.

In *ʿUṭārid*, the implications of this hellish totality are gruesome. Resistance, like revolution, becomes absurd. In Captain Otared's definition, resistance amounts to "safeguarding the state."[62] By logic that bears striking resemblance to the strategy of accelerating capitalism until it somehow explodes, Captain Otared and his fellow officers of the so-called resistance plot to accelerate (through mass murder) Egypt's fraying post-revolutionary society's total collapse:

هذه المرة لن نخلق هلعاً أخلاقياً زائفاً، بل يجب أن نخلق هلعاً حقيقياً...هلعاً صافياً.

> Instead of engineering a fake moral crisis, we must give them the real deal. Pure panic.[63]

The several pages that follow this stated goal of sparking panic contain a very important narrative of the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution from the officers' perspectives. (This section takes place in 2025). This narrative includes the chaotic street violence and deaths during the days of the revolution itself, the Rābiʿa Square massacre of many hundreds of civilian supporters of ex-President Mursī by state security forces in August 2013, and fictionalized accounts (in Alexandria's al-Manshiyya Square in 2018 and at Al-Azhar Park and ʿAyn Shams University's Faculty of Engineering in 2019) of similar outbursts of citizen protest met by lethal police violence. By linking historical and fictionalized/speculative accounts of this police violence against citizens, Rabīʿ's narrative of the revolution and its aftermath is actually a retelling of how the police forces came to understand their own ability to act with impunity and to devalue civilian life. Walaa Said smartly notes that Rabīʿ does not recount revolutionary demonstrations

[62] Rabie, *Otared*, 72.

[63] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 66; Rabie, *Otared*, 67. Translation modified.

or hopes in the sections of *ʿUṭārid* set in 2011.[64] He focuses instead on the chaotic violence of the streets and the loss of life suffered. This is an unusual choice that has the effect of portraying the revolution not as an exception to the hellish and violent light in which he casts Egypt but as a point of continuity within such an order. We are denied even the word 'revolution' (thawra), which the officers repeatedly deride as 'reverlooshun' (sāwrā), as an object of hope external to the totality of *ʿUṭārid*'s hell. The officers' retelling of the revolution and its iterations of state-sanctioned murder of civilians becomes a call to continual violence, either safeguarding or reclaiming the state's order:

> لقد أثبتنا في مناسباتٍ وأيّام عديدة أنّنا كنّا أبطالاً شجعاناً، في يناير وفي أغسطس وفي مارس وفي سبتمبر، وأنّنا أهمُّ من المواطن العادي، وأنّ أرواحنا أهمُّ من روح المواطن العادي، بل إنَّ روح المواطن العادي ليست ذاتَ قيمة في مقابل الحفاظ على الدولة. اطمئنوا، نحن الآن نخطّط لاسترداد الدولة من أيدي المحتلّ، وإذا كان قتل المواطنين حلالاً كي نحافظ على الدولة فهو واجب لاستردادها.

> On many occasions, on many days – in January and August, March and September – we showed ourselves to be heroes, courageous, proved that we were worth more than the average citizen, that our lives were worth more than his life. Indeed, we showed that the life of the average citizen was worthless when measured against the value of safeguarding the state. But rest easy. We're planning to take back the state from the occupier, and if killing citizens is permissible in order to safeguard the state, then it's a positive duty when you're setting out to reclaim it.[65]

When reading the above passage, it is clear how Rabīʿ composes a lineage of eternal violence from 455 AH, through 2011, and into 2025 – i.e., into the realm of speculative fiction. It is also clear how conspiratorial this concept of ceaseless violence is, not only because Captain Otared is part of an elite officer corps meting out seemingly random murder to resurrect the

[64] Said, "The Metamorphosis of the Significance of Death in Revolutionary Times," 238.

[65] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 70; Rabie, *Otared*, 72.

Egyptian police state but also because of the frequent assertion that Egypt is literally hell.[66] How is it that an otherworldly notion of hell is brought to life on Earth by a band of rogue police officers? Maḥmūd Ḥusnī notes that the theme of hell in *ʿUṭārid* and the frequent use of phrases such as "I learned that…(ʿalimtu anna)" and "I saw that…(raʾaytu anna)" suggest that Captain Otared has access to some hidden element (ghayb mā).[67] This almost prophetic quality of Captain Otared – a quality that is announced at the very opening scene when he sees himself as the liberating murderer – is indeed a major aspect of the novel's elevated style. But Captain Otared is not a prophet in any conventional or meaningful sense, nor does he possess meaningful access to hidden knowledge of any kind. Rather, the occult aura surrounding him stems both from the grotesque yet aestheticized violence that permeates the novel and from the sustained theme of hell. Indeed, Ḥusnī points out that hell – and, I would add, hellish aesthetics – acts the "abstract link" (rabṭ tajrīdī) between the novel's disparate timelines.[68] Captain Otared, like his namesake, Mercury, is directly implicated in Egypt's hellish state in the novel, so it is perhaps in this sense that he carries something otherworldly about him. What must be emphasized, though, is that even Rabīʿ's recourse to hell is decidedly grounded in Egypt's earthly post-revolution politics. He deploys scenes of hell-on-earth to force us into a confrontation with the speculative future consequences of Egypt's authoritarian neoliberalism. In this way, *ʿUṭārid*'s dystopian critique has decidedly worldly resonances.

[66] For an excellent recent study on conspiracy in modern Egyptian literature, see: Benjamin Koerber, *Conspiracy in Modern Egyptian Literature*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[67] Ḥusnī, "*Uṭārid*..al-lāhūt ḥayna yakūn ʿadamiyyan."

[68] Ḥusnī.

Losing Senses, Losing Critique

The world Rabīʿ describes in *ʿUṭārid* is sensorily saturated and burdensome. This is, of course, a major aspect of the novel's critical force. Abject and accelerationist aesthetics, gore and sexual violence, and beautiful language in tension with revolting content overwhelm the reader. *ʿUṭārid* is an affecting read in visceral ways linked to the body and senses. We feel revulsion, disgust, and horror upon reading descriptions that call upon our senses of smell and touch, sight and sound. It is therefore striking that Zahra, the young girl orphaned and taken in by Insāl, suffers a mysterious affliction that deprives her of most sensory capacity because her facial features – mouth, eyes, and ears – progressively seal themselves shut. Zahra is notable not only because of this bizarre and terrifying condition but also because she is portrayed as being fundamentally innocent – she is, after all, a child – within a storm of terrible and horrific events. How should we understand her condition and its relationship to Rabīʿ's sense-driven critique?

Seale has identified Zahra as the character who, despite her facial transformation, experiences a rare moment of human connection in the novel, which "comes as a poignant relief."[69] The episode she refers to takes place after Zahra has fully lost her facial features and discovers that she has an aunt who suffers from the same affliction. The moment of poignant connection occurs between Zahra and her aunt, as Zahra runs her hands across her aunt's empty face:

> ظلَّت زهرة تمرّر كفّها على خدّ عمّتها، تمريرات بطيئة رتيبة، تختبر حاستها الأثيرة: اللَّمس ثم توقّفت عند فتحي الأنف، ورفعت رأسها ثم حشرت أتملي سبابتها ووسطاها فيهما. توقفت برهة، ثمّ انطلقت زفرة مفاجئة من أنف العمّة، فسحبت زهرة كفّها بسرعة مفتعلة الفزع. وأرجعت العمّة رأسها إلى الخلف، وكذلك رأس زهرة، ثم عادت الجهتان للتّلاقي، كنتا تضحكان.

> Zahra kept running her hand over her aunt's cheek. Slow, even passes, testing out her favored sense: touch. At the nasal openings, she stopped, lifted her head, and

[69] Seale, "After the Revolution: Three Novels of Egypt's Repressive Present," 87.

> stuck the tips of her first and middle fingers into the holes. There was a momentary lull, then the aunt released a sudden blast from her nose and Zahra snatched her hand away in feigned alarm. The aunt rocked her head back, as did the girl, then the two foreheads met once more. They were laughing.[70]

While this is indeed a poignant scene, I'd like to offer a reading of it that speaks to my broader argument about the novel's aesthetics and critical project. To do so, I will turn to a much earlier work of literature that also explores the face, the loss of facial features, and the relationship between the senses and political critique: Syrian Saʿdallāh Wannūs's play *Ḥaflat samar min ajli 5 ḥuzayrān* (A Soirée for June 5th, 1969).

Ḥaflat samar min ajli 5 ḥuzayrān is Wannūs's most famous play. It, like *ʿUṭārid*, emerged out of a major political disappointment, the 1967 defeat. The play is a scathing response to the defeat and a revolutionary call to arms. It exemplifies Wannūs's theory that theater must politicize the audience and urge them to take action to change their political fate.[71] For him, this mission demands innovative techniques to engage the audience in the work of theater. In *Ḥaflat samar min ajli 5 ḥuzayrān,* this entailed planting actors in the audience so that they could respond to the play as part of the performance, modeling political engagement for the audience. Wannūs deploys this technique toward the end of the play to communicate the notion of mutual responsibility for defeat. One actor planted in the audience remarks that he sees himself in the defeated soldiers on the stage as if it were a mirror:

> يعكسون وجهي في المرآة. اني أهاجم نفسي في المرآة. ألامس عاري في المرآة. اني مسؤول. انك مسؤول. كلنا مسؤولون. ما من أحد يستطيع أن يجد هذه المرة مخبأ من المسؤولية.[72]

[70] Rabīʿ, *Uṭārid*, 228; Rabie, *Otard*, 252.

[71] Saʿdallāh Wannūs, "Bayānāt li-masraḥ ʿarabī jadīd," in al-Aʿmāl al-kāmila, al-mujallad al-thālith (Damascus: al-Ahālī li-l-ṭabāʿa wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1996), 36-39.

[72] Saʿdallāh Wannūs, Ḥaflat samar mi ajli 5 ḥuzayrān (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb), 112.

> They reflect my face in the mirror. I attack myself in the mirror. I touch my shame in the mirror. I myself am in the mirror. I am responsible. You are responsible. We are all responsible. This time, no one can escape responsibility.

This prompts the other actors in the audience to look themselves in the mirror so they might see themselves in the clarity of defeat. The result is striking if didactic:

> لا شيء في المرآة. لا وجه. لا صورة.[73]
>
> Nothing is in the mirror. No face. No image.

The metaphor continues as the planted actors explain how they plugged their ears and cut off their tongues lest they be called to political action or imprisoned for their political speech. Instead, they have become "featureless faces" (wujūh bilā malāmiḥ).[74] Clearly, at issue for Wannūs is the dehumanizing effect of authoritarianism. The loss of facial features and senses expresses this dehumanization, a particularly antisocial dehumanization that separates the individual from the collective responsibilities and commitments, which for Wannūs entail a Leftist politics, that were part and parcel of pre-1967 forms of iltizām.

Similar to Wannūs's politically symbolic use of the face, Deleuze and Guattari theorize the face as sitting at the intersection of the self and the social world of others, or – to borrow their terms – 'subjectification' and 'signifiance', 'the black hole' and 'the white wall'.[75] However, their framing diverges from my reading of Wannūs in their insistence that the mapping of social and subjective meaning upon the face, which they call 'facialization', is inherently machinic and inhuman.[76] Yet, for Deleuze and Guattari, facelessness would not amount to some

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[73] Wannūs, 114.

[74] Wannūs, 137.

[75] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167.

[76] Deleuze and Guattari, 190.

uncorrupted proto-human form. They write, "Earlier, when we contrasted the primitive, human head with the inhuman face, we were falling victim to a nostalgia for a return or regression. In truth, there are only inhumanities, humans are made exclusively of inhumanities."[77] It is this issue of the human and the inhuman found in Deleuze and Guattari's writing on the face that I would like to consider alongside the political dimensions of facelessness in Wannūs's *Ḥaflat samar min ajli ḥuzayrān* in our discussion of Zahra's loss of facial features in *ʿUṭārid*.

Returning to Zahra, I posit that Rabīʿ's use of featureless faces incapable of most sensory activity is linked to Wannūs's politically inflected expressions of dehumanizing facelessness. The difference is that in *ʿUṭārid* dehumanization is violent and self-evident at every turn of the page, not only in Zahra's loss of her face. It is ubiquitious, not something the audience learns slowly over the course of watching an entire play. This again highlights the changed pace and intensity of Rabīʿ's aesthetic project as compared to the politically symbolic aesthetics of the 1960s, i.e., in the works of Wannūs and Ibrāhīm. The poignant relief Seale identifies in Zahra's connection with her aunt is not an escape from dehumanization – a term Seale evokes when defining hell (and Rabīʿ's hell has no escape) – but, more precisely, a reprieve from the violent aesthetic onslaught that makes up the rest of the novel. Moreover, the exceptional connection Zahra manages with her aunt (who suffers from the same condition of facelessness) cannot really be considered an escape from the horrors of *ʿUṭārid*. This is partially because the loss of one's facial features and sensory capacity is itself horrifying, albeit not marked by the same gore and violence found in the rest of the novel. More importantly, the reprieve Zahra and her aunt manage is achieved by their embodied removal society, which in Deleuze and Guattari's language might be expressed as the black whole or self being removed from the white wall of

[77] Deleuze and Guattari, 190.

social meaning. Deleuze and Guattari valorize this process of 'defacialization,' but it can also be seen as a turning inward from the social world.[78] As Wannūs's play illustrates, sensory and facial loss is also symbolic of one's waning capacity to witness, resist, and critique totalizing political forces. If this political interpretation seems too heavy a burden to lay on the character of Zahra, a young girl, then we might consider her in the most generous light possible: Zahra is the only character to find light laughter amidst the novel's terrors. Zahra, even despite the loss of her face (or, by Deleuze and Guattari's logic, because of it), is the most human figure amongst a cast of characters dehumanized by the novel's violent and abject accelerationism. Yet, even in this reading by which I have striven to cast Zahra as the human amidst dehumanizing figures and forces, her laughter is possible only because of her profound isolation from the world.

Rabīʿ's aesthetic project in *ʿUṭārid* is complex and unsettling. He overwhelms with visceral and embodied horrors, often sexual, gory, and violent. At the same time, the allure of his language and the rhythmic clip of his narration draws us in and onward, accelerating the sense of impending doom yet granting no escape. As I have argued, these aesthetic elements have a critical function: they communicate political stakes through the senses and embodied affect. Parallel to this aesthetic overwhelm, Rabīʿ terrifies us with Zahra's story of retreating from the sensory world, from the human connections he casts as obscene. If most of *ʿUṭārid* is a work of aesthetic excess, Zahra's story is one of a critical loss. Her story of isolation and becoming less and less recognizably human is not a form of salvation in solitude. Rather, it is a parallel speculation. We ought to understand Zahra's loss of her facial features and sensory capacity within the intersecting contexts of aesthetics, embodied affect, and political critique that lie at the heart of *ʿUṭārid* and, indeed, *Left Behind*. In such a frame, Zahra's transformation is a self-

[78] Deleuze and Guattari, 190.

debilitating response to this onslaught of horrific excess. She is the exception that proves the rule. There is no hope of escape from Rabīʿ's earthly hell.

Connections and Conclusion

Zahra, with her deteriorating sensory capacity, serves Rabīʿ as a striking embodied locus of his political and aesthetic critique of neoliberalism in Egypt. In this sense, Zahra's character links Rabīʿ's project to those of Arwā Ṣāliḥ and Nādiya Kāmil, who address history and politics through affected and gendered language and critical methodologies. This link is markedly less overt than that between Rabīʿ and Sunʿallāh Ibrāhīm; nevertheless, it is an important counterpoint to *ʿUṭārid*'s overwhelming excesses of aestheticized violence, which I have placed in Ibrāhīm's lineage. One salient feature of this aesthetic and critical lineage running from Ibrāhīm to Rabīʿ (and encompassing much of Arabic literature from the second half of the twentieth century to the present) is the way in which the sexual-symbolic purchase of the female body – itself inherited from the literature of iltizām – is objectified and made to face violence. On the whole, *ʿUṭārid* is a prime example of this tendency. Yet Zahra is again exceptional because she is the rare female character who is neither sexualized nor made the victim of (sexual) violence. Her character amounts to a distancing from the dominant sexual-political symbolic approach to the female body and aligns this aspect of Rabīʿ's novel more squarely with the innovative critical approaches to gender, affect, language, and the body that I have traced in the writing of Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil. While I have been careful not to interpret Zahra as an escape from Rabīʿ's earthly hell, I would like to suggest that the critical potential of confronting neoliberalism in literature lies not with the violent aesthetic lineage of sexual-political

symbolism, which Rabīʿ has exhausted in extreme excess, but rather in the minor strand of critique inflected by gender and embodied affect, which is so moving in the character of Zahra.

Conclusion

This study has traced an aesthetic genealogy of Left literary critiques of neoliberalism in Egypt. I began with a discussion of the literary and intellectual history of iltizām, its aesthetic and symbolic profile, and its relationship to the Nasserist state (Chapter 1). This acted as the foundation for the core argument of *Left Behind*: first, that the literary Left has offered robust critiques of neoliberalism despite the history of political capitulations; second, that these involved critical deformations, intensifications, and refutations of iltizām's gendered aesthetics and sexual-political symbolic economy; and, lastly, that this genealogy shows how iltizām shifted from a hegemonic form of literary commitment to oppositional forms of literary critique. I have striven to show how iltizām haunts – aesthetically, symbolically, and interpretively – this trajectory of Neoliberal Egypt's literary Left just as Nasserism haunts its politics. The aesthetic links to iltizām and its critical deformations are clearest in the trajectory explored through the fiction of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (Chapter 2) and Muḥammad Rabīʿ (Chapter 5), which can be seen together as demonstrating how increasingly entrenched neoliberalism and authoritarian military rule have elicited intensified aesthetic, symbolic, and affective responses so that literature's critique resonates as such.

The critical trajectory I have traced through Arwā Ṣāliḥ (Chapter 3) and Nādiya Kāmil (Chapter 4) represents a more complex engagement with gender, genre, and the critical valences of language and form. I have made the case that Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil respond less directly to the aesthetic afterlives of iltizām and more squarely to the modes of interpretation and engagement with history and politics it fostered. These authors have rejected the symbolic purchase of the (female) body and shifted attention to the critical power of the individual's lived experience of political militancy and public engagement. By turning away from sexual-political symbolism,

Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil have redirected gendered and affective aspects found differently in the critical trajectory explored through Ibrāhīm and Rabīʿ. Instead of producing an affective or aesthetic overwhelm in their readers, Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil infuse gendered and affective elements into their language, narrative style, and analytical method to direct their historical and political critiques. Their interventions invite us to rethink political and literary inheritance, the contours of the nation and nationalism, and the epistemological underpinnings of history, politics, and literature – and the sense of genre they depend upon – in a manner that explicitly centers questions of gender and the lived experiences of women. For these reasons, I view Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil as examples of a relatively new frontier of literary critique with much promise to deliver innovative approaches to confronting neoliberalism in Egypt.

With *Left Behind* I have sought to propose new ways of approaching the legacies of iltizām; the relationship between literary aesthetics, politics, and gender; and the history of the Egyptian literary Left in the neoliberal era. It is every scholar's hope that his or her work creates intellectual space for further discussion, debate, and breakthrough. I am most hopeful that this is true with respect to my focus on gender – gendered affect, gendered language, and especially gendered critique. I have sought to highlight gender in the epistemological, historiographical, and literary interventions Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil (and, to a certain extent, Rabīʿ through the character of Zahra) make through their works, for I view these as profound interventions of great significance to the trajectories of literature and critique in Egypt. I hope that in a small but meaningful way this dissertation has highlighted the political stakes of these interventions and of literature writ large. With this aspiration, I have striven to situate *Left Behind* within the political history of neoliberalism and military rule, and Left opposition to these intertwined and defining features of the last fifty years of Egyptian public life.

When writing about literature and politics as I have in *Left Behind*, the boundary between the two – both in terms of understanding the literary texts themselves and my interpretive approach to them – has at times seemed fraught, as if this relationship between literature and politics were the essential issue in and of itself. Indeed, this question of the boundary between the literary and the political is not solely a theoretical issue of scholarship. It is urgent and inescapable given the ongoing and personal (often gendered) ways the contours of neoliberalism in Egypt – authoritarian military rule, economic inequality, and austere religious and moral conservatism – are made manifest in contemporary life and inflect public culture. Through the course of writing a dissertation rooted in concerns of aesthetics, critique, and gender, it has become clear to me that the literary cannot be thought apart from the political. With that said, I have sought to clarify that *Left Behind* tells the story – aesthetic, critical, and gendered – of a distinctly literary Left with a history and intellectual lineage intertwined with, yet distinct from, politics proper, i.e., political militancy and party politics. I have insisted upon the political stakes of literature while also delineating a decidedly literary analytical approach. This is a point of scholarly methodology and reflects my understanding of literature as a contemporary productive and creative field. By this I mean that literature intervenes in Egypt's past, present, and future and thereby opens a space – beyond the fraught and inhospitable terrain of politics under authoritarian rule – for critical thought, reflection, and hope.

Despite this hopeful horizon of critique I see in the literary field, I have framed the literature of *Left Behind* with a context of political defeat and failure. This is, to some extent, inevitable given the history and realities of Neoliberal Egypt. And yet the critical opening literature offers serves as a way beyond defeat. This is evident, for example, in the principled despair driving Arwā Ṣāliḥ's critical method coexisting with flickers of political hope. The traces

of hope in the works I have examined are few and far between: the desperate hope that comes from principled candor in Arwā Ṣāliḥ's *al-Mubtasarūn*, the hope of Nabīl's generation mourning and reimagining Marie's political commitments in Nādiya Kāmil's *al-Mawlūda*, and the character of Zahra offering respite from the excess and violence of Muḥammad Rabīʿ's aesthetic onslaught in *ʿUṭārid*. These traces of hope are inadequate to put it plainly, but they nevertheless overcome – however slightly – the impasse of the neoliberal present. These traces of hope are part and parcel of the gendered critical trajectory I traced to Ṣāliḥ and Kāmil and view as a promising frontier in terms of literary critiques of neoliberalism. It is impossible to foretell Egypt's future political chapters. Things will inevitably change. I view the sparks of hope in this gendered critical trajectory as an urgent path forward as Egyptian literature continues to grapple with neoliberal politics and culture. With the aesthetic and symbolic economy of iltizām critically deformed, taken to extremes, and exhausted, I expect the intersection of language, genre, and gender to serve as a site of critical innovation and produce novel modes of literary critique to confront the future of neoliberalism in Egypt.

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