



# *Journal of Arts & Humanities*

## Majnün Performing Autopsy: Exposing the Ugliness of Dictatorship in *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb*

Sami Alkyam<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Trauma and the experience of it is only one of the ways open for victims to speak and/or testify for the horror done to them. My argument in this paper focuses on the use of the verbal (i.e. words) and the nonverbal (i.e. the body) testimonies as modes of remembering and disclosure. Through the reading of the heart breaking love story of *Ṭā'ir al-kharāb* by ʿabd al-RRab Sarūrī, the paper shows how the novel gives a voice and space to Ilhām to recounts her individual and collective past and expose the traumatic impact of the dictatorship on the female body, and by a means of allegory on the body of the nation, as exemplified by the character Ilhām. The juxtaposition of both the story of the raped female body and the rape of the nation by the dictator, who is referred to throughout the novel as *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* (the bird of destruction) as well as Sheikh al-qābilah (the tribal sheikh), is read as an anguished cry for normalcy sought by not only women in Yemen but all the nation. Srūrī's representation of the body may be looked at, and this is what this paper is doing, as an index of his position on dictatorship, its nature, the relationship of the individual to state and society in it, and the place of authoritarianism within the decaying body of Ilhām which he uses as an allegory to the body of the nation. Thus, the transformation of the trauma of the past, this paper suggests, is treated less as a source of knowledge than as a means of assigning a human-like quality to texts where they become able to speak, even if it is allegoric, to and of the present.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism, authoritarian deliberation, dictators, Majnün.

Available Online: 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Near Easter Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, USA. Email: alkyam@fas.harvard.edu.

Love runs the gamut of contradictory feelings all at once—joy, sorrow, dedication, pain, resentment, anger, rebellion, revenge, death—which always tend to spin out of control, to escape the controlling grip of sanity, or reason, and to relish in chaos. Love is madness, and to love a nation-state is to go mad (Ouyang, 2013, P. 79).

## 1.0 Introduction

The creation of national, postcolonial Arab states enterprise led by many Arab nationalists during the Fifties and the Sixties left a number of legacies; among these legacies is the perplexity that individuals in the Arab world experienced caused by the dictatorships and the statecraft which strips people off their very rights under the name of nationalism—one of the numerous tactics that authoritarians employ to ensure the survival of their regimes. Yemen has been and continues to be one of the most poignant and wretched examples of the damage caused by dictators and their dictatorships. The country, like many of the Arab countries, has endured the trauma of dictatorship for more than thirty years under Ali Abdullah Saleh—a man who exhorted many strategies to ensure his survival, among of which is the purposeful production of chaos. This dictatorship left a scar that does not seem to be going anywhere on both the people and the landscape. One of the most interesting and important voices on the topic of dictatorship and history and the impact of the former on forming the second is that of novelists.

Unlike their counterparts of novels coming from the centers of the Arab world cultural arenas - Cairo and Beirut—which many Arab scholars argue made its first appearance in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Allen, 1995), the novel, or the “travelling genre” as termed by Mary Layoun, reached the shores of peripheral places in the Arab world such as Yemen later on. This is not to deny the contribution of acknowledged and celebrated Yemeni novelists such as Zaid Muti Dammaj, Hussein Salim Basideeg, Mohamed Ahmad Abdul-Wali, Mohamed Sagiery and others but rather to say that, at least, until the late 70s Yemeni novel was still in its infancy struggling to gain a foothold (Ibrahim, 1976). As young as it is, the Yemeni novel is rich with narratives about the Yemeni’s exile, emigration, and the reconstruction of Yemeni rural society in which the literary characters crouch, panic and collapse sometimes in their efforts to unfold and reveal the ugliness of reality and those who control it for the sake of exposing and challenging the abuse of power by authority and authoritarians. All of this, Tarek El-Ariss argues, is performed “[t]hrough modes of revealing (kashf) and hacking (ikhtirāq, tansīf)” (El-Ariss, 2013, p.3). To this, I would also add performing autopsy (tashrīh). These three actions require some act of knowledge on the part of the performer. And if we are to play with the order of these three, we can see them as actions that can be performed by a doctor. But then, is the novelist a doctor? ‘Why not?’ the answer could be. The novelist might be a doctor whose tools are narratives and words rather than traditional medical equipment. The novelist as a doctor brings with him/her a body—in the case of this novel, a female body, a survivor—which wanders, runs away, shakes, faints and panics before it collapses in France to be brought to the laboratory for autopsy.

Given Richard Shusterman’s main argument about the body being “the organizing core of experience”, it is not surprising then to see how it is used in narratives sometimes as the locus because, as Shusterman tells us, “[the body] expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world” (Shusterman, 2008, p. 3). What this tells us is that the construction of dictators stays unavoidably incomplete and marred by holes that must be filled by a tangible informed conjecture which takes the body as its departure to create an overarching story and/or narrative. Through the created story that constructs/deconstructs the history of the dictator which utilizes unveiling (kashf), hacking (ikhtirāq, tansīf) and performing autopsy (tashrīh), the product of excavating endeavor becomes necessarily an approximation of what happened. As Jacques Derrida proposes in his *Writing and Difference*, “violence appears with articulation” (Derrida, 1989, P. 147-148). In her discussion about “literature of Trauma,” Kali Tal argues that it “holds at its center the reconstruction and the recuperation of the traumatic experience” (Tal, 1996, P. 17). The depiction of the body as a site of rupture is not a new motif in Arabic novel. In his chapter, *A Room of One’s Own: The Modern Arabic Heroine between Career and Domesticity*, William Granara writes: “The female protagonist has often been constructed or manipulated as allegory of the nation in modern Arabic literature” (Granara, 2014, P. 3).

This paper draws on Granara's statement to offer a close reading of how *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* by ʿabd al-Rḥab Sarūrī depicts the new socio-political practices which necessitates the construction of aesthetics and different interpretative modes to unveil the ugliness of dictatorship in Yemen. Exploring the female body in sexual encounters interspersed throughout the novel echo, for the sake of unveiling and violently exposing, the discourse of Arab dictatorships in relation to the body which has been transformed from a source of lust and desire into a marker of a nation. In *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb*, there is an obvious gendered reproduction of the nation.

My goal in this paper is to analyze the ways in which the novel has chosen to represent the dictator's power. In so doing, I argue, that the novel provides a space to shift the paradigms of the politically charged Arabic novel "from questions of representations and cultural exchange to an engagement with genealogy of symptoms and affects [... represented by] disorientation, anxiety attacks, and physical collapse" (El-Ariss, 2013, p. 2). I am, of course, aware of how treacherous this reading is given the polemic exchange between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad over the former formulation of what he terms "national allegory" as the theory through which we can read 'all' third world literature (Jameson, 1986, P. 1). However, my reading of this specific text through the lenses of national allegory, I argue, enables us to see how the agony of dictatorship reinforces the trauma of the besieged female body and by means of allegory the modern nation state of Yemen which consequently becomes the site of struggle for its freedom. The experience of the dictatorial power in the Arab world bears uncannily on the literature produced and the relationship between allegory and the role of the intellectual becomes as permeable as this experience. In this engendered discourse the voice of narrative becomes a trope of empowerment in which the narrator transgresses, dismantles, violates and speaks to/of the violation committed against the body of his beloved, and in the case of *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb*, Ilhām, which he metaphorically uses to draw an ugly picture of the rapist, the dictator. It is the linking of the corporeal violence to that of the linguistic, sociopolitical, and critical discursive that this paper concerns itself with only to confront the former as the contested site of resistance and de-silencing. In her book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, in which Veena Das examines some cases of extreme violence of the Partition of India in 1947 and the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, she critically studies violence and how it affects everyday life. Unlike many anthropological inquiries, her major concern was to find how violence has entered the recesses of normality to be viewed as normal instead of being viewed as an interruption of life to which we simply bear witness. It is this project that *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* is engaging with, specifically Das' concept that "some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended" (Das, 2007, P. 39). The theme of the female body as an allegory for the rupture of the body of the nation or "body politics" as critics refer to it is not a new in Arabic literature (Faulkner, 2005, P. 3). Rather, many writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Mohamed Hussein Haykal, Nawal Sa'dawi, Hanan Shaykh, Liana Badr, Shar Khalifa, Fawaz Turki, Mahmud Darwish, Ghasan Kanafani among others have long explored the themes of exile, psychological trauma, physical displacement, nostalgia through the imagery of the female body. Arabic literary critics have often read these novels against an external oppressor, colonizer, or against the patriarchal hegemony of the society ascribing its origin to the feminist movement as the norm in Western literary tradition. My reading of this novel is driven by and focused on the issue of rape on the female body. This rape, however, differs from that of France of Algerian female body, for example, and by a means of metaphor the body of the nation-state as represented in the writing of Assia Dejjbar and other writers or that of the imagery of a male's fractured and castrated body which stands for raped and colonized Palestinian state in Kanafani. Rather, it is a rape of a trusted figure in the family, a father, of his own daughters, the twins: Ilhām and Naʿīm.

## 2.0 Methodology:

Through a dialogue with theoretical articulations by Shusterman, Kali Tal and Das, this paper shows how the novel, *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* by ʿabd al-Rḥab Sarūrī, portrays a description of a traumatized body that enact in the text a form of deterritorialization. Through this deterritorialization and what it creates from connecting the life and testimony of the female body as a survivor to the story of a whole nation suffered from dictatorship, the novel calls on us as readers to witness and experience the ugliness of dictatorship.

All of this will be within the framework of the representation of the body, the gendered violence and that of trauma and the ensuing consequences.

### 3.0 The Framing of Yemen's Political Crisis

To understand and attempt to engage in a discussion of Sarūrī's text specifically, but also of the oppressed subject generally, it is imperative to give a historical background of the political crisis in Yemen. Although Yemen has a long standing history, for the sake of clarity, this paper focuses on unified Yemen, if we are allowed to call it so<sup>2</sup>. Studies on the Yemeni political system during Ali Abdullah Saleh argue that the political system was a pluralized authoritarianism where the Yemeni regime consciously framed itself as democratic but muzzled any effort or initiative which might have led to facilitating a democratic consolidation. Sarah Philip, a prominent analyst and a researcher on the political reform in Yemen argues that: "There has been a marked increase in the level of popular political activity, but the country's power structures have proven resilient to political reform" (qtd. in Day, 3). This means that the authoritarian rule in Yemen is actually permeated by a wide variety of practices which combine the authoritarian concentrations of power with the deliberative influences to produce what political scientists refer to as "Authoritarian Deliberation," a mode of communication which embodies persuasion-based influence (Rehg and Habermas, 1996). From the early time of the unification, Saleh has created a system that shows his intention to democratize the country but he fostered it in such a way to ensure that the swing vote on crucial issues and affairs of Yemen are always under his control.

This is made clear, Stephan Day argues, when Saleh made sure that: "The executive authority of government was a five-person body comprising three northerners and two southerners" (Day, 4). Over the last two decades, the authoritarian regime in Yemen has increasingly experimented with controlled forms of political participation to maintain its power while deceiving the public of creating a variety of hybrid regimes permeated with a wide variety of participatory practices. Saleh has done so through mixing his authoritarian rule with political devices including elections, consultative forums, political parties that we would normally associate with democracy. One of the examples that one can look at to see how manipulative this regime was, is the country's first national elections in 1993 and its results. Day, writes "Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) gained 40 percent of the seats in parliament but received only 28 percent of the vote. Islāh, a northern Islamist party whose name means 'reform', was the direct descendant of an Islamic front Saleh created in the 1970s to prevent the spread of southern Marxist influence; it gained 21 percent of the seats. The Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) placed third, with 18 percent of the seats and 18 percent of the votes, the remaining seats were won by independent candidates and small parties" (Day, 5). What this means is that though it remains an authoritarian country led by Saleh, its government is now permeated by participatory practices with many innovations such as an increasing use of Peoples' Congresses to discuss policy, and acceptance of some kind of autonomous civil society organizations, and initiatives to decentralize the government. Put on Saleh's own words, the regime sustains its existence by "dancing on the head of snakes," as he likes to tell journalists who write about Yemen (Clark, 2010, P. 1). While Saleh has managed to stay in power for more than thirty years, he and his regime have failed to show any apparent interest in regime-level democratization. It is, rather, a regime that benefited from tribalism and its interplay with military officers and businessmen yet it "failed to forge a national bond between northerners and southerners" (Day, 7). This probably explains the sense of ambiguous domination that Saleh's regime had for so long of a time in Yemen and maybe in most of the Arab countries under the rule of dictatorships. And here I am reminded of Lisa Wadeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* in which she argues that the Syrian regime of Assad operates by compliances rather than legitimacy.

One of the characteristics of the regime in Yemen during Saleh's era is its ability to disguise itself sometimes as a shadow government and by this I mean its ability to function as a combination of both a

<sup>2</sup> Throughout history, Yemen has never been unified under common rule but a formal one has been imagined in 1990 with the two Yemens (North and South) becoming one. The population of the North is almost five times larger than the South, so San'a became the capital and Ali Abdullah Saleh served as the president with Salim Al-beidh as his vice president.

tribal and a patronage systems. In her article about Yemen, *The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen*, April Longley Alley unveils the dynamics of autocracy used by Saleh among the elites in his country to keep them under control and most importantly under his own control. She suggests that the rule of the game depended on four well-thought out and managed processes of bargaining and decision-making starting from “inclusion, exclusion, rewards, and punishments” (Alley, 2010, P. 385). What this tells us about Yemen then is that it is not just a failing state rather it is a state which has a double sense of itself—on the one hand, and on paper, it “has an elected parliament and president, a multi-party system, an independent judiciary, and the framework of a democratically elected local government. In reality, however, these institutions do not produce or transfer political power. Instead, power and wealth are produced and transmitted through a [...] patterned web of tribally- and regionally-based patronage relationships” (Alley, 2010, P. 386). In a place like this, you find yourself accepting what is given to you even if it is not the best of what you are looking for because you know what your options are—you will be excluded and punished. If you comply with the rules of the game and do not push for any change in the status quo, however, you will be included and rewarded. While these rules appear random the rules of the game of patronage are certainly organized and carried out in such a way that ensures the satisfaction of the recipients and guarantees their willingness to reciprocate. Elites, for instance, Alley argues are placed into patronage networks that take into consideration “elite identity, grassroots strength, proven loyalty, and tribal, family, and regional affiliation” (Alley, 2010, P. 399). Saleh, like any Arab dictator played skillfully with these policies and strategies that are aimed at effacing any trace of “crossing red lines” (Alley, 2010, P. 400). This strategy helped him, as it did with other dictators, to paint a specific picture for their citizens and themselves that would justify their mission. Thus, creating events and preambles that fit their own objectives became a necessity. In other words, to achieve their objective, dictators, like Saleh himself, first had to study their citizens and find a strategy that helped in convincing the people to accept, accommodate and to force them, if need be, to stop short of crossing red line. The accounts that emerged out of this desire took on a theatrical quality which has puzzled writers and intellectuals.

#### 4.0 The story of Ilhām 's open wound

Habīb ʿabd al-RRab Sarūrī's *Tai'r Al-Kharāb*, is a graphic and poetic novel which emanates from the terrifying and terrified experience of a violated female body. The scars of the social and physical suffering of the violated body which explodes after a long period of silence are as big as that of the nation itself. The novel presents a fictionalized and imaginative reality that explores both the physical violation and the developing subjectivity of a Yemeni woman whose story reconstructs and parallels the experience of a silenced and abused nation. For, after all, what are nations but narrations that we read, map and construct through “textual strategies metaphoric displacements, subtexts and figurative stratagems” Homi Bhabha tells us (Bhabha, 2013, P. 6). For Benedict Anderson, however, the nation is an “imagined community” constructed as random as it is by people who “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Bhabha, 2013, P. 6). The analysis of the novel will attempt to show how stories told about a single woman in a nation grant it, the nation, a sense of being through the voice of once-silenced victim and lived experience, is not history making after all a transformation/s of lived experiences into narratives?

The novel is a heart breaking love story between an immigrant Yemeni professor, Nashwān, who works and resides in France and a Yemeni student, Ilhām, whom he met in a conference in France. The love relationship is told in a way that unveils and chronicles the cruel life that they experienced in Yemen which has forced both of them to leave. After they meet in France, Nashwān and Ilhām get married but he has always felt that there was something missing in the relationship because Ilhām was never able to express herself even in the most intimate times. She loves him, but feels that she cannot offer him anything. This is why, at the end, she disappears from his life leaving him a letter telling him what she has never been able to verbalize, that she was raped by a man brought by her father. Her father watched to the rape to prove to his people that his daughter is virgin and he is dignified. After her departure, Nashwān sells his house in France and goes to find her in Yemen but he never manages to locate her.

While in Yemen, he meets Ilhām's twins, Na'īm who tells him the story of her and her sister. Nashwān's return to Yemen is not simply a man searching for his beloved; rather, it is a search for a lost nation. In order to trace this search and its implications, the concept of symbolized gendered violence will be employed as a framework.

The opening of the novel is an epigraph by Gustave Tibon which says: "Who are you, then, my beloved? The mirror that reflects me or the destruction which I get lost in the middle of"<sup>3</sup> (Srūrī, 2011, P. 13). This opening presents both the time and space of the novel—through the relationship between the, so far, nameless, speechless protagonist referred to as the beloved one (you) and a nameless lover in the first person (I and me). This beginning alludes to the love story that is to be told in which the nameless protagonist becomes known to us in the first paragraph, Ilhām. The description of the space in the first paragraph in the novel is very poetic and suggests a momentary relief for Ilhām to inspire her to talk and reveal her trauma:

Ilhām is swimming beside me elegantly and professionally! Nobody is around us, in this spring, warm morning, except sea gull's swarms and colorful butterflies... A chain of lakes and sea basins, for evaporating water, is aligned adjacent to the ocean. They look like glass, azure chess squares. Hundreds of pelicans and flamingos are laughing, pushing and jamming exultantly, there... The light has pearly shining color. Pine trees, palms, Berries, Cherries, grape fields cover the wide open land (Srūrī, 2011, P. 13)

Ilhām is now free of all the restrictions that have been once put on her and this is signaled through the picturesque scene that the narrator draws in this quotation where the "flamingos are laughing, pushing and jamming exultantly". This is a scene where they both are supposed to reveal their love to one another. In the second paragraph in the novel, the narrator gives us more explanation about the geography and the landscape of this place when he says describing it to us: "[it is an] aristocratic villa on a far steep, on the French Atlantic's beaches. I rented it for this eternal day, after hard, long and careful searching. This villa is the only one that fulfills the small and holy details I aspire to!" (Srūrī, 2011, P. 13). What is significant about this place that the narrator has chosen to unite with his beloved is that it is in an exile from the homeland. A place that he has found "after hard and long careful searching." This place, which seems to be an effort of making home in exile is very telling of the struggle of both Ilhām and the narrator in their own nation, Yemen, that they have to find their own sanity somewhere else.

The action of swimming, where the body is completely free to do any move to guard the soul of the swimmer, in juxtaposition with the natural beauty of the space itself allude to something Ilhām craves for: peace and tranquility. The absence of human beings is a precondition for her to be able to talk, "Nobody is around us," Nashwān reassures her. This precondition is very significant here as it captures, both, the sense of estrangement and alienation that the protagonist is experiencing. The sense of estrangement, I would argue, stems from the change of the physical place in the journey of the body that the protagonist is attempting to escape. Alienation, however, becomes one of the primary ways to articulate the physical change. The vivid description of the beauty of the place, when juxtaposed with the sense of estrangement and alienation, becomes necessary then because it serves as a safe place for the protagonist to momentarily forget about her defeat and seek a solace in the physical beauty of the place around her. And again, if we are to think back to the analogy of the novelist as a performer of autopsy and the protagonist as the body on which the autopsy would be performed, then we can imagine how important it becomes for the former to create a peaceful place for the latter so the autopsy is not interrupted. It is of our natural instinct as human beings to understand things in perspectives. What I

<sup>3</sup> The original text is in Arabic, thus, any English translation from the novel in this paper is mine with the exception of any reference to the text from p. 160-184 as these specific pages were translated by William M. Hutchins in a selection from *Tā'ir al-Kharāb* ("The Bird of Destruction") which appeared in Banipal No 36 Literature in Yemen Today.

mean here is that the vivid description of the striking beauty of the new place here does not only bring peace and tranquility but it also speak to and of the horrors of the events, to be told later, about home.

After this brief description of the place where the telling of the love story takes place, the narrator moves forward in time when he says: “This spring, quiet day: 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 1990, was a secondary coincidence, very minor, that does not equal anything compared to the beach’s sand that we will lay on soon” ( Srūrī, 2011, P. 14). This specific date is very significant to the time of the story because, as it is footnoted by the author himself in the novel, it is the day of the unification of the two Yemens: North and South. And this is the main plot of the story of their love which does not seem to be able to survive the present and the unfolding of the past of Ilhām. This past, as we shall see in this chapter connects the suffering of the female body to that of the whole nation in a way that leaves us wondering how could such past ruins the presents and spells the end of a love relationship between Ilhām and the narrator. The whole story then plays with the connection of the personal to the public space in which the suffering of Ilhām becomes the suffering of a nation suffering from the disappointments of the failed state and the transformation that has beset Yemen since Saleh’s coming to power. As a result of the restrictions imposed on them in their own nation, they take shelter in exile. This exile, one can argue, is not voluntary, rather it is involuntary.<sup>4</sup> The comfort given to Ilhām from the beauty of the new space is momentary because it gets interrupted by the hostile recollection of her past in Yemen. The image of a horrifying home becomes the reoccurring theme that seems to haunt Ilhām throughout the novel and it is against the troubles of this past that the protagonist seems to struggle.

In one occasion, for instance, the narrators tells us about his encounter with Ilhām and how she came to know everything about his past—his life in France, his education and even his childhood in Yemen. He, however, fails to gather any information about Ilhām simply because she intentionally avoids to talk about her life in Yemen. It is as if she is trying to forget this life by imagining that it has never existed. The narrators tell us how Ilhām would listen to him with vivid joy telling his story but she would avoid talking to remain silent about hers:

She would prompt me to speak excessively about my childhood in Yemen too, as though seeking an alternative childhood to her own. She took great pleasure in this. Perhaps she was looking for something or other, allowing me to immerse myself like that in recounting all the details of domestic life and street life in Aden, childhood adventures and pranks, all the day-to-day affairs of my poor city... She insisted I tell her day by day, hour by hour. I elaborated on every single friend, and laid out every frivolous story and occurrence in the greatest detail.

Yet she would content herself with being oddly selective about the minor events she related from her life in Yemen, speaking at times about her tastes in Yemeni cuisine, describing certain villages, veering off in recalling a certain place or giving a protracted description of female friends she held dear. Yet she was careful not to delve into details concerning major crossroads she had met with in life; neither did she talk about her home, her early childhood or her relationship with her parents, especially her father, of whom I soon realized she was immensely frightened, and whom she refrained from mentioning by name or alluding to in whichever way. It was as if she was struggling to forget her childhood completely. If I would ask her to recall some incident from her early childhood, the answer would always be: ‘I don’t remember anything from those years! (Srūrī, 2011, P. 26)

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the words “voluntary” and “involuntary” exile was first by Bettina L Knapp in which she argues that the first is the case of someone who leaves to escape persecution or evade punishment or even to seek a new existence for oneself. The second, however, is when someone is forced to leave ones homeland by “authoritative decree.” Although, I do not agree with her concept of voluntary as I see them both falling within the category of involuntary knowing that there is a force that drives someone to leave. So my usage of voluntary and involuntary here is a bit different. Voluntary for me is a case of someone who leaves for the betterment of a position, economic or educational system. The involuntary for me, at least in this context refers to either one of Bettina’s categories.

The desolation of Ilhām's life in Yemen which is alluded to by her avoidance to talk about it triggers her reminiscences of the past. It is like after becoming at ease, she just wants to be overlooked. She does not want to talk, rather she wants to be silent. Talking for her does not provide her comfort; rather, it may lead to more pain. In the above scene, there is a reference to the figure of the dictator: the father. This reference establishes a temporal and dehumanized character of this one who occupies this seat of power. Her fear from the figure of her father, the head of the power hierarchy makes his power sounds like a demonical one as it processes not only her body but her soul which also seems to be haunted by this image. In so doing, the novel allows its readers to capture the subjectivities of the female body, and the body of the nation—its struggle, its trauma, its loneliness and the new challenges it faces. We are introduced to a body that is not only collapsing but rather traumatized and simultaneously haunted by the history and the geography of the place left behind. This is reminiscent of all of the Arab dictators who are fully aware of their abuse of power. They do such not only by exploiting and degrading their victims, rather they make them even more afraid and ashamed of telling others about the wrong doings of these patriarchs. The dichotomy between fear and silence that the novel expresses here is the thematic basis for the sense of discomfort of Ilhām which also conceptually portrays a sense of satirization of the abuse of power which is superficially grasped by her father.

The narrator, is Majnūn<sup>5</sup> (mad), thus, for attempting to remove the cover from all of that. He is a narrator who understands, as Tarek El-Aris argues, that his role is of both “an act of sabotage [...] and of play and negotiation” (El-Aris, 2013, P. 43). In the context of this novel, the narrator seems to be very aware of his role as the destroyer of everything that seems to be settled. He is the one who does not take “no” for an answer. In one occasion where he tells us about his childhood friend, Shihāb, who taught him to question everything, the narrator says:

I am indebted to my friend Shihāb for instilling in me the love of birds. Perhaps from all that observation of bird rituals and scrutinizing of every possible condition of their rest and movement I became ‘imbirded’ myself and grew invisible wings! I turned into a bird in a man's body! But, first and foremost, I owe this friend one critical moment in my life, which I will now describe, that transformed me into a new man. But for this moment, I would never have been swimming now where the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean intersect, alongside my immortal Ilhām, the queen of birds (Srūrī, 2011, P. 40-41)

He engages in a process of “revealing (kashf), hacking (ikhtirāq, tansīf)” (El-Aris, 2013, p. 3) and performing autopsy (tashrīh). Nothing will stop him or his imagination from encoding the crimes of the dictator. A new conceptualization of the role of the intellectual emerges through this writing. It is the intellectual who fears no power, the one who challenges any paralyzing projects. Shihāb, he tells us later on, is the one who “rescued me from all the evil spirits which haunted all my childhood nights. I am indebted for him for the rest of life. It was because of him that I started to think, interrogate, learn, use my mind, rebel, reject. I even started to say the most powerful word, the most sacred and holy word: ‘No’” (Srūrī, 2011, P. 46). The three processes above provide a critique of the dictatorial, tribal and political system of Yemen through problematizing the discourse of history writing and the very meaning of culture blind obedience.

Through introducing us to the two main characters of the novel, Nashwān and Ilhām who both are Yemenis living in exile, both seeking salvation, the novel marks a significant innovation on the author's part. The presentation of the protagonists in such a way portrays a sense of the loss, humiliation and impotency that Arab people in general, and Yemeni in this novel in particular, are facing in the post-independent dictatorial state. The novel thus becomes a domestic tragedy which offers a compelling

<sup>5</sup> The concept of Junūn in Arabic Literature is one of the stages of love. The stages are seven and these are: hub (attraction), uns (infatuation), ʿishq (love), akidah (trust/reverence), ʿibadah (worship), junoon (madness) and the last stage is mawt (death). When a lover loses his mind upon reaching stage number six he is called Majnūn. For more about this refer to: Tarek El-Aris, (2013). *Majnun Strikes Back: Crossings of Madness and Homosexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature*. “International Journal of Middle East Studies,” 45(02), 293-312.



narrative of the devastation faced by the victim/s who suffer/s from the rape and the aftermath of it. This is why, I would argue, that unlike the Arabic novels that we have read before about the exploration and the representation of the city of exile, the focus here is on the abandoned city, the left behind one, the home. The point that I am making here is that in reading novels about the experience of living in exile from what we often refer to as “East-West encounter”<sup>6</sup>, more often than not, we get a sense of estrangement, marginalization, separation from ones family that the protagonist experience<sup>7</sup>. In this novel, however, although the story of Ilhām is being narrated from a city in exile, the focus is more on the suffering and the pain that Ilhām had to endure once at home at the hand of “Sheikh al-qabīlah.” Early on the novel, for instance, the narrator says:

I could easily perceive from our first encounter that her previous life in Yemen had left a large wound, an unmitigated pain, deep within her and that she had decisively resigned from that life or even spit on it with eternal disdain. It suffices to hear her covert moaning sobs and see her shriveled eyelids when she tries to approach her memories from those years. She would not talk for long, nor passionately and with genuine concern on any living being she sympathizes with and strongly loves besides her only younger sister Na‘īm, ‘my spiritual twin’, as she called her. I learned that they spoke regularly on the phone, and Ilhām would tell her all that was happening in her everyday life (Srūrī, 2011, P. 26-27).

The trauma of dispossession and its aftermath creates a body-in-exile which subverts facile binarisms in which Ilhām projects at once the non-space of objection and at the same time the resistance to signification. The sense of her vulnerable, female material body that patriarchy has always marked as “definitively other and as uniquely vulnerable” leaves her speechless (Bergoffen, 117). In her book, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, Georgia Agamben argues that any subject when feeling shame “becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame” (Agamben, 106). It is this feeling that renders Ilhām speechless because she knows that to speak means to talk about the shameful, sexual violence of her body being raped by her father. The crisis of Ilhām and her besieged body depicts the crisis of Yemeni and, in a broader sense, the crisis of Arab intellectuals living under their repressive regimes. The dilemma of Ilhām is that of an intellectual who strives to reconstruct and remap a sense of him/herself in the face of the increasingly repressive presence of a failing state.

Talking about Egypt and Egyptian writers and their role within the Egyptian literary sphere, Samia Mehrez argues that writers are the “conscience of the nation, responsible for articulating its collective disillusionments and for voicing its silenced realities” (Mehrez, 2009, p.148). The silenced reality of intellectuals is represented by Ilhām and her inability to speak. This is why in the above quote the narrator tells us that it is from Ilhām’s “covert moaning sobs [... and] her shriveled eyelids when she tries to approach her memories” that he can understand her suffering and confused being. He, the narrator, becomes the conscience of Ilhām and by a means of allegory, I would argue, the “conscience of the nation”. On attempting to speak of a destroyed female body, the narrator reminds us of Edward Said’s articulation of the role of the public intellectual as one who “is endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public” (Said, 1994, p. 11). By reading the novel as such, I am not trying to render it to politics, rather I am trying to show how writing in the Arab world under dictatorships has a political as well as artistic purpose. As such Arabic novels can also be conceived as the artistic expression of the people and/or of the nation in which writers try to realize their function as public intellectuals in the face of dictatorships. And here we are talking about the emergence of a new literary direction and new aesthetic values, with writers attempting in one way or another to represent the new social and political reality that culminated in the

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<sup>6</sup> For more about this please refer to Rasheed El-Enany. *Arab representations of the occident: East-West encounters in Arabic fiction*. Routledge, 2006. Although El-Enany is not the first who has discussed this when it comes to Arabic literature, he is the first to write about this issue in English.

<sup>7</sup> What is in my mind here are writers like Baha Tahir, *Love in Exile*; Muhamed al-Bisaati *Daqqat-Tubul*; Tyeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* and many others.

practice of the dictatorship/s of Sheikh al-qabilah which led to further disappointments in the years that Ilhām had to endorse in Yemen. This new literary aesthetic calls into question the absolute use, and in fact abuse, of power that had been firmly established and practiced in many Arab nations in the aftermath of the anticolonial movements of the 1940s and the 1950s in which dictators consolidated their grip on power by arresting, torturing, detaining anyone who poses a potential threat to them.

In a semi hallucinating scene where Nashwān and Ilhām are contemplating on their sense of loss and being at the heart of it, Ilhām asks him to read her fortune by looking on her cup of coffee after she finished drinking it<sup>8</sup>. The novel explores absurd humor, a non-traditional style of writing, as a vessel for conveying a stronger message above and beyond what a traditional narrative can convey. When she asks him to read her fortune, he replies:

Certainly!

Then [he continued] I looked at the side opposite the heart on the inside of the cup. There were many scribbles. Scribbles if looked at in separate sections, but, if looked at as a whole, are more interesting, more complex and miraculous, more terrifying, more perfect...

I focused my gaze on the inside of the cup, to make sure that I wasn't dreaming, up close or from afar. In reality I wasn't dreaming, and I took enough time to confirm that...

I was, in fact, at the height of my concentration when I saw: a majestic image of a detestable bird of prey, wings outspread, claws visibly frightening, neck turned upward, licking the sky with a long tongue, as if it had been etched with a fine pin by the hand of a skilled artist...

A terrifying bird!

A bird of destruction!

I was truly astonished, extremely awestruck! I felt a strong blow to the backside of my fanatic secularism...with a sharp slap on the cheek of my rationalist arrogance, intense superiority...I was overcome with a combination of anxiety and chills...

Ilhām asked me once again: What do you see?

I secretly put the tip of my index finger and the middle of my right hand into the cup. Unwillingly shook them, two swift, fleeting, deceitful movements, in order to mix everything together. To make this mysterious, terrifying mural disappear! To make the "walls" of the cup stop "praising"! To erase the effects of this sudden irrational, metaphysical, satanic attack!

Then I handed her the cup, commenting:

"Oh, nothing, nothing...just scribbles, nothing more nothing less!"

Fate had not been this honest, obvious, transparent and trustworthy with me before this day, and it was pointing with its forefinger toward my ultimate, radical enemy.

My fateful enemy: the bird of destruction! (Srūrī, 2011, P. 56-58)

As absurd as it is, the invoking of a fortune telling as a means to understand the present and future of Ilhām describes how ridiculous her situation is. Absurd humor in literature uses absurdity and irony as tools and is often satirical in nature, meaning it uses wit to criticize faults in a person, institution, or society<sup>9</sup>. Upon looking at her *fungān* (cup), Nashwān was struck by the terrifying image of the bird of destruction. Albert Camus, the distinguished French writer, points to the emergence of this type of writing after the Second World War and says:

<sup>8</sup> Arabic coffee, or Turkish coffee as it is known in the US, differs from the coffee we know in the west in the way it is ground and served. Coffee beans are roasted a few times and then grinded very fine. The coffee, then, is prepared in tiny pots called *Bakrag*. What is unique about this coffee is neither the way it is grinded nor the way it is boiled, but rather how it allows your fortune to be told by looking at the cup. This custom of coffee cup reading is at least as old as the coffee itself, and it is repeated with each and every cup consumed. While this can be done casually among friends, it is also possible to consult professionals.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Esslin argues that the Theatre of the Absurd deliberately reduces and sometimes abandons the traditional theatrical features of characterization, plot, development and even common sense to convey, as she puts it, "its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin, 24).

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity (qtd. in Esslin 23).

The novel has intuitively resorted to this subversive theatrical subversion to mask its resistance to the unjust social and political circumstances. The disappointment in the postcolonial leaders as well as in the institutions of religions and traditions resembles what Kafka referred to in his definition of the Absurd: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose [...] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental root, man is lost; all of his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (qtd. in Esslin 23). This lack of hope and frustration experience are reflected in the form of the Absurd. Nevertheless, ridiculing such meaninglessness of life and bitter experiences urges and inspires the audience to move the stagnant water and to change the status quo. By using the tactics of absurdity, writers subtly engage their audience in their quest for freedom and justice and push them to make a change in their lives.

In her seminal book, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Sidonie Smith emphasizes the place of writing and its ability to turn the corporeal into narrated subjectivity. In looking at the female body as the locus of cultural motives, it becomes a discursive sign which lays barefooted the female oppression. Writing the body, then, becomes a practice that aims at exposing oppression; it is a practice, I would argue, not a process because it becomes a site of history, politics, violation, wove into the history of a given nation. As much as it is relevant to what I am doing here, I am interested the most in the connection that Smith draws between the female body in one side and the metaphor of what she terms as “being home.” In her analysis the body is viewed as a space inhabited by the self. If the self is embodied in this space then the body is home with sanity and stability. In contrary to that, if the self is not embodied in the body—when there is a split between the self and its space—then the body is “not being home” (Smith, 1993, p. 128). And this is evident in *Tai’r al-Kharāb* which implies a split between the self and the body in which the latter experiences the feeling of “not being home” (Smith, 1993, p. 128). This split between the self and the body is the source of Ilhām’s being at loss. This feeling is expressed in the novel when the narrator gives us a description of the nation, the space, that Ilhām went back to in order to search for her being “You don’t recognize the country to which you return July 17, 2000, either up close or from a distance!<sup>10</sup> You’re not sure you have any tie to this place! You feel a complete stranger here, stripped to the marrow of your bone!” (Srūrī, 2011, P. 161). Because the narrator is Nashwān not Ilhām herself, the novel becomes a discursive diptych between Ilhām, someone who has experienced and lived in this nation—a sort of an eye witness—, and Nashwān who bears witness and testifies to the horror of the unseen and the unheard of in Yemen which stays unknown until he himself loses his beloved who now disappears. The young Ilhām through the entire novel for Nashwān is not going crazy but going sane—defiantly attempting to stay human and to gain her lost self and bodily home and by extension her raped body. And in so doing, the novel introduces us to its central metaphor: The question of that the narrator articulated as “How can Ilhām be two beings: The first is pure and crystal clear and the second is black and mysterious” (Srūrī, 2011, P. 145).

Images of the female body as the raped nation of Yemen are scattered throughout the whole narrative. The journey that Nashwān undergoes to Yemen is not just a visit of an immigrant to his family and his country, rather it is a journey of excavation to introduce us, the readers, to the sources of Ilhām’s miserable life, her oppressor/s and his<sup>11</sup>/their wrong doings. In the last page of the second titled part of the novel, right before it embarks on a new part entitled “Celebratory Fireworks in Honour of Defloration” (Srūrī, 2011, P. 159), Nashwān tells us about his journey by saying “ I determined the plan of my journey: Aden, my mother, my friends,... excitement, longing, gifts, memories, tales... then to Sanaa, Na’im, her

<sup>10</sup> Author’s Note: The disagreeable war that devastated Yemen and that proclaimed Aden fair game for the victorious tribes ended in July 1994 (on the 7<sup>th</sup>) and July 17, 1978 was the starting date for the system that has ruled Yemen up till now.

<sup>11</sup> I deliberately use the masculine pronoun here because history of the current Arab nations informs us that all Arab dictators—religious, political, or social, have been men.

husband, her two kids ... and then Thulaa... I determined the direction and the destination of my plan: the bottom of the destruction” (Srūrī, 2011, P. 158). Nashwān has a vision of and for his journey to unveil the mysteries of a revolutionary character, Ilhām. Ilhām here represents a reincarnation of both women and Yemen itself at once as the body of Ilhām which was stripped of any kind of life is actually the earth/body of the country imprisoned, tortured and eventually crushed and defeated by Sheikh al-qabīlah.

Upon his immediate arrival to Yemen, therefore, Nashwān admits his happiness that the two Yemens- the North and the South-are now united as he does not want to think of the country as North and South. But this unity is similar to the unity of Ilhām and her sister Na‘īm who only unite in pain, suffering and violation. Ilhām’s formerly violated body is a violated Yemen, the homeland, and the personal home of her and her sister and in fact all sisters and brothers. The following is a vivid description of the body of Yemen as told in juxtaposition of the story of Ilhām:

You touch down first at the Sanaa Airport, which is the largest Mikhbaza in Yemen,<sup>12</sup> and then land in Aden’s old airport, because the new one, which was reduced to ruins and devastation in the war of January 13, 1986, has never been rebuilt. You are delighted that your Yemen is finally united but actually have reservations about the nature of this unity, which is much less a coherent union of civil society, political and justice systems, cultural programmes, and progress and freedom than it is a unity imposed by the tribe that donned the state’s mantle and an incoherent coalition of starvation, corruption, barbarism, plunder, ghat consumption, and galabiyas (Srūrī, 2011, P. 161-162).

Though the practical purpose of Nashwān’s trip to Yemen is to find his lost beloved, it is really a quest for understanding of why Ilhām, who was married to him in France, can never escape the horrors that both her body and mind suffered while in Yemen. In order to understand the continual flashbacks of Ilhām’s day-to-day- existence with him in France, he resolves to the history of the nation and the union of the North and the South and its arbitrariness to expose the tortures and horrors prevailing in his homeland. A home that has never been more than a jungle ruled by what the narrative terms “the tribe that donned the state’s mantle”. The departure from France, which embodies the very essence of liberty and modern nation-state, to Yemen for Nashwān is a very symbolic one. It shows how Nashwān, like many Arab immigrants who live in the West, is dazzled by the lack of freedom and political liberty in his country. This reading of the novel places it within the canon of what is previously thought of as predominantly Latin American tradition of dictator novels. In removing the veil from the puzzle of Ilhām’s passivity and the predicament of her body, the novel dismantles the presence of dictatorship in Yemen suggesting that dictators and dictatorships are a performance of power in which the dictator “Ta’ir al-kharāb” (the bird of destruction) coercively and violently performs and exerts power. And, only by unveiling performativity which this kind of novels, dictator novels, can fulfil that “power can be performed differently” (Spencer, 2012, p. 147). As such, writing for Sarūrī becomes both a sort of a call for political response and a means of bringing together readers, writers and the texts themselves into a collective political action in which a new modes of governance are sought. And if we are to think of this novel in terms of crime fiction then the novel, as Spencer once again argues, performs “power in such a way as to unveil the state itself as the principal miscreant” (Spencer, 2012, P. 154).

The unveiling of the evilness of dictators and their wrong doings to their nations is continued in the novel when the narrator links the harm done to the nation to that of the body again when he juxtaposes both “the touristic rape” and the “geographical rape” to tell the story of Yemen and Ilhām (Srūrī, 2011, P. 174). The vivid description of the decaying cities and their landscapes when juxtaposed with the story of Ilhām evokes in the reader, who has some knowledge about Arab dictators, the images and posters about dictators and their catastrophic ruling and ruining of their nations. The poster drawn by the narrator, as he tells us, at the end of the scene is “patriarchal pimping” that has lead for the destruction of the whole

<sup>12</sup> Author’s Note: “Mikhbaza” is the name of a Yemeni chain of mass-market restaurants renowned for their constant clamor and racket and for their selection of especially delicious regional dishes.

nation. The narrator asks the rhetorical questions: “who has dug this swamp for them? Who has pushed them to this damn jungles?” then he sighs to conclude by saying: “How ugly is the poster of the birds of destruction” (Srūrī, 2011, P. 184). This juxtaposition of the story of the personal and the public transfers the body into “an intentional instrument of individual agency” in which humans write/tell their stories to cope with a psychologically, traumatized being otherwise (Mallot, 165).

## 5.0 Conclusion

Because the body tells the story of self which becomes the story of the collective, then the story of the body and what it might remember may unveil important truths which help us in understanding the intersection between the personal and the collective. And, it is this intersection that seems to hold important clues for how history and narrative are intertwined. The novel looks at history as very relevant, and given this relativity, it is inscribed through the body of the fictional character and our bodies as readers. Some scholars, such as Edward S. Casey, have even went further than this to argue that “there is no memory without body memory” [emphasis is his] (Casey, 2009, P. 172). The suffering of a whole nation is placed within the suffering of Ilhām’s body and the reading of Ilhām’s story then places the suffering of her body within our body as readers. In this belated witness, through the eyes and experience of us as readers, the novel as a literary testimony attempts to broaden the “the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in one’s own body” (Felman, 108). As such, writing for Sarūrī and Arab writers becomes both a sort of a call for political response and a means of bringing together readers, writers and the texts themselves into a collective political action in which a new modes of governance are sought. To this end, historicity is very essential to the story. Historical and fictional characters blend with each other to, effectively, rewrite the history of Yemen and its dictatorship.

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