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**From the Individual to the Collective in the Writings of
Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif**

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To the memory of my father, Ali Al Sahib Al Ghamdi, an exceptional man whom
I miss more and more every day.

To the memory of Radwa Ashour, a dedicated intellectual of authentic stance.

Abstract

The past forty years of Egypt's history have been characterized by political oppression, deterioration of social structure and waves of uprisings in what could be considered an era of competing visions of Egyptian self-governance. This situation has prompted a number of writers of *Jil el-thawra* (the generation of the revolution) of 1952 to advocate for a collective outlook to combat national uncertainty. A great number of the writers of this generation have also lived through the 2011 revolution. Amongst these writers are Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif, who in their works construct a counter-narrative of Egyptian political hegemony that this thesis will bring to bear on Ayman El-Desouky's explication of *amāra*. The pre-revolutionary fictional works examined in the thesis deploy a narrative practice akin to what Fredric Jameson terms 'national allegory'. In focusing on the individual's part in the nation in their fictional works, Ashour and Soueif bridge the gap between the individual and the collective in a form of life writing that has been termed the 'Tahrir memoir'. What Ashour and Soueif create are multi-layered literary narratives that actively fuse history, politics, and literature in investigating Egypt, Palestine, and the Arab world. Through experimentation with literary forms, their works claim a new public space by embracing the duty of voicing truth to power. This project examines eight primary texts from their fictional and non-fictional works that critique political authoritarianism and voice social concerns through exploration and expression of selfhood, historical representations, and collective memory, maintaining their generation's ethos of carrying a fundamental message of hope. The writers' endeavour to re-envision the history of their nation

argues for a public space in which they can, as female intellectuals, equally assert themselves as part of Egypt's community.

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Introduction

Egypt's past four decades may be regarded as an era of competing visions for Egyptian self-governance. Political oppression, social deterioration, and a constant wave of uprisings, have prompted a number of committed writers, in the sense put forward by Edward Said, to advance a feeling of a collective destiny as antidote to this national uncertainty. Amongst them are Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif who belong to the generation known as *Jil el-thawra* (the generation of the revolution). Through close readings of the key texts of this movement, this thesis investigates the practice of gaining agency as an intellectual to re-envision the condition of Egyptian and Arab politics under state surveillance, offering a counter-narrative to the political and social changes and ruptures. Ashour and Soueif's works are literary entities that scrutinize the dynamics of these changes, narrating social moments, historical scenes, and political repression, an undertaking triggered by these writers' sense of patriotism, egalitarianism, and national affiliation.

The following inquiry examines eight primary texts from the fictional and non-fictional output of these writers that narrate societies subject to political totalitarianism and contemporary social concerns through the individual, historical representations, collective memory, and realism, all the while echoing their generation's fundamental message of hope. It will further establish this analysis through utilizing historiographical and narratological frameworks that concern themselves with memory and literary form. This thesis argues that the locus of Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif's works is a textual endeavour to explore the truth

veiled by hegemonic and official versions of Arab and Egyptian politics moving from the individual to the collective both before and after the January 2011 revolution. This study will also explain the close ties between the writers' sociopolitical activism and their literary work.

This thesis examines Ashour and Soueif as two exemplary writers of their generation who, through their fictional and life writing, call for collective action. To substantiate this claim, it will highlight the literary methods and personal voice these writers utilize to portray Egypt's and the Arab world's sociopolitical shortcomings before and after the January revolution, demonstrating how this outlook relates to the concept of *al-iltizām al-adabi* (literary commitment). My motivation for attending to the works of Ashour and Soueif is that they negotiate the crucial move from writing resistance narratives to revolutionary narratives, where the individual trajectories traced are relevant to the trajectories of Egyptian women more widely. Despite writing in modernist and postmodernist eras, these writers have not strictly conformed to the Western models normally associated with such movements. Their narratives are certainly in dialogue with a Western understanding of postmodernism, but they do not entirely conform to its subject matter and stylistic paradigms. Postmodern texts of the West tend not to write narratives of the nation but rather are more preoccupied with the notion of the individual, produced by or at odds with late capitalism. Ashour and Soueif do not acquiesce to the concept of alienation from mass society found in most modernist and postmodernist texts.

The questions at stake in this study include how political visions are inflected with personal concerns and how fictional narratives are informed by investments in national destiny. What are the main concerns of these authors as they write variously as political commentators, social critics, and above all as female Egyptian citizens? Is there a specific trope that they see fundamental to their political critique against state and power? By what metric do they choose the literary form to portray these concerns? What are the ways they challenge the limitations of female authors to bring themselves upfront in the public sphere? And, most importantly, what effect has the 2011 January revolution had on their writings?

The reason for choosing Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif as this study's central focus is that they belong to a generation of writers who have witnessed the forceful, constantly fluctuating, and complex political, economic and social history from the mid-twentieth century until the early twenty-first century and are able to incisively articulate the significance of their times. As national scribes and cultural commentators, Ashour and Soueif are conscious about their country's political and social problems. These writers have viewed the Egypt of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak and have written works set against the backdrop of the key events in modern and contemporary Egypt. Even though the narratives explored in this thesis are confined to Egyptian literary practice, they have a wider regional relevance where other Arab writers experiment with and defamiliarize pre-existing literary genres. This study, however, narrows this down to a specific country, defined time frame, and two selected authors to look in greater detail at the personal as well as

textual record of these writers in an attempt to offer a detailed depiction of the momentous sociopolitical changes from which these works have emerged and to shed light on the homologies in between them. The primary texts in this thesis were written between 1992 and 2013. Hence, through placing the intellectual and its public sphere side by side, the thesis attempts to signal out the sociopolitical directions and cultural layers that have affected these intellectuals; which puts them in dialogue with their surroundings over the past two decades. As Jacquemond emphasizes, Egypt is the most fitting example to demonstrate the close relationship between ‘written material’ and power. This relationship shows how ‘[c]ity-states, empires, and nation-states have all had various forms of relationship with the written’ and how ‘these have in turn led to the fixing of languages, the constitution of bodies of sacred and/or profane writings, and formation of intellectual classes’ (5).

Since this study investigates selected literature that spans from the late twentieth century until the early twenty-first century, the main critical reflections of theoretical works scrutinized in this thesis are concerned with an analysis of the voicing of resilience as expressed through choice of literary form, collective memory, realism, and El-Desouky’s concept of *amāra*. These theoretical frameworks are essential in attempting to explain the ways in which Egyptian literature has challenged and adapted forms of narrative in an attempt to weave a collective national imaginative. This creates opportunities to address major national

struggles through both fictional and personal expressions.¹ In broad terms, the material this thesis will be considering serves to problematize the binary oppositions of the private and the public, the traditional and the emergent, the cosmopolitan and the national, the West and the East, and the local and the global. What is at stake in challenging these polarizations is a form of commitment to intellectual critique.

Ashour and Soueif's literary commitment may be made sense of in terms of Edward Said's description of role of the writers and intellectuals. According to Said, a certain type of tension has always controlled the civic role of the writer and intellectual in relation to the question of how far a writer can be signified as a political intellectual. In his essay 'The Public Role of the Writers and Intellectuals' (2002), Said maintains that the difficulty of this 'unresolved tension' resides in the fact that the public and politics are no longer separated by borders (20). Hence, the role of the intellectual is to help preserve the past from disappearance caused by the rapid changes through which the world is going, which is portrayed in many cultural and historical forms. Hence, it is the intellectual's role to 'present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity, who tend to work in terms of falsified unities' (37).

¹ For a wider scope on women writers in Egypt, see: miriam cooke. "Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World." *Cultural Critique* 45.1 (2000): 150–84.

Said's account of the role of the intellectual is mainly drawn from Antonio Gramsci's understanding of the intellectual. Gramsci firmly states that '[a]ll men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (9). For him, an intellectual represents a different social stratum than those who engage in the society's material reproduction. Said emphasizes in his book *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) that he confirms Gramsci's model of the traditional and organic intellectual but that he also intended to insist that

the intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business. The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. (11)

Said maintains that intellectuals must be in a position to 'question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking, and sense of class, racial, or gender privilege' (xiii). This will perpetuate an intellectual's quest for 'human freedom and knowledge' (21). Hence, a writer's vocation in this context demands a level of 'commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability' (13). For Said, this vocation calls for 'a state of constant alertness' as it is 'not always a matter of being a critic of government policy' (23). It also demands a

perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along. That this involves a steady realism, an almost athletic rational energy, and a complicated struggle to balance the problems of one's own selfhood against the demands of publishing and speaking out in the public sphere is what makes it an everlasting effort (23).

This echoes Pierre Bourdieu's argument that the intellectual is privileged by 'being placed in conditions that enable him to strive to understand his generic and specific conditions. In so doing, he can hope to free himself (in part at least) and to offer others the means of liberation' ('How Can', 44). Consequently, the effort Said refers to of balancing and witnessing a 'sorry state of affairs [involves] what Foucault once called "a relentless erudition"' (xviii). This involvement entails

sourcing alternative resources, exhuming buried documents, reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories. It involves a sense of the dramatic and of the insurgent, making a great deal of one's rare opportunities to speak, catching the audience's attention, being better at wit and debate than one's opponents. (xviii)

In this writers and intellectuals in the Arab context are very much aligned; they engagingly offer, in this respect, visions for a future society based on their awareness of what the society has been through. This differs from the Western concept of a writer and a public intellectual falling into different specialist categories. Bourdieu draws attention to the apparent differentiation between a writer and an intellectual in the realm of Western thinking. For him, intellectuals

are ‘a dominated fraction of the dominant class. They are dominant, in so far as they hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital [...] but writers and artists are dominated in their relations with those who hold political and economic power’ (‘Intellectual Field’, 145). In the Arab world, however, especially in Egypt, the two positions of an intellectual and a writer are closely linked, even interchange, and have become a system that relates the intellectual, the writer, the nation, the state, and the global world (Jacquemond, 225). This significance explains why Ashour and Soueif are considered in this thesis both as novelists and cultural commentators who work across a variety of genres through following the intellectual tradition of being a conscience of a nation.²

It is essential nonetheless to point out that women writers in Egypt have not attained such a public role straightforwardly. Scholars such as Hoda Elsadda and Caroline Seymour-Jorn have stressed that women writers of the mid-1990s have been given neither the proper acknowledgment nor a concerted effort to understand the particularities of their vision as female writers. Seymour-Jorn goes even further to assert that these writers are fully aware that they are not entirely recognized to be in a position of a writer or an intellectual. This awareness, according to Seymour-Jorn, results in women writers adopting a role broader than the one shaped by Western feminist aspirations and focusing instead on claiming the rights that should

² I borrow this phrase from Richard Jacquemond’s book *Conscience of the Nation*.

be afforded them as citizens. This is evidenced in most of their writings where its main purpose is to claim proper citizenship as a female. Seymour-Jorn explains

I found that the 1970s authors did not want to be characterized either as feminists or as ‘women writers.’ With the exception of Salwa Bakr, they did not speak about trying to generate a specifically ‘female language’ in their fiction, though they all acknowledge that the woman writer’s point of view is different from the perspective of her male counterpart. Osman suggested that women’s writing in Egypt is distinguished not by a different use of literary technique, [...] but by a different vision and attitude toward society and also by a more indirect way of describing experience [...]. For many of these writers, emphasizing the female orientation of their work risks dismissal by at least some important members of the literary establishment. (15)

It is important to highlight that Osman’s argument, cited in Seymour-Jorn’s book, does not take the experimental endeavour of women writers in their fictional and non-fictional works into consideration, a consideration that will be further examined in this thesis. However, this project cannot deal neatly with the primary texts chosen without referring back to the political background they have been written in, for the purpose of critique.

I. Historicizing Egyptian Politics

This section will examine Egypt’s political instability under Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Anwar al Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. During their rule, Egypt experienced

consecutive setbacks and political and socioeconomic fluctuations. The complexity of this political account lies in the discrepancy between the political rhetoric of state policy and the reality. The Arab Spring has significantly unsettled the Middle East and the 2011 January revolution has shaken the image of the most populous and historical country in the Middle East. However, this comes as no surprise in some senses: it is not the first time Egypt has drawn the world's gaze. The political order that has dominated Egypt has restricted the nation's sociopolitical progression through the biopower practiced by it both before January 2011 and thereafter. This has resulted in a case of consecutive incomplete and thwarted national uprisings that Egypt has gone through. Poorly implemented political policies have significantly affected the stability of the country. Nasser liberalized Egypt to a certain extent, implementing socialist policies while practicing rigid suppression of his political rivals. This was followed by Sadat's adoption of capitalism and Mubarak's authoritarian neoliberalism, all of which have failed to address the developmental challenges of the nation.

Soon after the 1952 coup, writings on Gamal Abd al-Nasser's era emerged through hagiographical accounts of the leader, glorifying his Pan-Arabism, his compassion towards Egypt and its citizens, and his courage and political capacity. Yet, his regime was more complicated than the great leader he was to become. Nasser's regime appears to have been afflicted with corruption and nepotism, resulting in economic setback and the rise of violent Islamic extremist attacks. Steven Cook argues that 'Nasser's great talent was not his military acumen – though his reflections on the Palestine war of 1948 suggest that he was competent at

soldiering – but rather a complicated mix of political agitation, conspiracy, opportunism, and leadership’ (41). From 1958, Egypt’s politics became bleak. The regime repressed the Left and dissolved political parties to expand its power. The detention of some members of the Muslim Brotherhood and members of the communist party left little to political freedom.

Nasser implemented a policy of carrying out a ‘revolution from above’ from the beginning of his rule. This facilitated the spread of Pan-Arabism and socialist views that lasted until the mid-1960s. Despite Nasser’s attempts to initiate major programmes to improve the position of the poor such as land reform and the nationalization of the country’s financial and industrial institutions, such reforms were not satisfactory as employment, free education and health benefits were held by the state (Radwan, 264). Noha Radwan further adds that

personal freedom, meaningful political participations, and expression of dissent were severely curtailed. The burden of Nasserism fell most heavily on intellectuals and those who had previously been, or aspired to become, politically engaged. These intellectuals were at a loss to understand the implications of Nasser’s policies, the societal changes these policies were bringing about, and the appropriate ways in which they should engage with or disengage from Nasserism. Writers, therefore, diverted their focus from material conditions to the internal and personal struggles of their protagonists, and modernist narrative structures were most appropriate to conveying this experience. (264)

This, however, came to a complete halt after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War (Baker, xii). The 1967 Israeli strike, according to Baker, was due to Nasser’s inadequately implemented socialist views. He argues that ‘Israel struck in June 1967 because Nasser’s Arab socialist revolution threatened to remove the most powerful Arab country from the political and economic dependency on the world capitalist system, headed by the United States. Israel, according to this view, served as an instrument of the Western global economic and political system. [...] Nasser failed to develop the country because his “revolution from above” was flawed in its party institutions and its socialist ideology’ (xvii). Israel, in this case, was terrified of Nasser’s potential success in developing a pro-Palestinian regional Arab nationalism, while the West strongly feared him succeeding in implementing a socialist regime. After his death in 1970, however, Anwar al-Sadat promised a political and economic ‘revitalization’, although by the end of the decade results were mixed (xii).

Anwar el-Sadat’s rule strayed from the supposedly ‘socialist’ regime that was initiated under Nasser in 1961. Sadat’s effort to shift towards a free market economy upset Leftist groups and many others (Cook, 120). In 1979, the Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty, signed in Washington in an effort to normalize the relation between both powers, made Egypt the first Arab country to give full recognition to Israel as a country. This was a major controversy on both local and international levels. Hafez reminds us of this saying that ‘since Sadat’s unilateral agreement with Israel in 1979 a widening gulf has grown between popular sentiment and the collusion of the political establishment with the worst US–Israeli atrocities in the region, and its *de facto* support for their successive wars: invasions of Lebanon,

Desert Storm, occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Egypt's marginalization as a regional power has only increased the younger generation's sense of despondency and humiliation' (48–9).

Following this occurrence, there was an observable backlash from the masses through popular culture and literature productions that ridiculed the regime's attempts to manipulate them through patriotic songs. Baker argues that since then the popular imagination has been replaced by a nationalistic revival, including pan-Arab songs filled with socialist messages from the Nasser era (85). Baker further explains, '[b]anned from radio and television stations, they blared all the louder from pirated cassette recordings. Forbidden Nasserist lyrics celebrating the building of factories and High Dam, the struggles for Palestine and for the "garden of socialism," were heard at weddings and private parties in the villages and poor neighborhoods of the cities' (85).

Even though Sadat implemented a multi-party system, rule of law, democratic thought and the rights of individual Egyptians were severely curtailed. Osman points out in this respect that '[t]he country's political system descended to frightening levels of coercion, oppression and cruelty. [...] This reflected the difficulty of Egyptians' daily lives, from the crumbling education system and decrepit health care, to humiliating transportation' (11). Sadat's attempts to relax his authoritarian grip collapsed, thus, Egyptians struggled to establish the collective life they have always aspired to live in. Noha Radwan stresses that Sadat

maintained the rhetoric of commitment to the lower classes while robbing them of any benefits Nasser's policies may have accorded them and liberating the Egyptian market to the benefit of the country's capitalist class. He kept up the nationalist fervour and the privileged position of the military while moving toward unilateral treaties with the American and Israeli government that de facto severely curtailed Egyptian military power, and he bragged about democracy while maintaining censorship of all media and keeping political participation to a minimum. (265)

The generation growing up through these events have witnessed a complex national development and have consequently decided to build the collective's awareness in order to better understand the forces behind the stagnation of their society. The essence of the collective memory is to be able to endure and persist through periods of repression through the power of joint experience (Baker, xii). This has placed Egyptians in a state of doubt and disappointment that their political hopes initiated the nationalist era have proved futile. Baker stresses that the bureaucracy system instigated by Nasser was also endorsed by Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. The state's monopoly on power has been maintained through manipulation in order to keep the same political castes in power. The international ties that Sadat established were found hard to shake off by succeeding leaders. Hosni Mubarak's presidency, which spanned twenty-nine years, was marked by what Mariz Tadros calls, an 'amoebic governance' (3). Tadros argues that Mubarak's rule was characterized by its shape-shifting. This refers to the strategies Mubarak used to rule Egypt. Tadros elaborates the dynamic thus: 'like an amoeba that alters its shape, extends and

retracts projections/spheres of control as it deems fit for its preservation and sustenance' (3–4). Tadros explains that her use of this exact term stresses that it acts as a contradistinction. The term hybridity here refers to the combination of methods utilized by a single regime. Amoebic governance, however, suggest 'a mode of rule in which the deployment of liberalization and repression can never be taken as a given' (Tadros, 4). Mubarak used repression in many unpredictable ways. He pursued a neoliberal economic agenda that enriched the elite whilst ignoring the demands of the people, slowly leading to disinterest and frustration amongst the citizens.

On 25 January 2011, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians assembled across the country to demand Mubarak step down. Eighteen days later, this revolution put an end to an authoritarian political order that had dominated the country for half a century. The collapse of the government, Osman argues, occurred with little difficulty due to the fear of failure that had driven the protestors to the streets. The failure of leadership was caused by unjust laws, authoritarianism, and declining economic and social conditions. Osman explains how '[n]ew generations of Egyptians had inherited failures that they had not contributed to, and yet had to endure their consequences in daily life. The society needed to liberate itself, not only from a tyrannical regime, but, more crucially, from a legacy of failure' (7–8).

II. Situating Ashour and Soueif in Contemporary Egypt

As Said stresses, 'one of the dilemmas facing a contemporary intellectual whose interest in what I have been calling the public sphere is not merely theoretical or

academic, but also involves direct participation' ('Reith Lectures', 2). Much attention will be paid to the personal trajectories of Ashour and Soueif in this thesis as their personal life and literary endeavours help to analyze the impulses behind the form of their literary expression. The span of the historical, political and social background in which these writers grew up in moulded and nurtured their political thought. Their social class and geographical background offer a better understanding of many of their views articulated in their works – whether it be their national consciousness or cosmopolitan aspirations. One of the complexities of the situation of women writers in Egypt is their class affiliation. Most of the women writers belong to a professional, educated, and privileged class. This juxtaposes with the inadequate educational system experienced by most of the country. Even though their challenges cannot be compared to the struggles faced by the illiterate and unprivileged, their middle-class nature makes these writers understand the struggle to keep their position in the face of the country's difficult economy (Seymour-Jorn, 13). Their struggle also resides in finding recognition as writers and intellectuals who belong to the upper middle class at the same time as they try to represent the voiceless female citizens.

Born in 1946, Radwa Ashour was a powerful figure who belonged to a family of 'intellectual bourgeoisie' status (Jacquemond, 244). As a novelist, a cultural commentator and a political activist, Ashour was an influential forward-looking author and some of her works foreshadow major political crises in Egypt. Her courage and integrity were reinforced when she married the Palestinian poet and writer, Mourid al-Barghouthi in 1970. The early stages of her writing career

were marked by short novels written after graduating with a degree in English literature. However, she started writing powerfully after gaining her master's degree and doctorate from the United States, publishing autobiographical narratives and a number of novels and short stories. She is said to be the 'spiritual heir of Latifa al-Zayyat' (Jacquemond, 244).³

Ahdaf Soueif was born in 1950 and is a renowned political and cultural commentator. Soueif was born into an upper-middle-class family and raised by academic parents who helped build her intellectual understanding of the world around her. She was educated in both England and Egypt. Gaining her doctorate from England, she then returned to Cairo only to realize that she wanted to return to Britain to be with her husband, the late Ian Hamilton, and raise their children there. Her regular columns in *The Guardian* demonstrate her strong political and cultural views on Egypt's foreign and internal policies, the Arab world, and literature. Her interest in the Palestinian question is perceivable in her literary expression and being an active member of many campaigns such as the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign. She was the Founding Chair of the Palestine Festival of Literature (Jacquemond, 285).

After the 1952 revolution, *Jil el-thawra* or the generation of the revolution, rapidly gained their political consciousness and national awareness. This generation has witnessed many pivotal political changes and setbacks. According to Hany

³ Latifa al-Zayyat (1923–1996) was an Egyptian writer and an activist, known for her famous work *The Open Door* (1960).

Hanafy, this generation observed the national independence dream of the overthrow of the royal dynasty since Mohammed Ali Pasha and decolonization following the British occupation. It is the generation that has survived the traumatic defeat of 1967, which reawakened ‘syndromes of neo-colonialism’ (25–6). Ahdaf Soueif and Radwa Ashour are Egyptian authors, activists, and cultural commentators who are fully aware of the fact that being a citizen from a third-world country constrains the writer to take a specific path in writing.

Historical ruptures in the Arab world are given strategic importance in Soueif and Ashour’s works. Making her remarks prior to the revolutionary outbreak, and because of literary censorship, Ashour asserts that the only way to go through political defeat in the Arab world and a half-century of ruptures, and attempt to write ‘pluralism-under-surveillance’ (Jacquemond, 17), is through fiction (‘Eyewitness, Scribe’, 88). These historical ruptures, such as the 1948 founding of the Israeli state, the Tripartite Aggression of 1956, the war of 1967, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 have been historically depicted in her writing. Soueif also masterfully experiments with utilizing her journalistic and literary skills in structuring her non-fictional works. She strongly believes that the fiction-making power in contexts of political distress should be kept aside. In the case of Egypt’s recent revolution, Soueif writes that the impact this political rupture has left on the creative power of Egyptian writers is nothing but a ‘tremendous flowering of the immediately responsive part of art’ (‘NS Interview’, no pgn). It is specifically the novel form that Soueif finds unsuited to political immediacy, claiming that its speculative and reflective language is less immediate. For Soueif,

fiction is a retrospective reflection; its aesthetic role supersedes its political ramifications. However, for Ashour fiction is indeed political and a way to imagine the future of Egypt.

Their writings are micro-political texts that critique the country's cultural malaise and political hegemony both metaphorically and non-metaphorically. Both writers believe that non-fiction is a suitable canvas to narrate the 2011 revolution and the counter-revolution as evidenced by *Heavier than Radwa* (2017), *al-Sarkha (The Scream)* (2015), and *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012). Their memoirs give factual accounts of the revolution with all its contesting powers laced with references to anxiety and merriment that accentuate the sense of communal solidarity against social corruption and political positioning. These narratives do not solely engage in the personal life of the memoir writer; rather, they give an account of the collective. Galvanized by their personal intuition, Soueif and Ashour offer a narrative that searches for what is beyond gender realms of liberation and calls for human freedom in a revolutionary narrative.

III. Previous Studies

There are several previous studies that focus on the writings of Ahdaf Soueif; however, there has been little previous examination of Radwa Ashour's works. Nonetheless, studies are growing at a rapid rate right after the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Some studies focus on cross-cultural and feminist aspects of works written before the January revolution, such as Elsayed Abdullah Muhammad Ahmed's *East Meets West: Gender and Culture Difference in the Works of Ahdaf Soueif and*

Monica Ali (2010), Chia-Ling She's *Breaking the Silence: Nationalism and Feminism in Contemporary Egyptian Women's Writing* (2012), and Yasmine Gad's *I Take Back My Body: Mapping the Female Body in Postcolonial Literature* (2014). These PhD theses focus on the encounters between East and West, liberation strategies from the feminist works starting from the 1920s.

Other PhD theses have examined a selection of Ahdaf Soueif's literary works in the context of their multiculturalism and Western perception, such as Yousef Moh'd Ibrahim Awad's *Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers* (2011), Hannah Charlotte Kershaw's *History, Memory, and Multiculturalism: Representations of Muslims in Contemporary British Fiction* (2017), Miram AbuDaqqa's *Representations of Arab Women Writers and their Texts in the West* (2015), Gouider T. Ben's *Rethinking Community in Dionne Brand's 'What we all Long for', Ahdaf Soueif's 'The Map of Love', Michael Ondaatje's 'Anil's Ghost' and Joseph Boyden's 'Three Day Road' and 'Through Black Spruce'* (2010). Maggie Awadalla's thesis can be seen as a preceding frame for the present study that examines the works of two prominent Egyptian authors: Latifa al-Zayyat and Ahdaf Soueif, from the 1970s until the beginning of the twentieth-first century. *National Discourse and Egyptian Women's Writing: Generational Difference in the Works of Latifa Zayyat and Ahdaf Soueif* examines the participation of Egyptian women writers in the corporality of the national discourse as a struggle of claiming a position in the Egyptian public realm.

This thesis's original contribution to this body of work lies in the manner in which the works of these authors are treated. A number of Ashour's works have not been translated into English, hence this dissertation offers a direct access to them in relation to her translated endeavours. The process of translation offered in this thesis to a number of Ashour's works is an important contribution to the postcolonial field of study in general and the canon of Arabic literature. Moreover, this thesis is the first work that extensively analyses their work alongside each other within a framework that justifies the juxtaposition of the two writers' main bodies of work in a single project. The originality of this work exists in its effort to trace their pre- and post-revolutionary works and investigate literary format, subject matter, and themes in relation to and affected by fluctuating political change. Most of the previous works shy away from a strict political reading of the texts owing to their fluidity and variability. By covering a combination of two genres, fiction and life writing, it is possible to assess their relative contributions to resistance literature. The thesis thus explores the extent to which life writing and fiction offer different means of engaging with national vicissitudes and are thus aligned with notions of how the personal is political and the political personal, as will be explained below through investigating both forms of writing. What also distinguishes this thesis from works written on Ashour or Soueif is its comparative methodology, comparing their fiction to their non-fiction and tracing the way their writing is developed and shaped by its temporality.

IV. Multiple Prospects of Selfhood

In undertaking the examination outlined above, the thesis will rely on a number of theoretical and conceptual frameworks that engage with the aesthetic structure of fictional and non-fictional narratives in order to examine the way content influences form and vice versa. The thesis will utilize Maurice Halbwach's conceptual work on collective memory, Fredric Jameson's notion of national allegory, and Aymen El-Desouky's concept of *amāra* in examining Ashour and Soueif's writing. It engages with further theories that enable us to investigate the aesthetics of the literary genres within which Ashour and Soueif write, explicating their relation to the sociopolitical status of Egypt by contextualizing resistance and revolutionary literature, historical fiction, social realism in the Arabic novel, as well as investigating journalism and creative non-fiction. A number of these sources provide a materialist account of the particularities of Egyptian politics and society, constructing a historiographical narrative that will be central to the textual analysis contained herein. Two chapters pay attention to some of the main works of life writing by the authors. With two exceptions, these examples of life writing are post-revolutionary texts which are defamiliarized to fit the immediacy of events under the revolutionary effort. In their life writing, the political consciousness of Ashour and Soueif transcends their personal voice. These texts do not solely narrate the personal lives of the authors as much as they narrate the collective sociopolitical undertaking of the nation.

Though the authors in some cases focalize the narrative through the personal self, they quickly shift to narrating and documenting the consciousness of the

collective, amalgamating personal events with historical ones that concern the whole country. Hence, in chapters one and three, I argue that this life writing engages in experimental defamiliarization in order to narrate the collective's revolutionary outburst through a genre typically confined to personal and private reflections.⁴ Female life writing in the Egyptian context reflects the connection between women's political emancipation and their role in nation building. It is noticeable, nonetheless, that the fear of the unknown and defeat are apparent in their writings, specifically in the context of personal illness as in *Heavier than Radwa* (2013) and the constantly changing nature of revolution in *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012). However, faith and hope overrule the uncertainty and serve to effect a collective reconciliation in these chaotic political scenes.

Even though its roots go back to medieval Arabic chronicles, Arab life writing, in its many forms and shapes, truly began to flourish in the second half of the twentieth century. This has resulted in new understandings of subjectivity, political activity, and role of the writer as a scribe responding to state hegemony, as well as to social setbacks (Abdel Nasser, 1–2). Tahia Abdel Nasser asserts in her book *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles* (2017) that the 'rise of Arabic autobiography dovetailed the private and the public, the individual and the national' (2). In this respect, Arabic autobiography does not easily reconcile with conventional Western accounts of the genre. Latifa Al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* (1960), for instance, portrays the apparent tension between the personal and the

⁴ For more on revolutionary life writing in the Tunisian context, see: Douja Mamelouk, "New National Discourses: Tunisian Women Write the Revolution." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 35 (2015): 100–122.

political; this is done on both personal and literary level in placing her private story as part of a much wider narrative. As she has remarked in interview: '[t]o reach maturity, to reach reconciliation with the self, you have to unite both what is private and what is public' (cited in Bennett, 291).

The significance of autobiographical writing in the Arab world rests upon its role as a medium of national and international mirroring. 'Autobiography', Abdel Nasser argues, 'enabled Arab writers to further explore the writer's role in national culture in the twentieth-century contexts of colonialism, dispossession, and postcolonialism and to depart from the forms prevailing in Western and premodern Arabic literature. The rise of autobiography is connected to modernity, national movements, and independence and its contemporary reworking show these complex intertwining in a new light' (4). What is also significant for this enterprise is the language Arab writers use for their autobiographical writings. Soueif's English-language memoir, for example, permits the dissemination of the text to a wider audience.

It is interesting to notice that when these writers intended to narrate sudden political ruptures such as the January Revolution, they both choose the form of life writing. Life writing signifies the value of the autobiographer or memoir writer as a national scribe in relation to their community, lessening the fundamentality of individualism and the scrutiny on the personal self within the form. As Sussane Enderwitz argues in her essay 'The Public Role and Private Self', the real reason behind the absence of Arabic autobiographies that closely delve into the self of the

autobiographer is that the 'culture strictly separates the outer from the inner and the public from the private sphere' (77). In her article 'Negotiating the Space between Private and Public', Dinah Manisty argues that the female autobiographers in Egypt have been challenging the genre of life writing in the process of searching for a medium to portray their specific concerns (273). Conventional autobiography is a 'sign of its falseness and alienation' (273). She further adds that '[a] woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined by the dominant male culture. In the process of forming an identity she is always looking at herself through the eyes of others. This alienation from her cultural representation is what motivates the writing' (273). These writers have used life writing not because they are concerned with the nature of the self, but rather because they are driven by the desire to strip literary concealment and portray social and political realities.

The concept of nationalism examined in this thesis differs from its Western theorization. Nationalism in the context of this thesis takes the form of the desire that regulates Ashour and Soueif's writings and their personal struggle as intellectuals and scribes. Nationalism's definition has always been conceived in tandem with an imperialist ideology that 'imposes uniformity on geographical areas that may be infinitely extended' (Accad, 15). In the Arab context, nevertheless, the concept of the nation is a 'construct whose function is to legitimize a certain pattern of the social distribution of values, that is, that nations are the products of states and states are the products of the economy' (Al-Barghouthi, 33–4). Peter Wien also defines nationalism in the Arab world as a concept that 'is not presented as a

political agenda of unification and cooperation [...], but rather with a focus on roots, the establishment, and the evolution of imaginative, symbolic, or “lived” ties between people(s) who claimed to belong to an Arab national community’ (3). Hence, this thesis utilizes a conceptualization of nationalism which relates to the Arabic word *Umma*. The common meaning of the term as defined in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, refers to the ‘collective body of those who adhere to the Islamic faith and thus belong to the Islamic community of believers’ (217). However, within the revolutionary Egyptian context, the emphasis on the other meanings of the term relates to the concept of nation and nation-building through forms of solidarity. In deconstructing the concept of nationalism in the Arab world, Tamim Al-Bargouthi makes a clear distinction between *Umma* (the Nation), and *Dawla* (nation-state) in order to attempt an account of nationalism as a doctrine in the context of Arab world for the purpose of nation building. According to him, ‘[w]hile the nation-state is the end and full expression of the nation, the Umma is the end and purpose of the Dawla. While a state can make a nation, a Dawla, by definition, cannot make an Umma. [...] Rather, a group of people are to be called an Umma if they demanded each government ruling over any portion of them to be accountable to the whole group, not only to that portion of the group under its jurisdiction’ (Al-Barghouthi, 64). As seen on Tahrir Square, nationalism has been revived after a long period in remission; it was one of the crucial elements that empowered disparate factions to embrace a common cause.

In *Sexuality and Sexual Politics*, Evelyne Accad explains her use of the term nationalism as follows: ‘[n]ationalism is a difficult notion about which much is

written, much of it conflicting. In both east and West, in old and new concepts of the term, nationalism is a complex component of revolutionary discourse. It can be deployed in all the various facets of political power' (13). Thus, nationalism in this context refers to the concept of the collective identification of a group as a nation connected through common consciousness. It is pertinent to establish the distinction between the term as used in this thesis and that of national sovereignty. Benedict Anderson's view on the nation goes beyond a governmental system sovereignly constrained by geographical borders (54). It is the defined bonds of solidarity and common ideas that defines the form of a nation. Hence, the term here focuses on the exploration of identity in this broader sense, which defends itself against state oppression, rather than the mere association with a nationalist political party or leaning.

V. Fictional Paradigms

The remaining two chapters in this thesis embark upon a close reading of the fictional writings of Ashour and Soueif. These fictional works narrate collective political and social concerns through historical recollections, testimony, and autobiography. Through collective memory, realism, and retrospective historical archetypes, these writers establish a political and social account that communicates the viewpoint of the Egyptian people. My argument is that the autobiographical dimensions drawn on in the novels are not truly an investigation of the self; rather they are the manifestation of a desire to locate the individual *within* the collective. Life writing therefore bridges the divide between the personal and public whilst fictional works concentrate on all individuals as part of the nation. This section

attempts to examine the changes of fictional narrative tropes of the 1960s generation onwards.

In the Arab context in general, and the Egyptian in particular, there is a direct homological connection in the changes of the cultural, the sociopolitical, and the textual. The Egyptian novel has gone through changes that strongly parallel the sociopolitical shifts in the country. Hence, Hafez argues that even though these changes are arbitrary, their interaction is dynamic and ‘overlapping’ (93). From the second period of the twentieth century, known as the 1960s generation, or as Radwan refers to it, the ‘post-Mahfouz’ era, is distinctive to its preceding era in their use of content, form, and trope. Their vision, according to Hafez, has changed from a ‘rural/tribal’ one into a more ‘urban and quasi-modernistic’ (94). Hafez further explains that on the political and national level, ‘the achievement of independence ended the old national consensus and brought to the fore other social and national issues. The old sense of purpose and unitary aim was replaced by sociopolitical pluralism in which many projects contended for legitimacy’ (95). Hence, this sociopolitical and cultural pluralism has matched the experimentation in ‘structural pluralism’ (105).

What characterizes this generation is their shift away from social realism that implements narratological techniques derived from European modernism (Radwan, ‘One Hundred’, 263). Writers of this generation have started to be more experimental with narrating sociopolitical concerns (Kendall, 192). Radwan argues that this turn away from social realism is due to the ‘success and failure’ of the 1952

revolution and the ‘rise of “Nasserism”’ as well as the tendency of ‘lending the novel an air of indigeneity, engagement with premodern historical texts was also a means of underscoring the historical process in which the present was only a part, as well as avoiding censorship and persecution that every author faced at the time’ (‘One Hundred’, 264).

Despite the initiation of the aesthetic revolution by the generation of the 1960s which led to eschewal of ‘mimetic realism’ and its narrative conventions, ‘it did not break with the idea that legitimate literature is that which retains an important connection to reality, as well as to the social and the collective spheres’ (Jacquemond, 93) which has been implemented by the generation of 1970s. Some writers from the generation of 1970s onwards, however, had no choice but to retreat into figurative and allegorical language to voice their critique of the Egyptian political establishment. This began when Sadat applied his *munakh tarid* policy. Hafez says,

In Egypt, the general conditions of post-modernity – the shift from the verbal to the visual, the predominance of commercialized mass media – have been compounded by state censorship, on the one hand, and a glossy, well-funded Wahhabism, on the other. Sadat paid lip-service to freedom of expression while orchestrating what is known in Arabic literature as *manakh tarid*, an atmosphere unpropitious to independent cultural praxis which succeeded in pushing many dissenting intellectuals out of the

country; subsequent governments have maintained the same traditions.

(‘The New Egyptian’, 60)

Realist depictions of individuals and groups are symbolically extended to reflect the state of the nation. ‘These writers’ Hafez stresses, ‘brought with them a range of discourses unknown in the previous period, and more importantly, their desire to articulate areas of marginalized experience necessitated a dialogue with the rich oral tradition of their sub-cultures’ (‘The Transformation’, 99). This generation do not only adhere to the sort of social realism theorized by Lukács; they also deploy allegorical modes and trans-generic experimentation. Radwan stresses that this period has been marked by a ‘rapid and rabid liberalization’ in the economic structure of Egypt. Hence, modernist and postmodernist forms of narratives have gained favour with novelists. Radwan explains that the

new unconventional narrative structures emerged along with the felt need to represent the unreality of the real, the absurdity of the sociopolitical contradictions, which left most Egyptians not only dejected but also confused. It is, however, my contention that the fiction of the Sadat-Mubarak era demonstrates a return of realism that observes Georg Lukács’s principle: the essential quality of realist narratives, what separates them from ‘naturalism,’ rests neither on the events of the narrative nor on its techniques [...]. The novels in question deploy modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques in an effort to represent

both the specificity of their events and the position within a pattern and a larger historical process that these events occupy. ('One Hundred', 265–6)

The development and influences of capitalism in Egypt had become evident by the 1980s, paralleled by regime repression and corruption (266). Writing of the 1990s brought new innovations, such as fragmentation and circular narratives with 'shifting styles, perspectives, and voices' (268). This required 'the novel to abandon linear time and conventional plots in favour of a self-reflexivity that questions its classification as a novel. These novels may include letters, newspaper excerpts, diaries, lists of various kinds' (268).

The concept of resistance is consistently evident in fictional work between the 1950s and 1980s. This concept is not restrained by gender, but rather resides in a deeper understanding of literary form (Manisty, 273). Through the Bildungsroman, realism, and collective memory, Ashour and Soueif portray their female characters attempting to embark upon a journey of knowledge, recovery, and awareness of the world around them. This is achieved by localizing the female protagonists under certain sociopolitical positions to discover certain meanings and patterns implemented in state manipulations and social corruption. Radwan stresses that writers' engagement at this moment with 'premodern historical texts [... is] a means of underscoring the historical process in which the present was only a part, as well as avoiding censorship and persecution that very author faced at that time' (264). Hence, it is evident that Ashour and Soueif's modern historical narration of the trajectory of Egypt resonates with the Lukácsian concept of historical

representations. Lukács argues that '[w]ithout a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible. But this relationship, in the case of really great historical art, does not consist in alluding to contemporary events, [...] but in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical, social and human forces which in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it' (*The Historical*, 53). By this measure, Ashour and Soueif's texts may be considered realist literature, hinging 'on a concept of reality which privileges the changing, the uncertain and the fragmented over the stable, the controllable and the unified' (Booth, *My Grandmother*, 14). Booth further illustrates that this type of socialist realism is

linked also to an understanding of the complex historical and class dimension of individual identities – both women's and men's; to a refusal to see women's control over their own lives as dependent on men's good will; and to a rejection of the notion of essentialist definitions of 'male' and 'female.' [...] While oppressive and marginalizing social relations are at the center of works by certain men writers of the same 'generation,' it is in these women's writings that the combined effects of class and gender in marginalizing large numbers of Egyptians become central. (9–14)

Ashour and Soueif have witnessed a triple crisis of the modern nation: political, cultural, and socio-economic. Sadat's 'open door' policy, the doubling of Egypt's population, the major increase in social spending, and the rise of illiteracy have been major issues caused by the political establishment's corruption (Hafez,

48). Writing under these ruinous social conditions has triggered these writers to offer a sharp critique of political failure, departing from pre-existing conventions of fiction that focused solely on social struggles. The fragmentation and the disruption of the linear order shows a reflective side to their narrative: their words are no more cohesive than the realities surrounding them. It is worth noting here that the fragmentation in Ashour and Soueif's novels reflects the frustrations caused by the unfulfilled hope of the Egyptian people for a better future. Fragmentation, nostalgia, collective memory, and cross-culturalism form the basis of the thematic structure of Ashour and Soueif's fiction revisiting history in a way that agrees with Walter Benjamin's suggestion that 'to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it was" [...]. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (255-256).

What follows is a detailed synopsis of each chapter of the thesis. The examples of life writing chosen in this thesis tend to focus on moments of crisis, providing factual accounts, while the fiction tends to reach both metaphorically and non-metaphorically for a broader historical canvas in order to imagine the trajectory of the nation from the past into the future. In spite of these differences, both genres experiment with the trans-generic and both are concerned with addressing the nation in terms of the experience of the collective.

Chapter One will provide an analysis of two of Radwa Ashour's pieces life writing, *Heavier than Radwa* (2013) and *Spectres* (2010). These texts are autobiographical and semi-autobiographical, narrating national concerns through

the self both explicitly and implicitly. Major political upheavals are depicted in works, including the Deir Yassin Massacre and the 25 January Egyptian revolution. In the chapter, I argue that in Egyptian life writing the personal and the public intertwine to become one canonical form. As a memoir writer, Ashour gives an account of the collective rather than strictly confirming to the typical rules of autobiography. One of the main theoretical frameworks employed in this chapter is Ayman El-Desouky's concept of *amāra*. In offering a detailed view on the role of the intellectual, El-Desouky explains that the concept is achieved by speaking truth to power. In this respect, this act is a 'counter-hegemony' in which El-Desouky tries to go beyond Said's understanding of speaking truth to power to extend its concern beyond intellectuals addressing leaders, speaking instead with people as one of them. *Amāra* then is a 'collective expressive force that is at once an aesthetic of resonance and an ethic of solidarity, offering visions of social cohesion that do not readily translate into the modes of knowledge production discourses of power and their conceptual languages nor into the sociological languages of effectuation of structures of domination or the political theories of populism' (12). This chapter will then embark on a theoretical analysis of the autobiographical genre vis-à-vis its post-colonial and Arabic commonalities and how the Western characteristics of the form have been altered to fit the role of the intellectual under different sociopolitical conditions. This chapter examines Bart Moore-Gilbert's account of postcolonial life writing in relation to Philippe Lejune's Western notion of the genre.

In *Spectres* Ashour defamiliarizes the fictional genre by amalgamating autobiographical sections within it. *Spectres* in this case more specifically falls under what has been termed autofiction, entailing the fictionalization of the self. Ashour writes this text without the ‘concern of what [she] perceive[s] it to be, but rather as [she] fantasize[s] it’ (Boyle, 18).⁵ This text narrates state oppression, corruption in Egyptian academia, subjugation of communists, and the Deir Yassin massacre. In *Heavier than Radwa*, Ashour writes a ‘Tahrir memoir’ that narrates the January 2011 revolution and takes a retrospective look at Egypt’s previous revolutions, drawing comparison between her own physical illness and the political setbacks.

Chapter Two will examine three fictional texts by Ashour: *Siraaj: An Arab Tale* (1992) translated version published in (2007), *The Woman from Tantoura* (2010) translated version published in (2014) and *Faraj* (2008) translated version published as *Blue Lorries* in (2014). These novels are micro-political texts that examine national despair masked in an ambivalent optimism. As these are pre-revolutionary texts, Ashour utilizes figurative literary strategies to convey a realist social testimony. This allegorical and figurative layer is one of the techniques that she employs to provide a sociopolitical critique whilst under state surveillance. Through these texts she offers a fictionalized historical record that critiques political shortcomings and attempts to convey the traumatic loss of the Egyptian

⁵ For more on the dual function of autobiographical novels, see Yunna al-Id, “The Autobiographical Novel and the Dual Function: A Study of Hanna Mina’s Trilogy.” *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*. Ed. Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild. Saqi Books, 1998.

and Arabic cultural heritage. This chapter mainly focuses on these three novels because of its relevance to the concerns of this thesis in terms of Jameson's national allegory along with the concept of collective memory. Other works such as *Granada Trilogy* (1994-1995), translated and published in (2003), is more fitting to be analysed in isolation due to its volume. Even though it falls under the conceptual structure of the chapter, yet it focuses more generally on the Arab world rather than Egypt. The theoretical framework of this chapter is Maurice Halbwach's concept of collective memory and Frederic Jameson's concept of national allegory, and will historicize modernist and postmodernist literary productions, offering a conceptual understanding of the thin line between history and fiction. Halbwach's theory of collective memory suits remarkably well Ashour's understanding of collectivity in her fiction. Collective memory, he argues, 'encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them. It evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousness' (51). This chapter will offer a conceptualization of Arab modernism and postmodernism and its mode of literary production. It partially describes fictional works of postmodernism that have been distinguished by their form and content experimentation. It then gives a brief account of the reasons behind the historical impulse evident in Ashour's writings. It will explain how Ashour's historical portrayal strives for a national truth that combats the melancholy of the postmodern era and, as Ouyang argues, that offers traces of the formation of intersections between the past and present (v-vi).

The three novels in this chapter highlight Ashour's concerns with political tyranny, the Palestinian question, and political activism. *Siraaj* is a novella that narrates a slave revolt against a tyrannical power on an imaginary island. The novel mobilizes an array of cultural and political interpretations and references. Ashour accesses collective memory by constructing imaginary worlds that reanimate actual revolutionary moments and foreshadow upcoming ones.

The second novel this chapter will discuss is *The Woman from Tantoura*. This novel shows Ashour's passionate interest in the Palestinian question. Ashour narrates the fall of Tantoura village at the hands of the Israelis in 1948 through the collective testimony of its characters. This siege and resistance cause a major massacre called the Deir Yassin massacre. Ashour constructs the character Ruqayya to serve as a cipher of the lives of the many Palestinian refugees and what they actually face in the midst of fear and traumatic loss of family, home, stability, country, and more importantly, fall of a nation. The final novel examined in the chapter, *Blue Lorries*, revolves around the protagonist, Nada, who grows up in the midst of strikes, protest, and sociopolitical activism that she begins to show a strong interest in. *Blue Lorries* explores activism through three different generations – the father's generation, Nada's generation, and her younger twin half-brothers' generation.

Chapter Three marks the beginning of the second section of the thesis where works by Ahdaf Soueif are examined in more detail. This chapter offers a detailed analysis of two non-fictional works by Soueif – *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the*

Common Ground (2004) and *Cairo: My City Our Revolution* (2013). These texts belong to the form that Roorbach terms ‘creative non-fiction’ or ‘crossed genre’, a genre that deploys factual prose that is still informed by the literary. In these works, Soueif challenges the conventional literary protocols of reporting and narration in presenting her political practices in relation to the system of sociopolitical ideas followed by the Arab and Egyptian citizens. By utilizing collective memory for expressing textual collectivity in her non-fictional writings, Soueif depicts the strength of the people of Egypt and their history of civic resistance against government injustice since the 25 January revolt. In this chapter, I argue that by paying attention to the literary journalistic writing, Soueif acts as a national scribe through a deindividualizing form of description, representing the Egyptian nation through situations that exemplify a politics of resistance and collectivity.

As a renowned journalist, Soueif mixes techniques of journalistic reporting and literary narration. Hence, this chapter will present a theoretical framework that deals with the function of creative non-fiction in relation to its political context. It will examine the ideas of Bill Roorbach, Caroline Forché and Philip Gerard in this respect. This type of non-fiction has granted both female and male Arab writers new avenues for representing selfhood. While it may well rely upon personal experience, it also has other functions that are pedagogical, ethical and political. The chapter will also offer a brief history of Egyptian journalism and examine how it emphasizes the relationship between the social and cultural field and political power, exemplifying their inseparability and reliance upon each other. It will then investigate how Egyptian journalism has moved from an objective to a subjective

stance and from individual to collective concerns as seen as Soueif's Tahrir memoir *Cairo* and in *Mezzaterra*.

Both texts share sociopolitical concerns, even though they are written in different styles and under various political setbacks. As a collection of essays, *Mezzaterra* raises different social, cultural, and political concerns. It reflects on an Egyptian cosmopolitan past and aspires for a similarly cosmopolitan future, something Soueif refers to as the 'common ground'. She also narrates, through one of her essays, her courageous visit to the Palestinian territories. *Cairo: My City Our Revolution* is an eye witness account of the eighteen days of the January revolution. In the book, Soueif communicates the struggles of both witnessing and writing the revolution, although it is also suffused with hope and positivity. Soueif's *Cairo* is a fitting example of how life writing as a mode of personal narrative can at once take on the significance of the larger national collective imaginary. It is interesting to observe that Soueif occasionally juxtaposes national observances with cosmopolitanism. She claims simultaneous belongings while resisting globalization.

Finally, Chapter Four will offer a close examination of one of Soueif's well-known fictional works, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), from a contemporary perspective. This chapter will shed light on the novel, examining it from a political viewpoint. In doing so it will draw connections between the novel and contemporary Egypt in order to demonstrate Soueif's interest in nation building through presenting a 'total vision', narrating political concerns for future building

and public awareness. This chapter will also highlight how Soueif uses factual reporting to showcase the political settings of the story. She shows her ability as a novelist to use fiction to question most of what she herself, and the nation, previously alleged. In most of her works, Soueif transcends the geographical realms of the Middle East and sees the Western political agenda, as also addressed in *Mezzaterra*, resonating with her cosmopolitan objectives. This chapter mainly focuses on *In the Eye of the Sun* because of its relevance to the concerns of this thesis. *The Map of Love* (1999) is a historical novel; although it shows the state of the nations in a retrospective manner, taking the reader back down the generations, it is less relevant to the concerns of the collective in its focus on imperialism as its main subject matter.

This chapter focuses on four main theoretical frameworks to contextualize the argument. This section will illustrate the dynamics and functions of historical fiction and the return to realism, as well as tracing the Arabic Bildungsroman and its importance in relation to both the key concerns of this thesis and indeed a general understanding of Soueif's work. Soueif's historical representation raises questions of how much fact there is contained in fiction. Choosing the Bildungsroman as a narrative form, Soueif traces the life of the main female protagonist and places her, in most cases, in specific geographical locations and different landscapes to utilize her, and other secondary characters, as agents of socio-political representations. This section will offer a detailed account of the literary concept of realism in both Western and Egyptian contexts. Realism in Egyptian literature goes further than a

mere depiction of ‘truth’; it emphasizes a collective reality integrating the personal with the public and the personal with the political.

In the Eye of the Sun is a Bildungsroman that narrates the life of Asya. Soueif traces Asya’s character development in many regards. This chapter, however, will focus on Asya’s political development through the complex history of Egypt’s political world, starting in the 1960s and continuing until the 1980s. The novel addresses a plethora of issues in Egyptian society, acting as a political chronicle of modern Egypt and unearthing forgotten history by revisiting speeches by Nasser and Sadat. In a reportage style, Soueif showcases Egyptian politics in tandem with the central character’s everyday social life; only occasionally is the reader exposed to the characters’ points of view. Thus, the novel may be considered as what I could call a holistic novel rather than a political one, as it calibrates the social and political realities at the same time. This chapter will examine the dominant theme in the novel, namely the cross-cultural dialogue that demonstrates a deeper desire to establish the cosmopolitan surroundings of a ‘common ground’. Through using Egyptian popular culture, this is coherently manifested in the body of work. This chapter will also revisit some of the themes in *The Map of Love*, in accordance with the close reading of *In the Eye of the Sun* in order to clarify its argument.

My readings of the works of Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif aim to show how their explorations of the relationships between the individual and the collective constitute a sustained commitment to envisioning forms of national belonging and

social justice. Ashour and Soueif's works have portrayed political setbacks as they unfold and revisits others in the past retrospectively through focusing on the collective and on the individual as part of Egypt's community.

Chapter One

Writing the Nation Through the Self in Ashour's Life Writing

All that is but part of my everyday consciousness. To tell my story was to include that composite experience which constantly incorporated the old in the new.

-Radwa Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe"

Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis will offer an analysis of two pieces of life writing by Radwa Ashour: *Heavier than Radwa (Athqal min Radwa)* (2013) and *Spectres (Atyaf)* (2010). Generally speaking, these works fall under the genre of autobiography or semi-autobiography. They are implicit and explicit autobiographies that narrate the self as well as the nation – Egypt in particular, or the Arab world in general. In both texts, Ashour narrates various political and social upheavals such as the Deir Yassin Massacre in *Spectres* and the outbreak of the Egyptian 25 January revolution in *Heavier than Radwa*, by which measure we may consider it part of a corpus of Tahrir memoirs. This chapter argues that in Arab life writing from the late twentieth century until the present day, the personal and the public intertwine and become one. Both texts do not solely engage with the personal life of the memoir writer, rather giving an account of the collective.

The theoretical structure of this chapter establishes a national, cultural and political viewpoint on the aforementioned texts. By examining the approaches

Ashour utilizes for narrating the nation and the state through the self, this chapter will focus on Ayman El-Desouky's concept of *Amāra*. In his book *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution*, El-Desouky examines the concept in relation to speaking truth to power. The book argues for a conceptual language that is localized and cultural nuanced that will reconceive the radical political changes in Egypt. In relation to this, El-Desouky investigates the position of the intellectual in speaking truth to the state's biopower, focusing on the relationship between the intellectual and the people in speaking truth for and to them. This chapter will take up these concerns in order to explain the concept of committed intellectual.

The remaining theoretical frame of reference for this argument is a body of critical theories elucidating the problematic genre of autobiography in the context of postcolonial life writing as well as anthumously and posthumously published works in order to aid analysis of Ashour's life writing. This chapter will apply a theoretical understanding of the autobiographical genre in relation to the post-colonial and Arabic commonalities and how Western characteristics of the form have been altered to fit the role of the intellectual in a certain sociopolitical situation. Moreover, it will historicize Egyptian women's textual nationalism and how the period of rule by Nasser and Sadat affected the writings of Egyptian women in the process of nation building. It will further analyse Ashour's attempt to historicize in order to not reaffirm Egyptian and Arab heritage.

Written before the January revolution, Ashour problematizes the traditional form of autobiography in *Spectres*. Joining personal memoir and fiction in this work establishes the text as an *autofiction*, a form of writing which mainly deals with the concept of fictionalizing the self and whose specificities will be further explained in this chapter. Ashour narrates major sociopolitical predicaments during the era of Nasser and Sadat such as the Palestinian Deir Yassin massacre, the oppressive detention of Egyptian's communist party members, and the decadence of academia in university campuses. *Heavier than Radwa*, however, moves the reader to the era that marks the end of Mubarak's authoritarian regime through narrating the events of Tahrir Square during the revolution. Through interlacing the narration of her illness with the political events in Egypt at that time, Ashour treats illness in a metaphorical way such that it refers to a wider national narrative. This text is therefore an autopathological text in which personal illness takes on wider significance in the memoir. The uniqueness of this text resides in the fact that illness and revolution are narrated in a corresponding and inseparable manner which will be further discussed in detail in this chapter. This chapter will also briefly refer to Ashour's last memoir *al-Sarkha* (2015). Before engaging on a reading of the key texts, the chapter will aim to establish an appropriate conceptual framework that is also of relevance for ensuing chapters.

I. The Committed Intellectual and the Concept of *Amāra*

In his book *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution*, El-Desouky writes extensively on the concept of *amāra* in its 'revelatory function in literature as a dimension of Egyptian social

reality' and in relation to speaking truth to power (19). This concept takes forward Sartre's idea of an 'engaged writer' as well as Gramsci's 'counter-hegemony' and places it in the Egyptian context.⁶ In *The Intellectual and the People*, El-Desouky attempts to examine the thin line between the intellectual and the writer. Drawing from Said's concept of the public role of the intellectual as a representative of his society (Said, 14), El-Desouky considers the effect of social realities on the content and form of speech in the intellectual's attempt to 'speak [...] to the people *their own truth*' (2). In this respect, El-Desouky questions whether these collective resonances and acts of solidarity establish the needed structure for an intellectual to speak truth to power.

El-Desouky asks whether the committed intellectual's questioning of authoritative power through an examination of truth and social realities are spoken to or on behalf of society. His work concentrates on whose truth is being uttered to: 'the social to the political' or 'the social to the social' (2). He asserts that:

If speaking truth to power is primarily indexing that function in which the intellectual speaks the social to the political, what does it mean to speak the social to the social, is there a need for that, and does such a need arise in the same spheres of power? What if 'the social' *already knows* and *already speaks*? when the social speaks, one necessarily imagines, it will not be by representing the totalizations of its political experience. (2)

⁶ For more on the Gramscian concept of moral and intellectual reform, see: Marco Fonseca, *Gramsci's Critique of Civil Society: Towards a New Concept of Hegemony*. Routledge, 2016.

What El-Desouky is highlighting is the challenge the intellectual faces in positioning their voice in relation to multiple domains of expressions in order to question their ‘discursive representation’ and ‘recognize that collective social realities have their own modes of speech and of knowing that must alter the theoretical terms of the game and enter the arena of equal footing’ (43). Consequently, between addressing this and positioning the voice of the intellectual, El-Desouky demonstrates that the social ‘must not only *speak to the political*, it must itself *speak the political*’ (43).

With a philological approach and under the postmodern circumstances of Egypt from the 1990s till 2011, El-Desouky suggests a new term in his account of the relation to the Egyptian intellectual and society in the act of speaking the political. In the context of Egypt’s political pattern and the demands of the populace, he utilizes the concept of *amāra* to scrutinize the pattern and role of the intellectual’s vocation. This particularly Egyptian ‘cultural practice’ has its roots in classical Arabic but has been employed to describe new practices in the revolutionary scene of Tahrir Square (21). The idea of a mass movement demands a ‘new different conceptual language’ (12). Thus, this idea, as he argues, requires a new kind of language, one which deals with what he calls *amāra*. *Amāra* is a vernacular word that means “ostensive sign”. By displaying ostensible signs, these intellectuals are offering expressive indications to the collective that directs them to a certain purpose towards contributing to the populace’s awareness. El-Desouky offers a brief definition of the term by saying that *amāra* is ‘a collective expressive force that is at once an aesthetic of resonance and an ethic of solidarity, offering

visions of social cohesion that do not readily translate into the modes of knowledge production discourses of power and their conceptual languages nor into the sociological languages of effectuation of structures of domination or the political theories of populism' (12).

El-Desouky refers to *amāra* in relation to the 'claiming of public space' through a 'return of the political from below', utilizing a 'socially cementing language that is inclusive and beyond the socialist and nationalist discourses of the state and its apparatuses'. He further stresses that this indicates the people's 'return': 'the realities of the referent, not as the reclaimed category of political, socialist and philosophical discourses but as the manifesting imaginary "We the Egyptians"' (98). Applying this to Radwa Ashour's life writing, and Ahdaf Soueif in Chapter Three, offers a link between the concept of *amāra* and literary production with consideration of the specificity of this production being by a 'female' committed intellectual mapping a collective consciousness and speaking the political.

In twentieth-century Egypt, women's writing always put the nation under consideration. The act of writing was considered a service to the community and as such is always connected to a wider cause such as women's emancipation in the community – a perennially contentious issue. Women in this era 'could not legitimize writing simply as an act of individual artistic expression, although no doubt some were inspired. Nor could they admit to writing in order to earn a living'. Writing for them was a 'bridge from house to house', and a manner to fight

seclusion and confining isolation (Baron, 40). After the turn of the twentieth-first century, however, the separating line between the personal and the public had been largely obliterated (Baron, 55).

II. National Consciousness, Resistance, and Revolutionary Literature

Mondal argues that in a certain community, ideological approaches and the manners of thought ought to be the centre of inquiry. Hence, nationalism according to him is a ‘structure of thought’ and the nation is the object that the discourse of nationalism is examining (33–4). What unifies a particular nation is the ‘unity of pattern and style of imagining’ that characterizes it. The term ‘nationalism’, as it is used in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century postcolonial Arab discourse fits more the impulse of a national consciousness as a model that allows sociopolitically engaged individuals – intellectuals in this case – to defend and protect their national identity against state corruption and its authoritarianism.

According to Anderson, ‘nationality, or [...] nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind’ (4). However, the position of women intellectuals in relation to this ‘artefact’ is vague; thus, the contribution of men and only men in nationalism has resulted in women deciding to set their silence aside and engage their self-consciousness in the process of conceptualizing their nationalism. Nationalism, as Anderson argues ‘is the pathology of modern development history’ (5). So what motivates these Egyptian women to express their deep national affiliations despite their knowledge that nationalism, according to Anderson, is a cultural artefact? It is these writers’ quest to engage not only in the

cultural production of society, but to write directly to the political in an investigative motif. Yuval-Davis clarifies that spheres of civil society have been strictly divided into public and private areas in regards to how women exist in society. Women and families belong to the private sphere. Moreover, nation and nationalism have always been placed in the larger public and political sphere; thus, women have started a pioneering women's movement in the early part of the twentieth century to resituate themselves as participants in the national discourse. This pertains to nationalism to them not only as a cultural matter but to the real conditions of marginalized existences. What Ashour, and writers of her generation, are engaging with is nationalism as a cultural expression that goes beyond ideology as it engages with a wide range of experiences. Nationalism as a cultural expression is implemented by these writers to emphasize that this discourse cannot confine itself to middle-class men and to place them in dialogue with the most marginalized of their nation. Thus, as regards postcolonialism, national culture is not an end in itself but a means of furthering liberation struggles that permit women writers to engage in a form of national expression that has been dominated and regulated by men.

El-Desouky, in this sense, seeks not to investigate the definition of the intellectual, but rather the position of the intellectuals in relation to politics and society. Initially, he stresses the impact of the challenges that collective means of expression pose to intellectuals. These challenges, in keeping with the historical trajectories of most Arab countries, have transitioned from the social to the political sphere. What El-Desouky believes constitutes one of the essential questions of this era is what these challenges entail to our own comprehension of the 'nature of the

collectivities, social cohesion and social movements, communities, societies and nations'. He adds that he believes this to be 'one of the most urgent questions of our time' (vi). According to Anishchenkova, the political and ideological crises in North Africa and the Middle East have precipitated a dialectical conflict that pulsates vibrantly between pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism, and local nationalism. Among them all, local nationalism has become a governing force, especially in Egypt, rather than this politics unifying with Islamic or Arabic doctrine (38).

From the 1970s onwards, literature written by Arab women writers has stepped into an 'age of doubt' where a 'question mark has replaced certainty' (Ashour et al., 8–9). These writers have written about social frustration, war and a change of pre-conceptions; which has resulted in constructing a 'reality even stranger than fiction' (8–9). In the introduction to *Arab Women Writers*, Ashour, Ferial Ghazoul, and Reda-Mekdashy examine the early period of the emergence of Arab women writers. They argue that anxiety and contradictions have been predominant in Arab women's writings and that these writings capture a reality that is complex and ambiguous. They maintain that these works are about the national struggle, corruption, civil war, social and political oppression and the status of women and their relation to men in a patriarchal society where writers attempt to assert themselves as women and as citizens. They add that Arab women writers have used different writing techniques to convey their message:

They produced modernist texts in which the collapse of all assumptions, the fragmentation of time, and the isolation of the individual come

together to impose a different novelistic form. They wrote historical novels in which they address their own reality through writing about former ages. In autobiographies, women documented their life stories or some part of their lives, such as the experience of childhood or political detention, or a story of a trip to the West. (Ashour et al., 8–9)

Occasionally, these women writers write chronological narratives directly in the first person. On other occasions, however, they invent new styles to fulfil their objectives, even though historical trepidations and an awareness of a double burden is a common theme in their pieces (8–9).

These intellectuals, however, have taken a new mode of expression in an attempt to express a national consciousness and represent communal truth to society. For instance, Yusuf Idris, an Egyptian novelist and playwright who wrote from mid twentieth century, aspired to shift the reader from his passive position into a ‘social agent’ by using a shared language of expression and colloquial Egyptian language to achieve his aspiration as an author (El-Desouky, 7). El-Desouky further adds that ‘[i]n the absence of political freedom, many writers had turned to aesthetic experimentation, but Idris had more radical ambitions, even if in more nationalist terms, in seeking to achieve resonance with the very voice character of the Egyptians. And he did so with a radical eye for the imaginative necessities of form as they emerge from very local modes of expression’ (7). However, El-Desouky argues that with the use of colloquial language and common modes of speech, the Egyptian intellectual elite have not yet conveyed ‘the validity

of populist creative expressions and formal practices the possibility of knowledge-production' (8).

Besides challenging the stereotypical representations of Arab women, whether in fictional narratives or factual writings, the engagement of women writers with sociopolitical events through voicing their national consciousness has been slow to gain recognition and treated as provocative. It has sometimes been seen as an offensive retaliation against the government and considered a questioning of authoritarianism, suppression and marginalization right up until the end of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, from the 1950s onwards, a new generation of Egyptian female writers started to emerge, contributing to a range of genres (Ashour et al., 7). However, the new perception of Egyptian women writers from the 1990s onwards has affected Arab literature's development in general and Egyptian literature in particular. Jacquemond notes that 'one of the most striking developments to have affected the Egyptian and Arab literary scene in the 1990s was the new visibility given to women's writing' (184).

The Nasser period and its socialist politics prompted writers to produce new 'ideological forms of writing' (El-Desouky, 9). As El-Desouky puts it:

Sixty years later, the demonstrators in Tahrir and other squares and public spaces did indeed disrupt such a singular construct in the name of the multitudinous and inclusive 'we the Egyptians', not in the name of 'we the people'. Even as some invoked Nasser as the legitimator of the people [...], a symbolic recall of the rhetoric of collective dignity – recalling Arab

nationalism, figured in the person of Nasser in its discursive power as a liberation movement – the language of the gathered demonstrators still deconstructed the older discourse. (120)

The generation of *Jil el-thawra* that Ashour belongs to has witnessed a series of political ruptures and defeats that created a different approach in their ‘exceptional alertness to time and place’ (Masko, 23). Other wars that followed the defeats in 1973, 1978, 1982 and 1991 as well as literary, institutional and social censorship limited these writers in expressing their national consciousness against the state’s biopower. The works of these writers, as expressed by Ashour, is a form of ‘cultural resistance which partly implies the protection of collective memory, a kind of cultural conversation in the face of the double threat of cultural imposition and cultural disintegration’ (‘Eyewitness, Scribe’, 89).

Ashour embraces challenging the dominant discourse, to invoke buried areas of the past and make history visible and coherent. She writes in ‘self-defence’ and in defence of ‘countless others’ (Masko, 23). In affecting a shift in the sociopolitical scene, Ashour, as emphasized by Sayed Mahmoud, is indeed a ‘committed intellectual’ (no pgn). This political impulse stems from belonging to the generation of writers who have been politically engaged without preaching. Hence, an autobiographical text in Ashour’s view is a consolidation of a historical document and a literary one. In Ashour’s sense, autobiography is a ‘testimony of time and place in which the author lives’, relating the intellectual to their community (Masko, 25). Born in 1946 into a bourgeoisie family of intellectuals,

Ashour has been described as the ‘spiritual heir of Latifa Al Zayyat’, another leading Egyptian author and activist of the late twentieth century (Jacquemond, 244). Ashour’s political activism expressed her political concerns as extended to those of her academic career. She collaborated with other activists to found the National Committee Against Zionism in Egyptian Universities at the time that President Anwar Al Sadat was working on stabilizing the country’s relationship with Israel. Later in her life, when Husni Mubarak’s *Baltaghia*⁷ broke into the university campuses, she helped form the March 9 Group for the Independence of Universities (Warner, no pgn).

Prior to the January 2011 revolution, many intellectuals and writers had been writing sociopolitical and cultural critique without having the chance to physically engage in militant and rebellious activism against political corruption. El-Desouky questions the correlation between the political imaginary of the writer and a real sense of the collective: ‘where are the people to be found in their imaginative figurations? We assume the answer should lead us to the realities of the social collective, national or otherwise imagined, that surround and ground the political imaginary against which the figure of the intellectual is thrown into relief in the grey zone between thought and action’ (9). He further adds:

It is not only against power, or the state or traditional forms of oppression, economic, social, religious and political, that the intellectual begins to

⁷ A group of hired individuals from the intelligent services. Maalouf describes them as ‘hired mercenary gangs and plain-clothed police who [use] brutal intimidation tactics’ (*The Rise*, 23).

trace his or her signature, but it is the power relations and their provenances that have tended to constitute the thrust of most studies on the intellectual. The very question of voice, as I argue here, has to be reconceived outside, or beside, the conceptual regimes of disciplinary knowledge, representation and power. (9)

It is clear that El-Desouky is offering a generic view of the role of the intellectual that he has primarily intended to critique. However, in the female intellectual context, especially in postcolonial Arabic discourse, it is not solely the 'power relations and their provenances' they write against; they also write for the double liberation of engaging female emancipation in regards to speaking to power.

The Tahrir memoirs that have been published thus far have engaged the form of diary writing as a literary device in the Egyptian life writing canon. From an earlier period, Latifa al-Zayyat's *Hamlat Taftish: Awraq Shakhsiyah (The Search: Personal Papers, 1992)*, for instance, acts as a prime example of the emergence of the genre as constructed by a female memoir writer. *The Search* is a memoir that seeks to abolish traditions and myths in the process of self-discovery. Other works such as Nawal al-Sa'dawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1984), Inji Aflaton's *Inji Aflatoun's Memoirs from Childhood to Prison* (1992) edited by Said Khayyal, Farida al-Naqqash's *Prison: Two Tears ... and a Rose* (1985), and Laila Doss's private collection of national memory and social history. These works all exhibit the key themes of Arab memoir namely, Arab nationalism, prison testimony, as well as a personal record of the narrator's experiences (Abdel

Nasser, 130–31). Indeed, half a century of memoirs and diary writing precedes the production of the Tahrir memoirs. Ashour's *Heavier than Radwa* is very much aligned with and acts as an heir to al-Zayyat's *The Search* in its portrayal of activism and nationalism (Abdel Nasser, 131). In her book *Autobiography and Arab National Struggles*, Tahia Abdel Nasser defines the 'Tahrir memoir' as 'a form written within the Arab revolution characterized by simultaneity, association, and introspection. Its forms are multifarious – journal, fragments, or diary amid waves of revolution in Egypt since 2011. [...] The Tahrir memoir preserves autobiographical sequence along with the introspection characteristic of the form in the midst of the revolution' (Abdel Nasser, 130). Narrating the revolution through life writing demands an immediacy in literary portrayal. Ashour emphasizes the importance of this immediacy in portraying historical political ruptures such as the January revolution. She stresses that other visually and textually immediate reporting such as images, social media, and video recording are immediately produced which echoed her impulse to choose a literary form such as life writing in which to record the revolution, instead of fiction or the straightforward writing of history (130).

Published posthumously in 2015, *al-Sarkha* is the sequel to Ashour's *Heavier than Radwa* and brings her autobiographical works to an end. *Al-Sarkha* was written between August 2013 and September 2014 (Abdel Nasser, 143). In this work, Ashour chronicles many personal and political issues such as her surgery in Denmark and narrates her suffering from her terminal illness whilst interweaving this with narratives of campus protest, views from the Rab'aa massacre, and a

strong demand to execute ministers in the government. Ashour also treats *al-Sarkha* as a platform to show her love and admiration of influential women in her life such as Latifa al-Zayyat.

III. Postcolonial Autobiography

According to Philippe Lejeune, autobiography is ‘a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’ (193). A comparable Arabic definition of the genre is by Jaboor Abdul Noor in *The Literary Dictionary*, where autobiography is defined as ‘a book where the author narrates his life, and differs in subject matter and method from the memoirs and diaries’ (143). While these definitions are quite generic, they do not engage with either notions of gender or the collective and thus do not accord with the contemporary writing of postcolonial narratives by Arab women in the twenty-first century. This may be seen as a consequence of the minimal attention given by Autobiographical Studies as a discipline to their work (Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing*, xvi).

Autobiography is a real engagement with an individual’s perception that offers a true representation of reality (Faqir, 1). It is negotiable, however, whether that truth is somehow restricted to the autobiographical form of literature. According to Maya Rota, self-(re)presentation is complex. An individual faces their own self, attempting to search for an escape from all ‘embarrassments’ and go through a path of self-recovery (50). However, Bart Moore-Gilbert suggests that the term ‘autobiography’ cannot be applicable to the postcolonial self-narrative.

Moore-Gilbert argues that postcolonial life writing does not adhere to ‘the classical rules of the genres’ (*Postcolonial Life-Writing*, 131). In fact, he specifically uses the term ‘life writing’ instead. Huddart explores this further in writing that ‘over the last twenty-five years there has been an explosion of interest in what now needs to be called life writing. One of the reasons it needs to be called that, rather than autobiography, is that the latter term privileges one particular way of writing a life, a way that for many critics is simultaneously too abstract, too masculine and Western’ (2).

The difference between postcolonial life writing and postcolonial autobiography concerns ‘commonality’. Rota establishes a clear distinction between the two modes. Postcolonial autobiography discusses ‘the anxiety of representativeness for a collectivity and the will to stage oneself as a model for the achievement of personal success re-inscribe given assumptions that the postcolonial has tried hard to discard’. Rota argues that postcolonial life writing deals with ‘the capacity to recount other people’s stories as if they were one’s own’. Rota further adds that this ‘becomes the peculiarity of a truly empathetic figure that best responds the needs of postcolonial subjectivities, that is, the *selfless* autobiographer’ (Rota, 61–2). Ashour’s life writing represents a total commitment to the muted voices of the collective, showing the reader what it really means to be Egyptian utilizing not just her personal expressions but also the expressions of the others around her.

However, Moore-Gilbert argues that the chief target of much postcolonial life writing by women is the '(indigenous) patriarchy rather than (neo-) colonialism' (*Postcolonial Life-Writing*, xxiv) and argues that women's engagement with life writing is perhaps best regarded as a mirror giving them a space for self-portrayal instead of being subjected to portrayal by men. Moore-Gilbert elucidates:

Feminist Auto/biography studies have identified the political purchase of women's life writing more specifically in a number of areas. First, it emphasises the agency involved in appropriation of this hitherto privileged and exclusive cultural form, which thereby offers women the opportunity to transform themselves from objects of representation to subject of self-representation. [...] From this perspective, issues of women's discursive representation and location in patriarchal cultures are inevitably political and contemporary women's life writing is thereby willy-nilly connected to the public sphere. (*Postcolonial Life-Writing*, 112)

For instance, black women's autobiography, as identified by Bernice Reagon, is a cultural autobiography simply because the story of the author's 'selfhood' is inseparable from her sense of responsibility towards the community (Rota, 43). This resonates with Ashour's concept on regaining agency through writing and acting as a subject in history rather than a mere object that will be further discussed in the second chapter (Ashour 'Eyewitness, Scribe', 89).

In opposition, Faqir argues that with Islamic revivalism, Arab women memoir writers have detached the public from the private. She adds that the inner self is not to be exposed, otherwise society will undeniably lose its respect for them. She says that these women writers, through their call for a collective voice, are in constant and brave opposition to a textual culture that is based on concealment(14). Faqir also argues that the social constraints placed upon male writers have not been as restrictive as those placed upon female writers. As she writes, ‘the woman writer of autobiography in most Arab countries has to avoid discussing religion, sex and politics overtly’ (11). Thus, political and moral personal views have been avoided or portrayed vaguely. Postcolonial autobiographical writing is not solely for the purpose of self-affirmation. As in Ashour’s case, for instance, she has written radically for national and cultural affirmation. She has expressed herself through the ‘us’ rather than the ‘I’. Friedman argues that ‘women’s sense of collective identity, however, is not only negative. It can also be a source of strength and transformation. As Rowbotham argues, cultural representations of women lead not only to women’s alienation, but also the potential for a ‘new consciousness’ of self (26–46). In discussing autobiographical writing by women, Friedman writes that the constructed feminine self revolves around, but is not ultimately grounded in, a form of consciousness. It is a special kind of awareness of what a ‘woman’ means according to cultural categories. She writes that ‘[a]lienation is not the result of creating a self in language, as it is for Lacanian and Barthesian critics of autobiography. Instead, alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the

autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech' (Friedman, 40–41).

IV. Defamiliarizing Life-Narrative in *Spectres*

Through different formats of writing, autobiographies, historical novels, and autobiographical novels, Ashour raises major political and social concerns such as civil rights violation in Egypt and the Palestinian question. In her life writing, however, Ashour tends to mix personal and public, joining her private concerns with those of the collective. Ghazoul reminds us that *Spectres* provides a unique and new paradigm of the writing of the self that goes beyond the local wave of experimenting in life writing and establishes its uniqueness internationally. 'If the personal is political [...], then the political is also personal in Radwa's writings. [...] For the first time, I come across an autobiography, which traces the road taken and the road not taken. [...] The idea of the double in Radwa's novel is different from that of [Western novels]. It is not a sign of a split self or of mental and moral confusion. It is an imaginative actualization of another trajectory that could have been, what one could have become had one taken the other road. The concrete and the potential are delineated side by side in a symbiotic relation' (13).

Published prior to the January revolution, Ashour defamiliarizes her life-narrative to permit herself a wider venue for national sociopolitical critique. This body of work can fall under several genres; novel, life writing, and campus narrative. In *Spectres*, Ashour defamiliarizes the novel and the autobiography as fixed literary genres. She builds a text through brilliantly intermingling personal

matters in the autobiographical chapters, with public, historical, and political concerns through fictional elements in others. In this particular work, the fictional sections narrate specific reflections of Ashour's self where the reader finds points of similarity between the fictional character Shagar and the author. This type of literary production is fittingly described as autofiction. Even though such works assert their fictionality, they offer at the same time explicit, and implicit on some occasions, personal indicators suggesting that the work is an autobiography. Additionally, many autobiographical studies have highlighted that fiction and autobiography as genres may be joined in one single literary work. Claire Boyle examines the genre saying,

The innovation of *autofiction* is that it involves not just an awareness, but *a celebration* of the fictionalization of the self in writing: in some of its hues, *autofiction* involves authors writing the self without concern for what they perceive it to be, but rather, as they fantasize it. In a reversal of the priorities associated with autobiography, *autofiction* participates in a valorization of the imagination which takes precedence over any commitment to representing an extra-textual reality. (18)

Such publications, according to Lejeune, encompass a 'pact', whether implicit or explicit, between the author and the reader. Moreover, whether this kind of 'pact' is 'clear or vague, [it] depends in part on norms governing publishing, for the title page itself may or may not include words such as "an autobiography" or "a novel"'. Lejeune further argues that when a certain text is declared as fiction, a reader will

then eventually search for similarities between the author and the lead character, ‘similarities that will have appeared “in spite of the author [...]”’. (cited in Taïb, 210)

By alternating the personal and political within the chapters, Ashour constructs a unique piece of literature that draws upon her personal life and the life of her fictional character Shagar. Shagar is Ashour’s protagonist, a professor of History whom her relatives hate for her independence and call ‘stubborn and arrogant’, ‘strong above shame’, and ‘a woman equal to ten men’ (6). However, in Ashour’s plot, Shagar is not just a mere protagonist; she is her *ka* or *qarina*. Right at the end of a prolonged debate in Chapter Fourteen about the etymology of the word *qarin*, Ashour establishes the roots of this double role and directly admits that *Shagar* is indeed her *Qarin* (Bamia, 175). According to the *Encyclopaedia of Ancient Egypt*, the concept of *ka* implies ‘a spiritual essence that existed alongside the human form and yet maintained individuality throughout the earthly sojourns’. It is also claimed that ‘the *ka* was an astral being, yet considered the guiding force for all human life’ (Bunson, 189). Ashour’s identification of Shagar as her *ka* indicates that the character is both separable and inseparable at once: separable in the sense that Shagar is sometimes an inspiration and a source of power to Ashour to articulate what she cannot herself voice; inseparable owing to the strong resemblance that permits Shagar to be an imaginative version of Ashour herself.

Shagar’s conduct is what the reader would imagine Ashour clandestinely daydreams she might herself achieve. Shagar is the more powerful character of the

two. Her vocation is beyond political and national boundaries; she speaks her mind powerfully without restrictions and constantly dreams of a better version of things around her. Shagar writes to gain mastery over her life, creating trajectories, characters and timeframes, to know them through familiarizing herself with them, even if this is fictitious. She writes about people, who just like her, live through a 'deadly moment of history' (*Spectres*, 232). Shagar begins where her ancestors end, reminiscing about the labour camps of the Suez Canal in the 1850s. Then she wonders why she is still contemplating the past after deciding not to look back into it (Qualey, 32). Shagar feels compelled to excavate the past as she is a Professor of history and realises that being such provokes her sense of national duty as she refuses to keep her history lessons enclosed in a university classroom. (*Specters*, 143) Ashour acknowledges Shagar's role in facilitating the historical narration of the massacre, and notes that without the latter she would not be able to convey the trauma in a straightforward way. Through giving Shagar a substantial and unrestricted platform for narration, Ashour allows her to recount the story of the troubled communists during the reign of Gamal Abdel Nasser. As a prisoner herself, Shagar narrates the experience saying

In prison there was ample time to consider the particularities of a life dispersed randomly in the press of daily concerns. In prison there is time, because the days and the nights as well, take their time: each hour has its own sphere, through which she passes in stoic endurance, and into which the succeeding hour does not crowd (142).

While being in prison, the only thing that occupies Shagar's mind and keeps her sanity through the long excruciating hours of detention is the type of acquaintance she had with her students at the university.

At the end of the book, Shagar's destiny being in Cairo is unclear; what is obvious, however, is that Shagar and Radwa, her alter ego, will always stay attached and engaged with Cairo 'in spite – or perhaps because – of its many ghosts' (32). She is Radwa's shadow; dark, mysterious, yet acts as Radwa's other half. While shadows have neither facial nor physical structure, Radwa constructs Shagar as she wishes. She is her 'life force', her 'strength of spirit', and her 'creative power'. Through Shagar, Ashour plays with language and ideas to reveal personal truth through what is apparently fiction but seemingly realistic. This is a tactic writers normally use in autofiction. As Boyle puts it:

These epistemological limits on self-knowledge call for a form of self-writing that acknowledges these limits, delivering a manifestly incomplete account, a cluster of truth-nuggets that require assembling by the other who reads them. From this perspective, *autofiction* reveals a kind of truth alongside its fictions of the self: though its fragmentary form, it reveals the contingent nature of truth – as something which, even when it concerns the identity of the writing self, is negotiated between self and other. (18)

National Concerns and Campus Narrative

As argued, through the combination of both genres – life writing and fiction – Ashour achieves a narration of both her personal life as well as her political and

social background. This section will examine three main issues that Ashour raises: the repression of communists during Nasser's era, the Palestinian question and her narration of the Deir Yassin massacre, and the decadence of the academic sector in Egypt. Throughout *Specters*, and through utilising this metaphorical doubling, Ashour puts an emphasis on how individuals' lives help shape history and how history helps shape the lives of the individuals. Through tackling broader issues such as the Palestinian question and the detention of the communists, and weaving this together with the issue of academic decadence in Egypt, Ashour offers a holistic narrative of political, social, and cultural corruption. Ashour takes the reader through a journey of personal narration of her Egyptian self. For instance, in a realistic and a straightforward tone, Ashour narrates a tragic example of state oppression of communist party members, referring to when some of her friends were imprisoned as a result of their political and cultural views. In *Spectres* she writes: '[m]y friends were in prison: Latifa, Amina, Awatif, Farida, Shahinda, and Safinaz; a number of my acquaintances and dozens of leading cultural and political personages of Egypt. The official detainees numbered 1,500; my name did not appear among theirs, although it did appear on the list of professors dismissed from the university' (166).

From 1959 to 1964, many communists were imprisoned for periods of time and then released. That particular period, as al-Zayyat describes, was 'without any intellectual vitality' (Ta'ib, 210). This period, moreover, had an effect on the personal life of al-Zayyat which greatly affected her. She has called it the 'mistaken trajectory' and a 'period of disarray for Egyptian Communists as a whole, who had

to place themselves in relation to Nasser's one-party regime' (210). The experience of imprisonment had a profound effect upon the intellectual behaviour, cultural conduct, and political activity of the communist detainees. Thus, many writers have desired to find their way through escaping from isolation and seeking their place among people which magnifies their solidaristic sense that transcends both political blockades and class structure. In the words of Mohamed Sid Ahmed, a communist prisoner under Nasser's rule, prison 'could be the inside that was also outside, that allowed one to break out' (Taïb, 209).

In an effort to exclude pre-existing political parties, Nasser created the National Union in May 1957. Nasser had personal influence on the structure of the Union from the local level up to the higher level of the Executive Committee (Hopwood, 89). Nasser had no legitimate intention in giving the Committee any real power, he simply felt the need to establish this type of political structure. Its main purpose was to prohibit other parties from political control whether it be the communists or the *Ikhwan*. In practice, its aim was to regulate the activity of the populace and to secure their absolute loyalty to Gamal Abd al-Nasser and his regime. 'Nasser was not seeking the participation of the people in politics,' Hopwood asserts, 'but rather their approval of his policies and the assurance that political criticism could be stifled within the National Union' (89).

After a decade of rule, Nasser finally established socialism in the Charter in 1962. Nasser's implementation of socialist doctrine was marginally adjusted to meet the Arabic and Islamic needs. However, these adjustments are not majorly

significant and do not drastically distinguish his policies from socialism practiced across the globe. In his belief that socialism would be the sole solution for Egypt's modernisation, Nasser decided that a 'firmer' ideology of socialism must be established and that the old path of socialism followed before that period had been inadequate. Hopwood adds that the Charter 'includes a section entitled "The inevitability of the socialist solution", which claims that this solution was a historical inevitability imposed by reality, the broad aspirations of the masses and the changing nature of the world. [...] The capitalist system had been discredited by its exploitation of the country and by its association with imperialism. It is interesting, though, that Nasser made it clear that this type of socialism was to be different from Marxist communism' (99). Thus, people and intellectuals started expressing their doubt and fear of the regime Nasser was practicing. For instance, Tawfiq al-Hakim in *The Return of the Consciousness* writes that '[t]he iron curtain began slowly to fall between the people and the actions of the absolute ruler. We loved him but did not know the inside of his thoughts or the real motives for his actions' (cited In Hopwood, 102).

In this respect Taïb reminds us that Latifa al-Zayyat 'wrote herself out of things, she wrote herself into things. She believed more than anything in taking a stand, in action' (210). In a comment made by Ashour describing al-Zayyat's approach, she says that al-Zayyat has been tormented by the tension between action and seeking shelter. This, however, was not considered to be a hurdle for people around her as much as it was for herself. Ashour says, '[s]he created the dichotomy' of always being active and protected at the same time. When al-Zayyat was not

militantly participating in uprisings and protests, her pen, instead, was always active. (*Specters*, 216)

Al-Zayyat was detained twice in her lifetime, once during the British occupation after she have participated in the students' revolt in 1949, where she was one of the three leaders of the Committee of Students and Workers. The second imprisonment occurred while she was one of the leaders for the Defence of National Culture committee that has been formed in response to the accords of Camp David and the power structure formed by Sadat. Sadat had imprisoned nearly a thousand of opponents of his political regime in 1981 shortly before his assassination; among them were members of the Islamic movement, intellectuals, activists, and Camp David opponents (Taib, 209–10). Sadat has been described as corrupt in the last months of his rule. The politicians who worked for him, moreover, were exploiting the liberalisation of Egypt's economy for their own personal revenue. His period was of a 'growing megalomania and indifference to the real problems of Egypt' (Hopwood, 183). Thus, what Mubarak inherited was the remains of a 'bitter and divided country' that he desperately and unsuccessfully tried to steer towards steadiness (191).

A few pages later in *Spectres*, Ashour sets details aside to provide more generic conclusions. In a sarcastic tone she weaves an image of sociopolitical decay by connecting her physical back pain with the modern circumstances in Egypt. She writes that '[m]atters in Egypt have assumed a gravity more severe than the pain that spread from my back to my left shoulder and my neck each time the needle was

inserted into my lung to draw off the fluid that had accumulated there' (166). Here she anthropomorphizes Egypt, associating it with her fragile body and hence treating her illness as a metaphor of her country's struggles. This, however, augments a picture of class hierarchy and what an intellectual from the bourgeoisie goes through. This is highlighted through the struggle of her class to voice their national concerns as part of the public. This struggle has placed these Egyptian women writers between the polarities of the inside and the outside. Therefore, the outcome of this struggle is the desire to take refuge in their *inside* world and the opposing desire to perfectly engage with the community *outside* as al-Zayyat, Ashour, and others are contended with (Ta'ib, 208).

Ashour's interest in the Palestinian question has always been aligned with her concerns with Egyptian social and political cases. This politicization, however, was significantly intensified once she married the Palestinian writer and poet Mourid al-Barghouti. Even though Mourid is Palestinian in origin, he carried a Jordanian passport. Many governments would not have granted him a passport because of his affiliation with the PLO. Ashour writes that 'I carried an Egyptian passport, and, because according to legal convention a woman is subordinate to her husband, the Egyptian passport authority had (it was, after all, the least they could do) recorded under "Remarks": wife of Nawwaf Abdel Raziq al-Barghouti, nationality Jordanian' (*Specters*, 170).

Ashour speaks about the Zionist occupation and allows Shagar to conclude narrating the rest of the political matters in an unrestricted manner (181). Through

the journey of writing, Shagar envisages images and voices that have pursued her. Names like Hayat al-Belbeysi, Basma Zahran and Omar all came to her in a dream as victims of the Deir Yassin massacre. However, it is worth remarking that whenever Ashour sheds light on Shagar's life and the work of the Deir Yassin project, Ashour's narrative becomes fluctuated and fragmented. However, she is still aware of the necessity of accuracy in her narration: 'but accuracy is one of the requirements of the act of writing, and to distil life down to an unmitigated tragedy is to risk dishonesty' (235). On one occasion, Ashour describes the writings of Shagar as lies, fragmented lies represented by fictional characters who Shagar has masterfully weaved. However, on another occasion, Ashour declares that these are real people in real incidents. What is constructed from these fragments is a woven texture of various strands of personal and collective memories fluctuating between past and present.

Together, Shagar and Radwa 'pick their way through life events'; they find out that Arabic and Israeli accounts about the Deir Yassin massacre are both deceptive and ambiguous (Qualey, 32). Qualey further argues that the Arab narratives in *Spectres* 'portray the Palestinians as naive innocents', 'lambs to the slaughter', whilst the Israeli narratives call what happened mere 'house-to-house fighting' (32). Thus, Shagar and Radwa in this respect step aside and allow the Deir Yassin members to narrate their own story. 'They take their turns in painting the scene' (32). For instance, here are some of the words of an Israeli Officer Uzi Narkis: "I reached al-Castal on Thursday, April 8 to supply the forces with provisions and ammunition. I asked if everything was going well. They told me that

conditions were excellent and the spirits were high. We had forced the Arabs to withdraw without any losses on our side”” (*Specters*, 201).

The occupation and its repercussions are a recurrent concern in many of Ashour’s works. In her posthumous work on her illness and post-revolution, *al-Sarkha*, for instance, Ashour’s personal interest aligned with her political activity with regard to Egypt and Palestine is exhibited in one of the scenes in the memoir. While Ashour was unconscious in Denmark after surgery, forty-eight detainees from Rab’a were handcuffed and crammed into a blue lorry fitting a maximum of twenty-four people and thus died of asphyxiation. The detainees suffocated, exacerbated by the heat and tear gas whilst being locked inside the lorry for nine hours on their way to Abu Za’bal prison. This tragic incident casues Ashour to reflect on a similar occurrence in Ghassan Kanafani’s novel *Men in the Sun*. The novella narrates the story of three Palestinians smuggled into Kuwait and perish through suffocation in a tanker-truck.

It is impossible to separate Ashour’s life writing from the frustration, defeat, and history of the region. It all revolves around Ashour witnessing the corruption and the decadence of the Egyptian leadership and others in positions of responsibility. El-Desouky has highlighted this type of writing in relation to experiencing and writing on the social and power decadence:

for at the crucial moment of encounter with the people, the speech of power falters and fritters away in the face of a mysteriously stubborn demand on the side of the people for a different kind of speech, one that

signals the resonance of the singularity of the intellectual's position with the shared imaginary of the collective, a speech of identity that offers socially cementing modes of communication. (11)

One of the main subject matters that this work focuses on is its treatment of the university and campus environment. *Spectres* is in this respect very much a 'campus novel'. It is more accurate, nonetheless, to refer to it as 'campus literature' rather than a 'campus novel' due to the fact that *Spectres* is better understood as life writing rather than as a novel. There have been a number of novels that detail situating the intellectual and the academic within the campus environment including Egyptian works such as Sonallah Ibrahim's *Americanly* (2003), Alaa' Al-Aswany's *Chicago* (2007), and Hala al-Badry's *Imra'aton Ma (A Certain Woman, 2003)* (Morsy, 140). These fictional works dwell upon the university life in their settings and characters. This provides social and academic critique of the system in view of the fact that the campus as a setting is not treated as a mere materialistic space, but rather a representation of academia as a whole. Edward Said, in his speech 'On the University', stresses that 'the status of a university or school, as well as what goes along with them intellectually and socially, is special, is different from other sites in society, like the government bureaucracy, the workplace, or the home. [...] (28). Said also refers to that notion of 'privilege' that society assigns to the academy that Ashour sees in risk of being sabotaged (28). *Spectres*, in this sense, deals with the deterioration of the university as an educational institution in Egypt through narrating its setbacks, student revolts, and administrative corruption.

The campus' status quo cannot be separated from the broader picture of the country's structure. It is not a metaphorical miniature of Egypt, but rather strongly connected to and part of the wider sociopolitical decadence of the country. In the book, Shagar indicates that academic corruption implies a corrupted society and vice versa. She writes, 'the university isn't outside society – what happens in society happens in the university, too!' (*Specters*, 91). Thus, Ashour is 'an eye witness to the decadence and corruption that has marked academic life in Egypt for the last few years' (Radwan, 98). Correspondingly, in *al-Sarkha* Ashour describes the counter-hegemony that springs from her sense of national consciousness as an intellectual and as an academic. While Egyptians set out to elect Morsi, Ashour shares her reflections on the incident and her impulsive decision to discard choosing a stance in her political affiliation, instead showing complete solidarity to the martyrs of the revolutionary outbreaks. 'I entered', she narrates

with the intention to elect Mursi. When I grabbed the paper, however, leaned on it with the pen in my hand, I found myself crossing out both Shafiq and Mursi's names while writing in a bold font: glory to the martyrs. Yes, my dear female reader, I have annulled my vote and you might see it as a mistake. I left the school feeling relieved, telling myself: I have not chosen the political work in its daily meaning that entails compromises, settlements, and middle grounds. I am a writer and a University professor and have no credit but my conscience and my judgment and what my mind dictates to me ... So be it! (61).

Shagar's admiration for the Egyptian heritage nurtures memories of it in hope of its revival in future. She contemplates, initially, the beautiful heritage of ancient Egyptian history evoked by a carven object by the Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar:

A small granite obelisk culminating in a flower or a flame [...], and complementing or communicating with the granite creation of the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar, there at the beginning of the route. She knows it well, and she could have loved it before she knew it, [...] and to believe that knowledge is consummated such as you discover after ten years, twenty years, or thirty, that each new experience enlarges you. And enlarges the scene. (57)

In later chapters in *Spectres*, Ashour creates a rather absurd image of the distortion of representation of the Egyptian heritage in the university campus. Shagar starkly ridicules the Egyptian university students misrepresenting Egyptian history while wearing Turkish turbans and popular contemporary dresses. 'Officers driving peasant farmers', the narrator describes, 'girls in evening dress, or in peasant dresses, others in traditional full-body wrap-dresses. A group of *mizmar*-players in folk costume. A masquerade party? Wondered Shagar' (263). Her frustration leads her to shout at students in a lost voice through the sounds of their beating drums. Later, Shagar writes her resignation and leaves the university: 'you must have realized that all this sort of thing is a sign of madness. There is no doubt that the place for lunatics is not the university, but the insane asylum' (266). Ashour also

focuses on this lack of freedom through her presentation of characters such as Khalil. Khalil is a student with Islamic leanings who Shagar likes for his ‘intelligence and exceptional talent’ and sees him fitting to join the faculty as a teacher Assistant (251). However, Shagar’s colleagues disapprove her position through discussing ‘the risks entailed in having Islamist types among the members of teaching staff’ (251). This resonates with what Said stresses in stating that ‘the atmosphere of the university has changed from freedom to accommodation, from brilliance and daring to caution and fear, from the advancement of knowledge to self-preservation’ (‘On the University’, 35).⁸

From Shagar to Radwa, and after spending two years in Budapest with Mourid, on a journey back home, Ashour reclines on her airplane seat, closes her eyes and recalls all that has happened during that time:

The second year was heavily frightened, an over-packed suitcase weighed down and filled to bursting with its excessive load: an afflicted right lung, the hospital, and the hospital again; the assassination of a president and his successor’s assumption of office; the release of prisoners and the government’s decision to reinstate the professors who had been dismissed; the invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut; the ousting of Palestinian resistance. (*Spectres*, 180)

⁸ For a factual account on culture and education in Egypt, see: Taha Hussein, *Mustaqbal Al-thaqafa fi Misr* [The Future of Culture in Egypt]. [1938.] Cairo: Hindawi Publishing House, 2014.

‘The woman’, as Ashour occasionally calls herself, reflects on the news of the Baghdad bombing from the image of prisoners, the destroyed vehicles, the dead bodies, and the interviews with the American soldiers. From a national and transnational perspective, this instantly evokes an involuntary memory: ‘she hadn’t realized that these scenes would open up the doors of memory, letting out a flood of images unravelling all the way back to her roots: the bomber jets, the Egyptian soldiers in Sinai, Beirut Airport, the Palestinian camps, Beirut under siege, Sidon and Tyre and Nabatiya, and the region of al-Tuffah’ (231). The Iraq War left a mark on Ashour’s subconscious. Whilst acting like a historiographer, the memoir writing aspect of her work instantly intrudes and stirs up her speculative self: ‘Am I oversimplifying? As I said before, who can separate the intertwined threads, who can separate fear of impending defeat from previous defeats? The woman weeps, quietly at first, but soon she is sobbing’ (230).

In an interview with Ashour, she clarifies that the process of researching before writing is essential for constructing realistic historical circumstances. In *Spectres*, for example, Ashour says she has spent time researching modern Egyptian history (Abu Zaid). *Spectres* is an ‘evocative tapestry of history, autobiography, fiction, and philosophy’ (Radwan, 98). *Spectres*, the title, indicates a key theme as of the work. The original Arabic is *Atyaf*. Ashour chooses the title of the novel in reference to the history book that Shagar is writing on the 1948 massacre of Deir Yassin, entitled *The Spectres*. Shagar has presented the massacre as an emblematic event rather than restricted to historical facts about the Zionists’ attack on the villages and the Palestinians’ resistance. This technique enables the readers to

‘consider the general as contained in the particular’ (Ashour, *Specters*, 76). The name Shagar indicates a worldly, national view and the voice of the citizens. Since Shagar is Ashour’s subconscious as well as conscience, it is the cultural act of facing the people and narrating their struggles. As El-Desouky notes, ‘[t]he crises of the intellectuals and their role in society have been most urgently felt not only when they faced power, or when in their self-reflections they sought inspirations in theories or earlier histories, but also when they turned and faced the very people in whose name they speak and in the imaginary constructions of whom they articulated their visions and their sense of vocations’ (11).

Ashour is pushing the boundaries of free speech through Shagar. Engagement with the Palestinian question is restricted by regulations, according to Ashour. Writing about Palestine has always been related to her sense of national responsibility: ‘when I am able to write about Palestine I’ll write about it, and I don’t think I’ll need to go back 500 years to do it’ (*Spectres*, 226). Ashour employs Shagar to act as a nationalist historian because she is hesitant to tackle the Palestinian question, especially when she has emphasized that she has never had the chance to visit Deir Yassin. In respect to this, the nationalist historian is basically a ‘monologist’ and a ‘monist’, as Gershoni noted. He asserts that a nationalist historian is a

self-appointed warden of the past and aspiring executor of the future, [she] purposely and purposefully introduces [her] voice into his [her] narrative and, in the coup de grace, equates [her] voice with that of the nation.

Voices from the past are absorbed into the monotone of the master narrator,^[9] for whom Reality and Truth are givens and non-elusive. Their recovery, or rather assembly, is a function of the present-oriented Collective Self (historian as embodiment of the nation) and inevitably accords recognition to the other only as an integral and organic part of himself. (7)

Gershoni further asserts that there are rich archives and symbols of national memories that the national historian illustrates which form the representations that ‘facilitates the meaningful constitution and cultural integration of the nation’ (7). This reinvented and recovered history, as he argues, offers an ultimate material for constructing and moulding a continuous link to fill the gap between the actual present circumstances of the nation and its seminal past (7). While Ashour’s drive for national and humanist freedom is what triggers all her writings, she diverges from Gershoni’s ‘master narrator’ in including voices other than her own and she does not privilege the genre of history. She intertwines more than one genre in almost all her works – historical, autobiographical, fictional, and philosophical. What makes it interesting is that instead of writing this national trajectory in mere fiction, Ashour involves her personal self. Partly disguising herself within her alter ego allows expression of a complex national narrative that demonstrates her strong sense of identification with her generation by presenting a counter-hegemonic

⁹ This may appear contradictory to El Desouky’s conception of an intellectual speaking from an equal position as the people. What Gershoni implies here by the word ‘master’ nonetheless is the skill and proficiency of the nationalist historian’s ability to integrate their voice into the national discourse.

narrative addressing state-led failures that came to culminate in a major civilian uprising, the January revolution covered in Ashour's *Heavier than Radwa*.

V. *Heavier than Radwa*: Narrating Tahrir through Historical Memory and Personal Illness

On 25 January 2011, throngs of Egyptians assembled in the streets of Cairo aiming to topple the dictator president Hosni Mubarak, imagining a new nation for themselves. Meanwhile in Washington, Ashour wakes up from anaesthesia after a lengthy procedure for the enucleation of her brain tumour. Later, in 2013, Ashour publishes her memoir *Heavier than Radwa* in which she masterfully narrates managing the pain of her physical sickness and the abrupt political alteration in her country. Ashour's memoir is overflowing with all sorts of corruption: political, social and academic. However, Ashour transcends categories of division in the formation of her narrative voice. In her memoir, Ashour's consciousness is moulded according to cultural pre-representations, narrating Tahrir and personal illness through historical recollections are in the forefront of this work. She narrates the way that Egyptians who are presenting their physical, emotional, and intellectual connectivity in Tahrir Square, achieve their longed-for dream of being in a collective and welded group with – as Young puts it – a 'self-conscious purpose' (728).

In *Heavier than Radwa*, Ashour relates two major events on both personal and political levels. Whilst documenting the progression of her illness and procedures, Ashour narrates the climax of the protests in Tahrir Square. Ashour puts emphasis on the symbolic representations of Tahrir Square as a revolutionary

place. Ashour emphasizes that Tahrir Square's representation goes, in some cases, beyond its symbolizing of 'Egyptianness' and reaches a universal level of freedom, democracy, and building national identity (Rooney, 'Egypt's Revolution', 193). El-Desouky claims that predominantly present in Tahrir Square was a language and fragmentary form of the intellectual that he describes as 'the cementing social imagery', adding that

the verbal and visual expressions as well as body gestures and movements, were all clearly visible *amāras* of the gathered individuals and groups, *placed* subjectivities that are both singular and collective. In the 18 days of Tahrir, such physical and psychosocial alignments were clearly manifesting beyond any party, class or sectarian affiliations. The imaginary was visibly tracing nationalist and cultural trajectories, special and temporal, evincing a nationalist popular culture, clearly traceable to the 1881 'Urabi Revolt and the 1919 Revolution. (ix)

It is evident that through her text, Ashour is firmly asserting the original values the Egyptians left and were loyal to; hence, she consciously intended to act as a committed intellectual, writing in optimistic values which are identified with the characteristics of the generation of writers she belongs to.

In *Heavier than Radwa*, the fall of the regime and its aftermath is a major focus. While Ashour is under the influence of anaesthesia, Tamim, her son, and Mourid, her husband, break the news of the revolution to her: 'Congratulations, Mubarak has fallen, Omar Suleiman has announced that Mubarak stepped down,

millions are dancing and cheering on the streets, Egypt is in *Eid*, I was not able to jump out of the bed nor cheer nor laugh, not even participate in talking. I smiled' (76). In the memoir, Ashour commemorates names like Azza Khalil, Mustafa Said, Mohammed Antar, Nawara Najem, and Salma Said, revolutionaries who fought fiercely for their rights (302–7). This places Ashour within the community as an intersection between the intellectual and the people. El-Desouky suggests that the main arguments surrounding the 2011 revolution had been in evidence prior to this moment and crucially concerned the position of the intellectual in relation to the people, the Egyptian people in particular. (ix). In expressing her communal obligation as a writer and a committed intellectual, Ashour makes an ethical reminder to the reader that narrating *al-maidan* is a national responsibility and an expression of solidarity. She writes, 'I know deep down that the revolution, *al-maidan*, the martyrs, the wounded, the victory, and such immense meanings are in fact an outcome of countless connections between these moments. Thus, the writer should pick up its threads, spin, braid them' (118). Hence, on her return to Egypt during the revolution, and despite her illness and pain following her surgery, she enters *al-maidan* with a flag that exceeds her physical size and joins the protesters with their cheering and chanting for political change and social stability. Through this physical act of solidarity, Ashour offers an alternative model of 'picking up' the revolution's thread that acts in dialogue with her narration of the event as a writer.

A few chapters later, Ashour begins the second phase of the autobiography, once again with a collective notion of the revolution in relation to the national

security services, exemplified by the high wall which was built between the protesters and the Israeli Embassy. With highly satirical language, she ridicules the security system for merely imitating the Israeli services and illuminates how youngsters have stood against this act either by painting colourful calligraphy on walls or by chanting for the regime to step down. In an interesting description, Ashour offers a fairly comic comparison between King Farouk and his successors, where she characterizes the latter as cartoonish. Regarding his successors' tyranny, Ashour writes, 'I have been repeating myself for years, they are not like the King, they would not leave their chairs unless there is lots of bloodshed' (209). It is important to recognize the satirical literary style in which Ashour structures her expressions. Satirical language, Al Aswany writes, when used by Egyptians in particular, is kind of a refuge from the melancholy and depression that citizens are experiencing. He writes that

[w]hether jokes can actually change things is much debated. Some argue that Egyptians take refuge in satire as a kind of consolation because other means of expression have been blocked. If there were genuine democracy, they say, the political joke would disappear. Others say that Egyptians simply can't get through life without jokes – and that they will poke fun equally at leaders they like or dislike. Satire is simply a national pastime, they believe, and does not imply any particular political stance. (no pgn)

He further adds that it is not just a sanctuary they seek but also an outcome of the political and social conflict. He writes:

But humor is not always impotent or apolitical. The revolution of 2011, which toppled President Hosni Mubarak, brought satire out into the open. Mr. Mubarak was mercilessly mocked for his limited horizon, his lack of intelligence and his corruption. In particular, the networks of social media have come to be seen as a zone of satirical expression beyond the reach of the censors and bureaucratic joke collectors. (no pgn)

In this respect, Ashour constructs no barriers between her narration and her readers. This proves one of the main points of this thesis: that historical changes are reflected on the level of the text as devices through the language used by the intellectual. Such major political events offer a unification of language between the intellectual and the masses. This unification provides a chance for Ashour to speak directly to, through, and with people after a phase of utilizing a heavily allegorical language and this significantly reduces the gap between the people and the intellectual. Hence, language plays a dynamic role here in creating a discourse that speaks the language of the public. She engages in a live conversation with her readers as if they are physically present through the manner in which she addresses them. Ashour's memoir can furthermore be read as a feminist text due to her fluctuating gendered language. Her later chapters tend to address her reader in a gendered way: 'my dear female reader'. To analyze this from a feminist viewpoint, Ashour might be providing an answer to Spivak's famous question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'¹⁰.

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994.

Perhaps Ashour is trying to ‘de-subalternize’ Arabic women in the sense of identifying them in her course of narration.

In a dynamic passage, Ashour weaves a magnificent and vibrant picture in the last chapter of her autobiography. After describing herself, as if taking a break from narrating the nation, Ashour describes a profound allegorical affiliation with the Nile River. However, the picture is tainted with melancholy and the suggestion of death:

Life draws its frame around death. It advances before death and flows after it; it draws its borders surrounding it from top, bottom and the two sides.

This is my belief. I don’t know if this conviction has something to do with living in my early childhood until I reached the age of nine in a house that overlooked the Nile. The river was profoundly present, dictating to me its strange daily lessons. I’m saying ‘strange’ lessons because we internalise them even before we fully realise or articulate them in words. Later on, slowly, we will know that the Nile has been present since times immemorial, and it is staying for a time that is difficult to imagine, a future that is ambivalent and enigmatic; its persistent features are the river’s water, the sun, and the evading moon that comes and goes, in full or as a crescent. (cited in Mostafa, 391)

By mentioning the Nile, Ashour sheds light particularly on the Egyptians’ endurance. The Nile is a constant symbol of Egypt, a common and emblematic expression of ‘Egyptianess’. The poetic images that Ashour creates in her memoir

act as a metaphorical allusion that strikes at the core of the revolutionary feeling. People's struggle to live is not the mere act of living; in fact, it is a struggle to live a better quality of life whilst resisting humiliation and defeat. The sense of change and continuity that the Nile suggests as well as the lineage to the history of the land, serves in providing the fundamental context of people's comprehension of the January 2011 revolution (Mostafa, 119). This is what Ashour has focused on in delivering her role as a 'female' intellectual, freeing herself from obsolete and imposed personae and roles.

Ashour concludes her memoir with a message to the nation:

We [...] extended family of labourers, activists, dreamers, [...] we despise defeat. We do not accept it. But if it surmounts us, we die standing like trees, accomplishing two beautiful things: the dignity of trying and valuable experiences. An inheritance we cautiously leave to the newcomers. [...] There is another possibility to crown our effort without surrender, as long as we decide not to die before we try to live. (*Heavier*, 393)

Ashour foresees her proud defeat at the hand of sickness and the current political setbacks of the military regime while narrating the frantic and prevailing incidents of the revolution under tear gas and gunmen's bullets. In the Egyptian struggle to achieve the goals of the January revolution, Ashour exemplifies the common aim of all Egyptians at this time: to keep trying as long as they shall live (Mostafa, 118).

Even though she makes it clear to the reader that one of her motivations for writing is to link the personal to the collective narrative, she accentuates the fact that this particular text is more or less considered to be both an autobiography as well as a memoir, and that the main purpose of it is to convey the personal junctures of the writer. She further describes her beliefs as a writer:

It seemed to me while leaving Cairo on fire with tons of martyrs and hundreds of injured, (yes ladies and gentlemen when Mohammed Morsi was the elected president), the tear gas and the breaking fires just meters away from my house makes me feel that I am forcefully lugged from my place. I was so anxious and agitated with a feeling of languidness and the idea of not having any role except to surrender for age and death.

(Heavier, 342)

It is important to note that the act of social and political representation that the intellectual performs is tied to a question of knowledge. It should be clear that Ashour's quest to revisit history is not merely an act of nostalgia. It is in fact an opportunity for the writer to battle the melancholy of this era (Shalabi, no pgn). Ouyang argues that writers' nostalgic identification with the past is a perspective occupied in order to resolve the crises of the national culture and the nation state (18). Ouyang further explains,

The past, as we have seen, comes in a variety of forms, each bringing to bear on the present a rather unshakable epistemological paradigm that stifles the kind of hoped-for ontological transformation, such as

democratisation of political community and liberation of the individual subject, which require freedom from the stranglehold of, to name but a few examples, monarchy and theocracy in the political organisation of community, patriarchy in social conduct, and imitation [...] in literary expression. (145)

The past, present, and future of the nation are evoked in what Boym calls ‘restorative nostalgia’, which concerns mainly a collective imagery and cultural symbols, yet, cultural and individual memory is evoked by what is called ‘reflective nostalgia’, aligned with the individual who offers signs of memorial. Even though the two may overlap, they do not do so on stories of identity and narrative (Boym, 49). The word nostalgia comes from the Ancient Greek *nostos*, which means return home, and *algia* which means longing (Boym, xv). However, nostalgia as a literary technique for Ashour does not necessarily imply a different type of romanticising. Romanticising for Ashour is a territorial battle for a political critique on the capitalist representations of the present day. As Löwy and Sayre note, the actual purpose of Romanticism is to present a critique of modernity and capitalist society ‘in the name of values and ideals drawn from the past’ (17). Moreover, it emerged in reaction to the bourgeoisie’s annexation of authority. In this respect, the nostalgic remembrance of a lost civilization is coupled with a quest to regain what has been lost (22–3). Ashour’s fragmented and troubled nostalgia is expressed in agonized protagonists who use collective memory rather than individual memory. El-Desouky emphasizes the essential role the intellectual plays in questioning the agency of populace in articulating their own conditions (6). Ashour’s

autobiography is more like a biography of the nation, with all its revolutions, from the Grand Arabic Revolution up to the 25 January revolution. Examination of the Arab world's past is a recurring theme in her work. Critic Medhat El-Gayar says that the revolution 'reminded those who are living today of that past's significance for the present, and attempted to effect change in our contemporary circumstances, and in Arab literature' (El-Qasas and Rabea).

In Ashour's memoir, history is not static; she writes it and revisits it alternately. She evokes history for the purpose of associating the personal events of her life with the public events of the nation's life. For Ashour, writing history is as visual and appealing as writing a lengthy poetic piece (*Heavier*, 168). According to E. H. Carr, history 'is an unending dialogue between the present and the past' (5). Thus, history is mainly a process of 'reinterpreting', 'rethinking' and 'rewriting'. Carr insists that every era 'writes its own history' and that even that history should be 'reconstructed' and 'rediscovered' to reconfigure its relevance to the present. Hence, the era's 'preoccupations' and motivations regulate how it tends to see its past (5). 'It is a commonplace that the historian,' Gershoni asserts, 'in some sense, is a prisoner of the age and society in which he or she lives. A central problem of historical methodology is that knowledge of the past can only be obtained through the subjective experience of the scholar, which occurs and accumulates in the present' (5).

In this respect, creating a national identity for a nationalist historian is, as Gershoni argues, the ultimate writing purpose:

For the nationalist historian, concerned first and foremost with the formation of national identity and national renewal and rebirth, this ‘presentism’ is all the more salient. It is the very soul of nationalist historiography and the sole vantage point for representing the past. Nationalists facing urgent problems maintain, *a priori*, that the past is a tool for achieving current goals and aspirations. Seeking to validate the values and norms of their reborn nation, crystallize its rediscovered personality and enhance its self-image and self-representation, nationalist writers turn to history as the ‘golden age’ of communal splendour. (5)

Egypt has a long history of seeking self-determination under occupation; thus, it has a whole culture of resistance to draw upon. In nationalist historical discourse, the approach to offering a comprehensive examination of their own period of resistance, coming into being in the interwar period and maturing during the 1940s, has been the use of a structure that unifies the present with the past and future. In this respect, these nationalist writers and intellectuals have sought through their literature of resistance the shaping of a new national culture and a unique national identity in the social structure of Egypt. Thus, ‘identity and culture alike were to be rooted in a shared communal history in order to create a continuity between past, present and future’ (Gershoni, 7). For an ancient country like Egypt, history shapes the sociopolitical conditions in an inevitable manner. Cumulative historical incidents have shaped the ‘state-society’ interaction in the present time (Fahmy, 30). Fahmy stresses that Egypt’s fate ‘was and always will be linked with the Nile, that benevolent master which provides the country with life and prosperity’ (31).

This does not necessarily amount to the ‘golden age’ addressed by Gershoni even though it does signify the value of communal experience.

In the course of her involuntary memory, meaning free associations, Ashour constantly connects her personal history to national history, whether political or social. These everyday personal cues that Ashour encounters instantly evoke historical recollections of the past without a conscious effort, indicating Ashour’s integral position in Egypt’s historical heritage through her national belonging. In one incident, Ashour describes the excessive violence arising on the university campus from the Baltagiah (thugs). She writes that ‘[o]n the 30th of August, a month before the incident of *Ghuraib* [the name of the Baltagi who attacked her at the university campus], my husband insisted on taking me to the surgeon’ (*Heavier*, 24).

Ashour later articulates her love of martial music, which takes her back to ancient Egypt with its grandeur and glory, which the younger generation, as she explains, have not been privileged to experience. She expresses her admiration for Umm Kulthum as a representative of the Arab world and Egyptian heritage (189). Ashour nostalgically narrates an incident that directly relates to the public sense of common heritage:

We come back to ‘To You Peaceful Egypt’. We do not need to know that this song was our national anthem since 1923, when Saad Zaghloul was leading Egypt as a prime minister, and that it was annulled in 1936 after the agreement that led the school boys to protest on the streets. [...] What

really matters is that the people of the country have listened to it from one generation to another in times of confrontation and danger and when there is need for gathering crowds in defiance for their country, to celebrate a national day, or even a seized victory. (190)

Ashour's dwelling upon Umm Kulthum alludes to the authenticity and the 'Egyptianess' of the Egyptian people. Umm Kulthum is not only a singer, she is a cultural and social emblem. Danielson stresses in her book, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Umm Kulthum's agency in society and how as an individual she performed an extraordinary role in an 'expressive culture' (1). Generally speaking, Umm Kulthum was a cultural leader and not just a performer. Along with being a singer, Umm Kulthum was a member of governmental committees on the arts, the president of the Musicians' Union, and a cultural representative of Egypt in other Arab countries (1). Danielson argues that according to an Egyptian political scientist Umm Kulthum was not a politicized person; however, she nonetheless performed in political settings. She says, 'this "voice of Egypt" was female. Indeed, the careers of Umm Kulthum and her female contemporaries fly in the face of popular conceptions of Arab women as submissive, sheltered, silent, and veiled. Those unfamiliar with the Middle East may ask how a woman could represent cultural achievement there' (20). She adds, '[s]he helped to constitute Egyptian cultural and social life and to advance an ideology of Egyptianess. [...] Umm Kulthum and her repertory are widely viewed as *asil*, authentically Egyptian and Arab. She helped to constitute several different styles, and her performances

contributed to two important formations in contemporary Egyptian Expressive culture – one neoclassical, the other populist’ (2). Politically, Umm Kulthum recorded many songs after the coup in 1952. These songs glorified the new republic, hence, Umm Kulthum became directly associated with President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Later in 1967, she donated her concert proceeds after the Egyptian defeat in the Six Day War after touring the Arab world representing Egypt (Soueif and Massad, 80).

Umm Kulthum was ‘a village girl who grew up to become the cultural symbol of a nation’ (1). Thus, Ashour subconsciously relates to the personal, political, and social development Umm Kulthum has been through to gain such recognition by Arabs and Egyptians in particular. Danielson writes:

The political position suggested by Umm Kulthum’s musical sound and public persona – a version of ‘Egypt for Egyptians’ proceeding from indigenous values and precedents – proved unassailable. Thus Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab was the ‘Musician of the Generation’ but Umm Kulthum was the ‘Voice of Egypt.’ (198)

Danielson adds that ‘[j]ust as clearly, her “voice” was and is a collective voice, constructed historically. The performances produced by a single individual, Umm Kulthum, become widely shared within Arab societies and identified by vast numbers of people as important cultural property’. (198)

The title of Ashour's book, *Heavier than Radwa* has many implications. She has been given her name after a chain of mountains near Al Medina. Radwa, the name of the mountains, denotes stability, steadiness, and solidity, qualities which apply to the author herself. The comparative structure of the title of the text, *Heavier than Radwa*, indicates that there is a power that is stronger than all the steadiness of the mountains – the stability of her physical, emotional and intellectual self. Her resilience through sickness alongside the revolution in Egypt exceeded the strength of the mountains. In Islam, it is believed that the souls of the believers gather on Radwa Mountain waiting for Al Mehdi before judgment day at the end of time where they see the members of the Prophet's family, eat and drink with them (Lange, 248).

Body and Illness as a Metaphor

Ashour weaves an intricate connection between illness and woman's suffering body as a metaphor for a wider national issue. She also considers the relationship between the mind and body through the Arab female viewpoint, distinct from any Western conceptualization. Ashour describes her understanding of how the mind and body are connected when narrating the illness of her brother:

I connected his illness with losing thousands of youths from his generation, among them friends and acquaintances he knew, who had been moved to *Sina'* and never returned. My conviction has intensified since I have been diagnosed with the same illness in September 1981, when

Anwar al-Sadat arrested 1,536 people who were protesting against him during his well-known campaign, among them my friends. (*Heavier*, 25)

Ashour here acknowledges that the connection between individuals' illnesses is a symbol of whatever turmoil the country is going through as well as implying causal connection between historical trauma and illness. It is clear as well that such turmoil has caused enough trauma to directly cause psychological and physical imbalances in individuals which the body is unable to fight against. In her book *Illness as a Metaphor* (1978), Sontag puts forward an entirely different view on illness than that suggested by Ashour. Unlike Ashour, Sontag suggests that illness could never be metaphorical, and the most realistic way to regard it is to separate it from metaphorical thinking (Sontag, 3). A few pages later in her own memoir, however, Ashour goes further in linking a personal sickness to a wider sufferance:

It is by coincidence then that I am in the operating room under the hands of surgeons working their scalpels and blades on my head, while Tunisia breaks down right after Bouazizi has set himself on fire. There is no relation between the two incidents, albeit I intertwine them due to the date, and because the two incidents directly pertain to me, and perhaps have an effect in the course of life and its continuity. (47–8)

In this context, it is essential to note that the concept of body and illness in Arab literature does not conform to Western representations of the relationship between the two, particularly in Arab autobiography. Western autobiographical writing that narrates illness is a 'sign of cultural health – an acknowledgment and

an exploration of [the West's] condition as *embodied selves*' (Couser, 164). In her Book *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic literature*, Abir Hamdar examines literature written by male and female Arab writers which represents illness and disability. Hamdar stresses that the representation of a female suffering body in women writings has evolved from absence to presence, she argues that the representation of female suffering body in Arabic literature of the twenty first century 'completes its journey from a silent, indeed absent, subject to a fully articulated and embodied agent. It ceases to be merely a signifier for some apparently more urgent socio-political trauma and becomes a physical, affective, and phenomenological state of being in its own right' (97). Such representations of the female suffering body transform it 'from a private space [...] to a public one' (109). Hamdar's analysis affirms that by representing the female body as a metaphor for the 'Arab nation in crisis', it raises the female body to 'status of a national symbol' (48). Hence, Ashour's narration of her illness qualifies her life writing as what G. Thomas Couser calls autopathography.¹¹ Ashour's body is inscribed in the work as an entity that incorporates pain and symbolizes something that is beyond its physical structures. Evidently, Ashour argues against most definitions of fixed interpretations of the female body. She suggests a novel politics of the female body, no longer detached from the community, but rather engaging itself as a metaphorical symbol for collective pain. Occasionally, however, one specific aspect of illness that does not exist as metaphor

¹¹ *Autopathography* refers to *auto* (self), *pathos* (suffering, disease) and *grapho* (to write). For more on the genre, see: Thomas Couser, "Autopathography: Women, Illness, and Lifewriting." In *Women and Autobiography*. Ed. Martine Watson Brownley and Allison B. Kimmich. Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999.

in Ashour's writing is whereby the psychic self affects the body itself where it 'directly pertains' her physical health. But in most cases, and through apparently simple, direct, and realistic sentences, Ashour metaphorically alludes, for instance, to how her empathy increases for the sufferings of others by describing the effects of her own physical suffering, linking this to the brave attempts of young Tunisians to restructure and rearrange their own country. Ashour sees an old Tunisian man on YouTube who emphasizes how he has waited so long for this event. The way she describes the old man's frustration coupled with his vernacular words provides a vivid picture of the Tunisian revolution. The old man says 'we have grown old for this historical moment' (48–9); for Ashour too, the enthusiasm of the younger generation is what she has been longing for.

Similarly, this is seen in one of the scenes of *al-Sarkha*. In Chapter Twenty-One, entitled 'A Thought Hit my Trapped Head in a Closed Box', Ashour narrates her experience of an MRI scan during a routine check-up after major head surgery to keep track of any possible regrowth of her tumour. Whilst describing the process, Ashour again uses her illness as a metaphor of Egypt's situation. Surrounded by the banging noise of the MRI machine and waiting for her injection, Ashour notes:

[a] strange idea went in my head, I said: Is Egypt in a similar position? I did not like the question because the image of a sick woman in her sixties being examined compared to a big country that has an extended story of history and geography inhabited by millions of human beings, etc. is a silly analogy that is closer to hallucinations! I said there is no room for

comparison. It was just an idea that passed in my head triggered by the thought that we are looking for cancer cells that are destroying surrounding tissues or possibly jump to other areas in the body to destroy it or threaten its life. Or maybe it was prompted by my own sense of being trapped and my head jammed in a closed box that is making me feel suffocated. (159–160)

Heavier than Radwa may also remind the reader of Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *A Burst of Light* (1988) in the narration of illness as well as the engagement with civil rights and feminist issues. Lorde chronicles her battle against liver cancer whilst simultaneously narrating women's struggle against injustice. The point of comparison here between Lorde's autobiographies and Ashour's is the relationship between illness and national and racial struggles. In both texts, illness is seen as a metaphor of a wider struggle as well as racial and national suffering. Both writers infuse the personal and the political and continue to fight oppression during illness; Lorde against feminist inequality, and Ashour against state oppression. In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde writes that '[f]or those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond

understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth' (21).¹²

Unlike most texts that have been written on the representation of a female body as directly related to the representations of desire and sexual fantasies, the representation of the mind/body dualism in Western and Arabic literature is different. Lorde's exceptional treatment of illness is triggered by the marginalization she received because of her race, gender, and sexuality; all this places her in a closer position to Arab women's representations of the relationship between mind and body. However, the masculine valorization of the mind over body has disregarded illness as an important literary focus (Couser, 172). Inspired by Virginia Woolf, Couser reminds the reader saying,

If women and ill people are both marginalized in different ways, then sick women are doubly marginalized. With recent developments in autopathography, then, we have a return of the doubly, or perhaps triply, repressed – an overt, unembarrassed, unapologetic representation of the ill, female body. If illness is a literary no-man's-land, it may be, by default, a terrain available for women to map, a zone in which to challenge the conventional domination of mind over body. By acknowledging their illnesses and exposing the cultural components of their disability [...] "ill"

¹² For more on Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* and the relationship between sickness and resistance, see: William Major, "Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*: Autopathography as Resistance." *Mosaic* 35.2 (2002): 39–56; and Stella Bolaki, "Challenging Invisibility, Making Connections: Illness, Survival, and Black Struggles in Audre Lorde's Work." *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. Christopher M. Bell. Michigan University Press, 2012.

women may be well equipped to reconceptualize the relation between psyche and soma, to write the life of the body as well as the life of the mind. (Couser, 172)

Even though Ashour frequently apologizes to her readers for narrating her illness, she writes not just of the body and the mind, but also writes the life of her nation. Lorde and Ashour in this context both scrutinize what it means to have a traumatic physical experience that exceeds the realms of personal pain and agony to reach a more collective level and attempt resistance on both a personal and a national level. Illness for Ashour is not metaphorical in that Ashour's illness is real; however, she treats it and relates it metaphorically as well as metonymically to the nation.

Conclusion

In an interview conducted with Ashour, she emphasized that she disagrees with the notion that the writer has the complete freedom to write what they wish. In fact, ideological circumstances trigger and regulate the act of writing:

I don't think writers choose what to write about. I mean you live certain conditions and you feel you want to respond, to recreate your experience, to bear witness to what you've seen etc. etc. It is not that you choose a political topic and then you start writing about it. I think it is more complex than that. Had we been let us say north European, with less pressure, maybe we would've been different writers. We would've been North European writers. But, being Arab, being Egyptians, being part of

the third world with all its problems makes us write the way we do. ('In Conversation')

Both narratives examined above reconnoitre and circulate on the front lines of a freshly intact realm of resistance and revolutionary life writing. Her gendered language that fluctuates when addressing the reader shows that, galvanized by personal intuition, Ashour scrutinizes and inspects what is beyond a gendered discourse. Bugeja argues that these 'double-edged' forms of self-narrative are an 'optimal vehicle by which to navigate volatile cultural zones, conflicting and often antithetical historicopolitical projects' (Bugeja, 117). However, this does not seem to bother Ashour; her hopeful language in asserting herself and others' status as Egyptian citizens gives her and other female writers enough strength to overcome division and conflict in the forging of a unified national imagination.

Both texts write about the shortcomings of the nation, emphasized by Ashour's sense of patriotism and national affiliation. She personally affirms this in an interview, saying:

It's something which is always in my mind because that's what we face all the time, you only have to listen to the radio or look at a newspaper or a magazine or to an American or a TV or a European TV channel, you see all kinds of stereotypes and you know that is not you, this is not the people you know. [...] Hence comes the writing, your own expression of yourself. You express not only your individual self because the mere fact that you write, you use the language, means that the experience turns into

a collective experience, because no body, however eloquent, has a language of its own, it is common, it is collective. ('In Conversation')

Ashour is writing as multiple personae: a mother, an activist, a university professor, a fictional Shagar, but most importantly as an Egyptian. The cosmetic surgeon describes her as a 'master of disguise' as she perfectly hides her tumour in her hairdo. She is not a master of disguise, but she is a master of constructing spaces for the people surrounding her to thrive and flourish in. Ashour's factual account of the January revolution with all its contesting forces, filled with both anxiety and merriment, accentuates her sense of communal solidarity against corruption and political positioning. The quotations in my reading are selected according to the intensity of Ashour's association between the personal and the political, and the portrayal of the public through the private.

In writing about sickness, Ashour's struggle and pain does not give the reader any feeling of her surrendering so much as it accentuates the joining of mind, body and nation with hope. It is a detailed painful experience that Ashour describes, yet, there is always a feeling of hope hidden underneath the descriptions of personal and social pain. Optimism is constant. This makes her see in *Heavier than Radwa* that death is less painful than life itself and that life is 'heavier' than death. Ashour seems to be fully conscious of the way she wants to end her autobiography. Instead of writing an open-ended text, she makes it clear to the reader that the ending is going to be anything but defeat and humiliation. It is certainly not an easy task for the writer to frankly speak about his personal pain and brokenness; however, it is

as if Ashour's sickness has stripped away all her fears and given her courage to write bluntly about it. Her sickness is in this respect her cure. As much as it has intimidated her, it has cured her personal fears and hesitations. Similarly, without the Egyptian revolution, the populace would always be in silence.

Her portrayal of the individual is an act of placing a mirror before society, reflecting the suffering of the individual through the corruption of the state, of society, the academic sector, and the patriarchal society's treatment of the female figure. These themes will be further examined in her main fictional writing in the next chapter. The next chapter will portray Ashour's craft as a writer to demonstrate her ability to act as an intellectual for the people and collective and to show that her alienation is not from the nation but rather from those who lead it, demonstrated in terms of allusion. These fictional works were published before the January revolution; hence, they will be reviewed and thoroughly analysed through her use of subject matter and character choice in fictional metaphoric terms to conform with institutional literary censorship.

Chapter Two

Fiction as Collective Memory: Testimony and Activism in the Works of Ashour

I found myself going to the past which, however painful, was not as painful as the present.

-Radwa Ashour, "My Experience"

Introduction

This chapter will offer an analysis of Radwa Ashour's fictional works *Siraaj: An Arab Tale* (2007), *Blue Lorries* (2014), and *The Woman from Tantoura* (2014). Published in Arabic before the 2011 January revolution, these literary texts are micro-political novels that show an ambivalent hope, wrapped with pain and melancholy. Using collective memory, Ashour deploys a fictionalized historical record to re-envision political failings and attempts to convey the traumatic loss of Egyptian and Arabic cultural heritage. This chapter will discuss the power of imagination and allegory – whether fragmented or not – to construct a textual testimony to displacement, identity loss, and national despair.

As a novelist Ashour utilizes memory and history, private as well as communal, in weaving national concerns with the personal: tradition, ethnicity, gender, and, more rarely, religion. By extension, she scrutinizes the function of revisiting history and the past in a postcolonial text by a female Egyptian writer. This chapter will investigate the literary strategies used by Ashour in avoiding the trap of naïve romanticization when writing social as well as political realities

through the deployment of historical narrative. Ashour writes committed literature with a satirical patriotic sense. Therefore, she raises the question through the protagonists of her novels, of the ability of a writer to fictionalize and imagine the struggles of individuals from an upper-middle-class Egyptian perspective. This chapter will argue that Ashour seeks to write history from below by understanding the nation not as a political state but rather as the people.

Fiction excavates the contours of the experiences of Egyptians' private lives in relation to the public through its inherent allegorical capacities (Didur, 94). The purpose of Ashour's fictional endeavour is to explore the veiled truths of Arab and Egyptian politics and society. Through her fictional writing, she searches for new realities, for change and reform, always by means of imaginary characters and scenes. Through this allegorical world, acting as a sort of national scribe, Ashour aims to reach out to the populace in search of value and defiance for sociopolitical reorganisation. Prior to the 25 January 2011 revolution, and as a result of literary censorship, the political and social outlooks presented in her literary texts were necessarily discreetly concealed under a language of metaphor and allegory that attempts to speak the truth indirectly. Ashour does this by fictionalizing characters, personal incidents, and micro-communities living through realistic historical incidents. In doing so, Ashour skilfully amalgamates the accounts of real people with those of fictional characters. She creates microcosmic imaginary settings, or what can be called 'aspired utopias' to invite the reader to widen their own understanding of their sociopolitical context towards fighting against the obstructions and obscurities of their position in the nation as regulated by the

biopower¹³ of the state. Fictionalizing truths and realities does not necessarily diminish the historical account of a certain social incident or political predicament (Root, 37). In this respect, this gives real people faces and voices and counters the anonymity of biopower in which people as expected to be a silent labouring and reproductive body.

With modernity, the contours of the national imaginary have been profoundly shaped through one of the most important modern literary innovations: the novel. It has become the ultimate platform for Egyptian writers to offer a national critique and an analysis of political mainstreams, directions, and themes (Elsadda, xiv–xv). Ashour makes it clear it is vital to reform the traditional styles and forms of fiction, which stress the continuity of these texts rather than confronting the limitations of tradition (xviii). In this chapter, this argument is tackled differently in the three novels both thematically and aesthetically. Although all the novels write a history from below, they do so differently through different plots, sub-plots, and forms in each work. In *Siraaj*, Ashour presents a reimagination of the past for the present through narrating slave and worker revolt against tyrannical rule on an imaginary island. Alongside this fictional narrative she revisualizes the historical past by offering a narrative of the 1881 Urabi revolt against British occupation. In *The Woman from Tantoura*, she provides us an account of the Israel–Palestine conflict through the protagonist Ruqayya’s recollections of the past, where these personal reflections take on a metonymic

¹³ I use this term in the sense defined by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1990).

quality. Ashour's use of collective memory in this grand narrative of Palestinian life demonstrates to the reader how collective memory can highlight how lives are shaped by political trauma. In *Blue Lorries*, Ashour leads the reader through the concept of activism through the character of Nada and her indulgence in student activism and human rights campaigning. It also highlights the concept of the Panopticon and Jeremy Bentham's notion of the structure of the modern prison which Michel Foucault later took up as the model for his conception of modern power and political hegemony.

This chapter focuses on a selection of theoretical concepts that are related to memory and that may highlight the national allegory and historical consciousness of Arabic fictional writing, in particular those of Egypt. The first section will theorize national allegories and the use of historical consciousness in Arab narrative in articulating a national poetics of collectivity. It will integrate Jameson's concept of national allegory and Maurice Halbwach's model of collective memory in order to understand the construction of a collective identity in Ashour's historiographical fictions.

I. Theorizing National Allegories and Historical Consciousness in Arab Fiction

One of the features of an Arabic fictional text is the offering of a certain aspect of alternative national collectivity by conveying the multiple through the singular. Unlike the conventional singular protagonist of Western fiction, Arabic fictional writing will often incorporate multiple speakers and an exposition of their inner selves in relation to their political and social surroundings. As a result, joint plots

are a common feature, as is a fluctuating ‘polychronological temporality’ by which these plots are related. Though these characters are constructed as individual, autonomous, and well-rounded, Richardson argues that these narratives are ‘we’ narratives as a result of the shared perspective by which the reader can easily relate to the struggle, the trauma, and the national resistance. As Richardson says, ‘[t]hese narratives are addressed to a clearly identified audience that shares many characteristics of the protagonists. Together, these form an alternative collective poetics that draws on pre-, non- and postcapitalist conceptions’ (Richardson, 15). Ashour and Soueif, as Arab writers, focus on the collective to such an extent that the lines between the private and the public are blurred. The individuals in their plots face personal battles; however, these struggles are drawn into the idea of the collective that is projected in every person in a myriad of ways (Quawas, 56).

The call for *wahda wataniya* (national unity) has its roots from the Arabic renaissance movement (*nahda*) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the discourse of Egyptian Arab nationalism, this national unity has informed many of the themes of fictional writing. The aspiration of Arabic national unity was conceptualized materially in Egypt’s cultural, political and economic institutions. However, the use of the term went beyond its practical materialization. Unity is also figured as an abstract concept, an aspiration to being a normal structure of national life in the existence of the Arabic heritage as a requirement to extend and maintain the legacy. This has revolutionized the revival of the Arabic heritage, *nahda*. Gershoni and Jankowski explain:

The concept of ‘revival [*nahda*]’ suffused all varieties of Egyptian Arab nationalist thought. Egyptian Arabists repeatedly called for a return to the state of political and cultural greatness which had characterized the Arab nation in the past. The only path to such revival was through unity. It has been when it was unified in the early Islamic period that the Arab nation had experienced its greatest moments; correspondingly it was the rupturing of unity which ushered in the long era of Arab decline. [...] a return of unity was the prerequisite for Arab political recovery, cultural resistance, and a return to a position as a great nation among the nations of the world. (133)

In this respect, Egyptian fiction through the interwar period portrayed the state nationalist viewpoint, advanced in the wake of the 1919 Revolution. These fictions, however, were mostly realistic in their approach to narrating Egyptian troubles rather than historical. Soon after the 1930s, historical approaches to the presentation of Arabic and Islamic themes started to materialize. Gershoni and Jankowski note that ‘[t]his literature did not eclipse territorialist historical fiction; novels dealing with Pharaonic Egypt [...]. But the fact that several Egyptian novelists now turned their attention to Arab and Islamic history attests both to their growing interest in Egypt’s Arab-Islamic legacy and to an increasing popular receptivity to such subject-matter’ (130). However, Al-Musawi adds that until the 1960s postcolonial novels lacked a socio-economic and political critique of the state. The demand to draw correlations in regards to complex political issues such as the Palestine question, occupation, identity, and trauma have become more apparent (24). In the

1990s, the novels of a new generation of writers have been noted by many critics as distinctly short – one hundred to one hundred and fifty pages (Mehrez cited in Elsaddah, 146). The new generation of writers have diverged from the conventional structures and norms of the novel to an extent that they have been described as highly experimental in theme, construction, and form. Mehrez argues that ‘[t]hese new experiments are constantly evolving, interacting with the changing conditions in the new global order, and inscribing new idioms and imaginaries’ (149).

Moreover, their character choice has changed, seeing these writers constructing stronger and individual characters. Slotkin emphasizes that ‘[t]he emphasis on character implies a theory of historical causation that contemporary historians find suspect: a “heroic” theory, which emphasizes the agency of more or less powerful persons as shapers of events’ (Slotkin, 231). Ashour shaping the national struggle in this way allows the reader to imagine individuals’ inner psychological response to displacement and identity crises. Arab women writers focus primarily on the struggle and suffering of human beings. However, these texts are different in their character representation, especially of female characters, and are more involved in a process of self-recognition, self-realization, and self-discovery (Nasser, 7).

Although such a view has been widely criticized for generalization, Stefan Meyer has argued that what distinguishes Arab modernism from Western modernism is that Arabic modernism’s literary representation of individual trauma is unavoidably symbolic of wider collective quandaries and traumas at a certain

level. Meyers further argues that excessive focus solely on an individual life is equal to betrayal, especially in times of struggle (Elsadda, xxii). This resonates with Fredric Jameson's assertion of the fundamentality of nationalism as a form of restoring the consciousness of the collective in the third world in particular. However, in his work, Jameson is more concerned with the concept of nationalism in the third world in what he describes as their 'non-canonical forms of literature' ('Third-World', 65). For Jameson, the relationship between public and private is different in postcolonial societies than it is in the West. He argues that third world literary texts are all necessarily allegorical in a particular way. Jameson states that third world literature '[is] to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel' ('Third-World', 69). Jameson argues that third world texts venture on political dimension in the form of various national allegories, with no exception, however, of those texts that are 'seemingly private' to the reader and are 'properly libidinal dynamic' (69). The concept of national allegory is further emphasized through his recent article 'Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate', where Jameson maintains that national 'in this usage referred to the historical moment of the construction of the nation in a given geographical space, that is, to the "cultural revolution" (whether bourgeois or socialist) in which a collectivity [...] was being produced' ('Antinomies', 481). Bashir Abu-Manneh stresses that Jameson 'is interested in the emergence of national sensibility and its impact on narrativity, marking textual moments when the private could symbolize the universal or collective' (12). It is

noticeable that Jameson's point is a common feature of the majority of postcolonial texts, especially Arabic literature in general and Egyptian in particular, regardless of the dissimilar racial or gender specifics ('Antinomies', 69).

There are of course oppositional outlooks to Jameson's article, such as those of Aijaz Ahmad and Imre Szeman. Their mixed views on Jameson's theorizing of national allegory falls between their approval of 'a sophisticated attempt to make sense of the relationship of literature to politics in the decolonizing world' (Szeman, 804), and their criticism of his choice of the term 'third world literature'. For instance, whilst still endorsing the principles of Marxist analysis, Aijaz Ahmad argues against Jameson's terminology of the 'third' and the 'first' world in his essay 'Jameson: Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"'. It is clear that Ahmad's opposition resides in Jameson's lexicality and the binary opposition between East and West, asserting that 'we live not in three worlds but one' (211–12). However, Stefan G. Meyer offers a contrasting argument, writing that '[o]nly by disengaging from Western cultural priorities can we develop the objectivity to consider postcolonial modernism as a phenomenon both distant from, and related to, its Western form, and this will enable us to better appreciate the significance of modernism from a global perspective' (279).

The novel is an ideal setting for the reader to convey and understand the exclusion and inclusion of different social groups and all that may occur in the political and cultural sphere because of its 'privileged status' in cultural history (Elsadda, xvi). According to the Palestinian author Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the novel

is a ‘fusion of various elements drawn from the Aristotelian categories: from the tradition of tragedy, it takes the major theme of the conflict of the individual with forces more powerful than himself’. Allan explains that this is something Jabra ‘traces from Aeschylus to Dostoevsky and Faulkner [...]’ (Allen 3). Hence, a novel seeks a certain kind of truth, a truth that is beyond the material. In the case of the Arabic novel, it seeks a collective truth through presenting personal struggles. Ashour’s novels may appear to be historical in a strict sense, however, Ashour seeks a poetic truth. She recreates and rewrites historical facts to allow the reader to visualize these facts. Moreover, she gives a chance for her generation and many to come, as Slotkin describes it, to ‘create [...] a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts – and also a sense of what those facts *mean* in some larger sense – and to achieve that in a flash of recognition, rather than as the conclusion to a necessarily laborious argument’ (225–6).

Ouyang argues that the Arabic novel seeks a national truth through reminiscences of the past. Yet, the act of reminiscing is proof of the commitment to providing a platform on which to construct a rediscovered outlook for the future of the nation. She clarifies that the Arabic novel,

Which shares with the Arab nation its cross-cultural genealogy, has aligned itself with the nation, partaking in imagining, building and allegorising the nation, and modernising Arabic culture and literature at the same time. It does so by rooting both the nation and novel in the past, often mobilising the language of the past to write about the present, and

saturating the novel's textual landscape with a profound longing for the past, more importantly for the future that has yet to take proper and desirable shape. Interrogation of the past is synonymous with the search for future. (v–vi)

However, as discussed in the previous chapter, looking to the past makes a writer liable to the criticism of overly romanticising and idealizing a phase of life that no longer exists and thereby reducing its usefulness and reliability for later ages. However, Ouyang argues that reference to the past produces a uniquely correlated relationship that offers traces of the intersections between the past and the present. She further explains,

In the story of the triangulated relationship of nation-state, modernity and tradition the Arabic novel that 'employs the Arab cultural heritage' tells is another story of the dialectics of past and present, which is in turn shaped by its own search for a unique identity and indigenous roots, and driven by its own impulse to tell stories, to look at the ways in which it tells the stories and the consequences of its narrative strategies in the production of meaning, [... for] its nostalgia for both past and future and, more importantly, to track the history of the nation and novel as it writes. (Ouyang v–vi)

Ashour aims in her writing to describe what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has conceptualized as 'historical consciousness' through multi-layered narrative (102). Richardson argues that political censorship has automatically led to the

production of texts that are directed to mainly two types of readers: ‘one that allows their publication and another that understands their deeper, hidden meanings’ (Richardson, 13). Writing in an allegorical language, al-Musawi argues, describes the ‘post-independence state’ with all its underlying fraudulent politics and revolutionary terminology (124). As Lukács believed that the ‘smaller [...] relationships’ of individuals gave meaning to the ‘great monumental dramas of world history’ (cited in Phillipott, 2). Bill Ashcroft reminds us that history derives from the Greek term *historia*, which means ‘to investigate’. This investigation asks the most basic question of ‘what happened?’. Ashcroft argues that ‘many societies, perhaps most non-western societies, do not ask this question, simply because “what happened” is inseparable from what is still happening and will happen.’ (82) Hence, Ashcroft’s argument illustrates that the use of history by Ashour here is for the act of perpetuating rather than investigating the recollections of the past.

Both a historian and a writer of historical fiction have the same task; however, the aim is entirely different. They both aim to deliver a truthful insight into certain events; nevertheless, the main difference resides in how close they are to the solid truth. The writer of a historical fiction uses selectivity in narrating such historical events to fit in her or his literary message, whereas a historian would utilize chronology in the conveyance and the structuring of a, in Lukács’s sense, concrete historical epoch (*The Historical*, 15). Furthermore, Slotkin argues that a historical novel must ‘subsume the process of creating knowledge into its representation, displaying the character’s life as a subjectively experienced while – at the same time implicitly highlighting those forces or influences (derived from

historical analysis) which seem most significant. It can do more than re-create historical events, ideas, manners, environments' (226). Lukács argues that a historical novel does not merely retell great historical events but aims for an awakening – a 'poetic awakening'. The act of re-experiencing various motives whether social or political – under the scope of fiction – leads to indulge the reader in a process of thinking and evaluating their exciting realities (*Realism in Our*, 42).

II. Conceptualizing Halbwachs' Collective Memory

In the context of modernity, searching for the past and deriving messages from history may be considered an act of hindrance. Al-Musawi explains, '[u]ntil recently history has not been regarded as a construct. History is not only a redrawn, invoked and referred to by a large number of people, educated and not educated alike, but also relived as if it were only yesterday' (350). However, there is an existing relationship between history and narrative that may enrich the process of comprehension of the reader's perception of any given culture. Mehrez argues that the '[m]odern distinctions that are made between the "real" and the "imaginary", hence between the historical and the literary, are bound to mystify – perhaps even mask – the relationship that exists between literature and the human sciences, in this case history in particular' (*Egyptian Writers*, 4).

When the historical subject written about is in the distant past, the need to write a certain historical event, an era, a person, or a certain society is to allow for the other people's testimony who hold some remembrance of it (Halbwachs, 78). As Halbwachs notes:

The memory of a sequence of events may no longer have the support of a group: the memory of involvement in the events or of enduring their consequence, of participating in them or receiving a first hand account from participants and witnesses, may become scattered among various individuals, lost amid new groups for whom these facts no longer have interest because the events are definitely external to them. When this occurs, the only means of preserving such remembrances is to write them down in a coherent narrative, for the writings remain even though the thought and the spoken word die. (79)

Halbwach's analysis stresses the role the historical novel plays in not just 'bridging the gap between the past and the present' and 'restoring [a] ruptured continuity' but also carrying, as Slotkin argues, political implications (231). One of these types is the politics of content, the values and the perspectives that shape the author's choices in writing their novel. Ashour, for instance, used her cultural and political realism to weave a thread of nationalism and displacement throughout her works (Slotkin, 231). Referring to history is not a mere interest in antiquity, Sabry Hafez argues; rather, it is an attempt at awakening the reader's patriotism and giving them a pattern and an inspiration in their quest of national identity (cited in Allen, 25). Moreover, it is a sense of reality that both the writer and the historian aim to redefine. Mehrez raises an important point, which is that literature and history give the reader an opportunity to relive the past. Thus, 'history and literature are condemned to distort' by reason of their 'misrepresentations' rather than 'representations'. Mehrez further argues, 'representations (whether historical or

literary), as Roland Barthes has noted, are linguistic operations and as such can only be deformations' (Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers*, 4–5). This reality, however, deals not with how true it is, but 'how' the reality is transformed and rewritten in each text. Terry Eagleton concisely notes that '[i]t is not as though we have something called factual knowledge which may then be distorted by particular interests and judgements, although this is certainly possible, it is also that without particular interests we would have no knowledge at all [...]. Interests are constitutive of our knowledge' (12).

Ouynang explains the co-constitutive relationship between the representations of the past and the present in historical novels. Ouynang succinctly notes that the historical novel,

Looks at the past through the prism of the present in its imagining of political community and will to the modern, but sees the present through the eye of the past in its allegorisation of the nation-state and interrogation of modernisation and the role of tradition in the process, all the while telling the story of its own search for form. (vii)

Halbwachs argues in his book *The Collective Memory* (1950) that the individual's processing of memory is of two sorts: individual and collective. Though intermingled – as Halbwachs states, '[a] man must often appeal to other's remembrance to evoke his own past' – memory is further separated in its personal and textual function. Individual memory, Halbwachs argues, is a memory that deals with a certain remembrance that is merely personal. Even when it somehow

connects with others, it is nevertheless common only in the aspects that suits the individual. He further argues that '[c]ollective memory [...] congregates the individual as a member of a group'. Halbwachs states that 'the collective memory, for its part, encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them. It evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousness' (51).

Halbwachs adds that the temporal and spatial boundaries of collective as well as the individual memory are rather confined and limited. In the reality of national discourse, however, collective memory becomes 'borrowed memory'. Collective memories are best defined, as Halbwachs argues, as 'symbols' and 'conceptions'. In the process of recalling these national memories, the memory of others is what one should entirely rely on. In this respect, historical memory, moreover, deals with a broader time span but conveys it rather compactly. He states that 'it would represent the past only in a condensed and schematic way, while the memory of our own life would present richer portrait with greater continuity' (52).

Collective memory is 'a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive', and that is what makes history different than collective memory (Halbwachs, 80). In the process of an individual communicating and adapting his memory to others, Halbwachs argues that some sort of 'artificial milieu' is created which is 'external

to every one of these personal thoughts, though encompassing them all – a collective space and time, a collective history’ (59). It can be argued, however, that Halbwachs’s analysis of individual and collective memory lacks a consideration of gendered memory. His use of the pronoun ‘he’ throughout the analysis limits the width of scope of the study. Moreover, it delimits the universality of the word ‘individual’, especially in relation to Arabic postcolonial literature as in our present concern.

The connection between collective memory and creating collective identity through the strategic use of history is best described by George G. Iggers. He asserts that ‘a main function of historical writing whether professional or literary, has been the creation of collective memory which in turn has been a key element in the formation of collective identity [...]. History is memory; the task of the honest historian must be to prevent it from becoming distorted memory’ (32). In this respect, Iggers demonstrates that collective identity and collective memory overlap in a way that ‘[a]s a key element in collective identity, collective memory sees itself as committed to a whole set of attitudes and values which are accepted as right without requiring rational justification. [...] Memory involves not a detached recapture of the past but one which is deeply attached and committed’ (33). The following section of analysis will be based upon what we have understood from the theoretical framework outlined above.

III. Ashour's *Siraaj*

Written in Arabic in 1992, although not published in English until 2007, *Siraaj* is an apparently simple short story set on an imaginary island. The island is a dystopia, it is unnamed, an every-Arab place. The island is located between Yemen and Zanzibar and is ruled by an authoritarian wealthy Sultan who later allies with the British authorities to crush a rising revolution by the islanders which later leads to the British colonization of the island. In this work, Ashour constructs a sub-plot in late-nineteenth-century Alexandria and the 'Urabi revolution as a backlash against the British bombardment. Amina, a baker in the Sultan's palace and the main protagonist in the novella, anxiously awaits her son's return after his trip to Egypt. Through his voyage, Said, Amina's son, has borne witness to both a tranquil and chaotic Egypt. Through experiencing the 'Urabi revolt, Said develops a new political outlook and militant thoughts which he brings back home.

One of the striking features of the novel is its presentation of economic inequality and the island's class stratification. The novel's treatment of this disparity is portrayed through the incongruity of the Sultan's life of opulence – the banquets, the harems, and the noble Arab horses – with the subordinate class of workers and slaves, widowed women besieged with poverty, constant agony, illiteracy, prison, and a colonizing force both from their authoritarian Sultan and the imperialistic power. Right from the novel's outset, and through a simple naive and empathic tone, the narrator describes the lavish life of Lady Alia, the Sultan's wife, as seen from below. The narrator says,

But Lady Alia – by the will of God the most high and powerful – had remained childless, stalking about in her sandals of wood inlaid with gold and jewels, so that hearts trembled with fright and children ran with terror, and none in the high house could breathe freely except when Bint al-Mohsen, bearing lavish gifts and accompanied by her serving women, set out for Yemen to visit her father. But she was never away for more than a month, after which she would return to spread gloom and fear wherever she went in her fancy sandals. An austere and cold hearted woman she was, who never smiled – had the hardness of her heart spread to her entrails, turning them to stony ground in which no seed could take root, or had her heart turned to stone from grief over the absence of offspring? Amina pondered [...] [t]he absence of children wouldn't harden a tender heart. (3)

The 'gloom' and 'fear' of the Sultan and his wife later intensifies when the news of the foreign invasion slowly spreads between the islanders. In a panic in the face of foreign invasion, Umm Latif, a worker in the Sultan's palace and a friend of Amina, breaks the news of the arrival of the Queen of England. Amina narrates the trembling fear in Umm Latif's voice indicatively saying,

Then Umm Latif could not bear to wait any longer, and she announced in a voice she tried to keep to a whisper, but which rang like a bell, 'Tomorrow the queen of the English is coming to the island.'

The women who had lain down but not yet succumbed to sleep got up again, while the others adjusted their positions in order to hear better.

‘The English?’

‘That’s right, the queen of the English!’

‘Does a woman rule the English, then?’

‘A woman rules them. Such are the foreigners: with them everything is upside-down!’ (4)

Troubled by the slowly creeping news of the imperial invasion and their unfamiliarity with worldly affairs, the islanders are in anguish whilst helplessly anticipating what will happen to their island. Later, the reader comes to know of the invasion of Zanzibar, a nearby island. Amina narrates the powerful and merciless English troops setting on the island: ‘[t]he English were bearing down hard now,’ Amina narrates, ‘and had been for years. They bore down, exerted their authority, showing mercy not even to their closest friends. For here was the Sultan of Zanzibar suffering their commands, forced to accommodate them even as he beheld the ruination of his country under the conditions they imposed, and he without recourse, helpless as a sparrow in the talons of a hawk’ (10).

The subtlety of *Siraj* resides in the subplots and the secondary stories that highlight the connections between the imaginative/fictional elements of the novel (Romaine, xii). Said’s ship arrives in Egypt and his first impression of the country is quite different to what later emerges. The third person narrator describes Said thus: ‘Said walked behind his companion, amazed at his tales, his charm, and his

ironic comments. In spite of all Mahmoud's talk of how lucky Said was because he roamed the seas, Said felt it was Mahmoud who was the lucky one, because he lived in this vast and beautiful city, constructed not just of buildings but of wonders' (Ashour, *Siraaaj*, 15). Said's story acts as an allegory of the Sinbadian notion of voyage, redeployed in a politicized manner. In *Siraaaj* the story shifts from being a saga of a sailor into an 'allegory of the unconsciousness anxiety of the subalterns' (Ghazoul, 19). Ashour's treatment of this Sinbadian story, as well as the form in which she deploys it, adds to its politicized and modern aspect. Ashour's narrative, characterized by its structural nonlinearity, gives a modern twist to the tale of Sinbad. One of the political lessons that *Siraaaj* offers through mimicking Sinbad's tale is to present a double victimization of the Arab world, an 'external colonization and internal oppression' as seen from the exploitation from the Captain and the Sultan on Said (Ghazoul, 19). This subversion of linear time and the conscious vagueness builds 'a space between author and reader to place a share of the responsibility of the narrative on the reader's shoulders and thus an invitation to read the text for political and social change as committed literature' (Nasser, 3).

Not a long while after, Said sees the abrupt transformation of tranquil Egypt whilst still in it; the horrifying news spreads about the constant relentless and thunderous bombardment of the English ships on the Egyptian forts. People run to shelter at their homes, calling for 'Urabi's rescue (*Siraaaj*, 16). In a panicked tone, Said's friend Mahmoud explains the situation to a clueless Said: 'Said saw him [Mahmoud] leap into the air waving his arms like a lunatic and shouting, "Look Said! Listen, Said the forts are giving it back to them! The English are firing from

the sea and the forts are returning fire! The forts are shooting at them the way they're shooting at us! Orabi, he's a real man, folks, Orabi's a real man!" (17).

A few pages later, the narrator shows the traumatic outcome of the English occupation in Egypt through Said's eyes. Said witnesses the Egyptian women's passionate expression of grief from the invasion: some are climbing the roofs of the houses while 'tearing their cheeks, beating their breasts, and rendering their clothing' (24). The narrator further recounts the crying:

[T]hey were seizing the edges of their veils in their fists and yanking them this way that, in a rhythmic twitch that matched the cadence of their cries of lamentation. From time to time they would be interrupted by a sudden shrill wail from one another of the women, who would leap spastically about, like a newly killed chicken. (24)

A certain type of loss has prompted these women's moans, a sudden realisation of their loss of their countries and in turn their identities and consequent loss of self-worth. Ashour here intends to take the reader on a journey to the past that ends in the present. She aims to go back in history in order to highlight the current Middle Eastern alliance with Western neo-colonialism for the indirect benefit of both parties.

On the island, the workers show despair and helplessness when they hear about the English troops' arrival. The unpretentious mentality of the populace is shown through their internal political conversations. In a verbal encounter between

Amina and Ammar, an old slave on the island, both characters show very little political awareness:

‘English ships. They are setting up a base on the eastern side of the island, and they’ve begun constructing on it.’

‘A base?’

‘A base for this army.’

‘And why are the English posting an army among us, Amina?’

‘I don’t know Ammar.’ (30)

Amina’s perception changes, however, when Said returns from Egypt carrying with him new radical thought and a developed understanding of revolt. Said explains by utilizing the terminology of resistance when describing to the heroic acts of ‘Urabi to his mother, saying:

‘I was in Alexandria when the English attacked it. I saw their battleships bombarding the forts and destroying them; I saw the people cursing the English and calling on Orabi to defeat them.’

‘Is Orabi the leader of Egypt?’

‘He wasn’t the leader of Egypt, but its people love him. He was the commander of their army, and it was he who fought the English, but he was defeated and the English occupied Egypt and sent him into exile.’ (41)

Right before Ashour introduces the climatic events of the uprising by the islanders, they describe to Said upon his return that ‘everything was just as it had been when

he left', '[t]he Sultan is in his castle; the slaves are on the plantations, and not a week goes by that one of their men isn't arrested and thrown into the dungeon' (47). However, the slaves' and workers' oppression has been intensified by the construction of an English base which stimulates resistance. They say:

And we, as you see, are just as we ever were: we go out fishing and we come back; we give the Sultan his rightful portion and keep the rest. The only new thing on the island that base that's been set up by the English army, but they keep to themselves in the eastern section of the island: they don't have anything to do with us, and we don't have anything to do with them. (47)

Soon enough, rumours spread about a potential uprising. This uprising is not only anti-feudal but has been also triggered by anti-colonial impulses. The slaves who were secretly initiating a revolution used 'Sirraaj' as their keyword, the name was constantly repeated in their planning scheme. At the beginning, no one knew what it meant or what it referred to; however, the Sultan's helpers think that these 'communications constitute a security threat to the island and to your [the Sultan's] personal safety' (57). The vagueness of the word suggests the subtlety of the slaves and workers in their planning. The Sultan's dictatorship, which permits him full authority on what he calls 'his' island, is under threat. He gathers the princes in a tempestuous manner calling them 'men of straw, unreliable, negligent, and careless, fit only for the indolence of the women's quarters'(58). He addresses them with anger:

‘The roof is crumbling and threatening to collapse upon our heads’, he said, adding, ‘This island is my property, and its bounties come out of my own funds. I delegated you to maintain security for me, but you neglected your duties, so the slaves have flouted your authority and made fools of you. I swear to the greatest, the most high God, if you don’t change your ways, I’ll throw you into the dungeon with Mohamed!’ (58)

The Sultan is nameless; he represents every Arab totalitarian and dictatorial authority, blind to reality and the affairs of ordinary citizens. Slowly and gradually, the islanders’ political consciousness has developed, and now they no longer see the same hypocritical acts of their Sultan the same way (63). Soon enough they start to interpret natural things as to be evil omens and prophecies. Ammar then insists that Said’s dream of an ugly faced man is nothing but a vision of the Sultan’s downfall (73). Even though doubts are haunting them, they see this revolution as a chance of liberation, no matter what the consequences are:

The slaves wanted to overthrow the Sultan. Would God stand by their side? Would Ammar see himself, before he died, released from the imprisonment that had lasted almost a lifetime, or was it written in His book that slaves were to live out their lives in torment on his earth, to be found wanting in the strength needed to free themselves? Would God bring them victory, or would He forsake them? (79)

The narrator’s set of questions indirectly place focus on the inner turbulence of the slaves’ struggle, also showing that their subaltern position is the only thing

they stand to lose in the uprising. The day of the revolution has come and the slaves' decision to overthrow the king has been made. It is no longer simply rumours and secrets, instead a mood of solidarity amongst the slaves and peasants with the rest of the islanders has formed:

The secret was sinking in and leaving its impression: with the fishermen at sea, with the slaves on the plantations, with the sailors on their long journeys, in the memories of the old men sitting on their doorstep, and with the women as they sang lullabies to their children. The secret was sinking in, preserved in the people's hearts, locked up like the treasures of the wealthy, until the time came when everyone turned his key in the lock, picked up his lamp in his right hand, and set out with others. Boys and girls, men and women, the elderly supported upon their canes or seated on litters borne by the bale-bodied, infants at their mothers' breasts, plantation slaves, fishermen, sailors, pearl divers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons – all released their birds in the direction of the fortress and followed them, the lanterns in their hands. Thousands of lanterns glowed in the darkness [...]. (80)

Harouny explains that '[t]he implacability of the historical forces against which the island's residents unknowingly pit themselves – and against which they are ultimately powerless – lends a low-key menace to the unfolding narrative that is the author's prominent thematic preoccupation. While sometimes mythic in tone, this never detracts from the blunt force of the political reality that is the novella's factual

skeleton' (169). Ashour has stated that to her writing *Siraaaj* was a game where she pictured an imaginary place but the background of this imaginary place is made of real historical incidents, thereby constructing a connection between both worlds ('My Novel'). Through the mixing of worlds, Ashour emphasizes that she intended to write a story that can be relived and reapplied in our contemporary time, a timely epic of oppressed people under imperialism and dictatorship. Ashour constructs an imaginary scene to give the reader an alternate space in which to reflect and meditate on their own surrounding political structures. Romaine explains that *Siraaaj* 'is an allegory of contemporary political realities, drawing on the conventions of traditional Arabic storytelling, and the poetry and cultural nuances of those styles' (xi). It is evident in this case that literary obfuscation allows multiple levels of freedom for Ashour to put forward her own national aspirations, the private microcosm of the island acting as a microcosm of the Arab nation viewed, however, from below. Moreover, by dwelling upon the theme of resistance, Ashour provides a reminder to people, Egyptians specifically, of their own history of uprisings and their recurrence: in this sense the 1882 uprising can become the 1952 one, and so forth.

It is essential to highlight the importance of the representation of the youth as having an amount of agency in resistance and propagating change in the novel. Hafez, Said, and even the Sultan's son Mohammed, have the potential to instigate reform despite their upbringing and makeup. On one occasion, Mohammed offers, through the letters he used to send his father from London, allusions to human freedom in civil society. Upon the request of his father, Mohammed observes

everything in London. Surprisingly, what strikes him is the way that the workers protest upon a clash with their employers with women protesting for their right to vote. It is striking to observe that Mohammed has been presented as a character that opposes his ancestors' political thought and develops his own ideas that echo the demands of the islanders (9). Along with the change Mohammed observes and absorbs, he also starts to dress in a Western fashion and sees political alternatives, with democratic impulses. Mohammed tells the Sultan, 'I suggest we set up a consultative council, and executive ministries, that we separate the state treasures from your private ones; that we emancipate the slave and have them work for wages' (56). However, these suggestions are met with resentment by the Sultan. He imprisons his son in the dungeon and from then on Mohammed's life is severely limited. The Sultan is outraged and overwhelmed by feelings of betrayal from the threat he is sensing from all sides: from his son's proposals, the colonial machinations of the British, and the possibility of a slave revolt. Ashour's intention is to highlight the potentiality in the mobilization of the political impulses of the youth and their engagement with the politics of revolt. This stresses the correlation between the political dynamics 'from below' and the actions of youth in relation to authoritarian regimes.¹⁴

Ashour depicts illiteracy in the novel as a condition desirable for those in power to maintain amongst ordinary citizens; learning and writing are considered dangerous acts and can only be monopolized by the male elite. 'There were no

¹⁴ For more on youth activism under authoritarianism in Egypt, see: Sika, Nadine. *Youth Activism and Contentious Politics in Egypt: Dynamics of Continuity and Change*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

women', Ashour writes, 'on the entire island who could read, apart from the daughters of the Sultan' (40). The written word's power and privilege is shown throughout the novel. For instance, Ammar's need to 'record' his experience as a slave on the island through documenting his personal story with the island's sultans is a firm indication of the power of literacy in portraying the political concerns of the islanders. This power is also apparent in the Sultan's distress triggered by the request of the British to offer them a 'written document' showing his submission to their power. It is also to be perceived in the hidden messages the slaves and workers exchanged in preparation to take over the high house and dungeon (Embabi, 61).

Ashour wants to suggest that illiteracy is an intentional effect of tyranny and oppressive practices. The primary reason behind this is because collective memory has always been orally transferred in Arab societies. In contemporary times, especially before the 2011 January revolution, the restriction of oral performance had increased drastically. Romaine explains, 'literacy has become a prerequisite to empowerment in the developing world, if it is to stand a chance against imperialism and occupation – political, cultural, and otherwise. Thus illiteracy, too, can become a form of privation, a fact of which the underprivileged are not unaware' (xv).

Written in 1992, when dictatorship was prevalent, Ashour's *Siraaj* typifies a country that has been ruled by dictators pursuing tyrannical regimes whilst their countries stagnate or deteriorate, leading its citizens to either flee or adopt radical ideological interpretations of politics and religion in the aspiration to gain the voice that they are otherwise denied (*Siraaj*, xvii). By shedding light on the class system

and the inner lives of the working classes, Ashour aspires to direct the reader's attention to the implications of the economic and political dynamics of Egyptian society, as well as to provide an indirect allusion to the Egyptian workers' movement as a counterpoint to rapid capitalist development and as an indication of her communist views. Ashour points out the totalitarian political authority that forms and moulds the cultural ideology of the public.

Ashour gives the reader a chance to develop a critical eye to both political and social contemporary events (Boullata, 173). In elaborating on her form choice, Ashour emphasizes that the historical and fictional are amalgamated to represent the parallel representation of the 'Urabi uprising with the slave revolt against the Sultan in the island. Ashour explains another aspect of the novel which stresses on the many ways in which its structure permits her to re-inscribe history and offer a counter-narrative. As Ashour writes,

The 1882 bombing of Alexandria and the defeat of Orabi are distanced and pushed back to the background whereas the fictional revolt of the African slaves is brought to the foreground. It was a modest attempt to modify the boundaries of the novel genre incorporating and adapting traditional narrative forms. [...] I found myself going to the past which, however painful was not as painful as the present.¹⁵ (88)

¹⁵ For a contextual history of the 'Urabi Revolt, see Donald Reid, "The Urabi revolution and the British conquest, 1879–1882." *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Vol 2.* Ed. Martin W. Daly. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

El-Namoury notes that painful stories of the subalterns in the novella ‘promise a continuity of the revolution till “Bread, freedom, and social justice” are finally achieved’ (no pgn). Ashour’s *Siraaj* is a tool for the writer to outline a modernist view of Arab collective resistance. To this end the novella alternates between folktale and various sociopolitical allegories in a strategic manner. Ashour’s allegorical story of economic and political resistance is portrayed through the characters’ endorsement of viewpoints that echo those of human rights rhetoric. She intends to highlight the idea that awareness of subordination starts on the personal and social levels and slowly spreads to the political through people seeing themselves as part of a collectivity. Through gathering enough courage, men and women in the island have sought to change their own destiny through planning the uprising.

Ashour’s *Siraaj* is a story of the relationship between tyrannical power, the struggle of oppressed individuals, and the representations of slaves in the African as well as the Arab world (xi). The allegorical and historical side of narrative is an essential aspect for Ashour in her striving for the survival of the Arabic culture and the revival of its heritage. This, of course, is a most natural outcome for a writer who has borne witness to the merciless form of society’s obliteration of their primary forms of narrative, and the realisation that this is the most fundamental attack on individual expression (xii). Doaa Embabi asserts that *Siraaj* is a ‘fictional “documentation” of the voices of the disenfranchised’ (60). Through dwelling upon political and cultural issues, Ashour is also accessing collective memory through using imaginary worlds to re-animate actual revolutionary moments.

IV. Oral Testimony and Trauma in *The Woman from Tantoura*

In *The Woman from Tantoura*, Ashour recounts the *Nakba* and its aftermath through the generational development of one family; the narrative demonstrates Ashour's ability to convey the psychological construction of individuals during times of traumatic historical change. In the novel, Ashour tells the story of Palestine, in Abu-Manneh words, as a 'human case' and not merely a 'national struggle' (21). As Ruqayya, the novel's protagonist and the woman from Tantoura, narrates her story both through the *Nakba* and exile, Ashour highlights the power of collective memory and testimony, one of the main thematic structures of the text. The novel suggests Ashour's awareness of the potential power of focalization of collective events through an individual's mind. Two stories run in parallel in the novel: the *Nakba* in 1948 and Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. These events unfold through Ruqayya's fragmented recollections that help to rectify and develop her political Palestinian consciousness.

The novel follows the story of Ruqayya, from her early childhood until she becomes a grandmother. Through narrating her migration from Palestine to Lebanon and other Arab countries, Ashour traces her story as well as her children's and grandchildren's account. The novel takes place between 1947 and 2000, opening with the narration of the traumatic event of losing Tantoura under the occupation of the Israeli forces and ending with the liberation of south Lebanon. She then mournfully narrates losing her father and brothers as martyrs in the Deir Yasin massacre. Ruqayya is a strong, rounded character whom the reader will follow, seeing her psychological development and how cultural trauma has shaped

her thoughts and feelings towards the world around her and her feelings towards Palestine. Ruqayya is haunted by a past of pain, dislocation, and a history full of martyrs. Through despair, pain, and tears, Ruqayya seems strong and stoic but with a mixture of feelings of anger and resentment bottled up inside her inner self, which we see in her recollections of the past.

Ruqayya serves as a general exemplar of the lives of the Palestinian refugees and what they face in the midst of fear and traumatic loss of family, home, stability, and more importantly, loss of a nation. Again, Ashour narrates history and national aspirations from below through revealing torture of the refugees, dislocation and loss of innocence, and psychological trauma. Ashour conveys these themes through a sequence of testimonies, national songs, and poetry. Just as Ruqayya's present is affected by her trauma, her children as well are affected by her past, suggesting that Ruqayya's past is not so much a private as it is a collective one. In describing Ashour's female characters, Al-Musawi maintains that the frame of mind of Ashour's women is not gendered but rather 'strongly believe in one main line of conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed' (220). They resist submission, yet 'combine affection and thoughtfulness' (220). Al-Musawi's argument reflects on the way these characters place themselves in a more public sphere rather than a private one. Their concerns are politicised and very much aligned with the collective's national concerns.

The novel starts with a calm paradise-like picture of Ruqayya's memories of Tantoura, its sea and its seasonal changes. However, this abruptly changes when

she narrates a detailed description of the Zionist attack on her village. Ruqayya narrates the attack through the eyes of a child, a memory marked by innocence and lack of understanding of the intensity of danger and fear. 'I didn't know all the details,' Ruqayya says,

what happened in Haifa on any given day, how many were killed by the powder barrel the settlers rolled down Mount Carmel in such-and-such street, or in what village they invaded the houses by night, pouring kerosene on the stores of flour and lentils and oil and olives, firing in the inhabitants. But like the rest of the girls in town I knew that the situation was dangerous, not only because we heard some of what went from mouth to mouth, but also because there was something frightening in the air, something on the verge. On the verge of what? We didn't know. (*The Woman*, 16)

As a young girl, Ruqayya used to listen to her mother's conversations on the intensity of the encounter between the Arabs and the Jews. As a child, Ruqayya grew up with the sounds of gunshots, early signs of their coming displacement and a plan of settler colonialism. She explains the first news that directly pertained and altered her saying,

what happened in Haifa at the end of the month of December, since one of the neighbors told my mother about fights in Haifa between the Jewish and Arab workers in the oil refinery. The neighbor said that the Jews threw a bomb from a fast-moving car and killed and wounded many of us.

She said that on the very next day the Palestinian workers rose against the Jewish workers, armed with sticks and knives, taking vengeance and killing anyone they could. (17)

Through the contrasting image of sticks and knives against Israeli bombs, Ashour here intends to emphasize the discrepancy between the weaponry used in the course of resistance. These recollections capture the horrific first stages of alienation and exile that led families to destitution and displacement. This is further described in Wisal's recollections. Wisal was the first refugee Ruqayyah meets from Qisarya, a city located in the sea, after its fall. The former narrates the Israeli attack that happened in their village,

My friend tells me that the Jewish troops laid siege to the town, attacked it, and drove the people out of their houses. 'My mother said, "Where will we go? We have no one to support us, no one who can take us to another town or arrange a way for us to live." She insisted on staying in the house. We stayed, and we learned that others did as we did. A week after they entered the town, they took us out of the houses and destroyed them and forced us to leave. They did the same with the Muslims and the Christians.' I found that strange, and I asked, 'Are there Christians in your town?' (20)

The traumatic attacks as well as the people's various experiences of the Israeli invasion have led Ruqayyah to build up a large set of unresolved questions, that take on collective significance, on the state of the country. She reflects on the sudden

fall of Haifa that foreshadows genocide, wicked strangulation, and apartheid. ‘How had Haifa fallen?’, she questions.

The question would be repeated over the length and breadth of the country. Had the British handed it over the Jews? How? What had happened to the garrison? What had happened to bring the people out to the port collectively, to leave the city? Now I can’t pluck apart the threads [...]. But I know that the fall of the district capital was like a bolt of lightning in the village, a bolt that strikes the earth and the sky and causes a convulsion that encompasses everyone, as if they are waiting to see if the sky would fall on the earth and cleave it in two, or if the disaster would pass the universe would remain as it was (27).

Ruqayya narrates the consecutive fall of the cities with great distress. She says, ‘Qastal fell [...] and at the dawn of the following day the attackers moved on neighboring Deir Yasin and slaughtered any of the residents they could. Three days later Safad fell, and after three more days, Jaffa. And three days after the fall of Jaffa, Acre fell’ (28). Later, Ruqayya narrates a set of confused questions about the faded role of the Liberation Army and ‘how could Acre fall when it was Acre?’ (28). However, she firmly says that these speculations were not hers: ‘[t]hese were not my questions, because I was only a girl of thirteen hearing what was repeated in a village that seemed like a time bomb, where the people were aware of the ticking that brought them closer to the explosion. But would it explode among us or among them’ (28).

Ruqayya revisits history by narrating the gathering in Tel Aviv where the written statement is signed by the Jewish leaders and announced by Ben-Gurion. Ruqayya says, '[i]t was said that the statement would be in force beginning with the first minute after midnight, when the British Mandate ended and they would take its place in governing Palestine. The country would become a state of the Jews and its name would become Israel. All I remember from that evening is the silence' (36). Ashour argues that the novel as a literary genre is inseparable from history and that history can be rewritten and relived even in the present day. Al-Musawi argues that in order to meet the writer's perception on reality, history ought to be redrawn by a novelist to help the reader in comprehending their present (220).

In chapter seven, entitled 'When They Occupied the Village', Ruqayya narrates how the nascent Israeli army invaded Tantoura. This is a turning point in Ruqayya's life; she is no longer a citizen, but a refugee. The sudden strength that her mother gained puzzles her even though the 'sound of explosions and the rattle of bullets' have silently filled her with grief (*The Woman*, 45). Pointing innocently at a pile of corpses, Ruqayya distinguishes the bodies of her father and brothers, 'piled one next to the other at a distance of a few meters from us' (48). The narrative pitching suddenly, Ruqayya moves to describing their journey as refugees without reporting any sorrowful or painful thoughts after seeing the bodies of father and brother; her child-like view has restricted her ability to comprehend and digest this traumatic incident and instead she keeps quiet. With fragmented sentences, she describes what she saw to her uncle saying,

My father and my two brothers were killed. I saw them with my own eyes on the pile. They were with a hundred or maybe two hundred people who were killed, but they were on the edge of the pile, I saw them. My mother will tell you that Sadiq and Hassan went to Egypt and that my father is a prisoner. I saw them covered with blood, on the pile. (52)

The fragmentary narrative in *The Woman from Tantoura* acts as a reminder to the reader of the struggle that resides both in the centre of the novel as well as its periphery. Al-Musawi argues that fragmentation, whether intentionally or unintentionally, tends to describe all kinds of anxiety and despair. It is a bewildered attempt to make sense of the chaotic environment that surrounds a character (3). However, throughout the novel and through the years of her adolescence, Ruqayya's memory ambushes her, forcing reflection upon it. However, Ruqayya acquires an emotional resilience towards the vision of corpses, saying, 'I didn't cry. I didn't cry even when I saw the bodies of others floating on the surface of the water' (*The Woman*, 54). Being a survivor of the massacre has halted her ability to bear witness and has immobilized her senses. In describing her repressed memory Ruqayya says,

Am I really telling the story of my life or am I leaping away? Can a person tell the story of his life, can he summon up all its details? It might be more like descending into a mine in the belly of the earth, a mine that must be dug first before anyone can go down into it. Is any individual, however strong or energetic, capable of digging a mine with their own two hands?

It's an arduous task requiring many hands and minds, many hoists, bulldozers, and pickaxes, lumber, and iron and elevators descending to the depths beneath and bringing those they took down back to the surface of the earth. A wonderfully strange mine into which you have to descend alone, because it does not belong to anyone else, even if you find things belonging to someone else in it. Then it might suddenly collapse on your head, cracking it open and burying you completely under the debris. (66)

The debilitating psychological complications of trauma have made it difficult for Ruqayya to access her memory. She describes the process of recollection as digging inside a mine that needs to be descended alone. One result of this seems to be that her memory moves between an individual and collective sense. The metaphor changes: her mind is no longer a mine but a bundle that needs to be 'intertwined with the lives of others'. She writes,

Perhaps it's more like a bundle than a mine; but can a person tie up his story in a kerchief and then hold it out to others in his hand, saying, 'This is my story, my lot in life'? And then, how can you transport a bundle like those women carry on their heads as they flee east over the bridge, the story of a whole life, a life that's naturally intertwined with the lives of others? (67)

This paves the way for Ruqayya's consciousness of her as well as other refugees' situation to develop. Soon enough she finds herself in a difficult position to offer her oral testimony on such mass violence. Hassan, Ruqayya's son, is interested in

collecting testimonies from villagers who experienced the *Nakba*. He is particularly interested to collect his mother's testimony. However, the idea of recollecting the incident has put Ruqayya in distress, even sickness. She says, '[h]ad the mine collapsed on my head during that night, as I was recalling some of the details in preparation for giving my testimony?' (67). Hasan is a representative of a younger generation that still carries the question of a free Palestinian state in his mind and heart even if he did not have to suffer the physical and mental displacement of 1948. Still, he acknowledges the significance of testimony which forms a key part of creating the collective memory which shapes nationhood. Ruqayya's act of retelling is not at all an objective manner of reporting, but a reengagement with the past as a way of preserving Palestinian national feeling for a future return.

This longing for the return of Palestine in the novel is symbolized by a large iron key Ruqayya's mother used to hang around her neck. She never takes it off when sleeping or bathing. Through time and while visiting refugee camps, Ruqayya discovers that most women on the camps do the same. She says, 'some would show them to me as they told me about their villages they came from, and sometimes I would glimpse the end of the cord around their necks, even if I didn't see the key. Sometimes I would not see it and the lady would not refer to it, but I would know that it was there, under her dress' (75). The key is a major Palestinian icon representing the right to return, it is not a symbol of loss as much as it is a symbol of hope. In two of her works, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002) and *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015), Ghada Karmi highlights the key as a symbol of *Ḥaqq al-ʿawda*, (the right to return) (Al-Atawneh and Ali, 28).

Passed down to the younger generation, the feeling of *Ḥaqq al-‘awda* takes hold in Ruqayya’s sons, Abed and Hassan, who are concerned with their national duties. It occupies their everyday plans and rests deep down in their conscious. Abed occasionally sings nationalistic songs on freedom and the return to the homeland: ‘I will carry my soul in the palm of my hand, and cast it into the chasm of death, to live, and gladden the heart of a friend, or to die, and bring to the enemy wrath’ (*The Woman*, 97). Endorsing the idea that Palestine is their longed-for home despite not being raised in it, Hassan follows his brother by proudly singing Iraq’s national anthem ‘My Homeland’ *Mawtani* which was formerly the de facto national anthem of Palestine. He sings,

My homeland, my homeland
Splendor and beauty, majesty and magnificence
Are in your hills, in your hills.
Life and deliverance, pleasure and hope
Are in your air, in your air.
Will I see you, will I see you
Safe and sound, blessed in honor?
Will I see you, so sublime
Reaching the sky, reaching the sky,
My homeland, O my homeland?’ (97)

She goes further in describing the memory of the loss of her father and brothers: ‘[t]he memory perhaps, the memory of the loss was like mad dogs that gnashed

mercilessly if they were let off the leash' (100). Not only does her description of memory connote suffering and sorrow, it also reminds the reader of the frustration of there being no obvious remedy; hence, memory gnashes with utter madness. This aggravates her despair, as portrayed in her stream of consciousness. She says,

My relationship with heaven became complicated, complicated to the point of being completely ruined since that moment when I saw them on the pile. There was no acceptable or reasonable answer for 'why?' however much it rose up, loud and insistent. I did not ask 'why?' I mean I didn't speak a word, and perhaps I was not conscious that it was there, echoing in my breast morning and evening and throughout the day and night. I didn't say a thing, I fortified myself in silence (101).

The animosity between the Palestinians and the Zionists are fully described through hostilities by Palestinians from the camp where Ruqayya occasionally visited. 'The Bastards' as Umm Ilyas, one of the refugees in the camp, describes, have driven them out of their villages and occupied their farmlands. Some fled to neighbouring villages hoping that the Arab Liberation Army would help them (120). Later on, Ruqayya recounts the strange reassurance she feels when listening to the ladies' stories, or, more precisely, their testimonies. She says,

When I listen I'm no longer outside the train. I don't jump inside it, because the train I used to express our situation has disappeared. The earth becomes rounded like an embrace, an irony I do not understand and which confuses me, because the elderly women were telling the stories of the

theft of the land and of those they lost among their families and children.

They also talk about the camp in the beginning [...]. They recall their fears the day they heard that the government intended to drive the people out of Shatila and destroy the camp [...]. The story reassures me, in some strange and wondrous way I can't understand. (122)

'I said I was beset by panic,' Ruqayya narrates, 'and that my imagination was running wild. No, it wasn't my imagination but the earth that had gone wild, making everything wild and savage familiar' (140). Ashour then uses the third person narrative voice to cast doubt upon Ruqayya's sanity. This technique implies that even Ruqayya herself is not conscious of the madness that her trauma has inflicted upon her. It makes her question what position she holds in the world after such displacement and loss of stability. 'Ruqayya returned to her old silence. She had not lost the power of speech; she would speak to her aunt to reassure her, or exchange brief words with Hassan or Sadiq or Abed or Amin, but if that wasn't necessary, speech would retreat into silence. She lived barricaded in it' (141). The narrative voice here appears to shift from Ruqayya's voice into third person narration. However, Ashour explains in an interview with Mayada EIDemerdash that on some occasions Ruqayya refers to herself in the third person. This does not necessarily mean that the speech has shifted to another narrator; it is a way of 'showing that she is talking about herself and reflecting on the girl that she was' (Ashour, 'On Al-Tantouria').

Ruqayya offers an interesting introduction to the politics of fear and what war generally teaches you: to wait, endure, and be alert, which defines the Palestinian practice of *sumud* (resilience).¹⁶ For Palestinians living in the occupied territory, this form of resilience is necessary because of the unpredictability of their situation. With Ruqayya, however, this unpredictability manifests in her fear of recollection of the past and her ability to offer a testimonial narrative as a result of war. Ruqayya says,

War teaches you many things. The first is to strain your ears and be alert, so you can judge where the firing is coming from [...]. The second is to resign yourself a little and to have only a certain amount of fear, the necessary amount only. If your fear exceeds the amount by a tiny bit [...] your fear will turn into a malignant disease that will eat away your body everyday until it destroys you; the rocket will spare you and your fear will kill you. [...] It's certain that there are fourth and fifth and sixth things that war teaches you, but it always teaches you to endure [...]. To wait and endure, because the alternative is to become unbalanced, in short to go mad. (146)

Melancholy and trauma strikes Ruqayya in most occasions, it torments her and deludes her senses into thinking pessimistically.

¹⁶ For more on the concept of *sumud*, see: Caitlin Ryan, "Everyday Resilience as Resistance: Palestinian Women Practicing *Sumud*." *International Political Sociology* 9.4 (2015): 299–315; and Mohammad Marie, Ben Hannigan and Aled Jones, "Social ecology of resilience and *Sumud* of Palestinians." *Health* 22.1 (2018): 20–35.

How did I bear it? How did we endure and live, how did a drink of water slip down our throats without choking and suffocating us? What's the use of recalling what we endure and bringing it back in words? When someone we love dies, we place him in a shroud, wrapping him tenderly and digging deep in the earth. We weep; we know that we must bury him to go on with our lives. What sane person unearths the tombs of his loved ones? What logic is there in my running after the memory that has escaped, trying to flee from itself? Do I want to kill it so that I can live, or am I trying to revive it even if I die because ... because why? I suddenly scream: Damn memory, damn its mother and father, damn the sky over it and the day it was and the day it will be. (149)

Ruqayya engages in a melodramatic language that describes the process of recollection as a practice of actively creating meaning from past events; hence, her inability to avoid the act of recollection plagues her mind that struggles through a troubled psychological vortex of whether she wants to remember or not and whether she is able to remember or not. It is seen that the act of recollecting the incident of the *Nakba* is a dangerous area in which she does not want to be placed again, even if only through memory.

Later, when Hassan asks his mother to write down her testimony about the fall of Tantoura village, Ruqayya goes through a mute phase, unable to remember. Ruqayya's memory fails her and she is unable to write her testimony of the massacre. She neither knows what to write nor how many wars could fit it one

single story. The focal point of the novel is when Hassan hands her an empty notebook with a cover on which he has already written the title *Al-Tantouria*, ‘The Woman from Tantoura’. She says, ‘The title was seductive, and the blank pages whispered suggestively, aren’t you the Tantouria? Temptation. I would avert my face and tell them, go away, I don’t want you. At night when I lay down in bed to sleep I would find them waiting for me’ (164). Ruqayya finds the act of narrating ‘pleasurable’, ‘interesting’, and ‘problematic’ and wonders how a melody can be imprisoned in paper. As soon as she advances with her ‘rough trails of memory’ Ruqayya halts and fails to continue (164).¹⁷ Here, Ashour shows how Ruqayya is slowly learning to live in peace with her memories. In this respect, Al-Hardan stresses that these memories ‘are memories of survival as well as survival memories. [...] In these communities, life and death coexist and times and spaces in the Palestine of the past and the Syria of the present are nonlinear, uprooted, and fractured’ (Al-Hardan, 147).

Ashour incorporates polylogical epistolary techniques in the novel. For example, Ruqayya’s letters to Hassan, which tell him that the process of writing is distressing her and making her relive the tragedy again, are a way to convey facts without having to rely upon the omniscient narrator due to its real life mimicry. She writes, ‘Dear Hasan, your mother can’t bear to read a book that recalls what happened and examines the details, so how can you ask me to write about the subject?’ (184). Through Ashour’s use of letters, she is able to portray the

¹⁷ This is echoed in Elias Khoury’s novel *My Name is Adam* (2018), a narrative based on memory and recollections of the *Nakba*.

characters' turbulences, fears, motivations, personal happiness and, more often, distress. Later, in a heated encounter with Ruqayya and Hassan, Ruqayya admits that writing her testimony will kill her, "I'll try, Hassan" she says, "But what if I die? The writing will kill me." "It won't kill you, you're stronger than you think. Memory does not kill. It inflicts unbearable pain, perhaps; but we bear it, and memory changes from a whirlpool that pulls us to the bottom, to a sea we can swim in. We cover distances, we control it, and we dictate to it" (186). Even though Ruqayya sees the truth behind her son's words, she soon enough returns to her hesitancy to support Hassan's novel narrating Lebanon's attacks as she believes that such traumatic events cannot be contained in one book and under one title. She says, 'How? Is it possible to tell what happened in these few pages? How could a small book, or a large one, bear thousands of corpses, the extent of blood, the quantity of rubble, the panic. Our running for our lives, wishing for death' (319).

The novel ends with Ruqayya heading to the south on a bus with Palestinians from the camp to visit other Palestinians who are still in occupied territories through the barbed fence. Ruqayya narrates,

The buses move off, taking us back. The disc of the sun is gradually falling into the sea, which we smell though it's hidden from view. Silence unfolds us, I think, the holiday is over, in the blink of an eye. Everyone is going back to where he came from. Strange! It's as if we were returning from a long trip. The silence is broken by a strong voice, belonging to a young man sitting on the left, in front, and singing a song of Fairuz:

Back from far deserts, by tents of their own,
The night fires are happy, and shadows are thrown.
There's none to tell them of a wound deep as bone.
The tents move on, and I'm left alone, alone,
Yaba oof, yabaa off, aoof (358).

The chapter is filled with nationalistic songs that may leave the reader with mixed feelings. This temporary return gives Ruqayya a fleeting satisfaction and self-fulfillment as portrayed in Fairuz's song. Ashour also here utilizes history not to merely criticize patriarchal domination, but to reach beyond that into wider nationalist sensibilities of equality regardless of religious variations of gender favouritism. Just as Al-Musawi argues, '[h]istory is obliquely recalled in order to criticize and expose political fabrications and social ills. History as such is no longer a record of factual detail. [...] Here the present is set against the past, and the past is fused into the present in the ever-reflecting mirrors of the author's soul and mind' (351).

Ashour joins the fiction and the factual by mentioning names that are prominent in national history discourse, such as Ghassan Kanafani, Maruf Saad (the Lebanese leader martyred in 1957), Dr Bayan Nubhad (the Lebanese historian), Dr Anis Sayegh (the founder of the Palestinian Research Centre) and Najji Al-Ali. At one point Abed says '[t]hey've assassinated Kanafani. He left his house and got into his car, he turned the key and the car blew up with him and his niece inside'

(*The Woman*, 113). Then Ruqayya narrates sadly that ‘[e]leven days later [she] heard the news of the attempted assassination of Anis Sayegh’ (113).

Ashour’s fascination with mix history and fiction in order to offer a meta-commentary on the role of art in connecting individuals into a collective are apparent throughout her novels, especially in *The Woman from Tantoura*. In one of the chapters, Ruqayya shows interest in Naji Al-Ali’s drawings. Naji Al-Ali is a Palestinian artist from Ain al-Helwa. Ruqayya says, ‘When he was martyred I became more interested in him; I thought his drawings must have had great importance since they feared them to the point of killing him. Is it true that Abu Ammar had a hand in it? Rumours about that circulated, but I say it was Israel.’ She goes on to describe his drawing, saying ‘I began to notice that he expressed things that I wanted to say, even if it was not aware that I wanted to say them until the moment I saw the drawing’ (259–60). Al-Ali’s well-known character, Hanzala, was a bare foot ten-year-old boy with patched clothes and dishevelled hair. Ruqayya says, ‘Naji said in his interview that he created Hanzla to protect his spirit. As if he were an amulet protecting him from error’ (260). In a letter from Maryam to Naji Al Ali, she says,

Naji Al Ali’s cartoons make us know ourselves.

When we know ourselves, we are empowered.

Perhaps that is why they assassinated him.’ (267)

For Ashour, this fiction and factual amalgamation is an ‘artistic game’ which suggests ‘additional meanings’ for the reader.¹⁸ This game constructs a certain kind of imaginative relating to a particular reality, giving freedom to the text whilst remaining attached to reality (‘On Al-Tantouria’). A novel, in Ashour’s sense, does not strictly parallel history, but rather ‘follows a thread in history’. She maintains that this thread is ‘suspended among thousands or hundreds of thousands of threads in the fabric of history [which she] worked hard to weave it through story and characters and language and rhythms to make this fabric a visible, felt experience that readers are conscious of and that affects them’. This is also prominent in Ashour’s well-renowned novel *Granada Trilogy* (2003), which takes place in the sixteenth century. *Granada* narrates the fall of the Arab nation by the Castilians. Ashour’s historical narration aims at resuscitate Arab history indicating that it is anything but inflexible. On this note, Adam Spanos argues that *Granada* is “less concerned with demonstrating Arab victory than it is with thinking seriously about the philosophy of history in which previous defeats have been understood. Ashour engages the problematic of Arab time in a way that avoids both the nostalgia of cultural conservatism and the “creative destruction” of neoliberal “forward thinking.” Displacing the terms of this debate, Ashour searches the past for traces of a future never realized.” (391) For Ashour, the novel is a metaphor; she says that it portrays the ‘experience of defeat and of oppression and the attempt to liberate oneself by confrontation and resistance’ (Ashour, ‘On Al-Tantouria’).

¹⁸ For more on fiction and factual representations in film, see: Michel Khleifi (dir.), *Canticle of the Stone*. Sourat Films, 1991.

It is obvious that Ashour's interest in the Palestinian question arises from her own struggles married to the Palestinian poet Mourid El Bargouthi. They spent almost seventeen years of their marriage apart as a result of Mourid's exile from Egypt for his affiliation with the PLO. In writing the Palestinian struggle, Ashour is not just fulfilling David Damrosch's understanding of world literature for the sake of traveling beyond a geographical zone; rather writing for her is as national testimony of a historical understanding of Arabic heritage before a religious Muslim one.¹⁹ Ashour's other novel *Qeta'a Min Uropa (A Piece of Europe, 2003)* displays her commitment to scrutinizing the Zionist project relating it to colonial capitalism starting from the end of the nineteenth century until the year 2002 marked by the Jenin massacre that occurred during the second Palestinian Intifada. This body of work echoes certain structural aspects in *The Woman from Tantoura* in its re-visualization of history. In *Qeta'a Min Uropa*, Ashour also narrates the uncertainty that the European project of modernizing Egypt has left on its people and consequent reflections on the country in general. Structurally speaking, the project's fissures are recounted in the text through 'writing back', in Bill Ashcroft's terms, against the modernist or civilizing project as well as the linear narrative in a realist novel that has been connected with the *Nahda* project (Hanafy, 24).

This particular aspect of Ashour's work echoes the concerns of Ghassan Kanafani in reflecting historical despair of the *Nakba*. It is an 'instigation against injustice', Abu-Manneh argues, that Kanafani sought by narrating a passive notion

¹⁹ For more on Teddy Katz's controversy on narrating the Tantoura massacre, see: Ilan Pappé, "The Tantura Case in Israel: The Katz Research and Trial." *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 30.3 (2001): 19–39.

of ‘returning’ to Palestine in *Men in the Sun* (1963), rather than the quintessential hopeful outlook followed by most Palestinian writers (Hanafy, 22). Additionally, a more recent work by Rabai Al-Madhoun depicts the *Nakba* through a rather new fictional form that appropriates the concerto symbol. His *Destinies: Concerto of the Holocaust and the Nakba* (2016) is a polyphonic Arabic Booker Prize winning novel that does not offer a solution but rather leaves its resolution open ended. Al-Madhoun asserts that he ‘make[s] a habit of leaving [his] stories open-ended, fundamentally due to the fact that reality has never provided answers or resolutions for our big questions, the crisis continues, and the Palestinians are still fighting and struggling for their rights’ (Al-Madhoun).

For Ashour, an upper-middle-class Egyptian, writing *The Woman from Tantoura* is an act of revisiting the *Nakba* and its psychological effect on the Palestinian collective as a committed intellectual. Ashour’s representation of the Palestinian struggle translates a personal and a generational wound. For her, it is narrating the Palestinian human experience that has been an ever-present concern of the *Jil el-thawra*. Writing about Palestine is an indirect way of writing about how the Egyptian intellectuals have been searching for justice on the question. This highlights what Samah Selim has suggested, namely that writers who belong to the urban as well as rural petit bourgeoisie have ‘their social affiliations and political aspirations [...] rooted in the lower and middle strata of Egyptian society. Their aim was not so much to join the establishment and to reform it from within as to reshape it fundamentally from without. It was this class of intellectuals in a putative alliance with the downtrodden Egyptian masses that now claimed for itself the role of the

vanguard of the *Nahdah* [renaissance] in Egypt' (*The Novel*, 131). This excavation, in search for 'forces of justice and enlightenment' (Abu-Manneh, 21) is an act of knowledge, a total depth in 'knowledge of human experience' that she acquires as well as offers to the readers (Ashour, 'On Al-Tantouria', no pgn).

V. Egypt's *Blue Lorries*

Originally written in Arabic in 2008 with the title *Farag (Release)*, after a period of dormancy and despair on account of Mubarak's regime that ignited a wave of activism (Sika, 60), *Blue Lorries* is a novel that narrates activism and political detention depicted through different generations' struggling with political unrest. Nada, the novel's protagonist, retrospectively narrates her own experience of being a child of a political detainee in the late 1950s, her own detention due to her activist practices in the mid-1970s, and her brother's detention upon his participation in the demonstrations against the 2003 Iraq invasion. The common thread of alternating between fact and fiction seen in much of Ashour's fiction is quite apparent here in both temporal and special senses. The novel uncovers the world of student revolt as well as examining the ontology of prison, reflecting the structure of the Panopticon as originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham. The treatment of prison in the novel is perceivable on two levels, the metaphorical and the real. Through Nada we come to know that prison and society are very much interrelated. Life has become a prison and prison resembles the power structures of society, reminding the reader of Foucault's question: '[i]s it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' (228) which Ashour invokes in the novel.

The novel opens in ‘Mahatat Masr’ (Cairo Station), also known as Ramses Station, where the five-year-old Nada travels from Cairo to Upper Egypt.²⁰ At first, Nada finds great difficulty in adjusting to Egyptian customs and the pattern of life. Soon enough, she realizes the purpose of her trip – to visit her detained communist father. Her parents’ interest in activism on behalf of politics and socialism made her a child who is no stranger to these things. Right from her childhood days, Nada shows a subconscious political interest. In collective terms through a backward glance, she recollects her childhood, saying

I wasn’t alone in this, for I recall that Mona Anis – whose father, Dr Abdel Azim Anis, was my father’s colleague, both of them university professors and both incarcerated in the same prison – confided to me that one of Abdel Nasser’s sons was her classmate. I told her I wanted to meet him, so that I could ask him why his father has put our fathers in prison, and if he didn’t know we could ask him to find out. (13)

Nada grows up as a child watching Nasser deliver speeches on television. This only further fuels her imagination in comparing her real father with this national father: ‘[w]hether or not they resembled each other wasn’t the question, even if they were the same generation, sharing Upper Egyptian origins, and both embodying the idea of “father”. The first was generic father, held in common by all, while the actual

²⁰ Masr station, known as Cairo Train Station in the present day, was originally called Ramses Station, referring to the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II whose statue was erected by Nasser in its square in 1954. For more on the history of Ramses station and Egypt’s railways, see: Gary Goldfinch, *Steel in the Sand: The History of Egypt and Its Railways*. Finial Publishing, 2003.

was individual, actual father' (16). In an interesting stream of consciousness, Nada childishly compares her father with Gamal Abdel Nasser.

How was I to apply this new piece of information to the comparison between my father and Gamal Abdel Nasser? What reasoning could I bring to bear? I found myself thinking, "He doesn't know how to write poetry to his daughter – maybe he's no better or smarter than Nasser." But then the scales would tip the other way, and I would think, "But my father has a doctorate from the Sorbonne, he was a university professor, so surely he knows and understands more than officers do, and his political goals are superior to theirs. (14)

She goes on describing,

My father wasn't there, though, while Nasser's name, his voice, and his picture cropped up everywhere, on a daily, even an hourly, basis. He was celebrated in songs that I loved, whose lyrics I could recall, and I would sing them, whether I got the melody right or not. He wasn't merely a leader, merely a president. He was a topic of conversation in every household and on every street and in every school – quite simply he pervaded the very space in which we grew and took shape, as if he were water or air or earth or sunbeams that we absorbed as a matter of course, becoming what we became. It was Nasser who brought us up, proud though I was of my kinship to my father. (15)

In this excerpt Ashour wants to emphasize the kind of relationship common between Egyptians and Gamal Abdel Nasser. Ashour belongs to a generation that regarded Nasser's nationalist-socialist agenda as an aspirational and hopeful beginnings for Egypt and the Arab world in general (Seymour-Jorn, 114). Gradually, the perception became more ambivalent; Egyptians thought highly of him whilst harshly critiquing his authoritarian control of society and curbing of democracy. Nasser here, and in most of Ashour's works, is not a character, but a topic that people discuss; he is represented through characters' actions and perceptions. In Omar Khalifa's words, he is a 'silent figure' to whom the novel does not give a voice but rather on whom it allows other characters to provide their own views on. This is another example of Ashour writing a history from below (27).

Soon enough, Nada's father leaves prison and with difficulty resumes his life as a father and a university professor. After the family's reuniting, however, Nada's mother decides to return to Paris. In explaining her choice of destination to her daughter, she says,

“France was confronting a revolution in Algeria, and Nasser was supporting the revolution, and moreover he had nationalised the canal. He was a threat to France's interests, and they wanted to get rid of him.”

“Were you on the side of the French when they attacked Egypt?”

She laughed, “How could I have been on their side?”

“But you're French!”

“Are you in favour of your father's detention?”

“Of course not.”

“So you don’t agree with everything your country’s government does!”

(Blue Lorries, 18)

Through this conversation the reader can come to realize the turning point in Nada’s character whereby her ability to understand political history will only intensify and turn her into a progressive, politically aware individual. This is first highlighted when Nada realizes that Nasser, the father figure she constantly watches on television, is no longer an idealized fatherly leader:

My mother said, “Nasser constituted a threat to the French, and therefore they attacked him.” This bit of information assumed a powerful significance in the debate that preoccupied me as to which man was right – the president who had arrested and detained my father, or my father, whose opinions had led to his incarnation of his being exiled from his family for all these years. (19)

However, this entirely changes after her father’s release. It is apparent when Nada’s father brushes away his tears while Nasser gives a speech announcing his decision to step aside after the Six Day War and the consequent defeat by the hand of Israel. Her mother shouts at him saying, ““Why are you crying over him? Isn’t he the fascist officer, the brutal dictator who put the lot of you in prison for five years without the slightest grounds? Isn’t he ... wasn’t he ... didn’t you say ...?” [...] Suddenly my father said, “You must be blind!”” (50).

Nada grows up with the politics of imprisonment in her family; hence, she later develops an interest in prison memoirs. She wants to know all that her father has been through whilst he was detained. She uses her imagination to visualize his cell, the bed he slept on, the food he ate, and even the corridor he traversed. While others accuse her of being 'self-destructive', her humanistic sensibility makes her a well-rounded individual who attempts to empathize with other people's struggles (26). She says, 'I could describe Wahaat Detention Centre with its three wards, number one of which was designed for convicted Communists, number two for detainees such as my father, who hadn't been tried or convicted, and number three for members of the Muslim brotherhood' (26). In this section, Ashour commemorates historical names of political detention centres such as Wahaat Detention centre, a political prison that had in its cells a great number of prominent thinkers and writers by whom Ashour was influenced. Ashour then alludes to the memoir of Egyptian writer and cultural and political commentator Sonallah Ibrahim, *The Diaries of Al Wahaat*, published in 2005. This amalgamation of the historical and the factual is also evident in the novel's portrayal of certain characters. It is true that Nada and her family are fictional characters but the novel also brings together real historical characters such as Siham Sabry and Arwa Saleh. Sabry and Saleh are prominent leftist activists who are presented as role models for Nada. They are leaders of the student movement who have been detained by Sadat. Their desire for liberation, and the failure of this cause, lead them to despair, triggering their suicides in 1997 and 2003 (Al-Arian, 221). Since the novel's events are largely based on historical ones, Ashour intends to show the enormous struggle,

through Nada's imprisoned colleagues, that these prisoners go through after their release. Instead of continuing their struggle for social liberation and transforming society, they indulge in 'self-criticism' and total despair (Al-Arian, 221).

Later on, as a university student in Egypt, Nada meets Hazem with whom she shares her views on writing on prison politics. He asks her about writing her own book on prisons; in a reply Nada says that she has three plans for it: one is a book about the Egyptian prisoner's experience at Mahariq, with her father's experience as well; another writing an edited volume where 'each chapter [...] contains a selection from the writings of political prisoners from a particular country, Arab or non-Arab'. However, her main plan was to write about and invert the common structure of things, she says, writing a book 'whereby it is those living outside the prison who are the prisoners, not the other way around' (*Blue Lorries*, 33).

Nada's public political engagement in Paris when visiting her mother, where she learns about the political unrest during the May '68 protests, also allowing the novel a juxtaposition between the unrest in Paris in 1968 and the student revolt against repression in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s. 'In Paris that summer,' Nada narrates, 'I made my first step toward taking an interest in public events. In my childhood, my father's arrest was an entirely personal event, no more than that: a reasonless, incomprehensible removal to an obscure place' (49). Nada's belief in equality and rights grow faster whenever she is familiarized with patterns of strikes and demonstrations. In France, her friend Gérard tells her all about the

major student demonstrations and battles that took place in France. Nada was ‘flying high’ talking and discussing French politics with Gérard. Her joy and thrill deepens, stimulating her imagination, especially when Gérard tells her about ‘Bloody Monday’ and other political incidents. ‘Everything Gérard told me,’ Nada says, ‘was exciting – it stimulated my imagination’ (57). She also says, ‘He would talk about the violence of the police, the students’ resistance, how many were wounded on both sides, and how many arrested. I would see with my own eyes some of the slogans scrawled on the walls: “Let our comrades go!” “Down with the police state!” “Down with capitalist society!” “Long live the workers’ assemblies!”’ (54).

A few pages later, the reader encounters Nada’s first dogmatic politicized views in a debate with her father which will later manifest in practical insubordination. Nada says, ‘[b]y the way, Papa, the position the French Communist Party took on the student revolution was rubbish. [...] and at the May 13th demonstration the position of the workers’ union controlled by the Communists was a scandal’ (63). Her father interrupts her, arguing in support of the French Communist Party saying, ‘[t]he whole movement was nothing but a tempest in a teapot, stirred up with no thought for the consequences. All too often this kind of thing is fomented by the adventurers of a parasitic leftist movement: Maoists, Trotskyites, anarchists’ (63). This paves the way for Nada’s feistiness to blossom; soon enough, she is preoccupied with student activism. Her residing passion to be an authority on the subject triggers her activist commitment to oppose any fascist turn against the favour of the people. It is not, however, a matter of mere

militant participation, but an unlocking of her horizons of thought and social possibility as a result of this learning.

Blue Lorries also has some bearing on the concept of Panopticon,²¹ the well-known architectural design put forward by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1798 and since understood metaphorically as an analogue for political power and social regulation. The design is intended to structure a prison building in a certain way such that it allows total surveillance of all prisoners. Bentham describes the design as a circular building where the prisoners' cells are positioned around its walls. In its centre is an 'inspection house' where the 'officers' are observing the prisoners in an omnipresent manner. 'The whole circuit', Bentham describes, 'reviewable with little, or... without any, change of place. One station in the inspection part affording the most perfect view of every cell' (cited in Gardner, ix). The inmates in this sense are unable to see through the inspection house, which makes them constantly aware of their conduct. This is able to replace violence, torture, and dungeon-like cells used for centuries all over the world. This is why Bentham describes this mode of observation as 'obtaining power of mind over mind' (39).

In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault sees Bentham's institutional structure as a metaphor for a system of social control and 'disciplinary projects' (198). Foucault maintains that this form of

²¹ The term is originated from the Greek *pan* (all) and *opticon* (seeing). For more on the model, see: Capaldi, Nicholas. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Corporate Social Responsibility*. London: Routledge, 2008.

structure calls for ‘multiple separations, individualizing distribution, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power’ (198). Foucault argues that the main effect of the Panopticon is to ‘induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ (201). In this sense, the power-knowledge is gained through the mechanism of observation. Foucault’s concern here, however, is not that the individual is repressed, and altered by society, ‘it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it’ (217). Consequently, Bentham’s nomographic model, in Miller’s words must ‘designate, to individualize’ the masses through an artificial mechanism of total control (28). Miller stresses that the Panopticon in this sense is ‘artificial’, unnatural and non-neutral (6). In this artificial doctrine, ‘power’ according to Laval, ‘becomes both a spontaneous and a permanent practice’ (54). Laval further explains saying that the system,

[R]evolves rounds the self-discipline and self-control of which the individual is both the object and the subject. An economical government manages successfully to transfer to the individual the cost of monitoring himself and others. In other words, the Panopticon constitutes a ‘fabric of certainty’, because it is a model of efficient rationalisation, and because it applies a model of calculus to certain categories of defective calculators. The Panopticon provides subjects with the means to become the agents of their own supervisions and that of others. It also precludes them from acting freely. (Laval, 54)

Bentham and Foucault's notions are revisited in the novel through Nada's personal confessions. Their concepts prompt her realisation of the limitations of individual freedom under state power. Right after Nada's arrest for her participation in one of the students' strikes, and even though she makes it clear that she is not intending to draw a connection between Foucault's concept and her own personal situation, she perceives the implications of Foucault's conception on the political condition in Egypt subconsciously. Nada's growing awareness of anti-utilitarianism strictly opposes the broken promises of democracy in Egypt showing only forms of social control instead. After being released from detention and whilst explaining her experience in prison, Nada satirizes Sadat's rhetoric on democracy saying, 'the new president had risen to power only recently, holding the card of democracy: a democracy with teeth, as he declared, [...] it hardly matters; what matters is that it was a democracy that permitted the arrest of thousands of students, [...]' (*Blue Lorries*, 94–5).

Nada points out that mentioning Foucault's or Bentham's conceptual work is neither to 'reiterate' their words nor connect her situation with their contributions; it is rather to highlight that the concept of Panopticon has 'opened a door for me, inviting me to contemplate – obsessively at times, at others less so – the relationship between us and power, the role of the authority in either subjugating dissenters, or destroying them whether wholly or in part, and the possibilities for escape from its grip through some form of resistance' (85). She further adds that Foucault's conceptual work regarding the 'transition from securing power by means of extreme torture to control by means of Panopticon' (85) is more suitably structured

in a European context and fits only to a certain extent the Egyptian agenda. Hence, power structures, in the Arabian context in Nada's words are like a 'thrifty, scrimping housewife, who never gets rid of anything, even if it's worn out – she keeps her old, used-up things along with whatever new things she has managed to procure, usually in the same drawer, or at best in two adjoining drawers, opening sometimes one, sometimes the other, according to circumstances and need' (94).

Prison in this sense, in its realistic and metaphoric terms, could either destroy or strengthen the collective on account of the repressive power acted upon them. It is clear that in this quotation, Nada is placing Panopticism in the Arabic, more specifically Egyptian, context. It is the Egyptian biopower that manipulates the collective through individualizing them; hence, the concept of a Panopticon prison in its seclusion and surveillance is applied in the social statuses of Egyptians. Ashour maintains in an interview that the 'other prison' presented in the novel is that of society. She says that in the novel: 'I made use of Foucault's concept of the "disciplinary society", [...] in which he states that the authority [...] used prison and torture as tools of punishment. However, later on, especially in the twentieth century, this was not only restricted to prison. The authority exercised full control on all aspects and details of the society; it thus became a "disciplinary society", just like the prison' ('My Novel').

In this respect, forms of power stimulate a sense of despair and fear portrayed through Nada and her comrades after being released from prison. This appears to have a direct impact on how the theme of death manifests in the novel.

Death may be actual and metaphorical, Nada says, 'I mean also the other death, metaphorical death, in which the body and spirit dissolve. The common element between the two is its premature occurrence, before the time when it would be normal and expected, before the person reaches an advanced age' (*Blue Lorries*, 85). While the deaths of her father, mother, Hazem, Siham and Arwa are seen as actual deaths where their spirits still exist, the metaphorical death in Nada's understanding is being dead while alive. This is depicted through the state of stupor the prison detainees go through post-detention as seen through Nada's words on the impact left by Hazem's death, 'I'm afraid' Nada tells the doctor,

awake or asleep. Maybe I rush around because I'm afraid, and rushing around alleviates my fear – I'm no longer aware of it. When fear takes over I find myself unable to get up or to walk. [...] I've called my feelings 'fear', but I'm not sure whether that's an accurate description. Maybe it's something else – weariness, or anxiety, or a mixture of feelings of which fear is only one component. I don't know. (181)

Like *The Woman from Tantoura*, *Blue Lorries* shows generational difference in resistance and activism between her father's, Nada's, and her younger twin half-brothers' generation. Nadir and Nadeem show political interest in their early lives, and this gives Nada an absolute thrill. Nada spent days telling the boys at an early age all about their father's political acts despite her stepmother's disagreement. The former believes that knowing about their country's history will give them the power of knowledge instead of them acting like 'deaf people at a

wedding' (*Blue Lorries*, 171). Later in the novel, the twins' political awakening drives them to fight for the same cause in the 1990s. Through their participation, the novel chronicles the history of protest in Egypt in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ashour's belief in the importance of activism and collective memory is apparent throughout the text. Through Nada's retrospective recollection, Ashour places Nada in a mix of melodramatic and factual contexts that shifts the reader into Nada's collective memory. Hence, *Blue Lorries* is a novel about a 'disillusioned' generation due to 'broken promises of an unfulfilled revolution' (Al-Arian, 221). This is strongly seen in Nada's portrayal, as well as that of her twin half-brothers, throughout the novel. As someone who has witnessed dislocation and estrangement, she does not hesitate to join the world of activism and student sit-ins of her generation. Al-Arian maintains, that '[t]he amorphous and non-ideological activism of this generation's youth contrasts with that of the previous one, and appears to cast their struggle as much against the failures of their parents as it did the early excesses of Sadat's rule' (221).

Conclusion

Amina, Said, Ruqayya, and Nada experience being marginalized in different ways. In Ashour's fictional context, Booth argues that the only way to read novels as 'histories of the nation is to see them as works of oral history that view Egyptian society from marginalized perspectives' ('House as Novel', 380). Ashour combines historical realism with something that is more visionary through utilizing an

allegorical method in the narrative. It is the history of the ordinary that shows the subjective worlds of men, women, children and their confrontation with social and political oppression, personal and public loss. Seymour-Jorn notes that Ashour's work is 'infused with a sadness that emanates from the constant separations endured by her characters [...]. Parents, children, lovers, and spouse are separated by war and colonization, political imprisonment, exile, and death' (109).

Ashour satirizes political and social shortcomings without offering a better or fantastic reality, although her writings aspire to social justice. Ashour does not write fiction as much as she fictionalizes reality. Ashour writes about history to gain authority in it. As she has said, 'I write, the pace becomes my own, and I am no longer an object acted upon by history but a subject acting in history.' (cited in Seymour-Jorn, 114) This also relates to what Nishevita Murthy calls 'the politics of creativity', which is based on 'the ability to reveal, and subvert, the discourses of power underlying erstwhile uncontested depictions of reality. This affirms the hypothesis [...] that creative representation facilitates political critique. In the process, the "poetics" of fictional representation becomes a discursive act that constructs alternative meanings [...] through a combination of reflection and construction' (168–96). In *Blue Lorries* for example, some parts of the novel imply that the narrator is conscious of the act of writing. Nada opens a chapter by explaining to the reader concepts and terms, and the whole novel is based on Nada's recollections; she narrates her memories whilst being conscious of a potential reader. In this respect, Seymour-Jorn illustrates that in Ashour's view, 'The author must present the "truth" as she sees it, and each author's take to that truth will be

unique, according to her unique historical affinities. Her interpretation will be symptomatic of the reality in which she lives, the reality that she is writing about' (115).

Most of Ashour's female characters in her novels reason similarly despite their differences. They share the same human objective, and they strive for similar goals functioning as Ashour's spokespeople. The characters created by Ashour are common people, people who are experiencing daily struggles of life away from any elite or privileged background. However, what distinguishes Ashour's characters from other ordinary people is the mere fact that these people carry a nationalistic vision and a collective memory, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, one that parallels Ashour's recognition of her sociopolitical and cultural surroundings. Hence, the fictional stories that Ashour constructs carry many strands that bind them together as two authors who belong to *Jil el-thawra*, representing strong female characters that struggle under political alterations, but never surrender to the shortcomings of their ideological surroundings.

Death is an underlying theme in all the novels, where women end up alone, broken, hurt and traumatized yet still thrive for freedom and equal living. Ashour states the reasons behind the apparent theme of death in all her novels. She says,

I belong to a generation that has opened its eyes to defeat the 67 in which thousands of young people martyred and I lost a lot of my friends in the various wars fought by Egypt since 67 until 73, I also married a Palestinian, militant death in his home country is also a national feast .

Perhaps for these reasons that death was significantly present in my work,
but I still love life. ('Death is Present', no pgn)

Nada loses her father and most of her friends who were prominent activists;
Ruqayya loses her parents, brothers, and husband mostly as martyrs in massacres;
Amina loses her husband who drowned in the ocean, and son in the uprising.
Ashour's writing, as Mehrez describes, offers an 'alternative narrative', the stories
of which

give voice to the exploited, oppressed, marginalized, and silenced subject.

In doing so, they do not always place women at the center of their
narratives; sometimes they select situations of other oppressed groups
which evoke parallels with the position of women within our traditional
societies. Thus, they locate their women characters' problems within the
more general and pressing context dependency and closure in the Arab
world at large. (*Egyptian Writers*, 10–11)

Works of Naguib Mahfouz, Abdel Rahman Munif and Emile Habibi have
directly influenced Ashour's personal and literary worlds. These works are mainly
characterized by the unique mix of satire and tragedy in pointing out political
shortcomings (Ashour, *Siraaj*, xvii). In an interview with Ashour, she describes
how before the twentieth century, the historical novel had a bad reputation. Things
have changed, however, due to the intensive consideration given to the novel as a
genre and the common ground between it and history. Moreover, it is difficult not
to consider great novels by great writers who carried historical fact as historical

novels; hence, this form gained its reputation back. Etidal Osman, a highly acclaimed Egyptian writer has written that '[i]t seems to me that the only way of facing all the crisis in social, political and economic life, all the fragmentation, all the tearing apart of things, all the fear of losing identity, is the concept that if we can reproduce our tradition in a modern context, that may provide the solid base, the integrity of the modern human being' (Seymour-Jorn, 95).

Seymour-Jorn argues that Ashour's fiction can be easily read as a form of 'cause conscious' writing in that it connects the details of a certain character's personal world with the outside social and political realities. This aspect of her work, however, is balanced by her skilful play with the narrative technique, making it artistic rather than inelegant. Through Ashour's fiction, the complexity of human relations is conveyed through various narrative techniques such as dream-narrative, stream of consciousness, and a unique technique in letter writings (111). Ashour explains the thin line between the past and the present in saying

Whether the setting is 20th-century Cairo, 16th-century Spain or a 19th-century island off the coast of East Africa, history is always there – a pervading presence. I don't think that there is a clear demarcating line between the present and the past. To me the two constitute interplay of light and shadow [...]. The past is too much of a present and the present is too imbued with the past to make any sense without it' ('Eyewitness, Scribe', 88).

For Ashour, past and present complement each other in that the present is very much integrated in the past. This confirms Ashour's desire to treat the present as an outcome of historical accumulation.

Chapter Three

Cairo and Mezzaterra: Finding a Common Ground

But in today's world a separatist option does not exist; a version of this common ground is where we all, finally, must live if we are to live at all.

-Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra*

Introduction

This chapter will discuss non-fictional texts by Ahdaf Soueif: *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (2004) and *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012). Challenging traditional protocols of narration takes Arabic literary practice into a space in which it has not been before, one that defies the orthodox rules of non-fiction. These texts critique Egyptian national and transnational policy through a technique of literary reporting that serves at once as a political practice and a system of social ideas. Even though these two texts are examples of life writing, they do not solely write about the private self but rather inscribe the Egyptian and the Arab community as a whole. This chapter will analyse the aesthetic forms of these texts, which Soueif uses to represent as a committed intellectual the collectivity through people's political consciousness. This chapter argues that by using creative non-fiction, Soueif de-individualizes her representation of the Arabic nation during pivotal sociopolitical situations, identifying a politics of resistance and collective action whilst also demonstrating a fear of betraying the national impulse.

The theoretical framework of this chapter focuses on the aesthetics of the

genre of creative non-fiction and on the crossing of fictional borders in political expression. Soueif's use of creative non-fiction accomplishes two main aims: to write the collective in a narrative form that has traditionally dealt with the personal, and utilize the amalgamation of genre for political action. With regards to Soueif's journalistic writing which informs the form of *Mezzaterra*, the first section of the conceptual framework will give a brief explanation of the evolution of journalism, from its struggle to gain agency into its role in offering collective political commentary. It will also show how journalism has transformed itself into a form of a literary expression of the personal as well as the collective. Furthermore, it will examine the form of literary journalism as a medium that crosses the line between fact and fiction. It will also investigate the experimental blending of memoir and reportage that Soueif uses in the production of a sociopolitical critique that instantiates a new representation of selfhood for Arab women writers. This paved the way for Tahrir memoir to be a form of a 'cultural activity' that acts as a collective narrative (Moore-Gilbert, 'A Concern', 105).

Both *Mezzaterra* and *Cairo* incorporate reported political thoughts that shape an overall public argument of collectivity. These two texts belong to what Roorbach has termed 'crossed genre' as examples of 'creative non-fiction' (*Contemporary Creative*, 1). In both texts, Soueif utilizes literary techniques normally used in fiction when reporting her political views. While the two texts share some social and political concerns, especially with respect to cosmopolitanism, the ideas are executed in different styles and in each inflected with questions of their own contemporary moment. *Mezzaterra* raises questions of

a cosmopolitan past and future, something Soueif experienced in Cairo in the 1960s and wishes for a return to in the future. It also shows Soueif's *amāra* in relation to the Palestinian question through her trip to Palestine. Published as a revolutionary narrative, *Cairo* renders Soueif's aspirational utopian cosmopolitanism through an eye-witness account of the eighteen days of the 2011 January revolution.

I. Creative Non-Fiction: Crossing the Fictional Borders

In the last few years, creative non-fiction emerged as a genre that joins factual prose with a literary aesthetic. Caroline Forché and Philip Gerard assert that this genre infuses stylistic devices and rhetorical flourishes from fiction and poetic writing into prose. 'It is fact-based writing', they assert, 'that remains compelling, undiminished by the passage of time, that has at heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to *truthfulness*' (1). What differentiates this genre from 'deadline reporting', 'daily journalism', or even 'critical biography' is its sense of 'literariness' (1). Creative non-fiction tells the truth through calling for 'a reporter's investigative determination, photographer's eye for detail, a historian's sense of documentation, a poet's passion for language, a storyteller's feel for narrative arc, a detective's nose for truth, a travel agent's ability to organize an itinerary, [and] some wise forethought a little courage to put yourself in line' (4). In the Egyptian context, this 'literariness' is apparent in fields that depend on prose writing, such as the field of journalism.

Ziad Fahmy argues that, through colloquialism and satire, journalism in Egypt has been consciously responsible for portraying social and political

shortcomings (Fahmy, 76). From the 1950s onwards, Egyptian journalism has taken on a more dedicated role of bridging the gap between literature and the political situation in the country (Kendall, 2). It has gone, nonetheless, through a ‘struggle for real agency’ (Sakr, 3) under consecutive state regimes that have incarcerated journalists and suppressed freedom of speech. The power of political and social reporting has reasserted itself after having been released from the shackles of governmental monopoly. According to Kendall, journalism played a role in ‘the evolution of modern literary forms and techniques in Arabic’ (1). Much of Soueif’s work may be considered literary journalism. Norman Sims best describes this as a field that reshapes ‘literary styles to permit passages across the borders between fact and fiction, journalism and autobiography, and reporting and sociology in such a way that their readers expectations and confidences were not violated’ (xiv). Literary journalism is also defined by Jim Boylan as a form ‘that aims at substantial literary quality and fidelity to the truth as the writer sees it; it is writing that seeks to encompass aspects of life and culture that may lie beyond the grasp of other forms of journalism’ (cited in Sims, xvii). According to Abrahamson and Abusharif, literary journalism has found its way into the Arab world, a culture that has always privileged fictional modes of expression because of various economic, historical, sociocultural, religious reasons (1). They further argue that what accentuates the literary aspect of literary journalism is its timelessness as well as ‘meanings which resonate beyond the expected boundaries of time and space’ in comparison to normal journalism (2). One of the most notable literary journalists in the Egyptian tradition is Nawal El-Saadawi. Her well-known non-fiction *The*

Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World, carries a ‘moral passion’ through its descriptive passages which moved the reader emotionally and helped mould their intellect since the 1980s (6).

SouEIF masterfully employs her journalistic and literary skills in portraying her public concerns, constructing a hybrid form in *Mezzaterra*.²² This confirms Bourdieu’s assertion that the lines between journalism and biography are blurred and diffuse (Kendall, 117) and makes this text difficult to place under a single genre. Ron Rosenbaum, a prominent American literary journalist, observes that literary journalism ‘asks the same questions that literature asks: about human nature and its place in the cosmos’ (cited in Abrahamson and Abusharif, 2). It is the timelessness and universality that makes literary journalism ‘literary’ in the sense that it reaches beyond the limits of local events (2). Literary journalism is also able to appeal to shared human experiences because literary writing can portray events in more vivid terms, allowing the reader to relive them. Hence, there is in this writing an empathetic quality where the writer is able to imagine people’s feelings and translate them into text. This empathy is further intensified through the utilization of the first-person singular ‘I’, as seen in *Mezzaterra*. SouEIF’s first-person perspective pitches the text into the form of memoir writing, a type of journalistic writing that reveals subjectivity.

This notion of combining two forms – memoir writing and journalism – into

²² For more on the aesthetic form of *Mezzaterra*, see: Christiane Scholte, “Ahdaf SouEIF’s and Etel Adnan’s Art of Creative Non-fiction.” *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*. Ed. Annalisa Oboe and Shaul Bassi. Routledge, 2011.

one has troubled some scholars. For instance, Bill Roorbach argues that memoirs are constructions of true stories. The memory of the writer builds a structural narrative in any literary construction. He also adds that the unfolding action of the story revolves around the writer themselves; that is to say that the memoir writer is also the protagonist of the story. He further adds that '[m]emoir arises in and exists only because of the first-person singular: the *I* remembering' (*Writing Life*, 9). Hence, he stresses that memoir writing cannot be journalism as 'journalism relies more heavily than many journalists like to admit on the same faulty human memory – that subjective sieve – that memoir does' (10). It might seem that Roorbach's theoretical approach to autobiographical memory and literary journalism does not comply with the writings of a great number of non-fictional productions by Arab authors that utilize memory and reporting, where the writer sheds light upon an area of the world in an attempt to promote education and empowerment (23).

Contemporary Arab writers have explored the use of literary narrative, writing the self, and journalistic reporting. This type of non-fiction has granted women and male Arab writers new representations of selfhood during times of political turmoil, differing from Roorbach's model in that, while such writing may well rely on personal experience, it also has other functions which are variously pedagogical, ethical and political. In relation to women writers, Isabel Allende argues that women's writing about political systems and revolutions is 'cataclysmic', a form of literary practice that is daring and optimistic in a genre that

²³ For more on the transformation of life narratives in the Afghan context, see: Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

has previously been regulated and directed by the male subject. This type of literature, she stresses, is flexible in its use of language even if it is colloquial. What adds to the aesthetic aspect of women writing politics is that it never shies away from emotion. It is a literature that examines the 'spiritual dimension of reality' and 'accepts the unknown and the unexplainable, confusion and terror; a literature that has no answers, only questions; a literature that doesn't invent history or try to explain the world solely with no reason, but also seeks knowledge through feelings and imagination' (171).

This is also applicable to the non-fictional writings of Soueif and other female writers who wrote about politics before and during the January revolution. Aside from the novel, memoir writing is one of the prevalent aesthetic forms that authors adopted to narrate revolution. Other forms such as song, mural, theatre, and film have depicted the revolution in a short timescale; however, the fact that novels take time to write means that by publication events have moved on. Corresponding with Allende's above remarks, Soueif emphasizes in an interview that the impact the revolution has left on the creative power of Egyptian writers is nothing but a 'tremendous flowering of the immediately responsive part of art' (Soueif, 'This Year', no pgn). While maintaining that the story chooses the writer, not the other way around, Soueif argues that in 'times of crises, fiction has to take a back seat'. 'In Egypt,' Soueif maintains, 'in the decade of slow, simmering discontent before the revolution, novelists produced texts of critique, of dystopia, of nightmare. Now, we all seem to have given up – for the moment – on fiction'. With this statement, however, the reader comes to realize Soueif's claim that the language of narration

should detach itself from the reflective and speculative mode and engage in a representative literary reporting perspective marked by its immediacy. This form of writing, Soueif argues, is a clear and hopeful narration that spreads sanguinity and reassurance amongst Egyptians. Soueif's claim echoes the fact that there were a number of memoirs produced shortly after the eighteen days of the 2011 revolution unfolded. These memoirs act as counter-narratives to the predominant fictional depiction of Egypt under state censorship. This form purports to be more informed than other narratives through investigative reporting.

In the light of the Arab spring, Bromley explores the challenges that face revolutionary narratives, which are utilized as a medium for conveying cultural memory. A revolutionary text must be remoulded to fit the 'non-hegemonic relations of time and space' (224). Bromley adds that

They represent the organising of collective time, an act of symbolic appropriation from the time of the state, a deposing of the dominant memorialing [*sic*] of the regime – for example, 25 January was National Police day in Egypt – and became part of a new narrative configuration, a specific, popular orientation in time with mnemonic and iconic properties. The stress on the 'condition of temporal existence' [...] – the naming of memory days enables the revolutionary narrative – a site of unity and presence, [...] – to achieve full significance by a continuous unfolding over time. (224)

Bromley opens his discussion with a powerful set of clearly structured questions

that illustrate the challenging form of the revolutionary collective. He asks: '[h]ow do we configure the immediate, the Now, from the social, historical, personal and cultural dimensions of the prior, or extra, or textual? More particularly, how does a diary, a memoir, a record of a revolutionary moment, a rupture, find a radical form which will enable it to enter into a renewed connection with the world of action at the level of the cultural? Voice, tense, perspective, order, language all come into employment, especially in we-narratives designed for collective aspiration' (224).

In the context of the revolution, memoir has become an individual act of a collective intention. In this sense, Bart Moore-Gilbert insists that autobiographical writing in the non-Western world is a form of 'cultural activity' ('A Concern', 105). Hence, during the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a new wave of cultural thought ignited accompanying the prominence of the Tahrir memoir as a literary form. According to Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, what is taking place in the Arab world is 'not only a political revolution; it is also an equally and forcefully a social and cultural revolution' (12). In this sense, the Tahrir memoir revises half a century of memoir writing, replacing the personal with the collective. In the second half of this chapter, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* acts as an example of a memoir written using a revolutionary language. Soueif narrates state-led brutality experienced by young revolutionaries who are acting in a collective manner. This reminds us of the opening of Latifa Al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*. Other prominent works which give a first-hand account of the eighteen days of the revolution are Mona Prince's *Revolution is My Name* (2012), Wael Ghonim's *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater Than the People in Power* (2012), and Rosemary

Sabet's *From Trafalgar to Tahrir* (2012). These writers take the memoir genre further to represent historically significant moments of political activism (Bromley, 221).²⁴ In Soueif's review of *The Egyptians: A Radical Story* by Jack Shenker, she asserts the importance of using this type of genre in such a time of social and political unsteadiness. *The Egyptians* narrates the January Revolution in its historical and political context, illustrating the struggle in Egypt amongst the Egyptian populace, whose lives are ruined by the 'dominant global neo-liberal capitalist system' (2016). It is a documentation of a certain historical period, and a celebration, in Soueif's words, of the collectiveness and the cooperation between Egyptians. Soueif goes further to explain that this form is not solely about the Revolution, but rather 'an act within it'. It advances a revolutionary narrative by making it a 'case' that documents its tragedies as well as its achievements and celebrating collective solidarity (Soueif, 'The Egyptians').

II. Soueif's Cosmopolitan Horizon in Mezzaterra

Through a collection of essays written between 1981 and 2004, Soueif sets out a hopeful common ground unregulated by geographical borders. Soueif's political analysis generally draws on cultural ideals, human values and historical models. In *Mezzaterra*, she seeks a common ground between Eastern and Western cultures. *Mezzaterra* demonstrates Soueif's fearless political analysis and cultural commentary on cosmopolitanism, globalization, Egypt's biopower, journalism, and

²⁴ For more on this notion in the Tunisian context, see: Douja Mamelouk, "New National Discourses: Tunisian Women Write the Revolution." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 35 (2015): 10.

the question of Palestine. Most of the essays in the book are connected through a common underlying theme of cosmopolitanism. She calls upon people to focus on the effects of rapidly changeable economics, communication, and ideology that have driven the world towards globalization. However, in the context of Egypt, Soueif stresses that the attention given to constructing the common ground will always be obstructed by the ruling powers that will make sure Egypt stays annexed. Soueif takes a defensive stance after seeing the utopian image of *mezzaterra* collapse. With the interference of the United States of America and Israel in the postcolonial Arab world, there is nothing but disillusionment with the situation. In a manner similar to Jack Shenker in *The Egyptians: A Radical Story*, she contests Orientalist constructions by providing a counter-narrative. Soueif mainly tackles this subject through portraying the misrepresentations of the Arab world in the Western media and literature through different ways of reporting.

While *Mezzaterra* makes a case for Soueif's views on cosmopolitanism, there are various understandings of the concept to be reckoned with. Growing up in both upper-class and liberal Zamalek in Egypt and England shaped Soueif's cosmopolitan values; hence, her social views were different from her predecessors (Jacquemond, 124). Her clear-eyed and focused view on national social and political reformation is free of religious and racial concerns, taking a more moral 'common ground'. This view is strongly evident in *Mezzaterra*, whose publication has cemented her as one of the most respected speakers in the field with authentic and frank pluralistic views (124). Cosmopolitanism cannot be thought of in the solid oppositional terms of the local and the foreign, the national and the global, the

insider and the outsider. According to Bruce Robbins in *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence*, cosmopolitanism in this sense is paradoxical. He argues that a ‘full, absolute, genuinely extraterrestrial cosmopolitanism doesn’t exist. There is no cosmopolitanism without some degree or mode of belonging, even if that belonging takes the negative form of shame rather than the positive form of pride. All cosmopolitanism is really local or rooted or discrepant, patriotic or vernacular or actually existing. Therefore all cosmopolitanism is more or less paradoxical’ (53). This is an apt critique for consideration of Soueif as she attempts to find a way of inhabiting this paradox – her upbringing proposes new considerations for Egyptian cosmopolitanism. Soueif does not simply aim to bridge the gap between the worldly and the local. She believes in the idea of reimagining alternative pre-existing realities for a democratic Egypt, an alternative national construction that acts as a driving force to represent the struggle of citizens.

Rooney explains in her article *Utopian Cosmopolitanism and the Conscious Pariah: Harare, Ramallah, Cairo* that the main reason Soueif’s mezzaterra is crumbling is mainly due to the ‘loss of faith in the West’ (151). American and British policies towards Israel and Iraq, at that period of time, are one of the mentioned reasons of the faith loss. What makes the Egyptian case noteworthy, however, is that Mubarak’s authoritarian regime has been ‘complicit’ with the West as a ‘parvenu’ neoliberal government. Discussing identity politics, Rooney argues that it is neoliberalism that fails the emancipatory promise of utopian cosmopolitanism because neoliberalism is opposed to the collective. She argues

that ‘the proposition is that the capitalist West may be seen to substitute the economic for human rationality’ (152). Soueif’s utopian cosmopolitanism is infused with a hope that she refuses to give up on as there is no other place worth living in except the common ground, the mezzaterra.

Soueif’s insistence on a common ground is not an act of mourning, Rooney argues. What Soueif is attempting to write is rather an act of refusal of and resistance to rapid erosion. Rooney puts forward a defining concept of what ‘common-ground’ really stands for. According to her, common ground is a concept that goes beyond what cosmopolitanism denotes that includes ‘liberal cosmopolitanism’ and a mutual accepting of broad differences. In fact, it goes deeper into all the far-reaching issues of what people commonly value that joins them in solidarity. She adds,

Soueif speaks of the common ground in the impassioned terms of love and life itself. More than a question of culture, it seems that the impassioned urgency concerns our affective and ontological co-existence or, more simply, our lived experience on a collective level. While the solidarity at stake is not nostalgic or retrospective [...] it may be thought of as an ongoing *utopian* horizon. (23)

This brings upon a problem shared in both Western and Arab media of misrepresentation which Soueif highlights in her preface. Soueif focalizes this through a feeling of alienation she struggled with whilst in the west. She asserts that the Arab media and public do not ‘view the West as one monolithic unit’, unlike

the Western media does of the Arab world. However, Soueif asserts that the Arabic media is

aware of dissent, of the fact that people often do not agree with policy, with the role of the judiciary. [...] an Arab assumes that a Westerner is, at heart, very much like her – or him. Many times I have heard Palestinian village women, speaking of the Israeli soldiers who torment them, ask ‘Does his mother know he’s doing this?’ (4)

Here, Soueif writes of media misrepresentations from the position of ordinary people, aiming to distinguish the people of the Arabic nation from their ruling powers. Hence, Soueif attempts to construct an analytical description of the rulers of the Arab world’s foreign and domestic policy and their misrule and rigid strategies to remain in power:

A linked and recurrent theme is to claim that Arabs use Israel and the West as an alibi, an excuse for their passivity, that they should get on with fixing their lives, with developing. Here it is essential to differentiate between the Arabs and their rulers. The rulers will do nothing because their only interest is to remain in power. (17)

She reaches the conclusion that these rulers have not been successful in their sole task – to protect the Arab nation’s independence. Moreover, she argues that they have failed to intelligently manage the country’s resources and thus facilitate a decent living for all. Hence, the outbreak of the 2011 revolution is an incident that

best confirms Soueif's remark in that the people acted promptly as they were tired of the ineffectuality of their leaders. In his article 'Reflections on Two Revolutions', Ahmad Shokr emphasizes that in the absence of a structural democratic rule, people gradually develop an anti-hegemonic tendency. In this anti-hegemonical mood, people refuse to identify with their ruling elites, resulting in people developing a lack of trust in institutions of power. He further explains that 'anti-hegemony results from more than the lack of visionary leadership that some observers have noted in the Arab revolts. Its roots go further back in time. The malaise can be traced partly to state itself, and the feeling that it never gets things right. It reflects not only the shortcomings of individuals, but of policies, practices and institutions – in short, a system of authority losing its legitimacy' (4). Soueif's treatment of anti-hegemony is to establish a high ethical aspiration for what globalization can offer and assert that one of the roles of cosmopolitanism is its ethical imperatives to world media and politics.

In the light of what Soueif has written, her view of the importance of cosmopolitanism resides in its flexible overview of the bond that ties the nation-state and the offering of a 'new humanism'. As Fine and Boon stress, cosmopolitanism turns the rigid nation-state structures 'to social scientific forms of understanding: to theories of democracy in political science, theories of society in sociology, theories of international society in international relations, and theories of state sovereignty in international law' (6). Through this, Fine and Boon add, 'we as human beings are able to see the true nature of humanity in relation to commonalities between inhabitants of a certain space' (6). Soueif's textual

description of contemporary cosmopolitanism is hence considered as a ‘new humanism’ (6). Drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s argument regarding the loss of humanity in the ascent of totalitarianism, Fine and Boon consider the new humanism’s premise lies ‘in the fact that the emergence of the universal idea of humanity in the modern age has always been accompanied by intellectual and political movements dedicated either to the justification of exceptions or more radically to the destruction of the idea of humanity itself’ (6).²⁵ In his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said stresses that the basic role of humanism is that it should excavate what is marginalized first in order to regain this possibility of a political and cultural dialogue. He argues that humanism ‘must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn’t make it onto the reports but which more and more is about whether an overexploited environment, [...] and marginalized peoples [...]’ (81). Through this, humanism then asserts itself as a ‘means’ or

the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality –

²⁵ For more on political humanism, see: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Meridian Books, 1958; and Michael McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt*. Lexington Books, 2012.

all of it occurring in the world on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search of knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation. (83)

James Moore argues that cosmopolitanism raises as many questions as it answers with regards to urban space as the term itself practically incorporates a reference to ‘nonlocal’ factors that refers to foreign agencies. In the case of Alexandria, however, applying this conceptual framework implies various problems; it is a complex city historically known for its cultural diversity. That is to say, it is over-simplifying things to suggest that the social structure is a ‘bipolar opposition between original, indigenous, or local forces and those that are non-original or external’ (880). Hence, cosmopolitanism creates confusion over what signifies as indigenous – who is local or ‘original’ – and simply suggests that foreigners are indeed the ‘cosmopolitans’ (880). Rooney introduces the term ‘metaphoricity’ to identify how citizenship is legally fictionalized by standardising the concept of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism in Egypt, Rooney adds, ‘exceeds a logic of private property and a *law* of belonging. In this alter-native culture, there is a kind of homeless belonging, belonging amongst pariahs, that has no law and cannot be governed. Like creativity, it either happens or it fails to happen: it is something that cannot be commanded. It is as if you could be resident of utopia’ (‘Utopian Cosmopolitanism’, 153). Hence, Hamid Dabashi in his book *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* argues that the social structure of Egypt, especially during the revolution, brought to the fore previously elided forms of cosmopolitanism that goes beyond the Western liberal or Kantian understandings

of cosmopolitanism, best defined by Pauline Kleigeld as ‘an attitude taken up in acting: an attitude of recognition, respect, openness, interest, beneficence and concern toward other human individuals, cultures, and peoples as members of one global community’ (1). Cosmopolitanism in the Arab Spring breaks down barriers to help people suffering under totalitarian systems to accomplish a progression guided by radical thought towards recreating a cosmopolitan collective.²⁶

In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Appiah argues that the concept of the nation is ‘abstract’; this does not imply that it can be discarded in our ‘normative reflections’, in fact, it is arbitrary in the term’s root meaning – its essentiality in the lives of people is ‘dependent on will or pleasure’ (244). This means that the concept is based upon a subjective personal choice rather than regulated by reason or system. He further explains that the relationship between the concept of national partiality and its ‘antithesis’ cosmopolitanism is an intricate one. Both concepts, according to Appiah, share the norms of allegiance: ‘a vast, encompassing project that extends far beyond ourselves and our families’ (239). ‘But what’s troublesome about cosmopolitanism’ Appiah also writes ‘– that it sometimes puts the abstract demands of a categorical identity [...] above our rooted [...] loyalties – is just what’s troublesome about nationalism’ (239).

Soueif’s approach to growing up in cosmopolitan Cairo is not primarily a nostalgic one (5). This is simply because cosmopolitanism to her is still a possible

²⁶ See: Lori Underwood, *Cosmopolitanism and the Arab Spring: Foundations for the Decline of Terrorism*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2012.

reality that can be redeemed. Hamid Dabashi, for instance, argues that the Arab Spring has opened up a new type of what he calls ‘cosmopolitan worldliness’ (14). Dabashi identifies the emerging cosmopolitan world after the eruption of the Arab Spring and firmly asserts that it has ‘always been innate’ to Arab societies and that it has ‘now being retrieved with a purposeful intent toward the future’ (14). Dabashi, like Soueif, refers to cosmopolitanism as a lived experience. He argues that the concept ‘cosmopolitan worldliness’ serves as an alternative to the normalization of the designations ‘Arab and the Muslim world’, the Orient, or ‘the Middle East and North Africa’, labels that are firmly related to historic colonial affiliations (114). It is not the Kantian concept of cosmopolitanism Dabashi refers to; rather, it is the ‘actual worldly experiences that have historically existed but that have been overridden and camouflaged by the heavy ideological autonormativity of “the West”’. It is those worlds, I argue that we must conceptually and categorically retrieve, as they become manifest in revolutionary praxis across region’ (115–16).

Soueif is far from minimalizing the concept to a romanticizing pattern in writing. Rooney explains, ‘[w]hat is maintained in the nooks and crannies of arty Cairo and its underground, cosmopolitan desire is also maintained in the diaspora of those whose youthful formations were in Cairo. That is, it’s the cosmopolitan worldliness of Cairo that may be said to have shaped prominent writers and intellectuals who in moving elsewhere manage to transport this cosmo-Cairo (this local cosmopolitanism) with them as a persistent source of inspiration in their “travelling theories” and “travelling fictions”’ (Rooney, ‘Utopian

Cosmopolitanism’, 150). *Mezzaterra* is an attempt to portray the miscellany of culture and social practices that Soueif is asserting in 1960s cosmopolitan Cairo. In conversation with Caroline Rooney, Soueif describes the richness and the diversity of the environment (Rooney, ‘In Conversation’, 481). Soueif says, ‘[g]enerations of Arab Mezzaterrans had, I guess believed what Western culture said of itself: that its values were universalist, democratic and humane... empathetic’ (cited in Rooney ‘In Conversation’, 481). Soueif’s view has been developed from a personal middle-class and elitist position; hence, initially it tends to portray the criteria of the classical concepts of cosmopolitanism. Sixties Cairo for Soueif can be considered as a macro-mezzaterra, a practical example of the designed hypothetical space (the mezzaterra) in which different ideas and cultures connect and intersect, where its inhabitants acknowledge the humanity and morality they share.

In attempting to explicate this notion, a vital area off the book for consideration is Soueif’s description of her visit to Palestine in 2000. In the chapter ‘Under the Gun: A Palestinian Journey’ Soueif describes, in a diary-like form, an overpowering journey mixed with fear and anticipation, triggered by the ‘unspun stories’ she has in her mind that the media has not answered, and promoted by the question she asks herself: ‘What is it that I can do?’ (29). In Jerusalem, where Soueif breaks her fast in one of the cafés, she coincidentally hears three elderly men talking at a table behind her; she describes them as such: ‘three elderly men are extolling the days of Gamal Abd El-Nasser and the idea of pan-Arabism. They end up singing popular Egyptian songs of the sixties: “Ya Gamal/beloved of the millions” and “We said we’d build and now we’ve build/ The Hi-i-gh Dam”’ (48). The songs of the

Nasser era and the concept of Pan-Arabism ring in their ears as a sign of an aspiration for liberation and triumph. *Ya Gamal ya habib al-malayin* is a song sang by Abd el-Haleem Hafez premiered to mark the 1952 military coup of the Nasser's Free Officers.²⁷ The song emphasizes a collective impulse that resides in the repetition of '*ehna el malayeen*' ('we are the millions'), reminding the reader, despite the song glorifying Nasser, that it is the millions of Egyptian people that matter in the end. Invoking history here is in aspiration for a leader who would reinitiate what Nasser has started but failed to accomplish.

Looking retrospectively at history is for Soueif a way to investigate truth. Meeting with Albert Agazerian, a historian at Bir Zeit University, Soueif narrates the type of cultural and ethnic cleansing the Israelis are aiming to accomplish. Whilst walking with him towards his house in the Armenian convent grounds, Agazerian points out the first British Church and the first British consulate, saying, 'Layers of history [...]. Dig here and you come up with at least seventeen layers of history – and the stories are all woven together. Here in Jerusalem we have what the whole world today is headed for: plurality. But the Israelis want to cancel everybody's story except their own' (48).

Furthermore, Soueif's conversation with Chaim Bloch, an Israeli professor, outlines various concerns she holds with regard to Egypt's foreign policy, as well as negotiation of the Palestinian question. At the beginning of the conversation,

²⁷ For more on Nasser's project and an analysis of the song, see: Joel Gordon, *Nasser: Hero of the Arab Nation*. Oneworld Publication, 2006.

Bloch says, ‘God promised us this land. The state of Israel was here two thousand years ago and God promised this land to our forefathers thirty-seven thousand years ago. There was never a state of Palestine here’ (58). She replies, ‘well from your own point of view, what should the Palestinians do?’, to which he replies, ‘[t]hey can go on living here, no one will throw them out. But they have to understand that they are living in a Jewish state. If they do not like that there are many places where they can go’ (59).

The scenario in Palestine, as explained in Soueif’s words, is ‘layered’ in the sense that the occupation in Palestine has left nothing free: its soul, borders, ‘instruments’ and ‘outcomes’ (Soueif, *Not a Border*, 2). The reader is then introduced to another truth by Soueif. She explains that it is quite troubling to an outsider to realize that most barriers, checkpoints and the wall, in that respect, are in fact borders that separate people from vital facilities. As Soueif writes, ‘they do not separate “Palestine” from “Israel”’; mostly they cut through occupied Palestinian land, separating communities from each other, from their land, from their markets, their universities, their schools’ (Soueif, *Not a Border*, 4). Soueif asserts that the Palestinian question is the main conflict, not only in the Middle Eastern arena, but also in ‘helpless’ global discourse. ‘It is an anachronistic project’ she says, ‘a colonial settler project at a time when colonial settler projects have been superseded: either they have completely taken over, as in the American case, or they’ve been defeated’ (481). In a world that fights for human rights across a spectrum of activities and identities, Palestinians are nevertheless descending further into dispossession. Soueif represents in material terms the example of the

built wall that separates people from their communities in Bethlehem and the dislocation of a huge number of Palestinians from their houses in east Jerusalem. She asks how, given the widespread recognition of human rights discourse, this has been possible. ‘How is that possible?’ she says, ‘how can that happen with the backing and finance of the superpower that also talks about being a defender of human rights? So I think that the fracture in the discourse, on the one hand, and the actuality, on the other, at a global level, is really crucial and that it is very bad for the world’ (481). She has said in interview that the Palestinian question is a problem affecting the whole world as a remnant of the colonial era; hence, it is jarring because it is out of place in the contemporary world. Like others, Soueif identifies the situation as one of settler colonialism.²⁸ For Soueif, it is the displacement, the ethnic cleansing, and the primitive struggle between religions that is troublesome in the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Soueif relates this to the relationship between Egypt and Palestine in the contorted picture portrayed through the Arabic media in general and the Egyptian in particular. Egypt, like Israel, is a recipient of American aid. Since 1974, when American interest in rural Egypt began, Sadat depended upon the United States for his foreign policy. This marked the abandonment of a Pan-Arab policy and opened the doors of capital investment to the country which was later also pursued by Mubarak (Mitchell, 126). Soueif adds,

²⁸ See: Noam Chomsky, and Ilan Pappé, *On Palestine*. Penguin Books, 2015; *The Israel/Palestine Question: Rewriting Histories*. ed. Ilan Pappé. Routledge, 1999; and Ilan Pappé, *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge*. Verso, 2016.

Egyptian official media, on the whole, play down what is happening in the Palestinian territories. Egyptian television, for example, does not show the images of brutality, destruction and grief coming out of the West Bank and Gaza. But half of Cairo is tuned in to the al-Jazeera satellite channel. On top of every building you can see the dishes facing up towards ArabSat. And every taxi driver you talk to says: “Isn’t that terrorism, what they’re doing to the Palestinians?” (83–4)

Soueif believes that the close ties Egypt has with Israel must be realigned. She says, ‘[i]n Gaza, you can see clearly what Egypt should do. It should stop acting as the Palestinian’s jailer and it should stop being Israel’s thug. It’s one of the things that people are looking for in the new president’ (Soueif, ‘This Year’).

The Islamic Monthly platform, an independent and US-based print and digital publication, maintains that by pouring out her sentiments in *Mezzaterra*, Soueif sacrifices the objectivity of a work that is intended mostly to be a portrayal of modern culture and politics. She illustrates a strong hostility between the East and the West, discussing the problem of Israel and its direct influence on the discord between the US and the Arab world, and further illustrates that poverty in the Arab world is mainly caused by American support for Arab dictatorships. It is not the case that these claims lack validity, but it can be argued that they assume under a broad categorization and lack cultural relativism, in both Western and Arabic contexts, which undermines their role as legitimate political analysis (*Mezzaterra*, no pgn).

Moreover, it is maintained that Soueif's stance of 'blaming' the West, America and Israel for the backwardness and misery of the Arab world disregards the agency of the Middle East in this. Her analysis cannot be regarded as thorough as she overlooks some of the Arab world's internal modernity and technological adaptations from the West. The Arab world's absorption of Western culture seen in technology and its leaps towards modernity represent a 'reaction to a dominant Western power' rather than the development of a 'modern cultural identity and indigenous economic paradigm on its own terms' (*Mezzaterra*, no pgn). This is significant in that it points to a tendency in *Mezzaterra* to align the Arab world with the intellectual middle class as its progressive force, whereas in truth the key political players are more often the economic elites and Muslim Brotherhood.

Rooney argues that Soueif's intention in *Mezzaterra* reaches beyond the mere concept of repressing hostility towards the people who are 'different' as implied by the term 'liberal tolerance' ('Utopian Cosmopolitanism', 152). Rooney argues the alternative to the repression of hostility 'is rather a beneficial form of exoticism: an enthusiastic curiosity in the face of foreign cultures, otherness as a source of inspiration and correlation. It differs from negative forms of exoticism in that it does not screen off the other through fantasy but seeks to meet with the other in reality. The rejection of identity politics in the above is what equates it with "the conscious pariah" position, a case of being not so much stateless as status-less in a straying, wayward, adventurous, unconventional bohemian manner' (151). Soueif's curiosity to explore collective suffering reflects the deeply embedded nature of political subjectivity and presents the reader with a kaleidoscopic window of the

ramifications of occupation penetrating the lives of the collective in the Arab world. Her solidarity appeals to a universal view of human sympathy. It has been mentioned in *The Islamic Monthly* that Soueif's common ground

can be found and defended only there where what exactly is meant by 'justice and equality' and what exactly is needed to achieve these in a particular context is defined and negotiated by the actual players of the game. It is on this level that misrepresentation can be challenged, what we share can become more apparent and solutions to differences can be sought: not on the level of a broad political discourse that is mounted to accuse and defend rather than to challenge the domination of the West as well as to question how the Arab world could be so easily submitted to this domination. ('Mezzaterra', no pgn)

Soueif's 'I' and personal reflections grant her agency to reconcile the loss of political and cultural authority as a woman intellectual. She is conscious that she is pouring out her sentiments to the reader, defying the normal objective standards of journalism. However, bearing witness is for Soueif an essential model of political emancipation, as demonstrated in activist commitments, because of its collective psychological and physical involvement with other people's traumatic experience. Through narrating her journey to Palestine, Soueif bears witness to a cause that has always been a central concern. She writes,

Exhaustion hits me the minute I get to London. This conflict has been part of my life all my life. But seeing it there, on the ground, is different.

What can I do except bear witness?

I am angrier than before I went. And more incredulous that what is happening in Palestine – every day – to men, women and children, should be allowed by the world to continue.

The choices are in the hands of Israel. They can hand over the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem and live within their borders as a nation among nations. There are no choices for the people of Palestine. (61)

In terms of literary technicalities, Soueif attempts to construct a connection between her political writing and her chosen literary forms in order to achieve full political emancipation. She explores literary genres that best illustrate immediate political incidents. As she writes, '[i]n my experience, fiction – except of a certain raw kind – will not be born today out of today's events. The impressions, insights and feelings of today need to be laid into the rag-bag a writer takes along everywhere. Later, much later perhaps, you will draw them out and examine them' (*Mezzaterra*, 1). Journalism performs a different, more immediate role for her: '[j]ournalism, on the other hand, responds to the day's most pressing concerns, tries, even, to nudge them on to a different track' (1). In this respect, Soueif implies that fiction is retrospective. However, in this she somewhat differs from other Egyptian fiction writers as Rooney points out that fiction can also be anticipatory ('Egyptian Literary', 370). Some Egyptian novelists such as Rehab Bassam, Bahaa Taher, Radwa Ashour and Khaled Khamissi are able to foresee the revolution whereas it seems that Soueif was taken by surprise. For Soueif it is journalism that can anticipate the future on the basis of the present situation. Looking at situations

retrospectively in her fiction, Soueif sees her novels as more related to memory and journalism as a way to investigate a future.

Soueif's *Mezzaterra* is written in an 'agonistic and antagonistic mode, always in relation to the alterity of the authoritarian regime and its narrative' (Bromley, 223). Bromley stresses that there is a need to revitalize testimonial writing and find new forms to fit a new political way of constructing narrative. The need to generate a new form is challenge for writers, even if drawing upon conventional and traditional diction and discourses. This, moreover, places the writer into a new relation between themselves and the text, a place which Bromley calls 'an intersection between a new potential political subjectivity and all those meanings, decisions and identities deposited in the authoritarian repertoire' (223). These 'meanings, decisions, and identities', he adds, are 'proleptic or prefigurative: scripting a socially shared, and sharable, future through mnemonic potential and iconic augmentation (the signs mentioned by Benjamin)' (223).

In defining the genre to which *Mezzaterra* belongs, Chakravorty argues that it presents a problem on account of its mixture of forms and subjects: book review, critical essay, editorial, and cultural and political commentary. Hence, the possibility of conveying cultural and political conflicts between the Western and the Arab worlds resides in its choice of form. Chakravorty writes,

In form and as well as voice, the book's forceful critique of a unitary orientation toward conflicts in the Arab world is possible only because of the ever-shifting outlines of multiple tones in which it makes its claims: It

is both terse and poetic, journalistic and metaphoric, a mosaic, complete and in fragments, of the world in which Soueif dwells. (116)

Mezzaterra's form displays the Arab world's political condition and its detrimental nature. The political unity of its states has been obliterated leaving the countries in fragments sharing nothing but scattered origins and broken dreams of unity. It is worth noting, however, that *Mezzaterra* was not initially intended as a book; it came about through collecting together these short pieces of reviews, reports, and commentaries as an advice from the publisher to keep her literary readership.

As a result of the ideological distortions that Soueif faces, whether in Egypt or the wider Arab world, it is necessary to address facts in order to correct these distortions. Primarily, Soueif utilizes the immediacy of journalistic reporting to highlight instant and urgent political and social occurrences. However, Soueif does not provide the readers with a plain account; she pays attention to the human dimension. This is where her empathy comes into play in delineating a common ground. This empathy adds urgency to her writing, bringing literary qualities to the work. Both the common theme and the journalistic form of narration act as forms of collective expression. While *Mezzaterra* is a record of civil rights violations at a transnational level and proposals for enhancing Egypt's sociopolitical status, it is for the most part a testimony to Egypt's status quo before the revolution (Jondot, 37). While *Mezzaterra* is markedly international in scope, the focus in *Cairo*, which is discussed in the next section of this chapter, is on a nationalistic homecoming. Even though cosmopolitanism is one of the main subject matters in both texts, they

exhibit different types of cosmopolitanism, as the event of the revolution is in fact the utopian cosmopolitanism that she always hoped for.

III. Cairo as a Counter-Narrative

As a cultural and political activist, a journalist and a novelist, Soueif reforms the linguistic and structural mode of expression of the revolution in memoir. In *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, Soueif takes the reader to the heart of the high-spirited Tahrir Square in 2011 when millions are protesting to oust Hosni Mubarak.²⁹ In the text, Soueif portrays Tahrir Square as an embodiment of the common ground to which she aspires. In a diary-like structure, Soueif narrates the eighteen days of the revolution as a collective experience. Just as all class structures merge into one in Tahrir Square, so too does the structure of the memoir; the narrator, the author and the protagonist all merge (Kamal, 585). It is a form of writing where the memoir writer refers to herself as ‘we’ instead of ‘I’. Through this unconventional use of memoir, Soueif defies individualism and establishes herself within a national sphere through the use of form, technicality, and diction.

In *Cairo*’s preface, Soueif puts forward her struggles in writing the book, struggles which compound with fear and anxiety in the process of narration. Soueif feels fear because of her desire to be an active part of the revolution, rather than simply recording it, and because of the enormous sense of responsibility she feels. Soueif stresses that this stems from her inability to write the revolution solely from

²⁹ For more, see: Alaa Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What Caused the Revolution*. Vintage, 2011.

her own perspective. ‘This story’, she writes, ‘is told in my own chosen order, but it is very much the story of *our* revolution’ (xiii). It is evident that this struggle does not permit Soueif to write the revolution from a personal view but rather she must situate herself *within* the collective revolutionary discourse. Soon enough, Soueif introduces the reader to another struggle: the conscious desire to write this specific historical rupture not merely as record but rather as a form of literary intervention – ‘it needed to take in – and on – as much of the present as possible’ (xiv). It is physical and mental, political and social participation. Soueif writes:

This book is not a record of an event that’s over; it’s an attempt to welcome you into, to make you part of, an event that we’re still living. And there are two problems in the writing of it. One is that while the eighteen days are locked into the past, the revolution and the fight to hold on to it continue, and every day the landscape shifts. The other is that you – my reader – are in a future unknown to me, and yet I want to tell a story that will ease the leap you need to make between where this book stops and where Egypt is as you read. (64)

The major struggle for her nonetheless resides in the fact that the revolution is a political ‘process’ rather than an ‘event’ and writing this process is not an easy task. Capturing a nationalist feeling erupting spontaneously from a collective revolutionary act, Soueif writes unpretentiously about the revolution whilst knowing and stating the fact that it is in constant change. By avoiding the use of overly sentimental language, cynicism, hyperbole, and linearity, Soueif maintains

the flow of the narration in an attempt to overcome fear of writing (Nasser, 5). Even though Soueif believes that the act of writing the revolution is, in fact, a revolutionary effort in itself, she makes it clear to the reader the revolution is a long process that requires patience and she accepts the immediate consequences of all economic and financial setbacks it may cause. She writes, '[t]he revolution is not an event but a process, a process we're all going through, and this book is going through it with us, fitting itself to the altered forms of the revolution and to the transformations of the city' (xiv–xv). Soueif concludes her preface with a varied set of personal sentiments including confidence, hesitation, pride, humility and fear, but above all, she invests this book with a sense of hope and solidarity that is genuinely implemented in Tahrir Square. She writes:

And at its heart there are eighteen golden days; eighteen days that were given to us, when we all pulled together to get rid of the head of the regime that was destroying us and our country and everything we held dear; eighteen days that brought out the best in us and showed us not just what we could do but how we could be. And it was this way of “being”, as well as what it achieved, that captured the imagination of the world; that made the Egyptian revolution an inspiration for the people’s movements that are crystallizing across the planet. Every Egyptian I know is both proud of this and humbled by it. I know I am. (xiv)

Soueif’s memoir opens with a grey, still, and dull image of the Nile, under balls of fire and an opaque, hazy atmosphere caused by tear gas. It is as if to give

the reader the ability to see what she has witnessed and hear what she has heard and smell whatever was lingering in Cairo's air: a mix of tear gas, smoke, dust, and above all, courage. Soueif narrates the battle against the forceful, violent regime that attempted to separate the protestors and curb their ability to communicate. 'That day' Soueif writes,

the government – the regime that had ruled us for thirty years – had cut off our communication. No mobile service, no internet for all Egypt. In a way looking back, I think this concentrated our minds, our will, our energy: each person was in one place, totally and fully committed to that place, unable to be aware of any other, knowing they had to do everything they could for it and trusting that other people in other places were doing the same. (6)

This sense of national telepathy directs revolutionaries despite the regime's attempts to cut off phone signal and internet access, which has done nothing but intensify the collective sense of purpose, as if the Egyptian people were magically in tune in a moment of political pressure and social hope. In an act of common solidarity and collectiveness, Soueif narrates the prime days of the Egyptians through narrating the reasons of the revolution's successful eruption. Soueif captures a moment in history where Egyptians have the chance to regain their country's dignity. She writes, 'we were doing what we Egyptians do best, and what the regime ruling us has tried so hard to destroy: we had come together, as individuals, millions of us, in a great cooperative effort. And this time our project

was to save and to reclaim our country. We stood on the island in the middle of the road and that was the moment I became part of the revolution' (7).

Soueif stresses that this collective cooperation is marked by its non-violent demeanour. Paradoxically, *Cairo* portrays contrasting notions of peace and death. The louder the protestors chanted and sang to declare peace, the more casualties there are. Soueif narrates this paradox as such:

At the other end of the Midan, from the roof of the American University, the snipers were watching us, too. Silently. Everywhere there was a continuous thud of guns and from time to time a loud, intermittent rattling sound. We stood. That was our job, the people at the back: we stood and we chanted our declaration of peace: 'Selmeyya! Selmeyya!' [...] On 28 January, standing at that momentous crossroads, the Nile behind us, the Arab League building to our left, the old Ministry of Foreign Affairs to our right, seeing nothing up ahead except the gas and smoke and fire that stood between us and our capital, we stood our ground and sang and chanted and placed our lives, with all trust and confidence, in each other's hands.

Some of us died. (23)

This powerfully written extract shows how confident and willing the Egyptians were despite the uncertainty of the circumstances suggested by the haze produced by the 'smoke' and 'fire' that hung between the protesters. Soueif asserts here that the core of the revolution is the youth of Egypt: they are the developing force, the

regulators, and the new ruler in Tahrir Square. It is ‘their’ Egypt now and no one else’s. As Soueif writes, ‘[t]he young revolutionaries just know that it’s their Museum and they have to protect it; they will not move until they have handed it officially to the army. They even make the brigadier with his tanks show ID before they’ll give him the building’ (27). The revolution has always been illustrated and portrayed as a peaceful demonstration: the mantra was minimum destruction, and minimum force. According to Soueif, it was a revolution that prioritized the law, and had in mind the reformation of governmental institutions rather than their destruction. Soueif says, ‘[i]t was very clear who its enemy was: the Dakhleyya and State Security and the National Democratic Party. Theirs were the building the revolution torched. Even the common soldiers of Central Security were spared – because they were conscripts’ (168).

Soueif takes the reader into a visual representation of what she refers to as an ‘apocalypse’. The apocalyptic image of the buildings near al-Maidan are somehow ‘dark’, ‘semi-empty’, and ‘shuttered’. The nothingness of this image connotes a devoid and darkened notion of a city that used to be called the mother of the world, and emphasizes that the city is in a state of mourning.

In the neighbourhoods across the country, through the night of this Friday that will become known as the Day of the wrath, the regime killed hundreds of Egypt’s young. Police and security men drove cars and trucks into groups of protestors. Snipers shot young men and women from the rooftops of the Ramses Hilton, the American University, the Egyptian

Museum and the Dakhleyya. Troops fired on them with shotguns and rifles and automatics, the thug militias, the baltagis, burned them with Molotov cocktails and battered them with stones, ceramics and marble. Soldiers broke down and cried and were comforted by the revolutionaries.

(28)

Soueif transports the reader into the heart of Tahrir and describes the immediate hurdle of the deadly and violent clashes that left thousands wounded. ‘I look’ she says, ‘Wounded young men everywhere. And other young men and women tending to them. [...] I write fast; their message is urgent: they’re using live ammunition. They’re using shotguns. Look: empty cartridges. Made in the USA, look. Look: his legs aren’t working’ (33). Soueif distinguishes the Baltagiah and Amn Dakhily, the forces who are responsible for harassing the protestors, and describes the scene in a frenzied language that shows violent nature the Baltagis and gives the reader the chance to visualize their nature of being. Moreover, despite the diversity of power structures in modern Egyptian politics, there is clear description of the dynamics of the overall political structure regulating the social structure of Egypt. This introduces the reader to a social classification of the authority-related reinforcement in the middle of Tahrir Square. By giving a clear outline of the people involved, such as Dhakhleyya and Baltagiah, the reader constructs a more lucid picture of the structure of power in the country, implemented in a miniature political state in Tahrir Square. Soueif writes,

The Dakhleyya, thoroughly beaten by the protestors in Alexandria and Suez, and about to lose Cairo, has pulled all its men from the streets. [...] They have received orders to withdraw from duty. Our government has switched off the lights and gone away. Actually, no; they've not gone away: in the dark they've thrown off the camouflage and transformed into the occupying force they always were. (34)

She adds,

The baltagis are worse than the regular forces. They're men – and recently women – with a record of violent crime, who're trained and paid by the Dakhleyya and used for special assignments, like beating people up at elections, dispersing protestors, etc. A baltagi is violent and loud but ultimately a coward; his specialty is bullying the weak. (36–7)

In offering a detailed structure of the system of power in the Square, Soueif is addressing her non-Arab audience, describing how the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) would always favour the populace rather than the state, especially during the revolution when protestors are in a strongly welded group. In this claim, unlike militaries in neighbouring countries, Soueif makes it clear that the EAF were siding with the citizens and helping direct the country towards democracy (Elhadad, 2). She says, 'I tell non-Egyptian friends, journalists, interviewers who ask, that we're not Greece or Latin America; that the Egyptian army is very much part of the fabric of Egyptian society, and in both 1977 and 1985 it refused direct orders to fire on Egyptian demonstrators' (53). This agrees with the argument Dalia Mostafa follows

in *The Egyptian Military in Popular Culture: Context and Critique*, that the relationship between the Egyptian people and the army ‘resist any simplistic interpretations because it can only be understood in the context of the perception of the “nation” and “nationhood” within a broader political and historical framework’ (2).

The demands of the Egyptian people calling for the fall of the regime called into question the army’s historic allegiance to the people. Even though there are a number of critical voices against the army and its intentions,³⁰ Khalil stresses that encounters with the army had not always been in favour of the people throughout the years of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak’s rule. However, according to Khalil, the protestors’ demands were not in fact ‘localized demands for reform [...], but a people’s demand for political change’ strengthened the army’s allegiance with the citizens at the days of the uprising. ‘Whether an intentional strategy or an internalized perception,’ Khalil says, ‘the collective memorialization of the army as protector against foreign imperialism and liberation of the nation, as a force having *always* stood by and guided the will of the people, gave it almost godlike qualities’ (250). Soueif intends to signify the unity of Tahrir through highlighting the representation of the army on the Square. In this sense, Mostafa asserts that the army is ‘perceived as the foundation of a unified, strong nation’ and is ‘central to the development of modern Egyptian national identity’ (*The Egyptian*, 9–10).

³⁰ See: Achcar, Gilbert. *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*. Stanford University Press, (2016).

The number of martyrs in Tahrir heightened Soueif's sense of death, triggering a memory of her mother. Due to exhaustion, Soueif's reference to her mother in the memoir does not solely indicate the motherly figure, whether advertently or inadvertently. It has to do, according to Elmarsafy, with the concept of what Hannah Arendt calls, in her book *The Human Condition*, 'natality' which he defines as, 'the quality or the faculty that makes political action possible' (131). At 2.00am Soueif writes,

I want my mother. I am cold and shivery and I. Want. My. Mother. I cannot tell you how many people in the Midan have said to me, Can you imagine if your mother were alive today? How she would have enjoyed this? I want to ring the doorbell and find her in the living room surrounded by newspapers with the television on loud. I'll turn it down, get some food from the kitchen, and sit beside her and tell her everything that's happened. I want her to be astonished and amazed and indignant and tickled. I want to talk to her, and I want to see her face. (126)

This is the one place in the text where Soueif moves from the collective back to the personal. Soueif intimately pours out her emotions to the reader. Her nostalgic memory cannot be regarded as a simple wish to recover a golden past; but it is because the 'integrative features' of her nostalgic episode are required to strengthen the 'integrative capacity' of her present self (Dickinson and Erben, 242). This mirrors Ziad Elmarsafy's understanding of natality, drawn from Arendt's *The Human Condition*, as offering an existential base for revolutionary reality. He sees

Soueif's act of remembering her dead mother, which was also committed in the context of political activism, as a 'response to mortality – if we're all going to die, it is because we are alive now, and we were once born' (131). In this respect, natality offers an 'ontological ground for action, without it action cannot be' (132). This idea of 'birth' in tandem with political action offers a notion of new beginnings as Arendt asserts, '[t]o act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin [...] to set something in motion' (177).

This action is seen in Tahrir Square, which for Soueif is the 'home to the civic spirit of Egypt' (11). Tahrir Square triggers Soueif's sense of nostalgia and pride by indulging in a spiral historical moment in time, given that since the times of Gamal Abd al-Nasser's rule *The Midan*, according to Soueif, 'has been our Holy Grail for forty years'. She continues: 'Since 1972 when (then President Anwar) Sadat's forces dragged the student protestors at dawn from around the empty plinth at its centre and into jail, demonstrations and matches have tried and failed to get into Tahrir. [...] Control of Tahrir has seemed central to controlling the country. [...] But as well as housing the symbols of military and political power' (10–11). Hassan asserts that central Cairo has long been ground for 'battles over urban space that are deeply linked to questions of modernity and its legacy, as well as to questions of national identity in Egypt' (232). Soueif too offers us a portrait of Cairo's social and political makeup – from the rebels and thugs to the Islamic fundamentalists and liberals, elites and common folk, and feminists and conservatives. Tahrir Square, on many levels, became a symbol and a place of freedom and a place for the recognition of dignity. People travelled to join the

revolution; others slept and lived in the square. Others who could not make it to Tahrir lived it through the narratives of witnesses. Others experienced it through TV, press, and social media, which have their own distorted ways of filtering and framing what to present (Peterson, 70). Hence, Soueif asserts that Tahrir Square is not solely an economic symbol; it also represents dignity and sentimental images (59).

Soueif illustrates how Egyptian governmental institutions have their own policies regarding Egyptian citizenship and, ultimately, the relationship between citizens and the government (Suzzane, 9). Soueif describes the ‘tired tactics’ of Hosni Mubarak: ‘the attempts to sow division’, ‘to make people afraid of each other, of foreigners, of “outside forces”, of “infiltrators”’; the harping on the need for “stability”, the need to not frighten investors, to not “sully” Egypt’s image abroad, the need to respect the state and its instruments’ (74). Mubarak’s techniques of ruling to divide and dividing to rule worked through emphasizing social differences so that citizens could no longer understand one another; they become scattered and so conflict begins. Whereas in neighbouring countries such as Libya and Syria other dictators were ruling with a more extreme doctrine, Mubarak, had been wielding power in a more subtle and effective way. He identified the importance of suppressing any centrist politics that could become the focus of people’s sympathy. Through that he aimed to keep Egypt extremist free, while other extremists were detained or assassinated in other neighbouring Arab countries. Consequently, like any other dictator, he slowly and gradually became an ‘impregnable’ ruler with no tolerance for any criticism (Cambanis, 26–7). Soueif

describes how ‘[i]t hurts how much this regime has messed with our heads, divided us maligned us to the world. [...] Together, in the Midan, over the last four days, we have rediscovered how much we like ourselves and each other [...]. I sneeze and someone passes me a tissue. And all the time chants continue, the demands are articulated, options for the future are discussed’ (59).

As discussed above, the regime divided Egyptians for a long time, keeping them in a state of disillusionment so that they were not able to comprehend daily events and thus obtain an overview of their prospects. The revolution for the Egyptian broke a spell and was a wakeup call. Soueif writes,

Bread. Freedom. Social justice. How many have come to today’s
millioneyya? The military say two million in Tahrir. Four million across
Egypt. And all these millions look like people who’ve woken from a spell.
We look happy. We look dazed. We turn to each other to question, to
reassure. A man asks: how did they divide us? How did they make us
frightened of each other like that? Another man – with his hand on his
son’s shoulder – says to me, picking up a thread of a conversation we
might have had: “Yes, really. I thought so badly of him; sitting all day at
his computer. Now look what he and his friends have done. Respect.
Respect. (55)

Soueif anthropomorphizes Tahrir Square in expressing that it is ‘nourishing’ and ‘feeding’ the protestors to overcome the disillusionment caused by totalitarian rule. It triggered the youth to defend that which represented or preserved Egyptians’

cultural heritage. She narrates, ‘this is the Egyptian Museum that holds our ancestors, the Museum that our shabab defended – the Museum that bears witness to who we are.’ (57). This acts as a form of compensation for Mubarak’s oppressive regime, an accumulation of repressive strategies garnered from the regimes before his. Egypt’s political history of dictatorship has been consecutively materialized through its ideological practices and implemented in the hierarchical structure of the country. Soueif argues, ‘[m]y sister says that Nasser is all the proof anyone needs that the “Benign Dictator” scenario can never work; no one could have been cleaner than him, or more on the side of the disadvantaged – but he set in motion the practices, the systems that led, finally, to Mubarak’s regime’ (164). What Soueif is shedding light on here is that the neoliberal order that has been overseen by Mubarak for three decades was nothing but a continuation of what Nasser and Sadat began: a strict repression of independent political groups and communist organizations. Even though Nasser and Sadat differed in their economic policies – the former adopting socialist and the latter adopting capitalist policies, they both operated a regime of arrest and torture in order to stifle dissent. Mubarak’s crony capitalism era was led by corrupt and powerful bureaucracies and an authoritarian oppressive police force. All of this led to an increased level of labour unrest caused by a polarized distribution of wealth and power (Marshall, no pgn). Thus, although resistance was present throughout the rule of the three dictators, all efforts were met with brutal repression.

Soueif sets out a lively comparison of the people and the space. The city, to Soueif, reflects people’s lives as well as giving Cairo human qualities. Soueif

masterfully emphasizes the darkness of the street in the night to connote the apocalyptic image of the city, and to bring out the true darkness of the regime and what has caused the city to turn into. Walking back to her home at 3.00am through the dark streets of Cairo,

[T]hrough the rubbish, past the shuttered shops and closed hotels and smouldering Party headquarters and the charred, upturned personal carriers, and it all seems apt. It's not a film any more. This is the reality that we've been living for decades, finally risen to the surface. At last our capital reflects the true condition of the country and of our lives: burned and broken and almost ruined. And now we'll have to save it. (39–40)

Soueif stresses,

And through it all I loved her and loved her more. Millions of us did. [...] Traffic signals were burned out and bent and we'd wake up another morning to find the city had sprouted plastic palm trees festooned with winking red and green light bulbs. They'd really scored there: not only made money but made Cairo into a clown. We apologized to her. Amongst ourselves and in our hearts. We told her we loved her anyway, told her we're staying. (43)

Soueif's shift from the personal to the plural illustrates the integration of the personal and the public. In this specific extract, Soueif goes back and forth showing personal and collective love, speaking on behalf of all Egyptians: 'Degraded and

bruised and robbed and exploited and mocked and slapped about: my city. I was ashamed of myself for not saving her. Every one of us was. All I could do was look and listen and stay and march and insist that I loved her. And she acted like she didn't care. She unraveled with bravado' (45). Soueif anthropomorphizes the city through identifying it as an object of love, a personification of a gendered human being. Soueif writes somewhat like a male protective of an abused woman whose body is bruised and exploited. It is interesting to note that Soueif mostly uses an ungendered language throughout the text but does indeed gender the city, which highlights the centrality of the city to the revolution. Soueif shows the level of stagnation and lack of development of 'bitty' Cairo has reached as a result of corruption and dictatorship (41). She also describes the alterations undertaken by the government on her favourite antique monuments in the capital. Soueif narrates all the signs of a city disintegrating, showing symbols of materialistic cultural decay: 'they built luxury gated communities on virtually stolen land' (43). Throughout the sadness and collective grief, the landscapes of Cairo remain treasured, a national commitment that transcends any materialistic structure:

I come home and find the old mysterious villa on the corner of our street gone. [...] I come home and they've pulled apart my beloved Abu el-Ela Bridge and built the ghastly 15 May Flyover in its place. [...] The flyover (named after the 1971 coup – the "Corrective Revolution" with which Sadat consolidated his power and got rid of what was left of Nasser's men) runs across Zamalek, and turns its high street into an instant slum. (41)

Triggered by her sense of intellectual commitment, Soueif highlights the natural need for Egyptians to utilize known Egyptian figures as well as writers and journalists as their national scribes, portraying the process of social change without concealment or fictionalizing. Bromley argues that the qualitative and symbolic significance of Egypt's January revolution is due to its events being turned into 'memory-figures', 'both as time', Bromley adds, 'and site of memory, [they are] moments of convergence and encoding, and resources for future interpretive practices' (6). In this vein, Soueif writes,

A woman sees me writing and comes up: 'Write,' she says, 'write that my son is in there with the shabab. That we're fed up with what's been done to our country. Write that this regime divides Muslim from Christian and rich from poor. That it's become a country for the corrupt. That it's brought hunger to our door. Our young men are humiliated abroad while our country's bountiful. Be our voice abroad. Tell them this is a national epic that will be taught in schools for generations to come.' (145)

She suggests that it is everyone's concern what is asked in the streets of Cairo; however, Soueif also calls into question whether people believe that a revolution that is 'determinedly democratic, grassroot[ed], inclusive and peaceable' can succeed (148). The answer, however, is still unknown; it is impossible for it to succeed unless the revolutionaries pursue their constant fight and struggle for their belief (Porteous, no pgn).

Harvie emphasizes that the activists' actions were 'performative' in the

sense that they ‘practice[ed] non-conventional, behaviour in order to interrupt, defamiliarize, and transform conventional, repetitive – and oppressive – social behaviours’ (63). The word performative in this sense does not imply a physical portrayal of an action through a specified script, rather the act of creativity. Ben Kershaw defines extra-theatrical performances as ‘cultural presentations that have recognisable theatrical components: namely, framing devices that alert the audience, spectators or participants to the reflexive structure of what is staged, drawing attention to its constructed nature, and more or less to the assumptions – social and/or philosophical, etc. – through which that construction is achieved’ (15). However, El Hamamsy and Soliman hold a different view on what the ‘performative’ entails and how art may or may not be self-conscious. They emphasize that artistic expressions from songs, graffiti, and art installations in Tahrir Square are not mere acts of social and political documentation. The spontaneity of such actions is a great example of how people connected artistic creativity with political change, a manifestation of a level of political awareness witnessed by the world through Egyptians on Tahrir Square. By examining the kind of art produced during as well as after the revolution, El Hamamsy and Soliman assert that there are a ‘number of common characteristics all pointing to the freshness and the “rawness” of the art produced. [...] this was art intended and used primarily as part of an activist agenda. This could include voicing dissent and dissatisfaction, documentations, exposure of the former regime, dissemination of knowledge, or raising awareness. As such, much of this artistic production was characterized by a sense of immediacy and spontaneity’ (250). Bromley suggests

that Soueif's narrative is an attempt to restructure memory through her 'performative' testimonial discourse and 'combine reflexive observation with eyewitness testimony'; hence, there is a 'staging' in the narrative which constitutes it a literary depiction of reality in the process of 'constructing a present for remembering, with the writer as witness within a "we-memory" community' (5). However, Bromley's reference to the word 'performative' and 'staging' seems contrary to Soueif's immediate treatment of the revolution. Her 'reflexive observations' fall under the ethos of creativity in narrating the immediate. Soueif's text is rather 'memory making' in the sense that the historical values of such times are very much acknowledged by writers, hence, their attempt to write about and on what they experience is an attempt to what he categorizes as 'legacy writing'. (5)

In *Cairo*, Soueif represents the artistic output composed and performed in Tahrir Square as a form of political resistance and social protest. This form of popular culture and theatrical performances manifested in the Square are to create a political and social statement. Protestors express their anti-establishment ideals through songs and serious and humorous performances in straightforward as well as more complicated ways. Soueif describes one of the theatrical performances she witnesses in the Square in a passage which stresses the confusion and doubt felt about the future of the protest by some of its participants:

[A] man wearing a large brown paper bag over his head rotates slowly on the narrow traffic island [...]. He's turning in slow motion and as he faces us we see the slits for the eyes and the large, red question mark starting in

the forehead and running down the nose with the dot at the mouth. Later I realise this is the first piece of revolutionary street theatre we see. Now, it just adds to the weird, dreamlike feel of the scene. (21)

This form of performance in Tahrir Square popularizes the revolution on a global level through internationalizing its demands (Valassopoulos and Mostafa, 642–3). Soueif translates what Helen Underhill refers to as globalized resistance into the terms of transnational activism, a discourse that has flourished within studies of social movements in a globalized world. Through citing Anderson, Underhill states clearly that “[i]n terms of the 25 January revolution, this globalized resistance lens brings to the fore activists who, through various ancestral connections, feel part of Egypt’s “imagined community”” (48). This internationalized notion, which echoes Soueif’s depictions of cosmopolitanism portrayed in the Square, is coupled with the fact that the demands of the protestors are not solely against Mubarak’s presidency, the civil war between secularist and Islamist factions, or even the unfair elections; they are demands uttered by marginalized Egyptians who are forcing their way towards collective sovereignty. The protestors are fully conscious that this collective sovereignty will help them overcome their confusion and grant them the emancipation needed to attain better basic status in civil society as well as establishing a national identity. Historically, the importance of popular culture in the Egyptian context has resided in its role in the finding and creating of national identity (Armbrust, 8).

Soueif’s cosmopolitan outlook on the revolution in her writing is a form of

utopianism, an outlook that strives for a humanism beyond religious and ethnic divisions. Such a stance demonstrates the spirit of a revolution that presents indirectly a cosmopolitan or utopian structure of Egyptian society. What Soueif wants to emphasize is that the Egyptians are creating what Foucault terms a 'heterotopia'; a space that acts as a counter-site of political hegemony. 'Places of this kind', explains Foucault, 'are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias' (4). Such space, moreover, juxtaposes various incompatible spaces and instances in one environment (6). The revolution created utopian features that soon changed into dystopian ones in less than a year; a key turning point was when the Muslim Brotherhood occupied Tahrir Square to celebrate the success of the Islamist party in parliamentary elections. However, Telmisany argues that despite the revolution's initial blissful and 'euphoric' outcome, the struggle between the utopian revolutionary groups and anti-revolutionary governmental powers has led towards a restoration of autocratic rule, as has been apparent to the world on many occasions (Telmisany, 36). In the Egyptian context, Telmisany also stresses that even though the notion of a revolutionary space cannot be removed from ideas of utopianism, it is noticeable that the concept has infinitely opened its boundaries and altered its borders in a free and innovative manner (45). She also argues that the revolution 'catalyses' and 'empowers' a certain type of utopianism which she terms 'nomadic utopianism' that was the ruling concept in Tahrir Square whether through virtual connections or

physical forms, disseminating through the Square a ‘living form of revolutionary will to power’ (45). She describes the revolution as

A grounded revolution maybe, but conscious of its power to move across borders, to transcend the *logos* of the state and expand the *nomos* of resistance and to rebel against any form of power that forbids movement and straits space. [...] [W]hatever the future may hold in store for the Egyptians, the heterotopian representation of the square as a site of contiguity will continue to inform both the politics of hope and the politics of dissidence. If the first can be disappointed, the latter is claimed with determination. (45)

De Smet argues in his book *Gramsci on Tahrir* that ‘the interpretation of the political and the social struggle, expressed in the slogan *aysh, horreya, adala egtema’eya* (bread, freedom, social justice) and the material conjunction of political protest and economic strikes underlined the continued validity of Marx’s and Trotsky’s concept of *permanent revolution*’ (2). According to him, what he calls the ‘workers’ revolution’ has disrupted state power in Mubarak’s final days of ruling Egypt. It also played an important role in the ‘decade-long’ groundwork of this revolution. He argues that ‘the insurrection fertilized the organizational level and every section of the Egyptian working class became involved in strikes and collective actions to defend material livelihoods and the right to organize. Permanent revolution, in its core meaning of a transition from political to social emancipation, was not an empty slogan or wishful thinking but a real possibility’

(2). De Smet further argues that ‘the wave of international protest inspired by Tahrir illustrated the geographic dimension of the “uninterrupted” revolution. Tahrir came to represent the potential for a global rupture of what Antonio Gramsci called the *duration* of capitalism – the “empty time” of a social formation that has outlived itself’ (2).

In this respect, Soueif occasionally interrupts her narrative with passages of hope. To her, these messages will make Egyptians pursue their longed-for dream of becoming free and making a bright future possible. She writes,

Hundreds died that Friday night. And thousands were injured, and many died later of their wounds. Their smiling, hopeful faces are everywhere. Our shuhada: Our Martyrs of the Revolution, who walked in peace and died before they could live the lives they dreamed of. Their song becomes our anthem. We march in their funerals and we promise ‘We’ll get what they died for / Or die as they died’. If we tire or our hope dims, our optimism for a moment falters, we open our hearts and they come to us: their bright faces, their hopes, their lives, their parents, their children. This is now our life’s work: we will create the Egypt they died for. (39)

However, underneath this hope and aspiration there is a sense of hesitation in Soueif’s purpose in this text, a sense almost of uncertainty of what outcome is expected from the revolution. There is a lack of certainty as to what stage the revolution has reached and down what route it will direct Egypt. Soueif writes doubtfully, ‘I’m writing and pacing. Writing and hedging. Will it be a piece about

how we're free? Or a piece about how we're waiting, holding on?' (178). Soueif's final sentence here demonstrates her intention in writing *Cairo*: the revolution and the act of being a national scribe here amalgamates the personal and the collective under the aim of emancipation. In a positive note directed to a broader audience, Soueif finally emphasizes that the impact of the revolution has in fact been personal too: '[t]here's been something different', she writes, 'something very special, about the quality of the attention the Egyptian revolution has attracted: it's been – personal. We have a lot to learn very quickly. But we're working. And the people, everywhere, are with us' (182). This stresses that development and learning has taken place on both a personal and collective level.

In Soueif's conclusion, in its concise, momentary form, she ends her autobiography with a powerful and hopeful statement quoted from her son Omar Robert directed from and to the revolutionaries. He says, 'We made a city square powerful enough to remove a dictator. Now we must re-make a nation to lead others on the road to global equality and justice. [...] Inclusive, inventive, open-source, modern, peaceful, just, communal, unified and focused. A set of ideals on which we build a national politics' (194). On this note, Soueif makes it clear that the Egyptian revolution is indeed a process; it is not the end but a phase to lay the foundations for a revolutionary path. It is, as Soueif puts it in the foreword to *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People Who Made It* (2011), in its infancy such that Soueif gets the urge, along with eighty million Egyptians, to remain focused on it, on this newborn revolution until it 'grows and steadies a bit' (10). Nasser asserts that Soueif's *Cairo* offers an 'open-

ended' conclusion in the intention to intensify the difficulty of the revolutionary process that is aiming for democracy transformation (5).

Structurally, Soueif's *Cairo* does not follow a conventional linear style of narration. Time leaps backwards and forwards and interruptions are introduced right in the middle of the memoir, which adds to the emotional dimension through its fragmented style and highlights her prioritization of immediacy over cogency. Places and stories are reordered to invite the reader to evoke their own memories and connect to a new set of collective memories (Nasser, 9). There is an interesting tension between Soueif's urge to dismiss the chronological order of her narration and her choice of a diary structure in the memoir. Soueif's use of this familiar format is in order to capture a sense of things as they unfold. She emphasizes that 'the story I've been writing is not just about the events that took place, but about how I, how we, perceived and felt and understood them. And it's also a story about me, my family, and my city – told to a reader, a friend, out of particular moment, a particular emotion' (xiv). As a 'returnee', this highlights the notion that Soueif is resituating herself at a national level in trying to rethink her relation to Cairo. Soueif is one of the intellectuals who returned to Egypt when the revolution began; hence, this memoir is an attempt to re-establish her claims to familiarity with Cairo as reflected in the title: *My City*. Her use of the diary form, whilst being conscious that the memoir is a political narrative rather than a personal one, is also to put emphasis on the spontaneity of the act of writing, giving it a more credible depiction of the truth.

Bromley focuses further on Soueif's use of syntax; he argues that her tense choice and pronoun use fluctuation between the pronoun 'I' and 'we' are literary indications of her collective views (4). In his article, he employs Fredric Jameson's idea of a radical form of subjectivity and collectivity that is '(a new level of being) in which individuality is not affected but *completed* by collectivity, and this is a neat summary of many of their writings – the we-narrative/memory mentioned later' (5). Mona Prince's memoir echoes this in its rediscovery of collective action. *Isme thawra (Revolution is My Name)* is a diary narrative acting as an archive of collective memory (Abdel Nasser, 147). Published in 2012, Prince's memoir captures revolutionary street language and state rhetoric during the eighteen days of the revolution in its satirical portrayal. Both Soueif and Prince's memoirs narrate the revolution through animating the movement in subjective terms.

Soueif stresses in an interview that participating in the revolution has not solely been for asserting female emancipation in political activities and in making history as much as it is an emblem of Egyptian citizenship. 'I am not sure if we participated in the revolution as women or as citizens' she says; 'I think everyone had a role in those wonderful 18 days. But it is not over' (Salem). Soueif narrates how, ostracized by their governments, Egyptians turned struggle into one strong force. In this respect, she stresses that participating in the January revolution, whether one is male or female, is about claiming agency as a citizen. '[W]omen have always been part of national and social movements and of political. This revolution has been about everybody claiming agency and women have been very much part of that' ('Finding the Words', 63). Despite emphasizing that her only

concern is the Egyptian citizen regardless of gender, there is a concealed gendered language in the text. It is quite clear that Soueif avoids placing a female emphasis on the idea of resistance, even though it does appear on some occasions. This shows in her selective usage of wording and clear declarations on the subject, such as when she writes “Come down from the heights / Come down and get your rights”, most women are smiling, waving, dandling babies to the tune of the chants: “Eish! Horreyya! Adala egtema3eyya!” Bread. Freedom. Social justice. Old women call: “God be with you! God give you victory” (17). This new ‘feminine sensibility’, as Mostafa argues, ‘brings a new sensibility [that] is crucial to combat the masculine chauvinism which the military regime is reinstalling in Egyptian political and cultural life’ (‘Egyptian Women’, 125).

Soueif’s account is about reclaiming Cairo and regaining authority over it. As a scribe and a representative for the popular interest, she reminds Egyptians to reclaim their power over the state through collective resistance. Soueif’s reclaiming of Cairo as hers follows a disappointment she faced after an extended hope of a common ground which made her avoid the city. She admits that ‘for twenty years I have shied away from writing about Cairo. It hurts too much. But the city was there, close to me, looking over my shoulder, holding up the prism through which I understood the world, inserting herself into everything I wrote. It hurt. And now, miraculously, it doesn’t. Because my city is mine again’ (9). *Cairo* stages a reconciliation between ‘I’ and the ‘we’ that Soueif symbolizes even in the title itself. The text, according to Mazloun, is a prioritization of unity over differences through emphasis on of the collective over the individual, which is what the January

revolution has introduced to Egypt and the Arab world (97). By narrating fragments of time and space and binding them together with history and silent interruptions and conscious pauses in her text, Soueif revives her narrative (Bromley, 5). In her memoir, Soueif implements 'intervention' and 'conversation' as a textual structure with Tahrir Square as a central locus of the structure. This connotes open possibilities of dialogue and civil conversations (5). She emphasizes that Egyptians have managed to 'force the regime to sacrifice the head, but the rest is there. The revolution is much more varied; it's scattered, but it's there. What we want is so big, so all encompassing, so radical, that this is the new way of life for a while' (2012, no pgn). Soueif, along with a number of writers of her generation, have challenged the established literary practices in the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular to set an example of their participation as political scribes. Soueif's narration of the revolution puts an emphasis on the heavy burden of loss and disappointment that all Egyptians faced, so that she can write, on behalf of women and men, 'my city is mine again' (9).

Conclusion

Living in Cairo and London, the importance of Soueif's social and political contribution resides in her ability to write Middle Eastern and Egyptian politics with the awareness of both an insider and an outsider. In *Mezzaterra*, for instance, Soueif uses the same techniques as in her journalism in a literary text. She is conscious about making it clear to both the Western and Arab recipient that Arabs and Muslims are just as distressed about the social abuses their governments practice as any other citizens would be. Soueif in this case, according to Porteous,

is offering an ‘urgent antidote to the prevailing stereotype about Arabs and Muslims, which for decades have helped sustain the West’s naive assumption that political support for torturing regimes and tolerance of human rights abuses in the Middle East have no consequences’ (Porteous, no pgn).

Through a collection of essays, Soueif conveys her theme in part by dwelling on personal history. She describes how growing up in cosmopolitan Cairo shaped her intellectual history. Soueif uses different writing techniques in each text; this is mainly due to the occasions and political circumstances in which each text was written. In *Mezzaterra*, Soueif looks to the past in translating her sociopolitical concerns. In *Cairo*, however, it is an instant impulse, writing the moment as it is seen; this affects the flow of the narration in parts of the text. Both *Mezzaterra* and *Cairo* are written in a literary journalistic form, with some autobiographical elements in both texts. There is continuity between both texts in the expression of hope in finding a common ground. If in *Mezzaterra* this takes the form of a yearning for a utopian cosmopolitanism, it is in *Cairo* that Soueif finds this. In the latter text, we see a shift in Soueif’s narrative voice: she is changed by the revolution as it brings her back to Cairo and draws her into a national project. As an action in a public arena, Soueif’s *Cairo* offers a true layout rather than a subtle critique wrapped with dry sarcasm, in the attempt of, what Bromley argues, ‘giving memory a future’ (105). Soueif’s *Cairo* is an example of a counter-narrative in which the writer presents her testimony on Egypt’s biopolitics through showing how Cairo was, is, and could be. As Nasser observes, ‘Soueif’s text includes her sentiments towards her loved city Cairo, nostalgia for a glorious past, melancholy over a

deteriorated present, and her yearning for reconciliation and optimism for a future’ (4). The text portrays idealistic, humanistic, optimistic, and sacrificial models of thought, describing an astounding city through a bewildering historical moment (Porteous, no pgn). Hence, it is the life memories, or what Robenson calls ‘time capsules’, that record and utilize the past in order to reform a present and build a better future (19). It is important to note that Soueif published a revised edition of *Cairo: My City our Revolution* entitled as *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* in 2014 which emphasises Soueif’s claim that the revolution is a process rather than an event. In the revised edition, Soueif added a final chapter entitled “Revolution III: Postscript” where she narrates consecutive protests against Morsi’s doctrine which was ‘steering the country to disaster’ and against the ‘continuation of the policies that marked the Mubarak era.’ (222-223).

In both texts, Soueif utilizes her journalistic reporting skills in producing texts which stand in opposition to the powerful and rigid mainstream media in Egypt, which is governed and controlled by the state. It is important to put Soueif’s non-fictional writings in the context of their function as public texts. The texts are civic records of major events in the Arab political scene. The common ground is apparent in both texts, however, with different environmental contexts. The aims of Soueif’s *Mezzaterra* are found in *Cairo*. She finds her desired cosmopolitan Egypt in Tahrir Square in its collectiveness and equality. Both texts show that there is hope under the rubble, despair, and confusion, even though this maintains a sense of idealism in narrating the reality of a nation’s deterioration. This fuels the dreams of a novel type of writing that gives a voice to ordinary people making them

‘participants in political life rather than its passive subjects – or victims’ (Soueif, ‘The Egyptians’). The archives of political and cultural fields in the Arab world will notice an expansion paralleling the unfolding of political events (Mostafa, ‘Egyptian Women’, 128).

Chapter Four

The Mezzaterra of *In the Eye of the Sun*: Narrating Politics, Cross-Culturalism, and History

[F]or that novel to be a good novel, it would have to have a firm grasp of the past, the present moment, and the future – what will happen, or what might happen afterwards. All this entails having a total vision.

-Sonallah Ibrahim, “The Imagination as Transitive”

Introduction

This chapter offers a close examination of Ahdaf Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) from a contemporary perspective. Although many have discussed this work in terms of its discourses of culture and identity, relatively few have placed the novel in a political context and no studies have yet revisited the novel in contemporary circumstances and compared it with works written after the 2011 revolution. This chapter will analyze the novel’s representation of the political scene in Egypt between 1900 and the 1980s, showing significant scenes of sociopolitical resistance that act as a prefiguration of the later revolution in Egypt. It will further investigate Soueif’s view on Nasser and Sadat’s Egypt and how she transcends the geographical realm of the Arab world and examines Western politics. This chapter argues that Soueif’s fiction is a vehicle to draw a portrait of the sociopolitical struggles of the Egyptian population through examining manners of representation of character and form. Through the use of the Bildungsroman form, she presents a holistic text where its various concerns – cross-culturalism,

society, politics and romance – intertwine. This chapter will also revisit some of the themes in *The Map of Love* (1999) alongside a close reading of *In the Eye of the Sun* in order to help clarify the argument.

The theoretical section in this chapter investigates three main frameworks: the relationship between history and fiction and the role of historical fiction as being a metaphor of the past, the Arabic Bildungsroman, and the return to realism. Soueif's treatment of history in the text raises questions as to how much fact may be contained in fiction and what truth fiction can portray. This will aid in analysing Soueif's consistent featuring of political history in the novel, showing the direct effect of politics on individuals who optimize the sense of collectivity through their correspondence with their surroundings. The second part of this section will examine the role of the Bildungsroman in both Western and Arab contexts. This form, along with a realist mode of writing, permits Soueif to highlight a collective reality that integrates the personal with the public and political.

For Soueif, the Palestinian question and the Suez Crisis have been pivotal moments in her development as a writer. Specifically, Soueif's political consciousness developed as a result of the Egyptian defeat in the Six Day War (Mehrez, *Egypt's Cultural*, 157). In this respect, it is important to highlight that politics play an integral role in the lives as well as the writings of Egyptian authors: an everyday dilemma and a tool in writing for social and cultural mirroring. The political concerns of these writers result in publications amounting to a state critique. Acting as national scribes, these authors are mostly inspired by specific

political events. Since 1956, the Cold War and the Suez Crisis gave writers raw material to discuss in their works. Their main subject matters and common themes are consequently the importance of solidarity, the virtue of sacrifice, and a selfless view of life. They also maintain and stress the powerlessness and insignificance of the individual outside of a group or a national community, asserting that strength is only found in a group. Moreover, they have argued that working within a community is an attempt to achieve self-realization, autonomy, and the rise to a heroic state. George Sfeir argues that the emphases in these Egyptian novels are ‘on the external, overt act of the protagonist, on his or her attempt to identify with the national cause, a war, a revolution, or merely a limited act of political resistance. The authors seem to be saying that a person achieves compensation for his sacrifices or redemption for his past sins against society through this identification’ (955). The next section examines Soueif’s realist style, which weaves together Egypt’s recent history and post-independence politics into her Bildungsroman form, enabling her to scrutinize the personal and the political in tandem, not as a sentimental gesture over the past but because it concerns a quest for a desired future.

I. History, Fiction and Truth

A number of theorists, such as Hayden White and Roland Barthes, have focused on the margins separating fiction from history (Peabody, 29); consequently, there has been debate over how much historical fiction can represent historical fact. The creation of historical fiction serves many purposes to both the author and the reader. The general public is more likely to learn about the past through historical fiction

than what might be termed ‘straight history’ (Peabody, 29).³¹ Peabody argues that most writers of historical fiction follow the familiar mantra of ‘show, don’t tell’. Narration of a certain event, be it political or social, is to be presented in a report-like manner. This argument is examined in this chapter through Soueif’s novel, which has sparked literary critiques especially over the way she portrays historical occurrences. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif unearths Egypt’s forgotten history by revisiting speeches by Nasser and Sadat. She showcases Egyptian politics in parallel with the characters’ everyday lives, and only occasionally is the reader exposed to the characters’ points of view. Hence, the novel can be considered what I would like to call a holistic novel rather than a political one, as it correlates the social and political realities at the same time.

On this note, Soueif consciously subordinates fiction to history in some sections of the novel; she purposely uses her characters as vehicles to portray the historical events of their time. Soueif gives her historical characters a palpable human dimension to achieve a realist literary aesthetic; she does this in an attempt to transform the present, using history as a guide (Massad, 82). What distinguishes Soueif’s writing from that of other writers of historical fiction such as Ibrahim Jalal, Muhammad Awad Muhhamd and Naguib Mahfouz is its feminine aspect. It could be argued that Soueif’s novel is a feminist tract since the main character around which events revolve is a woman discovering her place in the world and attempting

³¹ For a more general introduction to the subject of history and fiction, see: John Tebbel, *Fact and Fiction: Problems of the Historical Novelist*. Lansing: Historical Society of Michigan, 1962; and Joan Aiken, “Interpreting the Past: Reflections of an Historical Novelist.” *Encounter*, 64, May 1985, 37–43.

to assert her freedom. However, Soueif wants to emphasize that there is a larger motive behind it being a 'woman's novel' (Massad, 88). Some reviews were confused as to what conclusions to draw from the novel regarding the position of women; others saw it as a clear indictment of the restrictions faced by women. Soueif, however, is asserting more generally the importance of the political scene to the lives of Egyptians and suggesting that it has been significantly a backdrop, highlighting in this sense women's commitment to political thought.

In Soueif's earlier fictional works such as *Aisha* (1984), she writes female characters that stand against social challenges. Gradually, her characters begin to react more to historical and political predicaments that occur in the background such as wars, strikes, and revolutionary acts as seen in *In the Eye of the Sun*. Whilst the novel is a female Bildungsroman, it is also a novel about Egypt's political development; the evolution of its main character, Asya, is in tandem with the evolution of Egypt's modernity. In the novel, Soueif examines the eternal struggle of who and what really defines Egypt politically, which people hoped would be resolved in the 2011 uprising. This text is yet another manifestation of Egyptian women's political engagement, both through the specific act of Soueif's literary writing or by presenting a female character as a politically engaged individual. Soueif is retrospectively describing Egypt in the Nasser era that would act as a total vision of carrying through an agenda that connects this work to her earlier

publications.³² This chapter will offer a historical and factual background to validate the close reading of the text.

The other function of the historical novel, as seen in *In the Eye of the Sun*, is its role as a metaphor for the past. The dramatization of the past in the historical novel gives it the opportunity to allow the reader to fully understand that which in most cases ‘straight’ history is unable to (Peabody, 34). Soueif is not interested in a sentimental retreat into history. Instead her use of the past, as described in previous chapters, is to echo and strengthen her expressions of concern regarding Egypt’s present and future. For that reason, her historical sections are primarily concerned with the political agenda. Historical fiction provides a channel between the reader and the author by providing a certain vividness in the immediacy of representation that professional history fails to provide. Sabry Hafez notes that resorting to history is not ‘a sheer love for antiquity [...] but an endeavor to awaken the readers’ sense of national pride [...] and to provide them, by recalling past glories, with an inspiration and model in their search for a national identity’ (17). From the first glance of almost every historical novel, we realise the novel is a means of what De Groot asserts as a ‘national self-definition’ while functioning both locally and globally. He further proclaims that ‘[i]n modern critical and sociological terms, this has been defined as “glocalisation”, describing the interaction of the local with the international. The historical novel is part of the

³² The term ‘total vision’ is mentioned by Sonallah Ibrahim in an interview where he describes how Egyptian fiction written before the January 2011 had a ‘total vision’, or profound glimpses of the past, the present, and the future. See Colla, ‘The Imagination’.

typology of nationhood and helps to define what Benedict Anderson terms the “imagined communities” of countries’ (94).

II. The Arabic Bildungsroman and Realism

In the Eye of the Sun is widely considered a Bildungsroman in its construction and the maturation of character documented in it. However, reflecting its theme of cultural dialogue, the book showcases both Western and Arabic characteristics in its Bildungsroman. On this subject, Al-Mousa suggests that Buckley’s definition of a Bildungsroman lacks certain elements found in Arabic Bildungsroman. Buckley defines the Bildungsroman as a novel featuring ‘childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy’ (18). Moreover, Al-Mousa indicates three additional themes that distinguish an Arabic Bildungsroman from a Western one: the cross-cultural conflicts of East and West, a spiritual crisis in the journey of self-definition undergone by the protagonist, and the reconciliation of two conflicting cultures (whereas only the simple art of living is imparted in a Western Bildungsroman). Hence, the protagonist’s development in an Arabic Bildungsroman, according to Al-Mousa, ‘involves a great deal of bicultural stress and conflict.’ (360)

It is then noted that the primary goal in a Bildungsroman is the heroine’s achievement of maturity. The core actions of a Bildungsroman revolve around an ambitious young protagonist struggling against the prosaic reality around him, full of negative forces. Typically, the heroine leaves home to seek success and later

return to her community (Al-Mousa, 223). Nedal Al-Mousa writes that the thematic structure and the basic struggle in the Arabic Bildungsroman, which often entails a journey to the West, are stirred and determined by what regulates any Arabic country: historical, political, and cultural dynamics. Al-Mousa argues that a good number of Arabic Bildungsromane deal with a male hero, such as Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Birds of the East* (1939), Yahya Haqqi's *Umm Hisham's Lamp* (1944), and Ghaleb Hamzah Abu el-Faraj's *The Lost Years* (1980). Al-Mousa notes that the first female Bildungsroman is Emily Nasrallah's *Birds of September* (1962), a novel that revolves around a number of female characters struggling through a repressive patriarchal society that does not accommodate their freedoms as individuals (258).

Al-Mousa further adds that the theme of the journey to the West in some Arabic novels 'serve[s] as a means of inventing a new self free of duality and bi-culturality in an unconventional manner – that is contrary to the state of affairs in the traditional Arabic Bildungsroman' (268). The above summary of the Bildungsroman fits closely with Soueif's novel. *In the Eye of the Sun* tells the story of a young girl's maturation as she moves from Cairo to London where her mixed cultural experiences are integral to her political development. In this approach, Soueif is creating an individual model of her own to fit her feminist agenda in an attempt to further Arabic women's political emancipation in her writing by drawing equivalence between Asya's personal maturity and certain political concerns. Consequently, if the novel is viewed from an existentialist viewpoint, the heroine's self-definition, in Al-Mousa's words, is normally correlated with her growing sense of patriotism and commitment to nationalism (233).

In addition to the main themes that constitute a Bildungsroman, Soueif employs a realist mode of writing to seek political and social truth. Soueif structures the novel's scenes by what Bakhtin would call a chronotopic imagination. Bakhtin's term, literally meaning 'space-time', 'expresses the inseparability of space and time' (15). The chronotope of Soueif in *The Eye of the Sun* portrays a wider historical time and space in which the protagonist lives. This emphasizes realist aspects of the novel and the individuality of the protagonist. Bakhtin adds that '[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history' (15). Mehrez asserts that literary production has long been controlled by state power, whether political, social, or religious. For that reason, the novel has an important role in portraying what is 'real' as the 'cultural field lacks its independence as a field of knowledge compared to other societies that have succeeded in this on so many levels' (Mehrez, 'Writing Out', 154)

To historicize realism in the Egyptian context, the upheaval of social order in the first part of the twentieth century – the 'rise of secular, cosmopolitan bourgeoisie enmeshed in the economic and cultural web of world capitalism and nation-state ideologies' (Selim, 113) – may be considered a motivator for the 'new' Arabic fiction. Such social class employs a certain type of narrative that strays away from the norm, constructing the narrator as 'the custodian' and 'the transmitter' of the 'accumulated civilization', defined by Samah Selim as a 'clearly defined and

visible yet transparent figure through whom spoke the voice of communal history and collective wisdom' ('The Narrative', 113). Consequently, the narrator is transformed into an individual narrating events as an outsider rather than as part of the collective. Through a hegemonic and authoritative point of view, the narrator observes and describes through an objective stance and not as a 'communal historian' (Selim, 113). However, this type of narration has undergone a marked transformation in the second half of the twentieth century. Selim explains that '[i]t was not until the period of social and political upheaval of the second half of the twentieth century in the Arab world that the representational politics of narrative realism were interrogated and radically rearticulated by a new generation of social realist and neo-realist writers' (126).

In some cases, realism in Egyptian literature goes further than a mere depiction of 'truth'. In the case of Naguib Mahfouz's work, for instance, the realist mode highlights a collective reality that integrates the personal within the public, putting time and space in an essential role. As Samah Selim argues:

The example of Mahfouz raises an even more important issue related to the significance of realism in the Arab context. In this Arab context, realism is not simply understood as a technique of representation built on simple verisimilitude. Rather, realism here is constructed through a particular and very powerful discourse about collective social and political identity. Realism has to construct the basic elements of narrative fiction - time, place, character, plot - in a way that "mirrors" the particular social,

cultural and political reality [...] of the national collectivity. When Arab critics use the word ‘reality’ to talk about Arabic fiction, they mean ‘national reality,’ a term that raises the specter of a whole set of specific historical social issues such as colonialism and anti-colonial struggle, the rise and hegemony of national bourgeoisies as well as the real and imagined social composition of the national community. (110)

Mahfouz’s style of realism is not just a ‘technique of representation built on simple verisimilitude’ (110). This enabled the generation of writers who came to prominence in the 1970s to utilize it as a trope of representing wider subjects in a national collectivity. Hence, Selim asserts that when ‘Arab critics use the word “reality” to talk about Arabic fiction, they mean “national reality,” a term that raises the spectre of a whole set of specific historical social issues such as colonialism and anti-colonial struggle, the rise and hegemony of national bourgeoisies as well as the real and imagined social composition of the national community’ (110).

This mode of writing has enabled Soueif to voice her sociopolitical concerns to both the Arab and the Western reader. This platform of realism facilitated an accurate representation of time, place, and acts, establishing *In the Eye of the Sun* as a collective narrative. Despite the fact that the novel is primarily focused on Asya’s development, it highlights the idea that Asya is in fact part of a collective nation. In this respect, it is worth considering Lukács’s definition of literary realism as a form of writing where we see individuals’ lives as an integral part of a certain narrative which places those individuals ‘within the entire historical dynamics of

their society' (Lunn, 78). Lukács further illustrates in *The Historical Novel* that '[t]he historical crises are direct components of the individual destinies of the main characters and accordingly form an integral part of the action itself. In this way the individual and the social-historical are inseparably connected in regard to both characterization and action' (200–201).

This mode of writing permits Soueif to highlight the idea of the collective through the individual. Raymond Williams illustrates that realist narrative 'creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons' (278). This achievement, according to Williams, creates a certain balance between the individual and their background such that the narrative portrays a 'society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it' (278). As we see in Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, the characters' existence and daily encounters are directly and indirectly affected by the realist background of social, political, and cultural influences. The public historical context affects their personal tale in such a fashion that, as Williams asserts, '[t]he society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life' (278). Hence, the individual is not just an 'identity located in space' but a 'juncture in a relational system without determined boundaries in time and space' (Harvey, 167).

However, Robinette asserts that most postcolonial writers have encountered a degree of challenge in writing a realist novel as realism as a genre is a medium of expression allowing what is generally suppressed and masked under social

obscurity to become apparent. Robinette stresses that since its formation, a realist novel maps society in an attempt to ‘uncover the disavowed aspects of capitalist modernity and give narrative shape to dissociated experiences otherwise exiled from the consciousness of the reading public’ (2). ‘As the postcolonial novel repeatedly demonstrates’, he argues, ‘dictatorship, apartheid, and diaspora do not provide the same conditions of knowing as does citizenship in a liberal democracy. The freedom to observe social life, to collect data, to move through the various zones of economic, political, and cultural force - nothing guarantees these as human rights. Such power has frequently enough been stripped from the public and allocated to the state’ (8).

Another key feature of realist narration is the dovetailing of social and political contexts. Lukács notes that ‘[p]revious realistic literature, however violent its criticism of reality, had always assumed the unity of the world it described and seen it as a living whole inseparable from man [...] himself. But the major realists of our time deliberately introduce elements of disintegration into their work – for instance, the subjectivizing of time – and uses them to portray the contemporary world more exactly’ (*Realism in Our*, 39). Hence, the production of a realist novel should come in accordance to its social representation. Following this, Lukács affirms that the use of realist narration and the constantly changing social context must be communicated in a neutral tone which is neither optimistic nor pessimistic (Robinette, 6). Therefore, the forthcoming section will analyse *In the Eye of the Sun* based on three main themes of culturalism and reimagining history: integrating the personal and the public, narrating conflict and political struggle.

III. In *The Eye of the Sun*: a Common Ground

One of the main subject matters in *In the Eye of the Sun*, which pertains directly to Soueif's desire to establish a cosmopolitan society, or what she calls a 'common ground', is cross-cultural dialogue. According to Massad, one of the main focuses of Soueif's fictional writings is the investigation of this possibility. He writes that

Soueif explores the lives of middle class and poor Egyptian women (Muslim, Christian, Arab, and Greek), as well as the lives of foreign expatriates, American, Canadian, English, Turkish, black, white. These characters and their psychologies emerge as the effects of all that surrounds them – culture, domestic and international politics, economics, society, family, and above all desire and love. Everything about them is overdetermined in intricate and simple ways and rendered in a prose of high aesthetic quality. ('The Politics', 75)

Soueif's treatment of politics, class, cross-culturalism, and romance as interdependent themes is what makes the work holistic. She writes on encounters of East and West, English and Arabic, as well as the experience of gender through different class structures. Soueif exposes how politics, society, family, love, and desire have a major role in shaping the characters' physiologies and behaviour (Massad, 'The Politics', 75). Thus, it is clear that Soueif's novels aim to find a common ground between cultures. She utilizes language and translation to highlight her main theme. She often uses what John Mullan calls a 'lexical exotica', formed by using Arabic and French words in an Anglophone text. The glossary in the novel

provides the English-speaking reader with a translation, and sometimes brief explanation, of the terms. This process of translation ‘makes the crossing between languages the very substance of the narrative’ (Mullan, no pgn). She offers a critique through transcending binaries of West versus Arab whilst examining possibilities of cultural dialogues. In some parts of Soueif’s writings, we see a strong nationalistic voice apparent in her political narration. In other parts, however, Soueif promotes cultural connections and bridging the gap between East and West and is strongly pro-cosmopolitanism.

The title of the novel is one of Soueif’s many ‘multilayered’ cultural referents (Massad, ‘The Politics’, 75). Even though the title is borrowed from Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘The Old Men’ (1902), it was also featured in a song by Shadia, a well-known Egyptian singer – in the 1960s: ‘Tell the eye of the sun not to get too hot, for my heart’s beloved sets out in the morning’ (Massad, 75). Moreover, *In the Eye of the Sun* narrates Asya’s emotional journey and self-exploration through her marriage to Saif and her love affair with Gerald Stone, the English hippy she meets in London. The underlying argument, however, is a retrospective picture of Egyptian people under Egypt’s various political fluctuations. Soueif’s Bildungsroman carries several important political and cultural referents, be it popular culture or important figures in society. The title of the novel could be interpreted in many different ways and it is not mentioned in the novel, except in the incident of the military withdrawal west of the Suez Canal after the Israeli attack of 7 June 1967 (59). Soueif gives the reader space to create their own interpretations.

The novel opens in London where Soueif's emphasis on bridging the gaps between cultures is apparent through the setting of the scene. Asya, Nadia, and her Uncle Hamid Mursi all sit on a balcony in London listening to Rod Stewart whilst waiting for the mint tea to brew in the teapot, drinking it in small glasses instead of cups (9). What underpins this scene is a natural and unforced infusion of symbols of different cultures. Cultural boundaries are almost non-existent; this does, however, change as the novel progresses. Soueif foregrounds cultural dialogue through various techniques, in particular the utilization of the main character as an archetypal representation of Egyptian women. Asya's individuality is a direct comment that Middle Eastern women do not necessarily conform to Western stereotypes of them. Maitzzen argues that Asya's autonomic development 'does not depend on either a literal or a metaphorical "unveiling"; she does not define her life through a struggle against either Islamic extremism or Western Imperialism' (no pgn).

The novel describes President Nixon's visit to Egypt in 1974 through the deployment of Egyptian popular culture and translation. Through translating popular culture for both characters within it and a Western readership, Soueif highlights the 'show and don't tell' technique, through referencing popular political artists whose names and verses connote Egypt's rich resistance musical and poetic repertoire. In this respect, Soueif narrates President Nixon's visit – an attempt to restore peaceful relations with the Middle East that created many controversies on both Egyptian and Arabic levels. While his peace-finding mission was welcomed by Sadat and other diplomats, many Egyptians did not feel the same. This has

placed the public into a state of incredulity of the contradictory acts of the government, between what it is entitled to do and what it is actually doing. The months following June 1967 witnessed a rising level of activity in Egyptian performative arts, demonstrating their power to galvanize a collective sense of political solidarity and accelerate the public's political awakening.

Criticism started to become more outspoken, as in the case of the poet Ahmed Fouad Negm and singer Imam Muhammad Issa – as Booth describes them, a 'ragged-looking poet and a slightly built composer-singer with a wicked grin' ('Exploding', 19). Their performances inspired combined activist activity amongst workers, students and the public. Ali Shawki, a film director at the Higher Institute of Cinema, asserts that both artists have mirrored Egypt's 'universal disgust' after the 1967 defeat by Israel, as well as what they have experienced of social and political injustice and corruption (Laylin, no pgn). Hammond argues that the duo are the most well-known political songwriters in the Arab world associated with the post-Nasser era (155). One famous sarcastic poem composed by the duo particularly took hold in Egypt. This is the tune playing while Asya, Deena and Saif reflect on a student revolt that occurred during Nixon's visit. Asya plays the song and starts, along with Deena, translating the lyrics to her non-Arabic speaking friends:

Sharraft ya Nixon Baba,

Ya bta' el-Watergate – (496)

Asya explains the lyrics to Gerald and Lisa: “Baba” means “father” but it’s also used, as it is used here, as a title of mock respect – as in “Ali Baba”, [...] but the thing is you could also address a child as “Baba” as an endearment – a sort of inversion: like calling him Big Chief because he’s so little – and so when it’s used aggressively – say in an argument between two men – it carries a diminutivising, belittling signification’ (496–7). The song namechecks the Watergate scandal where in 1972 five men were arrested in the office of the Democratic National Committee, located in the Watergate buildings, and charged for attempted burglary. These men had ties to the committee to re-elect President Nixon. Despite that, Sadat, giving him unnecessary honour, warmly greets the former president.

The next verse goes,

Amaloulak eema w seema

Salateen el-fool wez-zeit – (497)

Asya translates the verse saying: ‘to make an “eema” for someone is to behave towards them as though they have value when they in fact have none’. Deena adds, ‘[t]his was on the occasion of Nixon’s visit to the Arab world – so he’s talking about the Arabs – the Arab leaders’ (497). Asya explains the next verse saying that ‘fool’ (a recipe made with fava beans) is the ‘basic diet of the Egyptians’ suggesting that it is the food of the poor and the unfortunate in the Egyptian society. Asya adds, ‘[t]he simplest and cheapest is with oil – “zeit” – and lemon’. Hence, to be ‘sultan’ of ‘fool’, according to Asya’s explanation, ‘argues massive poverty and backwardness’. However, Asya explains eagerly the twist in the verse and the way

the poet, intentionally or unintentionally, plays with words to show the drastic difference of wealth distribution in the neighbouring Gulf countries after the discovery of oil, suggesting in this case a hypercritical scheme of hierarchy: ‘but “zeit” also, like “oil” in English, means petrol oil. So if you take *that* meaning, then there are two categories of “Sultan” being referred to: the sultans of “fool” and poverty etc. and the sultans of wealth and oil’. She notes that even though there are lots of disparities between the two categories the similarity resides in ‘the reading of “fool and zeit” as a unit having only one sultan – a similarity in their attitudes to Nixon and the USA’ (498).

Asya further notes that the title of the ‘sultan’ nowadays is nothing but a ‘disparaging’ title except in the ‘folk-tales’. Asya goes further to explain the word ‘sultan’ is also a reference to when someone goes mad. “Salateen” is also the plural of “Sultaniyyah” which is a bowl, but which also has to do with madness. You know in a farce where a mad person wears a saucepan on his head? Well, in an Egyptian farce a mad person would wear a “Sultaniyyah” on his head. “He put on the sultaniyyah,” means “he’s gone mad” (498).

The tape continues,

Mahou mouldid

Shobash ya’s’hab el-bait – (499)

And Asya continues explaining:

A 'moulid' is strictly a 'nativity' of a saint – [...]. But because of how it's celebrated it also means a time of chaos where anything goes.

'Shobash' [o]n the other hand, [...] is used by the belly-dancer in weddings when she starts collecting gifts of money for the bride. 'Ya s'hab el-beit' would be the rest of the dancer's cry. [...] But the supreme 'House' is the Ka'ba in Makkah. And if you ever just say 'As'hab el-beit' it is taken automatically to refer to the people of *that* House, of the House of the Prophet, that is the people most honoured among all Muslims – who are now being honoured by the visit of President Nixon. (499)

Through the sarcasm and structural irony in the verse, Soueif highlights the effect of popular music in mobilizing the masses. With their wittiness and bravery, both artists have confronted the state with their engaging music and scornful lyrics starting what Shawki has described as a 'political turmoil with the government', especially after criticizing Nasser, which resulted in their imprisonment in 1969 (Laylin).

Ahmed Fouad Negm and Shaikh Imam became known for their down to earth instrumentalities. Ahmed Fouad Negm became a working-class hero. His colloquial language and dark satire of the political system and the cruel reality of oppression in Egypt meant he won the hearts of the masses. Also, Shaikh Imam's choice of simple tunes and popular melody to convey radical thought is what enabled people's love for them. Valassopoulos and Mostafa stress that his use of simple instruments such as the lute or the *riqq* (tambourine) asserts that this type of

music is a political commentary and does not necessarily need an orchestra or any additional instrumental backgrounds. However, what resides underneath this popular image is a vital political critique ('Popular Protest', 647). Naming such political entertainers suggests Soueif's responsiveness with this type of popular culture. Also, the fact that she depicts Asya's process of translation of the colloquial verses from Arabic to English achieves the cross-cultural dialogue Soueif weaves as a common theme in her writing. Moreover, through close scrutiny this section reveals that social classes merge when Egypt's rights are at stake. Asya, a representative of the upper middle classes, translates verses from two of the most well-known figures representing the working classes and the less fortunate.

Nash argues that the liminal space between East and West in which Soueif places her characters, exemplified in Asya, is a focal aspect that measures the author's writing strength. This is in line with Homi Bhabha's theory of '[h]ybridity, in betweenness, the beyond'. Nash further argues that this puts Soueif sometimes in moments of cultural confusion (67). The deconstruction of the meaning of Asya's name itself aligns with the cosmopolitan argument that Soueif treats in her novels. The name is discussed in *Sandpiper*, where it is defined thus: 'It actually means Asia in Arabic ... it can also mean "the Cruel One" and "she who is full of sorrow"' (93). The name Asya is what Malak calls a '[m]ultilayered hybrid' (130) in the sense it has been given to an Egyptian belonging to a country in North Africa and refers directly to another continent, whilst all this is explained in a third continent. This, as Malak suggests, means that 'Asya's feelings, experiences, and worldviews extend beyond her geographical borders' (130).

However, as an Anglophone writer, Soueif stresses the importance of targeting both Arab and Western audiences. As much as it is relatable for the Western reader to have a direct and a non-translated access to the text, Soueif believes that the Eastern reader relates themselves to her writings due to her authentic Arab *wigdan*, or ‘inner soul, passion, or sensibility’ (Mehrez, ‘Writing Out’, 89). Therefore, the novel is able to cut through society’s stereotyping and complications. There is an interesting mix of the national and the international in her geographical portrayal and placement of character. Mehrez shows the correlation between power, knowledge, ideology and the plot. She argues that narration that focuses on historical events is connected to ‘power’ and its ‘structure’, and ‘values’ – whether political, cultural or even aesthetic. She writes that the ‘link between the ideology and storytelling is the link between power and knowledge; power is always the trigger of the story, or more precisely, the plot’ (Mehrez, 153).

The reader may also see the significance of the act of translation *In the Map of Love*. Soueif has written that ‘I don't think it is possible to view the act of selecting, translating and publishing a work as simply a literary act. I think it has to be viewed as both an act of culture and of political significance – an act which takes place in a particular context’ (cited in Hassan Gordon, no pgn). Hence, Katherine King argues that the act of translation triggers a sense of cultural modification: ‘[t]ranslation, then can help change “the hearts and minds” of a dominant people in two ways: first, by making audible the choices of a subordinate people, it can engender respect for them as thinkers, and second, it can allow their experiences to

be judged by a universal standard of justice' (King, 152). This is clearly illustrated in *The Map of Love* when Amal says that 'there is a constant attempt to render Arabic into English, not just to translate the phrases but to render something of the dynamic of Arabic, how it works, into English. So, there is the question of how to open windows into another culture but also galvanize opposition to imperialist policies that are oppressing and distorting the culture' (481).

Albakry and Hancock have shed light on the lexical technicalities in *The Map of Love*, or what they refer to as 'code switching'. Soueif uses code switching in order to set a narrative mode and convey a larger motive, which is to highlight the cultural and social elements that are used as a means to showcase her subject matter (221). For example, Amal explains the language hybridity used between Egyptians, saying: 'We sit in soft leather armchairs and exchange news: our families, our children, what we have been doing over the past twenty years. We speak as we always have: Arabic inlaid with French and English phrases' (200). French is described by Albakry and Hancock as a 'third party language', a common medium of communication between English-speaking Anna and Arabic-speaking Sharif. Ironically, French is, according to them, used to wipe out the boundaries and class differences between the colonized the colonizer, as a consequence of it being the language of another rivalling colony. Hence, it establishes, to a certain extent, the 'mezzaterra' that Soueif is keen on. Albakry and Hancock say,

The use of French here might be viewed as a means of establishing common ground or levelling the distinction between the British and

Egyptians in the colonial British context. Whether Arabic or French, however, the art of code switching in this novel is part of the bilingual creativity possibly employed to demonstrate how language could be used to dissolve borders between the English and Egyptian, how language could be used to create barriers between the colonized subjects and British authorities, and how language could contribute to the discovery and redefining of cultural identity. (230)

In their article “Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution”, Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Mostafa argue that popular music has ‘helped to shape and articulate emerging desires and aspirations as well as participating in criticisms and grievances at the site of political change’ (638). The themes, they argue, dominating the concerns of these musical figures have been triggered by the thought and demands of the locals, and hence, their music is portrayed as a form of artistic resistance. It is about creating ‘new alternatives’ and breaking free from the ‘dominant ideologies’ that have regulated and restricted the crowd for as long as they remember. This has paved the way for a new wave of political and social music born from the 2011 January revolution.³³

As the novel progresses we notice that Asya’s views on political affairs begin to reflect on imperialism and her culture’s association with it. In London, Asya reflects upon seeing an Englishman coming her way and says, ‘I bring you

³³ For more on liberation and resistance music analysis, see: Joseph Massad, “Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music.” *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Ed. Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005; for mass culture in Egypt, see: Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

poetry as great as yours but in another tongue [...] I bring you Islam and Luxor and Alexandria and lutes and tambourines and silk rugs and sunshine and incense and voluptuous ways [...] She smiles, and the man [...] glancing up as he passes her, smiles back and walks on' (512). Nash argues that Asya's response to seeing the Englishman and proclaiming an association between his culture and hers shows no sense of 'colonial aporias' that is normally found in postcolonial texts such as those by Salman Rushdie or V. S. Naipaul. Nash argues that 'Asya's assertion of a personal identification with this imperial history, at the same time as she makes a claim on it, is fraught with postcolonial difficulties. Asya – surely here the mouthpiece of Soueif herself' (73–4). The ambiguity of the quotation's closure masks the vagueness of cultural dialogue even though Asya tries to assert the commonality between the culture of her nation and the man's. Nash questions, '[s]imply because she has appropriated his culture, does she expect her presentation of her culture will convince the Englishman of its equality with his?', adding that '[t]he romantic Orientalist clichés in which Egypt and Islam are presented suggest that although Asya claims for the two cultures an equal weighting, her appeal to British culture implies affiliation of her own to the former' (74).

In relation to this, Asya experiencing both cultures, the Egyptian and the English helped in molding her well-rounded character. 'It is Asya al-'Ulama', Massad writes, 'who explores the meanings of home and exile through interweaving the personal and the social *and* the political *and* the sexual' ('The Political', 76). Even though England's role has not been diminished to mere imperial argument, while looking at the 'grand façades of Whitehall', Asya reflects

on its 'accoutrements of Empire' from the great railways to the military bands playing every Sunday where she used to watch them as a child with her mother. Asya cannot help but examine the legacy the English build their country on. Whether it was the 'Egyptian cotton and debt, on the wealth of India, on the sugar of the West Indies, on countries of adventure and exploitation ending in the division of the Arab world and the creation of the state of Israel etc.etc.etc.' (511-2). However, soon enough, the reader is allowed back again to Asya's stream of unanswered questions that lead her to a psychological reconciliation of the past:

Why then does she not find it in her heart to feel resentment of bitterness or anything but admiration for the pleasure in the beauty, the graciousness, the harmony of this scene? Is it because the action is all in the past; because this is an "empire in decline" and all this magnificence is only a – monument, [...] Or is it because the thoughts, the words, the poetry that wound their way down the years in parallel with the fortunes of the Empire have touched her so nearly and pulled her in so close that she feels herself a part of it. (512)

Tangled with the emerging notion of Pan-Arabism, Asya's admiration of the scene of the Thames while walking along the Embankment and her acknowledgment of its beauty put her in a position far from Said's understanding of colonized subordinate location. Asya's cognitive efforts to equalize the position of colonized and colonizer may be what Tageldin calls 'conditional love'. Tageldin defines this type of love as breaking 'the circuit in which the self routinely must constitute itself

either as equal to or as greater than an Other – must constitute itself in the *I* of that Other’ (288). Such love, Tageldin argues, does not grant the full sovereignty of the Other; however, it maintains ‘the *I* always on the threshold of the Other, just resistant enough to be “itself” and just porous enough to invite its transformation’ (288). Asya’s love of the literature of Empire reminds the reader of Mahfouz’s words declaring his love of Western literature: ‘Yes, we know Western literature here. In fact, we love it too much’ (Taylor, 4). Asya’s belongs to an elite class of cosmopolitans so she is less cognizant of how imperialism is directly linked to capitalism, making her ‘part of it’ rather than resenting it. Soueif wants to emphasize the ‘seductive nature’ of cultural imperialism materialized in the literature of the Empire, which has a degree of control over the mind of the colonized. However, it is only when the (post)colonial subject recognizes that notion of seductiveness that it may liberate itself from its control. Soueif exemplifies this in the novel when she writes that ‘no rebellion can mitigate and no treaty bring to an end’ (512). Soueif’s technique of narrating various timeframes accentuates the notion of geographic dislocations which she utilizes in an effort to accomplish her aspiration of a cultural dialogue.

Soueif fluctuates between asserting a common ground, as portrayed in Asya’s relationship with Gerald after her constant arguments and frustration with Saif later in the novel, and highlighting the cultural differences that manifest in their lives. There is no denying that Asya’s affair with Gerald Stone, understood through her body as metonymic of the relationship between Arab and Western worlds, may be figured as a relationship of the Self and the Other. Moreover, this notion appears

clearer when Asya grows bolder towards the end of the novel and questions Gerald's predilection for women from developing countries, a bold move showing Asya's matured voice. '[T]he reason you have gone for Trinidad – Vietnam – Egypt – is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss – you are a sexual imperialist'. She further adds, 'You pretend – to yourself as well – that it's because you don't *notice* race – or it's because these cultures retain some spiritual quality lost to the West – you pride yourself that you dance “like a black man” but that is all just phoney' (723). One of the main reasons that Soueif situates Asya at the heart of the Empire is to provide a different context for the process of self-realization.

Soueif dwelling on Asya's sexual experiences can be read as a political act in itself. One of the main reasons this novel has not been translated into Arabic is its frank descriptions of Asya's sexual encounters and frustrations. Asya's sexual frustration towards Saif stands for a wider kind of frustration and despair. The interrelated treatment of the political and personal in the novel directly refers to the wider sense of frustration. Asya's sexuality may be read as a reference of her own citizenship, and Saif's inability to please her is cause and effect at the same time. This implies that the lure of the West is caused by Egypt's inability to move on from tradition and pattern. The inability of the state to fulfil the basic needs of its citizens builds people's frustration, causing sadness, helplessness, and despair.

Showcasing Asya's relationships in this novel is Soueif's means of opening out her concerns with cultural exchange and political history. Soueif dwells at length upon Asya's failed relationship with Gerald. However, what pulls Asya out

of this are political events and her desire to engage in the national politics of her country. Saif and Gerald in this sense are respectively representatives of Arab culture and political states and Western imperialism, Saif being patriarchal and constrictive and Gerald being seductive and controlling. Both treat Asya in a constricting manner: Saif's jealousy provokes him over trivial matters and Stone's sexual imperialism is reflected in his refusal to let go of her even when she tries to push him away. Here, Asya's relationship with Gerald appears as a kind of turning to the West for an alternative of freedom and hedonism. This does not work out because of the developed level of political values Asya aspires to. Cultural seduction proves inadequate in a world in which political machinations play out over conquests and colonialism, especially around Palestine and Arab solidarity.

Re-imagining History: Integrating the Personal and the Public

The concepts of nationhood and belonging entered a new era in the second half of the 1960s in Egyptian politics. This particularly started in 1952 through the revolution that resulted in the decolonization of Egypt by Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Even though this era marked a certain degree of pluralism and expression under surveillance, people's aspirations for freedom quickly turned into fear and their national imaginings into despair (Elsadda, 119). Like Ashour, Soueif engages with the disappointment of Nasser's legacy. Through Asya's conversation with Nadia and Hamid, Soueif introduces Nasser's political strategies such as a socialist economy and the 'non-alignment' movement, which were widely heard in Nasser's public speeches. According to Steven Cook, in 1955 after his participation in the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, Nasser has declared 'positive neutralism' which

he aimed to be the ‘defining feature in Egyptian foreign policy’ (65). This movement promoted ‘collective opposition to colonialism and the perceived predatory policies of the new global powers, the United States and the Soviet Union’ (66).

Gamal Abd al-Nasser is the Egyptian president who most divides Egypt in critique. The ambivalent relationship Egyptians have with Nasser is magnificently portrayed in Waguih Ghali’s *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964). Nasser in the novel is neither a friend of the poor nor a friend of the intellectuals. Like Mahfouz and Ghali, Soueif has a complex approach to the character of Nasser and, like many Egyptians, this complex feeling is portrayed accurately through Asya’s stream of consciousness when she sees Nasser in an Umm Kulthoum concert to celebrate the National Assembly:

The eye immediately went to the magnificent head and shoulders rising above the crowd. The heart leapt in his presence. His raised hand waved in greeting, the black eyebrows and the eyes crinkled up with a smile. The audience rose to its feet in an ecstasy of applause. (‘But what about the purges? Here: in this very university?’ whispered a quiet voice in her head. ‘what about the concentration camps? The torture of both the leftist and the Muslim Brotherhood?’ I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe he never knew of it. How can one man know everything? [...] How do I know what he knows? He nationalized the Canal, he got rid of the British Occupation, he gave us back our dignity – and at home, what about the clinics he’s

building everywhere? What about the high Dam? What about electricity for the peasants and land reform and education? He had to be a good man.)
(62–3)

We can see the proud manner in which Asya describes Nasser at the start of this excerpt, which gives a sense of her glorification of him that fades at the end of the novel. Here, we sense that Asya is not sure herself of Nasser's credibility when she starts questioning the truth behind his socialist doctrine and his actions against leftists; however, this is not yet well developed. It is noticeable here that Asya's political awareness has not yet been entirely developed, as seen in the questions going back and forth for and against Nasser, which portrays her uncertainty towards his deeds.

Soueif strongly believes in the role of musical production in shaping the collective. It forms a connection between the collective memory and certain key political and national events. Its importance to Soueif goes even further to it having 'healing' effects, as though she is suggesting that music is an act of resistance as well as a solace from all the surrounding upheavals. She says that '[t]here are two things, I suppose: how art expresses our lives and our feelings for us, and also what it does to our feelings – the function that it performs in our lives' (Massad, 'Liberating Songs', 85).

In the same scene, however, Umm Kulthoum sings:

Give me my freedom! Let loose my hands!

I have given you my all and held back nothing.

I ache with your bonds drawing blood from my wrists
Why do I hold on them when they have availed me nothing?
Why do I hold on to vows you have broken
And this pain of imprisonment when the world is mine? (63)

This love poem turned into a popular political song, which echoes Soueif's use of romance as a metaphor for politics. Composed by Ibrahim Naji, the poem was originally written as a love poem. Soon, however, it gained prominence on account of its political nuances. Soueif writes that '[f]or a moment the audience is apprehensive. Would he perhaps think that this was a veiled reference to his Mukhabarat? How very audacious she is. Who else would have dared to sing this stanza – even though it is in a love song?' (63). Nasser's authoritarian state had a developed ideology of political art and scrutinized that already produced in order to ensure they fitted the new state in Egypt. Hence, the romantic movement of art of art's sake does not necessarily fit the discourse of national struggle against occupation and a totalitarian state. Soueif writes,

'Decadence' scream the literary pages of the national newspapers. 'It is a well-known fact that the doctrine of "Art for Art's Sake" found acceptance – even in the land of its origin – among a few misguided and uncommitted so-called artist members of the upper class who lived in ivory towers. To adopt that doctrine in this country is an outrage. Now, more than ever, at this crucial point of our history, of our national struggle, intellectuals and artists alike should be committed to the single cause of our nation. Art is –

and *should* be – at the service of our society. Art is at the service of the Revolution. Will there be no end to British imperialism?’ (95)

The Suez Crisis is one of the main subjects that motivates the novel’s plot. The Suez Canal is an essential element of Egypt’s national security. For Egyptians, it is a ‘symbol of freedom, of strength, of victory’ (Soueif, 154). The completion of it in 1869 gave Egypt both security and strategic importance on regional and international levels. ‘And this Canal now’ writes Soueif, ‘lies defeated and stagnant; the great ships lie rusting under its still surface and the enemy builds the Barlev line along its Eastern bank and trains his guns on the red-roofed villas of Ismailia and Suez. The fields of strawberries and sugar beet lie uncultivated, the stores unmanned. Six hundred thousand embittered citizens have been evacuated. They take refuge in the capital and the City Victorious groans under the new burden placed upon it’ (*In the Eye*, 154). Soueif stresses how the geographical importance of Egypt’s location adds to the intensity of the struggle for Egypt’s political stability. It is an anti-imperialist way to showcase Egypt’s diplomatic and economic stability, as it should be.

However, after the withdrawal of the Egyptian army from Sinai, Nasser decides to resign from his presidency. Soueif describes the melancholic atmosphere in Asya’s sad reaction that represents the reaction of many Egyptians at that time: ‘President Nasser addresses the nation. From somewhere private. No audience. No applause. There he is: the big square head, the magnetic eyes, the massive shoulders, the pause before he speaks. What have you done to us, Chief? Oh, what

have you done to us?' (62). In describing this despair, Asya's household acts as an exemplar of every Egyptian house: 'They've got you now, they've got you', Soueif writes. 'They've wanted to for fifteen years and now they have. A terrible sadness. A desolation. Asya sobs in front of the television. Kareem and Deena sit mutely miserable. Their father and mother go into their bedroom, saying nothing and closing the door. And is this the time to go away? OK, maybe you are responsible. In fact, of course you are responsible. But how can we let you go? What shall we do without you?' (62)

From the above quotation, it is obvious how Soueif masterfully amalgamates real historical political settings with fictional events. At the start of almost every scene, Soueif provides passages describing actual political settings that also progress the fictional plot of the novel. The novel is more than an account of Asya's emotional and intellectual development; it is at once a story of Egypt's political struggles and how they affect people in their daily lives. For instance, in style similar to reportage, Soueif here shows the discrepancy between political histories through stating two political events after one another:

Tuesday, 1 September

Amman

Representatives of the Jordanian government meet with the representatives of the Palestinian resistance.

Wednesday, 2 September

Tel Aviv

General Moshe Dayan threatens to resign if he is not given free rein in the Occupational Territories. (202)

Through the narration of the Six Day War, Soueif retrospectively highlights yet another historical concern in Egypt–Israel relations. She begins by reporting Nasser’s speech of defiance asserting Egypt’s sovereignty over the Aqaba Gulf. He asserts that since the Aqaba Gulf constitutes the territorial waters of Egypt, then ‘[u]nder no circumstances will we allow the Israeli flag to pass through the Aqaba Gulf’ (41). He further declares, ‘[t]he Jews threaten war. We tell them: You are welcome, we are ready for war. Our armed forces and all our people are ready for war, but under no circumstances will we abandon any of our rights. This water is ours’ (41). Again using a reportage style, Soueif recounts Nasser’s defiant position in a military conference on Friday, 2 June 1967. Even though Nasser was reminded that retaliating militarily against Israel would result in big losses, he asserts that the ‘military strategy is merely an implementation of a nation’s foreign policy.’ (43)

A few pages later, Soueif places the reader inside Nasser’s hotel bedroom at the Hilton where he enjoys the Nile view and ‘looks down’ on it with the lights from Qasr el-Nil. The connotation of ‘looking down’ suggests a higher position that is detached from the ordinary Egyptians below. It also suggests that Nasser’s Hilton bedroom is an ivory tower that grants him privacy away from the public, quite contrary to the view of him being the friend of the poor. What confirms this point is Soueif’s narration that befalls after. He looks to ‘Abd el-Megid Farid, his Secretary-General and says, “How come I’ve never seen this wonderful view

before? Look at this! I'm buried alive out there in Heliopolis'" (213). The word 'buried' suggests concealment and obscurity, a sense of defeat or failure. The country's defeat in the Six Day War has left its mark on him as well as the people.

Despite that and after Nasser's death on 28 September, Saif reflects on the destructive state of Egypt along with his relationship with Asya. This extract draws a number of connections between politics and the self such that the personal and political become one. He sadly contemplates:

It felt like the end of something. 'Yesterday all the past.' It felt like another part of a closing chapter that had started in 1967 – before I had even met her. That whole autumn and winter. 'Abd el-Nasser dead. Sinai captured. The opera house burnt down. I have the photos I took on that early morning: the dove-white building, a scorched ruin, three slim white chairs covered in red velvet lying on their sides in the drive, the marble staircase intact.' (222)

Shillington suggests that '[e]ven though the people of the country turned out in huge numbers to demand that he withdraw the resignation and remain their leader, his reputation as a shrewd man of affairs, able to manipulate the major powers and enhance Egypt's place in the world, was never repaired' (472).

Nasser's resignation, however, creates concern amongst Egyptians over the ideological shift to Sadat's policies and the country's consequent move away from advocacy on behalf of the Palestinian cause in the aspiration of Arab unity, which

entails a strong ‘bilateral’ peace treaty with Israel. This contrast in Egypt’s domestic and foreign policy between Nasser and Sadat is presented in the novel through Asya’s confusion, alongside many in her generation, to see ‘their ideals being dismantled’ (18), leading her to speculate on the regime Nasser had established.

‘The worst thing,’ says Asya, ‘is this terrible rift between us and the rest of the Arab world.’

‘There you are, you see. Because you were brought up believing in Egypt’s position – its role in the Arab world –’

‘And meanwhile there’s real economic hardship at home,’ Nadia says. ‘You can’t imagine. I mean if you were to look for a flat in Cairo these days – forget it.’ (17–18)

Cook argues that ‘throughout the country’s history a set of ideas, questions, and themes tends to emerge that becomes central to the national conversation. In Egypt’s case, there has been intense debate to define what Egypt is, what it stands for, and what its relation to the world is’ (7).

The start of the Open Door policy stirred bitter mockery amongst Egyptians. After Nasser’s death, Sadat’s implementation of economic liberalization was yet another uncertainty for Egyptians. Soueif uses a sarcastic tone to ridicule the state’s corruption and its strong identification with the West. This appears in the conversation between Chrissie, Asya, Noora, and Mimi:

‘We’re going to get cosy with the Americans now –’

‘Did you see the picture in the paper?’

‘What picture?’

‘A couple of days after the funeral. The American delegation offering their condolences. Eliot Richardson and Robert Murphy and Sadat. All three with big grins on their faces.’

‘I noticed that. And Mohmoud Riadh was there too. Only he wasn’t smiling.’

‘Well, Sadat’s been smiling ever since the funeral.’

‘Elected by a majority of 90.04 per cent.’

‘At least it wasn’t 99.999 –’ (218)

In another part of the novel, Deena asks Asya’s help in writing the former a letter to inform her that Muhsin has been ‘on the run’ for two days, since Asya is in England and works in publishing. Filled with rage mixed with fear, Deena says, ‘I cannot believe how your newspapers there keep making like Sadat is this wonderful humanitarian hero. The only people he is “humanitarian” to are the Israelis’ (32).

In conversation Asya, Saif, Leon, and Frederick discuss Israel’s stand against Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt. In response to the peace treaty Sadat is signing with Israel to get Sinai back, Saif believes that Sadat’s main concern is Henry Kissinger’s friendship. However, Asya adds that the peace treaty is nothing but a mirage: ‘How can there be peace, actual *peace*, when the problem is still there? This agreement can only harm the Palestinian cause and it’s going to be seen as a piece of treachery’ (384). However, Asya sees the real tragedy as the fact that the Arabs cannot agree within themselves, let alone with the Israelis. She adds, ‘[t]hat

is our tragedy. And that's what Nasser saw and – for all his faults – what he tried so hard to correct. But maybe it's impossible –' (384).

Asya's engagement in political debate intensifies towards the end of the novel. In heated conversations, she expresses her political views on Sadat and Israel's 'blind' peace treaty:

'Well I think that before he made that "bold, visionary" move he should have found out if the Israelis were going to meet it with a bold, visionary move of their own, but they haven't: they've given him nothing.'

'They've offered to give you Sinai back.'

'And that way they divide the Arab front. The issue has to be Palestine –'

'Maybe that's down the line –'

'It isn't –'

'How do you know?'

She doesn't – not really it's just that watching that Knesset speech on television she'd felt – well, there he was up fronting away, centre-stage as he's wanted to be all his life, and there were Mr Begin and Mr Shamir et al., poker faced, knowing that the game was one of nerve and concealment and giving nothing away – unless America made them, and America wouldn't. But as far as Leroy and Marie – and Gerald – were concerned, she had plenty to be proud of: the Sadat initiative and the queues outside the Tut Ankh Amun exhibition –. (712–13)

One of the interesting aspects of the novel is the impossibility of disentangling the fictional aspects of the narrative from the historical account, which Soueif tends to report in blocks and through real characters. She believes that the context in which an individual lives is determinative of their actions. 'To understand a character,' Soueif argues, 'to work out their motivations, reactions, what they're capable of and what they're not, is all tied to their history, to what surrounds them' (Massad, 'The Politics', 88).

Soueif's fusing of history with fiction is a means to explore the possibilities and limits of a character in dealing with their daily lives. Soueif has asserted that she prioritizes the realistic and credible aspects in narrating history: '[w]hy should I invent a historical background, when it's all there really? What I did was to take history as it was, working out what was happening month by month, and then map my characters' lives against it if they were really living at that time, then how would they have dealt with these things? What would these things have meant to them? How far did public events encroach upon their personal life?' (Massad, 'The Politics', 87–8). According to Halbwachs, the turn to history gives us a certain kind of freedom to choose what from the past we could learn and wish to immerse ourselves in, since history, in his words, 'does not impose itself on us' (50). Extending Halbwachs's argument, history can here be considered heterogeneous; its fluidity allows Arab writers to draw on overlooked possibilities when the present imposes itself in the form of an impasse.

In Soueif's *The Map of Love*, the novel narrates Anna Winterborne's journey to Egypt in 1900. Anna's journey to Egypt is in hope of recovery from her husband's death, who, after returning from his deployment in Sudan, dies in London as a result of his feelings of guilt after being involved in a massacre of native people there. Soon after, Anna's trip to Egypt becomes more involved than she thought it would be. She falls in love with Sherif Pasha, an Egyptian nationalist who is totally committed to the country. Later, Isabel Parknan, a descendant of Anna and Sharif, visits Egypt a century after their story, carrying with her an old family trunk. The novel's narration is made up of a 'baggy assemblage of journal entries and letters, diaries and stray notes left behind by Anna and Sharif Pasha' (91). The documents in the trunk relate to Anna's personal life and the relationship she had with Sharif. Amal, Anna's great grandniece, narrates their story through the documents she finds in the trunk. It is not only does Soueif look through the past in her novel, but that Amal does too. The narration of the memoirs is a separate act from Amal's narration. Therefore, the text fluctuates between the present and the past – between the letters, journals, and diaries of Anna, and the narrator's life and her contemplations on the past of Egypt as a colony and post-colony. Along with a detailed exploration of Egyptian nationalism and its power in the country, one of the main concerns Soueif raises in this 'counter-narrative' the possibility of finding 'mezzaterra' (Halim, 442).

Although the novel was published nearly eighteen years ago, it is in many ways as relevant to Egypt's present situation as it was to its original context, which is narrated in the novel in detail. The main question, however, in elucidating the

key concerns of the novel, is what makes Soueif dwell on themes of imperialism and colonialism seventy-seven years after Egypt's independence? For Soueif, it is a matter of cultural and sociopolitical representation of the East in the eyes of the West. As Edward Said writes, '[s]ince an Arab poet or novelist [...] writes of [their] experiences, of [their] values, of [their] humanity (however strange that may be), [they] effectively disrupt [...] the various patterns (images, clichés, abstractions) by which the Orient is represented' (291).

As a national scribe, political and cultural commentator and a professional translator, Soueif sees the act of translating real historical figures into the accessible world of fiction as a conscious act of literary activism. The similarities between the character of Omar and Edward Said are indisputable. Valassopoulos asserts that there is a specific reason why Soueif chose to portray a 'fictional Edward Said' ('Fictionalising Post-colonial', 33). In doing so, Soueif is emphasizing the idea of the 'local but also international' intellectual, alerting the reader to the novel's tackling of profound issues relevant to politics, activism and the country's postcolonial history (33).

In *The Map of Love*, the thinnest line separates history and fiction and East and West. In making so fragile a divide, Soueif is keen to be what Valassopoulos calls a 'revisionist historian', setting the historical record straight and tackling the suppressed issues of the public consciousness. The result of this is a vibrant display of political engagement, which, as Valassopoulos stresses, 'reveal[s] that politics is still alive and flourishes amongst Cairo intelligentsia' (36). In *The Map of Love*,

Soueif aims to show the links between the world narrated and the present to uncover a nationalist spirit that has been lost. In this aim, Soueif revisits major events, political practices, and historical occasions that have led Egypt to its present position, and to trace the changes that have occurred. As Soueif says, ‘I wanted to bounce one time against the other – the end of the century against its beginning, each one giving the other more depth of perspective’ (‘Guardian Book’, no pgn).

Even though Mehrez believes that Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* marks her as a clear successor of Naguib Mahfouz, who has become part of ‘the international republic of letters’ (*Egypt’s Culture*, 52), the novel has been critiqued for its large news bulletins that cuts off Asya’s story, a technique Soueif utilized to represent the historical parts in the novel. Hilary Mantel argues that this kind of writing ‘reinforces the impression of a pervasive authorial clumsiness’ and that the flashbacks Soueif offered has disturbed the linearity of the narration. Mantel also notes that digression shifts Asya from being the centre of attention into an ‘absent’ character. ‘Asya is observed,’ Mantel argues, ‘she is commented upon, but it is not until a late stage that she seems to inhabit the novel that tells the story of her own journey to adulthood and self-realization’ (no pgn). It must be noted, however, that the political news bulletins that interrupt Asya’s story repeatedly put emphasis on the intersection of the private and public intersections that the novel insists upon.

The same issue occurs in *The Map of Love* where some parts of the historical events are presented as bulletins. Valassopoulos says on this matter that some of the political scenes ‘do read like a potted history of Egyptian politics and eventually

we have neither a history nor politics but rather a sample of each within this larger framework of West meets East. Furthermore, Soueif has to move away from the main narrative plot in order to offer insights on Arab history and the history of politics. [...] This insertion of historical facts that do not merge into the story, or indeed remain memorable, as they seem like appendages, begs closer inspection' (36). She further adds that it is acknowledged that the main purpose of presenting the historical section of the novel in such a way is indeed to educate the reader on the political structure of Egypt in the colonial period. However, they sometimes err towards a 'history lecture' rather than engaging the reader (36). Valassopoulos's claim harshly disregards the authenticity of the use of historical detail carried out by Soueif. The latter's mission for historical 'accuracy' instead of being imprecise allows the character to question and explore their places within the socio-political settings objectively. Hence, enabling the reader to feel present within the narrative through both: the characters' perspective and historical truth.

Mantel also critiques Soueif's inability to portray the private and the public in a frictionless manner. She believes that Soueif 'has not found an attractive or even an acceptable way to integrate the public and private elements of the story.' This, Mantel continues, is caused by stylistic weakness, offering the reader 'big brutal slabs' of information (no pgn). However, Soueif's personal response to the political events that feel at certain points somehow external to the novel is emblematic of her struggling to find 'the ideal way of merging the political information necessary for this book into the narrative' (Massad, 'The Politics', 84).

However, that does not entirely diminish the importance of the political agenda that Soueif is narrating. Despite not finding the ‘ideal’ way to amalgamate the political with the personal, she still asserts the role of combining the two in this way. Soueif did not aim to ‘fictionalize’ history in order to achieve narrative coherence; rather she is prioritizing historical accuracy, narrating the political sections as some of Nasser’s and Sadat’s speeches in order to explain the political rhetoric that lacks sincerity and meaning, even if it sounds impressive.

The novel moves in an unpredictable pattern from politics to romance to cultural concerns, capturing with it not only the lives of characters but also the political and social conditions that these characters are living with and fighting against. By narrating the political background, it suggests that the characters are active individuals conscious about their collective role; they are the catalyst through which the novel’s key concerns are introduced. The novel’s political commentary captures a wide range of the urban community in various modes, histrionic at times and dramatic at others. It has been widely argued that *In the Eye of the Sun* has similar characteristics to George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (Nash, 67). Though Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is much less concerned with political history than Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun*, the two novels are quite similar in their content and detailed portrayal of the main female character.

In the Eye of the Sun is also comparable with some of the most important mid-century novels such as Naguib Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy*, and Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*. *In the Eye of the Sun* depicts a similar three generational

middle-class family structure to that found in Mahfouz's Trilogy, the main difference being that Soueif's comes from a feminist perspective that also represents the Westernized characteristics of the society of Egypt. *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Open Door* are both excellent examples of novels reaching a level of autonomy both on a national level in portraying Egypt as a postcolonial country, and of individual Egyptian women who have matured and reached triumph. Both themes are done in a framework that fits the characteristics of fictional realism of Arabic literature (Booth, 'Egypt: *In the* ', 204).

For instance, in *The Map of Love*, Soueif is attempting to critique the existing binary opposition between the colonized and the colonizer in the portrayal of the cross-cultural relationship of Anna and Sherif and Isabel and Omar that forms the basis of most postcolonial writing. Anastasia Valassopoulos declares that in *The Map of Love*, Soueif 'not only integrates post-colonial theory into her writing but also manages to expose the tensions that lie within post-colonial theory by further revealing its unavoidable complicity with differing disciplines' ('Fictionalising Post-colonial', 29). Therefore, she argues, the novel can be described as an 'interdisciplinary novel' that 'in a sense acts as a reminder of this internal tension and the difficulty of successfully incorporating all the disciplines equally and justly without sacrificing inspirational suggestive writing' (34).

Soueif knows intimately Egypt's contemporary sociopolitical state. Therefore, she feels that it is her duty to show the ills of the Egyptian and the Arab regimes that continue to propagate the same harmful politics regardless of leader.

In Soueif's fiction, she incorporates what Sonallah Ibrahim calls total vision: 'for that novel to be a good novel, it would have to have a firm grasp of the past, the present moment, and the future – what will happen, or what might happen afterwards. All this entails having a total vision' (no pgn). Soueif's fiction, exemplified by *In the Eye of the Sun*, establishes the themes that she expands upon in her later non-fiction writing. The common theme of cosmopolitanism, finding a common ground, and the question of resistance are found in both fictional and non-fictional works. As with other Egyptian women writers, their writing marks the start of their political journey as national scribes. In her essay entitled *Restructuring Isis*, Tara McDonald explains that myth, and Egyptian history is masterfully blended with romance and politics. This combination constructs rather a 'complex plot' (163). What this particular complexity in the plot shows is the successful illustration of how the political agenda of Egyptians unites generations through their political aspirations despite them going through internal and external conflicts. The political, historical and geographical context is very much apparent in Soueif's work, and she uses it to establish many essential themes – cultural dialogue, cosmopolitanism, resistance, and neo-nationalism – that paved the way for her later writing.

Narrating Conflicts and Political Struggle

Soueif's text treats people's lives and countries as the theatre in which political and social dramas of the last forty years of Egyptian history have been carried out (Maitzen, no pgn). Even though *In the Eye of the Sun* cannot be considered a political novel in the strict sense, the settings of the novel cover a wide history of Egypt's political development in both time and place. As discussed earlier, it

discusses major political issues through the characters of the novel engaging in casual conversation, stream of consciousness, or through expressing their points of view in response to political incidents. From the 1960s to the 1980s, this novel narrates significant historical events such as the Six Day War, the decline of pan-Arabism caused by the sudden death of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, and Anwar el-Sadat's Open Door policy and his peace treaty with Israel which then triggered the rise of Islamism in the 1980s.

Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* highlights the long conflict between the revolutionary left-wing politics espoused by many Egyptians and state policies. Through character structure, Soueif creates an account that foreshadows and paves the way for an outbreak of revolution. She also portrays the historical struggle of these groups to gain legitimacy. Most of the characters in the novel belong to a leftist group or espouse socialist ideals. Muhsin Nur-el-Din's character, for instance, is that of a revolutionary and Asya considers his affiliation 'by right, of course, and under any decent system of government, would be a legitimate political party, but in Egypt's repressive climate had to work underground' (25). Muhsin is Asya's brother-in-law, who shares his leftist beliefs with Asya's family. Hence, both her father and uncle who have been engaged with the 'National Democratic League' and 'Bread and freedom' could not object to Deena's, Asya's sister, choice in marrying Muhsin (25). Her father and Uncle's past have done nothing but strengthen their views on activism despite their imprisonment.

The story of the crash of Asya's uncle, Hamid, which becomes known as 'the army incident' later in the novel, is the highlight of the novel as, from there, everything escalates (38). Moreover, this incident shows the aggressiveness of the ruling authorities and how Egypt cannot escape the rule of the military. During May 1967, and after visiting the Ulamas' apartment, Hamid drives through the streets of Cairo. Coming to the lights at the intersection of 26th July with Shagarat al-Durr Street, he sees a 'covered' army truck in front of him. Soueif describes the crash as such: '[t]he lights changed to green. He glanced in his mirror and saw another covered army truck coming up fast behind him. He eased his left foot slightly off the clutch and put a little pressure on the gas but the truck in front of him did not move. He looked again in his mirror, the sons of bitches, he thought, the sons of bitches – and then he heard the crash' (37).

Politics is discussed anywhere and everywhere in Egypt, even from a street stall. Am Saleh, who represents the majority of the working class in Egypt, selling Arabisco biscuits and cold drinks outside the Cairo University's main campus, shows his anger loudly in response to the news of the war. Soueif narrates,

After his son has left and the morning has quieted and heated up round him, 'Am Salih takes down his small Czechoslovak transistor radio from the shelf and switches it on. The voice of Fayda Kamel rings out in mid-song:

'... My wea-pon

I have yearned for you in my struggle

Speak up and say “I’m awa-a-ake” –

Oh war! It’s been a long ti-i-i-ime –’

He places the radio on his stump and lights a Cleopatra and the voice of Ahmed Sa’eed, Chief Broadcaster on Voice of the Arabs, interrupts the song: ‘The number of enemy aircraft shot down by our glorious air force is now twelve. The Zionist enemy, after treacherous attack on our sacred land this morning, is learning to his cost that Egypt is not a power to be trifled with...’

[...] The song fades back in and ‘Am Salih slams his fist down on his right stump. ‘You sons of bitches,’ he cries out loud in admiration, ‘you’re really going to fight! You’re going to fight and be men and get Palestine back after all these years!’ (52–3)

In the same scene, ‘Am Salih’s reaction to the attack highlights the propensity of Egyptians’ response towards Egypt’s political alterations. ‘Up and around and down and around and up and around – the radio clutched upon his stumps is going full blast, there are specks of foam at the corners of his mouth and his voice is hoarse. “Seventy-three – seventy-three and pray for the prophet. We’ll show’em. Them and other pimps. So no one can say one word about us after this. No one would dare open his eye in our faces –”’ (53).

The man at the candy stall in Soueif’s novel raises questions of poverty and proletarian views in a society whose political concerns are struggling to be heard in public discourse. For that reason, the music industry of that era used their wide

public reach to popularize a number of nationalistic songs with deep political undertones. For example, Fayda Kamel's representation here has its own significance. Again, Soueif mentions a musical figure who has deep roots in activism and political engagement. Fayda Kamel's nationalistic songs generally represent the poor districts of Cairo (Sullivan, 54). Kamel was also a member of *Majles el-Shaab* and a member of parliament. The efforts of Kamel and other women in *Mejles el-Shaab* in helping with 'local issues' resulted in the building of mosques and schools, housing projects, and a 'Faida Kamel Hospital'. All this is proof that these women are able to help create a better Egypt through the political system (71).

The relationship between media and culture represented by the radio as a medium of national inspiration highlights Soueif's intention of offering a political tract to serve the collective in contributing to their awareness. Galal Amin argues that radios carry a special significance in mobilizing people in times of national crisis and political upheaval. The 1952 revolution made Egyptians realize the importance of owning a radio, which acted as a replacement of newspapers in a time when illiteracy rates were above 80 percent.

This was intensified 'by the appearance of the small portable transistor radio, which made it possible for the new station that the revolution set up, called the Voice of the Arabs, to be heard in remote villages in Egypt and in other parts of the Arab world' (115). Amin further states that 'Egyptian radio did everything it could to mobilize people [...] and it inevitably recruited the most popular singers,

such as Umm Kulthum and Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, to contribute by singing songs in praise of the officers. The radio also helped to create a wide following for a new young singers such as Abd al-Halim Hafez and Faida Kamel, whose names were long associated with the inspirational songs lauding the leader of the revolution and everything important he did, from nationalizing the Suez Canal to uniting Egypt and Syria and supporting new revolutions everywhere' (115).

The novel also highlights the uncertainty of the Palestinian cause, a major political issue that Soueif grew up witnessing. In her words, the Palestinian question is 'central to the national project that was being dreamed of and, we thought, being implemented at that time' (Massad, 'The Politics', 90). The character of Basam, the Palestinian who married Noura, is one of the central issues in the novel. Its importance is both in terms of reality and ideology. In terms of reality, it touches upon the reader personally from what they witness every day, and ideologically in the sense that it is the 'greatest injustice' in the twentieth century and ongoing. Uninterrupted by any conventional dialogue or objective description, Asya's stream of consciousness reveals a lot about her internal feelings and thoughts on the world around her. It is yet another modernist literary device Soueif employs in the novel to communicate Asya's developing political awareness. Through contemplating the situation of Bassam, her Palestinian friend, Asya revisits her concerns regarding the Palestinian question, causing her to enter a swirl of deep unanswered questions. She glances at Bassam and starts wondering what is it really like to be him:

[W]hat was it *really* like to be him? To be so displaced? He was born in 1949; one year after the partition and the war. He's grown up in Nablus and since 1967 his family – and he in the summer holidays – had been living under occupation. Actual physical occupation. What would that be like? To have people, Norwegians, say, or Iraqis or Chinese, or, indeed – why go far? the Israelis themselves, stop you, say, at the gate of the Gezira Club, and say, 'Sorry. You can't come in here any more. You are banned.' Because taking over the Gezira Club would be the first thing anyone would do if they took over Cairo. You would just have to turn around and walk back home. And you would never even be sure of home anyway because any day, any minute, they might knock on the door and say, 'We are taking over this house. You have one hour to pack.' (233)

Here, the reader has direct access to the protagonist's mindset. Through this indirect interior monologue, Asya builds up a scenario in her head allowing her to understand what it really means to be thrown out of one's home. The collective nature of this experience of exile and dispossession is an effort to understand not just the identity of an individual, but the identity of a displaced nation as a whole. She further reflects that displacement transforms a person into being 'maimed' and 'bruised':

[D]espite the good looks, the mixture of French and Turkish with curly black hair, green eyes and a slightish build, he appeared almost – maimed. One of a bruised people. All those bruised people: Palestinians, Armenians,

Kurds, and of course the Jews themselves – and who knows that others would be added to the list; what other were in the making right now. (234)

The above quotation reveals a sense of belonging, a sense that causes Asya to go over in her head the anguish felt by the Palestinian population. This emotional representation gives Asya a feeling of familiarity and association with Palestinians that triggers her feelings of amazement and fear when she connects it with her own reality. Her thoughts roam further:

Amazing, really, and frightening, to think of all the things that are happening right now. Right now as they sit here studying for their poetry exam: secret deals being arranged in government departments, counterdeals in secret service meetings, ignorant armies moving silently by night, people being thrown out of their houses, babies being born, people being tortured – this is the point where Asya’s mind starts to do a loop. People being tortured. Right now. As we sit here. Tortured. And what do we do? We go on studying for our exams. And millions of others. They must think of this once in a while – and they go on doing what they’re doing. But what else is to be done? What *can* be done? Can you get up right now and rush off to some prison – assuming you know where one is – and hammer at the door? ‘Let them out, let them out’ – or at least, ‘Stop what you’re doing.’ No. No, well, of course not, that’s stupid – and yet how can you just go on sitting here while someone somewhere is having live wire pushed up his rectum,

his teeth pulled out of his head, her vagina stuffed with hungry rats, or having to watch her baby's head being smashed against the –

Asya jumps up, she always jumps up when she gets to this bit.

(233–4)

This excerpt reflects Asya's struggle and her helplessness in looking for meaning and truth in a world bombarded with ambiguities as well as her physical and psychological struggle for freedom and peace. Asya's overwhelming realisation of the people's suffering refers us back, according to Booth, to the epigraph of the novel. Soueif's choice of quoting from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a conscious act and it best describes Asya's fluctuated stream of consciousness ('Egypt: *In the*', 204): '[i]f we had a keen vision and feeling for all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die on that roar which lies on the other side of silence' (*In the Eye*, 1).

The long passage of Asya's stream of consciousness serves to illustrate that she is a complex character who needs a long, convoluted process of thought to reach personal conclusions. In this passage, Asya's role as a conduit for the voice of the masses becomes clear as her social and political awareness matures. This reveals Asya's journey of self-discovery regarding her place in life. She is able to recognize the urgency of detaching herself from the world of domesticity into the wider worlds of social change and politics. Asya describes in a concerned and sarcastic voice the wives of the Egyptians she met in England in a letter she writes to her mother: '[t]heir wives are firmly set in their supportive roles and work in the sandwich bars to help out, and the only time I went to one of their meetings they

spent the whole time talking about where you could get ‘fool’, and the exact recipe for *ta’mmya*, [...]. They’ve all got their radios propped up at an angle with the aerials sticking out of the window (in this cold!) so they can listen to “Voice of the Arabs” – through horrendous crackling of course – and contrive to pass the days as though they were not really here. I mean, of course here is completely deadly, but still – they’re sort of so *insistent* in their Egyptianness –’ (352).

This is also demonstrated through her sexual and professional experiences and her relationships and travel; however, she eventually seems so certain about her political views and her interest in keeping them up to date. This is the only truthful aspect in her life that shapes how she wants her life to be like:

To be the best she can be; to create meaning in her life by striving to be the best person she can, not in the ways that appeal to her, not by spooning aid porridge into the mouths of rows of starving children or bringing comfort to shrapnelled soldiers or singing *Carmen* to a hushed house or writing *Middlemarch*, but in the more difficult way that has been allotted to her – for the moment – and to draw strength from knowing that while she is doing her best for those whose lives most immediately touch her own, she is not at a standstill; she is working towards making her life more the way *she* wants it. (462–3)

Asya’s intellectual capabilities are at a level such that it creates jealousy in those around her, including her sister. She has been revolting since she was a nine-year-old child: ‘*Let – us – revolt*’ she chants (478). Asya’s well-rounded and committed

character has marked her out in her generation. In Saif's words, Asya had very strong views on everything. She is adventurous, courageous, and lives life in a 'fairytale-ish' atmosphere (153). Asya's difficult relationship with the society around her and her awareness of her role as a woman help shape her political awareness and individuality. She is a self-reliant and individual character who seeks intellectual growth. Filled with frustration from the hopeless relationship with her husband and a failed affair, confirming for her the difference between love and desire,³⁴ Asya gains her Ph.D. and finally returns to Cairo only to find that things are not the same. In this case, what brings the individual and collective together is the desire for freedom and self-determination; Asya's personal experience echoes the experience of the collective.

On the surface, it is a feminist narrative of women's emancipation and of an individual finding her freedom in the West. However, this owes a great deal to Asya's growing political awareness which shapes her character and gives her a mechanism through which to account for what sociopolitically surrounds her. This echoes novels such as Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s (2003) and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). Both novels explore feelings of national belonging through their protagonists – Yasin Zahir in Mahjoub's and Mustafa Said in Salih's novel. Both protagonists go through a journey of reconfiguring the past and encountering the West only to develop a new sense of national belonging at the end of the novel. Hence, the core value Soueif is

³⁴ For a detailed analysis on the effect of war and conflict on female and male sexuality, see: Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*. NYU Press, 1990.

demonstrating is that of self-determination, going beyond a basic sense of self-autonomy to a deeper role of the individual finding their place within the community through a return, often literal, to the national and the collective. This final reconciliation between Asya and her community gives the novel's end a sense of calmness and peace.

Conclusion

In the Eye of the Sun is a fairly long novel full of parallel and intersecting conflicts: physical, mental, social, historical, and political. The novel argues that the inner and outer correlate. The political and the social, the public and the personal amalgamate. According to Mantel, the sense of continuity derived from the massive ambition this novel carries is one of its many virtues. The continuity of 'family and national life stretching out before and behind the action chronicled; the time, the place, the people are fully realized on the page, warmly and affectionately depicted'. She further adds that Soueif does not use the 'backdrop technique' in the way she narrates her events, but rather attempts a parallel structure in which we see 'domestic minutia' are juxtaposed with 'high politics'. She concludes, 'it seems that war and terrorism and political dissidence will be as much part of the novel as the search for "the perfect pair of satin court shoes in dusty pink"'. (Mantel, 1993)

Anastasia Valassopoulos argues that the political foreground of the novel belies a more central concern with the 'internal psychological struggles' of Asya (*Contemporary Arab*, 124). Although it is true that the majority of the novel revolves around the characters going through a journey of self-revelation, what is

underlying this is ‘the complex process through which the unfolding of desire(s)-sexual, social, economic, and political-is shaped by the characters themselves and all that surrounds them. It is this complicated picture that is painted by Ahdaf Soueif’s meticulous brush’ (Massad, ‘The Politics’, 75). It is about both society and politics in the sense that it demonstrates that the personal is affected by the public and that the assumed barriers between them are not as great as they might seem. The women in the novels find their own spaces to express the national, the international, and the sexual. For instance, in *The Map of Love*, the romance in the story has a rather seductive effect to draw us in to the political notion of it which calls for immediate sociopolitical action. As Valassopoulos asserts:

The political and historical inclusions serve as a taster for the variety of causes that Soueif reveals throughout the course of *The Map of Love*, whilst the romance sections sustain a loose interest in the characters' lives, though it is unclear which way the reader should be pulled. Whilst on the one hand the overtly serious nature of the revisionist historical information requires a very different kind of reading, one that is committed and politicised, the love story pulls the reader into a frenzy of the seductive oriental tale of love, masquerade and harems. Also, as this next section suggests, even the colonial romance is staged according to colonial conventions – conventions hotly debated in post-colonial criticism. (‘Fictionalising Post-colonial’, 39)

The reader is so engaged with Asya’s personal life and her journey of self-discovery because the story is, for the most part, told from her point of view. In this

sense, Maitzen asserts that '[t]he novel's web of literary allusions as well as its own literary form, the *Bildungsroman*, insist on the familiarity of this yearning – on its affinities to what we already understand – even as it places it in a context of differences' (no pgn). Asya's aspiration towards values and truth, whether political or social, is a liberation from a romantic and false view of life. George Lewes captures the essence of Soueif's approach to realism in arguing that realism's 'antithesis is not idealism, but *Falsism*' (494). Soueif's characters go through a complex process that does not necessarily end in liberation (Massad, 'The Politics', 76). They reject totalitarian ideologies, whether political, social, or cultural, restricting their abilities for total liberation. Certainly, there is more to the novel than a simple depiction of Asya's emotional journey.

Soueif utilizes the dynamics of language to show a certain type of lexical flexibility. Muharram has noted that the distinctive aspect of Soueif's writing is her ability to translate feelings and circumstances through manipulation of the English language. Mehrez describes this new type of fictional literature written in a foreign language as 'alternative speech' that makes use of the freedom of Western culture as a less restricted space to address both local Arabic issues and themes of imperialism ('Writing Out', 155). This playing in language allows the author to open a window into other cultures.

Addison asserts that Egypt's twentieth-century political and social history act as an 'alert' for the readers to foresee the wave of anger that lead to the country's uprising in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring (145). It is not writing for a cause that

concerns Soueif the most. She believes that it is what unites the writer and an activist and creates a certain type of emotional empathy, a connecting link between the self, a writer or an activist, with others, the nation in this case. Soueif contemplates,

Is a novelist a literary activist? An activist is impelled by a cause and adopts it. Most people are content to live their lives within prescribed and personal boundaries. But one of the point of artists surely is that they live outside their skin, that they're connected, that they hurt with the hurt of their fellow human. How, then, can they disengage? How can you - if your task, if your gift, is narrative - absent yourself from the great narrative of the world? Our duty is to tell the story that comes to us in the most effective way possible. But we don't choose the story. We're drawn in where the feeling is deepest. A work of fiction lives by empathy is at the heart of much revolutionary action. ('In Times', no pgn)

In this respect, this level of empathy allows Soueif's to utilize the novel as a vehicle to narrate the nation's aspirations and concerns. The text becomes a form of social realism that can question the prevailing social order and attempt to re-evaluate its position. Similar to Ashour, Soueif's writings are macro politics; their intensified political tones run deep in the actions and characters of the novel in varied techniques, allowing them to involuntarily, and in some cases voluntarily, engage with the actions, live through it, and resist against it.

Conclusion

This conclusion will devote itself to summarizing the trajectory of this thesis before going on to indicate the lines of enquiry it opens up for further studies. The first section attempts to tackle the core arguments of this thesis in chronological order whilst providing a brief comparative examination of both Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif's works on the level of aesthetics and subject matter. The second section will lay out how this thesis is essential for further studies dealing with other post-January revolution texts.

As Mills suggests, '[i]f the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of live experience' (Mills, 299). This thesis investigates the relationship between writing and politics, and the writing of collective experience by two of the 1952 *Jil el-thawra* of 1952 writers: Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif who lived to see the 2011 January revolution as a socio-political fulfilment of many of their revolutionary hopes. What Ashour and Soueif succeed in building are multi-layered works through actively fusing history, politics, and literature. Through my examination of both writers, this thesis highlights the representational and aesthetic forms utilized in writing politics and the self. This is established through bringing together literary writing alongside life writing and examining what each genre offers respectively.

Both writers employ a retrospective reflection of the past in their fiction. For Soueif, the historical representations in her novel play a dynamic role as a means of directing individuals towards their destinies. Even though it appears as

though she is asserting the role of political history in the background of the novel, it is very much aligned with the characters' development of self-autonomy in rediscovering their place within the national collective. Ashour's use of history, on the other hand, is a vehicle to deconstruct the past as a way to investigate the present and the future of Egypt and the Arab world. This constructs metaphorical spaces to highlight how the collective is shaped by political trauma. What makes Ashour and Soueif's work postcolonial in terms of preoccupation, especially for an Anglo-Arab writer in Soueif's case, is the difficulty their generation experiences in defining itself without the assurance of the collective past and anticolonial legacy. In this respect, the novel for them is a metaphor for finding an answer to this conundrum. Their answer is a nationalistic response that calls for a collective stance through retrospectively returning to Egypt. After the outbreak of the January revolution, these answers have been reaffirmed through their use of life writing to narrate the eighteen days of the uprising. Their life writing takes on the role of counter-narrative to the repression and corruption of the state. While focusing on the individual as all part of the nation in their fictional works, what is striking in both writers' memoir writing is that it firmly bridges whatever division is left between the individual and the collective.

Hence, I have focused on the various literary strategies employed by both writers to examine the manner in which these writers use form, language, and technique to offer an incisive cultural critique in their politically committed texts. In this respect, their writings remind the reader of what is at stake in increasing women's participation in the political field and experiencing the 'value of truth' as

Egyptian citizens rather than in the strict sense of being 'women'. The pre-revolution fictional texts analyzed in this thesis feature narrative practices that may be considered national allegory. Through Ashour and Soueif's experimentations with the novel, they claimed a new public, cultural, and political role in voicing truth to power. Caroline Seymour-Jorn also argues that some women writers in the generation that Ashour and Soueif belong to achieve much besides this by crafting new linguistic and narrative forms that delve into women's and men's consciousness and memory. The 1970s authors generate an interpretive record of individual subjectivities in the context of momentous changes in the social and political circumstances of their era, making a unique and innovative contribution to the Egyptian and Arab literary traditions (149).

Traumatic events in their works, such as wars, massacres, and revolutions, are not depicted as generic events; each has its own sociopolitical significance in that their representation goes beyond their individuality. This may be seen as a discursive project to revive what these outbreaks and setbacks have ignited in citizens, not as victims, but as participants in a making of collective destiny as the literary characters and autobiographical personae Ruqayya, Shagar, Asya, Nada, Amina, Said, Radwa, and Ahdaf represent. These texts portray strong female characters but do not entirely privileged issues of gender over the nation. Consequently, Ashour and Soueif have reputedly established themselves in the narrative as well as the critical domain due to their 'successful fusion of sociopolitical critique with artistically innovative literary techniques' as well as

‘fus[ing] commitment to creativity’ (Seymour-Jorn, 152). Seymour goes further to write that

The fact that the 1970s writers do not target men or an androcentric gender system as the sole source of women’s oppression perhaps affords them more success with the critical establishment than writers [...] who focus more specifically on male abuse of women and on the limitations imposed on women by patriarchal culture. [...] An important part of their critique is a representation of how individuals respond to state discourses about what it means to be an ideal “modern” citizen and to the governmental bureaucracy’s (mis)handling of projects [in various sectors in Egypt].
(152)

The fictional characters portrayed by both writers share their nationalistic vision, though through different anthropological and hierarchical groundings. Ashour’s characters are ordinary people who face marginalization in different ways but deal with it through resisting it rather than submitting to it. Their dynamic need to change, build political awareness, and present cultural alternatives fictionally reflects the long quest for *karama* (dignity). Nada does this by participating in activism which places her in a struggle to achieve justice and political freedom. Said and Amina do the same through revolting against the Sultan, and Shagar and Radwa explore and critique the Egyptian social and political reality as a form of resistance. Soueif’s representation of Asya reflects directly on her political values, and it is safe to say that she acts like Shagar in Radwa’s novel. The worlds of female

characters represented in their fictional works are constructed not to reject society nor the reality they have found themselves placed in, but rather to learn how to live with this reality and resist rather than merely to reject it.

Ashour describes the act of writing as a process of dealing not just in ideas, but in language itself. Ashour says

To me writing is about a relationship with three things: a relationship with the surrounding, that is, the reality that I see, endowed principally with its social and historical condition; a relationship with the language and behind it the cultural and literary legacies shaped within and through the language; and a relationship with the craft of writing and the experiences acquired in the daily ‘workshop.’ (‘My Experience’, 171)

The fact that Ashour hides a lot behind metaphors and allegories correlates with Soueif writing as an outsider, which grants her more liberty and authority to engage in less allegorical forms of narrative than Ashour. Strict state and institutional censorship hindered Ashour from freely circulating her ideas in public space, which prompted her to resort to allegorical narrative. They both deploy the concept of collective memory to battle the elusiveness caused by the act of disremembering. Ashour and Soueif’s use of collective memory involves a type of connection between the past and the present through the agency held by the collective in the act of remembering. Ashour and Soueif use realism as a tool rather than as mere form. Ashour experiments with her literary allegorical devices to give a sense of creativity to her realist representation. Through irony and satire, Ashour constructs

a narrative that goes beyond the familiar in an attempt to consider an alternative reality. Soueif, on the other hand, reveals hidden worlds through her reportage style that shifts from the specific to the general and the local to the global. This trend goes beyond Mahfouzian realism in that their realist position is within a more global perspective, while they also inter-implicate the personal and national leading to their stylistic innovations and experimentations with the realist form. In this respect, Ashour stresses that the ‘Arab novel now offers the urban world and the desert world, the space of men and the space of women, the experience of civil war in the cities and the experience of peasants in the countryside and margins. Experience of exile at home and abroad’ (‘All Novels are historical’, no pgn).

The writers’ endeavour to re-envision the history of their nation encompasses a public space in which they can, as female intellectuals, equally assert themselves as part of Egypt’s community. For them, resorting to history is not about glorifying a given era, it is more about showing the process of change. In referring to Ashour, Hanafy asserts that what accentuates the distinctiveness of Ashour’s approach is that she ‘dismantles the official history canonized by the nationalist elite and enshrined in realist narrative that consolidate the illusions of a national independence and a façade of progress’ (45). Venturing into the archive of history, as Hanafy asserts, ‘yields more than self-knowledge and self-healing; it fosters the ethical insight of the human agency in history and the continuous possibility of transcending traumatic defeats. Ashour’s achievement of a “transmodern” narrative that incorporates the denied cultural self and the different other is an ethical message of resistance and optimism’ (45–6).

The January revolution marks a significant temporal event in presenting the pre and post revolutionary works of Ashour and Soueif. This event answers key questions dealing with solidifying the agency and the authorship these writers have created for themselves. For both writers, the individual and the collective interrelate in a dialectical connection and fluctuate consistently in a unified trail. For both Ashour and Soueif, moving to the collective does not entail a detachment from self-expression but rather an assertion of the importance of both ways of being. Taking a collective approach does not signify the loss of self, but rather the resituating of their voices within the community. It is interesting to note that both writers have chosen life writing as a form to narrate the incidents of the January revolution. In both works, the act of revolution, as well as the process of nation building, is seen through a collective frame. As Abouelnaga observes, 'it is in the daily micropolitics that women were capable of asserting their vision by bringing the personal and aesthetic into the political and public. The politics of memory and what the women's culture of protest chooses to forget and to remember was (and perhaps still is) another means of resistance to the attempts at homogenizing and subduing gender' (Abouelnaga, 5). In their life writing, Ashour's heightened poetic aestheticism is in opposition to Soueif's factual language. The former's national voice is constantly apparent throughout her writings, whereas Soueif shifts from an East-West cosmopolitanism in *Mezzaterra* to cosmopolitan nationalism in *Cairo*.

This call for a collective imagination does not diminish their existential beings as much as it sustains their positionality as an intellectual in a time of crisis. Ashour's solitude is on many occasions quickly overcome by philosophies of

collectiveness. Campus activism, political imprisonment, and Egyptian revolutions are some of the main political topics in Ashour's life writing. Tahia Abdel Nasser reminds us that Ashour's memoirs challenge the notion of solitude of the writer, whether it is her activist efforts, her illness, and independence in her career crisis (135). Shereen Abouelnaga stresses that '[t]he power of the central state and its system has always been so tight that the Revolution never managed to demolish them' (3). Hence, Ashour and Soueif's life writing, along with other works, have explored what the revolution has undoubtedly destroyed: 'the principle of homogeneity' (Abouelnaga, 3). Abouelnaga stresses that the notion of homogeneity

turned out to be a mere illusory notion, propagated for a long time by the state. The Revolution has allowed for the eruption of differences previously silenced and suppressed through the incessant celebration of homogeneity through the state-run media. The Revolution marked the appearance of a real diversity of several levels: ideological, cultural, religious, educational, class-based, and gender-oriented. The Revolutionary act has functioned as a political and cultural shock that affected subversions in a previously solid national gendered discourse. (3)

The revolution was accompanied by a loss of fear of the Mubarak regime. However, it soon became clear that Al-Sisi was the opposite of what he initially appeared. Al-Sisi's succession fundamentally undermined the freedom briefly held by Egyptians in Tahrir Square. When Al-Sisi rose to power, Egypt was in a chaotic state. The unexpected political and economic setbacks, along with the establishment

of the Islamic State in other Arab countries made Egyptian people long for reassurance after the disappointment of the revolution as well as for protection from the threat of Islamism. Hence, with the raised concerns of the fate of Egypt, Al-Sisi is recognised to be another throwback to a repressive period (Yefet, 172). This prompted the rise of a new generation of revolutionary writers that produced a number of fictional works, building upon the new possibilities writers before them had established. 'The rise of a new revolutionary generation,' Abouelnaga stresses, meant 'the rise of new texts fully independent of the state's authority and, thus, completely oppositional' (3).

The outbreak of the revolution, although accompanied by various setbacks, ushered in a new beginning. Therefore, the new generation of writers narrate new futures that were somehow unconceivable and unattainable (Elsadda, 213). Hoda Elsadda argues that the achievement of the Tahrir revolutionaries in toppling a dictator in eighteen days, regardless of outcomes, had undoubtedly created a whole new range of possibilities, new empowered subjects, new imaginings, and new realities. Arab writers throughout the modern period have played a key role in fashioning the imaginary of the nation. A decade into the new millennium, new forces and new variables are at play posing new challenges and opportunities (213).

A good number of these works have been marked by their apocalyptic and dark images of the revolution and its aftermath, for example, Soueif's son, Omar Robert Hamilton's *The City Always Wins* (2017) and Saleem Haddad's *Guapa* (2016). Dystopian themes and science-fiction tropes, which are not new in Arab

fiction, mark a shift away from realism to a more surreal discourse as seen in *Otared* (2015) by Mohammad Rabie and *The Queue* (2016) by Basma Abdel Aziz. These tropes were incinerated by the violence practiced against the protestors which seizes the sense of despair and anguish. An area that remains for development is to shed light on post-revolutionary literature, extending the in-depth examination of committed literature in order to highlight the different approaches writers are using to capture their public involvement in literary form, as well as to further examine the directions Ashour and Soueif's generation have opened up for the coming generation and whether counter-revolutionary works marked a total breakthrough.

Undertaking this project was personal to me on many levels. Soueif and Ashour's writings exposed me to a world that prompted me to raise questions rather than offer answers. As a Saudi woman I have always valued the process of changing the maturity and awareness of the community. I do not intend to individualize myself as *I am* part of a community that also strives to claim their space and have their voice heard. I have specifically seen this world through Ashour and Soueif's literature, which is emotional and courageous. Their understanding of human nature and its position in relation to the surroundings through battling different states of anxiety, fear, confusion, and illness, do not compromise their skilful ability to masterfully reach people's souls in a hopeful manner.

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