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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Cairo: Mapping the Neoliberal City in Literature
A Study of: *The Heron, Being Abbas El Abd and Utopia*

A Thesis Submitted to
Department of Arab and Islamic Civilization

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Nesma Amr Gewily

Under the supervision of Dr. Samia Mehrez

May / 2017

DEDICATION

To

Samia Mehrez

For shaping my learning journey throughout the past four years.

Heba Raouf Ezzat

For nurturing my interest in city and urban space.

My family

For their love, support and patience.

Amira, Engy, Sarah and Seif

For their precious friendship.

Ahmed Gomaa

For the valuable discussion and feedback and for the encouragement he sent from behind the gates of Tura prison.

Abstract

While many scholars have explained neoliberalism and its impact on the economic, political and social spheres, writers have successfully grasped the everyday realities created by the implementation of the neoliberal policies. In my thesis, I am going to use literary maps to analyze three novels written by Egyptian writers at different stages of the neoliberal project. The novels are: *Malik al-hazin* (1983) (The Heron, 2005) by Ibrahim Aslan, *An takun 'Abbas al-Abd* (2003) (Being Abbas El Abd, 2009) by Ahmed Alaidiy and *Yutubiya* (2008) (Utopia, 2011) by Ahmed Khaled Towfik. Mapping the three novels demonstrate the changes that the city of Cairo and its inhabitants have undergone in the neoliberal era.

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A Note on Transliteration

This thesis follows the Arabic transliteration system used by the Library of Congress. However, some names are differently transliterated in the translated versions of the Arabic novels analyzed here. The same goes for some authors and writers who transliterate their names differently. Those names are kept here as they appear in the translated novels and original papers.

A Note on Maps

This thesis depends primarily on Google maps. Older maps of Cairo (which corresponds to the time when the novels were written) do not show the details of neighborhoods where narratives take place. However, the maps used here are efficient in showing patterns of mobility and exclusion within the city space.

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“Without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible.”

Franco Moretti

Atlas of the European Novel

There are two stories that stand behind this research, one is professional and the other is personal. In fall 2014, I was enrolled in *Cairo in the Modern Literary Imaginary* class by Dr. Samia Mehrez. I wrote my mid-term paper about the futuristic representation of Cairo in *Utopia* by Ahmed Khaled Towfik. The novel is set in a divided world where the rich inhabit luxurious gated communities in the north coast, and the poor inhabit a deteriorated city deprived of basic infrastructure. The research has familiarized me with the concept of neoliberalism, the ideology that, as the Guardian columnist George Monbiot (2016) argues, “dominates our lives, (but) has, for most of us, no name.”¹

Before that research, I used to understand the different manifestations of neoliberalism as if they were independent of each other. For example, I used to think the phenomenon of informal housing areas is independent of gated communities or shopping malls; thus, I blamed the ‘absence’ of a governing body that would organize the city space and ensure a fair distribution of wealth. This differs completely from knowing both phenomena result from poor housing policies that subsidize the rich with land and abandon its responsibility toward the lower-income population. It is then I understood the role of the regime in impoverishing its citizens and transforming their rights into commodities.

This distinction will lead me to the personal story. On the 25th of January 2011, I was marching the streets of Cairo demanding Bread, Freedom, Dignity and Social Justice. This was my first time joining a protest, and I remember how hesitant I was while

¹ Monbiot, George. “Neoliberalism – the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems”. *The Guardian*. April 2016. Retrieved at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>

my fellow protesters chanted *al-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām*. Back then, I did not understand what “*al-niẓām*” meant, and I thought it was equivalent to Mubarak and his interior minister Habib al-Adly. I took part in the revolution on the assumption that the president and the government were corrupt, and this explains why I left the square after Mubarak had stepped down. I could see the change coming, and couldn’t anticipate that the regime is greater than the sum of its parts.

By the end of *Cairo in the Literary Imaginary* class, Dr. Mehrez allowed us to choose between writing a final paper or a short story. I chose the latter, and for six weeks, I interviewed several people about their experience in Tahrir, one of whom was Hossam who lost his left eye during the confrontations on the Friday of anger. It was a cold November night and we were standing at the entrance of Muhammad Mahmmūd Street when Hossam told me that ‘people of Tahrir’ are imprisoned in a moment that others know nothing about. This exactly what motivates me to embark on this research: I am imprisoned in a revolutionary moment, and for six years I have been continuously attempting to understand how it happened, why it happened, and why it ceased to happen again. Integral to this attempt is the study of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology which has been accused of subjecting Egyptians and the Arab population to harsh and dehumanizing living conditions² since its implementation in the seventies of the last century; an epoch that is abundantly represented in the Arabic novel.

There is a relation that exists between the novel and the nation state as proposed by Benedict Anderson in his outstanding book *Imagined Communities* (1991). As a

² Hourani, Nagib.B, and Ahmed Kanna. "Arab Cities in the Neoliberal Moment: Darab Cities in the Neoliberal Moment." *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 36, 2014. pp. 600-604. P.600

concept, the nation state is built on the assumption that nationals of one state will never have the opportunity to meet each other; nevertheless, they can still imagine their simultaneous existence as a “solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.”³ This imagination is made possible by both the novel and the newspaper which have provided the technical apparatus “for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation.”⁴

Despite being mostly a solitary activity, reading a novel (or a newspaper) facilitates the formation of an imagined community whose members identify with the text and with each other in terms of the shared calendrical time and the familiar landscape of the novel.⁵ Anderson comments on an example that he gives from the Indonesian literature and says:

“Here, (...) we are in a world of plurals: shops, offices, carriages, kampungs, and gas lamps.(...) We the –Indonesian- readers are plunged immediately in calendrical time and a familiar landscape; some of us may well have walked those ‘sticky’ Semarang roads. Once again, a solitary hero is juxtaposed to a socioscape described in careful, general detail.”⁶

The above example emphasize the centrality of space and time, as narrative elements, in the representation of the nation state, but what space is relevant to understand the neoliberal state of Egypt? It goes without saying that Cairo will be the

³Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, New York;London. 1991. P.26

⁴ Ibid. P.25

⁵ Ibid. P.32

⁶ ibid

focus of this thesis for the reason that, and as argued by Samia Mehrez in *The Literary Atlas of Cairo* (2010), the city space has dominated much of the Egyptian literary production of the twentieth century. For it contains the social, economic and political spheres, “Cairo becomes a protagonist whose existence is indispensable for the existence of the narratives themselves.”⁷

I started this introduction with a statement by the literary critic and historian Franco Moretti who says: “Without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible.” My research question is: How did the novel, as a literary genre, represent the neoliberal city of Cairo?

Theoretical Framework

This research is based largely on ‘literary maps’ as an analytic tool presented by Franco Moretti in his book *Atlas of the European Novel* (1999). Moretti is an Italian, Marxist literary historian and critic who has always been interested in a “scientific approach to literature”⁸. By scientific approach I mean employing different theoretical frameworks, originally developed in natural or social sciences to study *World Literature*; a term used first by Goethe and Marx to denote the circulation of many national and local literatures beyond their national boundaries⁹. Moretti has dedicated much of his academic attempts to find tools that would allow scholars to study this huge corpse of literary production around the world, not by reading more, but by reading distantly, and through applying different quantitative and digital tools to study the history of

⁷Mehrez, Samia. *The Literary Atlas of Cairo: One Hundred Years on the Streets of the City*. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2010. P.5

⁸Dinsman, Melissa. “The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Franco Moretti” *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Retrieved at: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-digital-in-the-humanities-an-interview-with-franco-moretti/>

⁹Moretti, Franco. “Conjectures on World Literature”. *New Left Review*, vol. 1, January- February 2000. Retrieved at: <https://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>

world literature and culture.¹⁰ As he simply puts it, “a new “science” emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method.” For Moretti, World Literature is the new problem, and Digital Humanities is the new science to address it.¹¹

In *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti embarks on writing the history of European Novel during the 18th and 19th centuries through the use of literary geography. The founding idea that stands beyond his attempt is this:

“Geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history happens, but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth. Making the connection between geography and literature explicit, then- mapping it: because a map is precisely that, a connection made visible- will allow us to see some significant relationships that have so far escaped us.”¹²

Then he explains that literary geography could mean two different things. It may refer to the study of space in literature or literature in space. The first instance is dominated by the fictional text where he studies “Balzac’s version of Paris, the Africa of colonial romances, Austen’s redrawing of Britain.”¹³ The second instance is concerned with real historical space such as the provincial libraries of Victorian Britain, or the European diffusion of *Don Quixote* and *Buddenbrooks*. In the first two chapters, Moretti follows the fictional space in literature, while he dedicates the last chapter to literature in the real space. Moretti depends in both quests on actual maps used as analytical tools which “dissect the text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden.”¹⁴ The map allows us to examine the literary space through which the plot

¹⁰ Mehrez, Samia. “Mapping the Novel: Moretti and the Re-Making of Literary History.” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, n° 34, 2014. P.68

¹¹ Moretti, Franco. “Conjectures on World Literature”.

¹² Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*. Verso, New York;London. 1999. P.3

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

unfolds, with its boundaries, taboos and routes. And then we can see the “internal logic of narrative: the semiotic domain around which a plot coalesces and self organizes.”¹⁵ Let’s take an example from the Atlas to explain how this tool works.



Map 1- Jane Austen’s Britain

The above map shows the places where Jane Austen’s plots begin and end. Literary mapping works by selecting a textual feature, which is the beginning and ending in this case, finding the required data, putting it on the map then looking at it. The map shall reveal a pattern. The pattern that the above map reveals is one of exclusion: Jane Austen’s Britain excludes Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. It is only England that is present in this world, not all of England, but England before the industrial revolution, which contrasts with the map of industrialized Britain. This contrast reveals the conflict

¹⁵ Ibid. P.5

that exists between both worlds: the old monarchy and the new industrialized country. Given that the novel is the representation of the nation state; therefore, the structure of the novel reveals the conflicts and divisions present in the nation itself. Through these conflicts, literary narratives are woven.

35. Social classes in London according to Charles Booth (1889)

Booth's color-coding, inscribed at the bottom of the map, runs as follows: '*Black*: Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal. *Dark blue*: Very poor, casual. Chronic want. *Light blue*: Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family. *Gray*: Mixed. Some comfortable, others poor. *Pink*: Fairly comfortable. Good ordinary earnings. *Red*: Middle class. Well-to-do. *Gold*: Upper-middle and Upper classes. Wealthy.'



Map 2- Social Classes in London

Moretti starts the second chapter of the *Atlas of the European Novel* with Charles Booth's map of social classes in London in 1889. This map is a section of the original Booth's map which investigates the economic texture of each block in city. As Moretti explains, at the macroscopic level, this map shows that "London is a self-organizing system, with a significant set of regular patterns: large commercial arteries trace bright red networks almost everywhere in the city. Extreme poverty peaks near the Thames, and slowly decreases in the direction of the suburbs. Great wealth concentrates in the West End."¹⁶ However, on the microscopic level, the map shows the rapid transitions between social classes in the city; a transition so quick that "a good walker could cross the entire spectrum of Booth's seven classes in no more than five minutes."¹⁷ This fast change between classes evokes confusion when one attempts to read the city. Hence, Moretti's main question in this chapter is: How novels 'read' cities? By what narrative mechanisms did they make them legible, and turn urban noise into information?"¹⁸

Moretti answers this question through mapping different works of both classical and popular British literature, all of which protect their readers from randomness by reducing the city into class,¹⁹ and erecting a border, through the movement of characters in the city, that stands between east and west of Regent Street.²⁰ This binary narrative model is challenged by Balzac's representation of Paris where his plots move fluidly

¹⁶ Ibid. P.77

¹⁷ Ibid. P. 78

¹⁸ Ibid. P.79

¹⁹ Ibid. P.79, 105

²⁰ Ibid. P.83

between five or six major sites. This fluidity is facilitated by the presence of the Latin Quarter, a product of social division of labor²¹, where Balzac's protagonists reside, but they soon move across the city space searching for their objects of desire, which are women and money. In Balzac's world, Paris is made legible through the protagonists' pursuit of desire.

Balzac's Paris is more complex than the two-pole London. Moretti explains that a morphological difference exists between both plots. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* concludes that a plot results from the binary opposition between two antithetical spaces. This demonstrates why the Silver Fork and Newgate genres reduce the urban complexity of London in the East and West of Regent Street. Balzac replaces this binary model by a triangular one where the plot consists of three fields: the field of the protagonist, the antagonist and then a third narrative pole "which intersects the narrative line, and changes its course."²² The third pole enters the narrative as a force of social mediation, and as the plot unfolds we find that the story is about this third pole, who or which, stands between two fields of power and is surrounded by their hostile forces. This tension requires a resolution. In Dickens' world, the third is the middle class who prefer to keep a distance from London through working in the city and living in the suburbs. In Balzac's world, the third is the Latin Quarter whose inhabitants escape the complicated urban life by falling further into the heart of the urban turbulence.²³ Balzac and Dickens

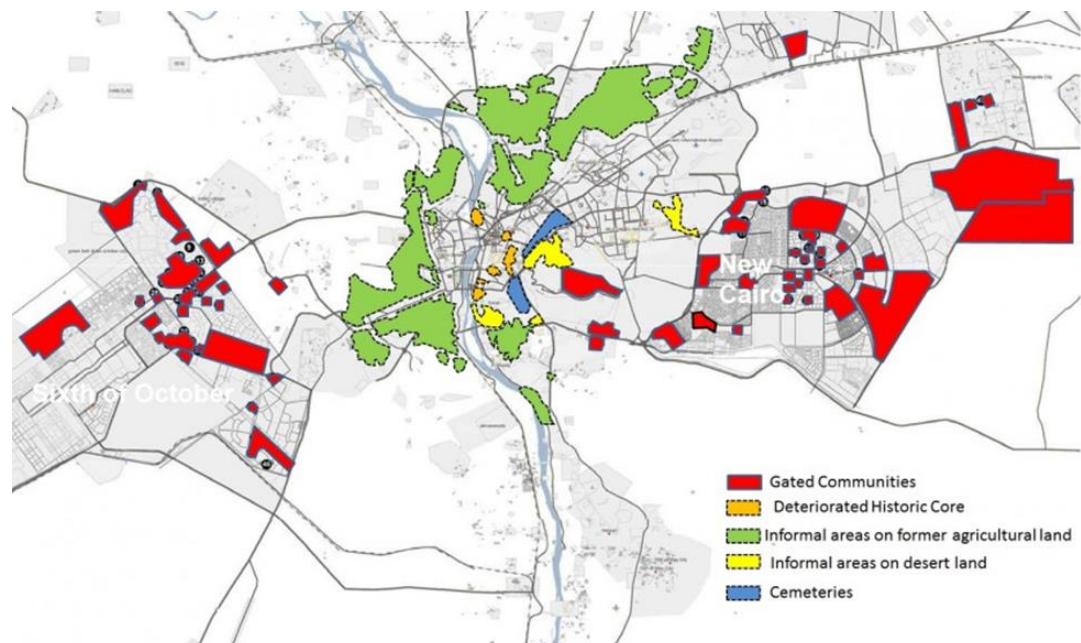
²¹ In commodity economy, the manufacturing process is subdivided into separate and independent branches of industry which are then exchanged. In Paris, the Latin Quarter is dominated by the University of Sorbonne which makes the Latin Quarter known for its student life. Due to social division of labor in Paris, residents in the Latin Quarter commute between different places in the city seeking work and pursuing desire.

²² Ibid. P.108

²³ Ibid. P.120

then employ different plot twists to unify their cities: Balzac's characters change classes, but Dickens unify London through the bloodline that turns the city into a family, where the middle class is stable with little ambitions to ascend the social ladder.

Mapping Cairo



Map 3- Cairo

Source: [Failed Architecture](#)

Like Moretti, I start this section with a map that shows the division in the city space. Unlike Booth's map of London, a good walker would need several hours to cross

the entire spectrum of social classes in Cairo²⁴. Since its implementation, the neoliberal project has subjected the city of Cairo to a series of ‘spatial transformations’ that aimed at facilitating both the economic and touristic activities.²⁵ Thus, new urban spaces have emerged on the fringes of the city and on the wreckage of old neighborhoods as well. The gap between the rich and poor has widened despite the many promises that have been cut to achieve social justice. Why did the city develop in such divided and segregated pattern? One cannot answer this question without looking deeper into the main features of the neoliberal ideology and its history of implementation in Cairo.

The Seventies: The Re-orientation toward the Open Door Policy

The premise that the neoliberal ideology is based on, as explained by David Harvey (2005), is that increased production is fundamental to human wellbeing. To promote production, it is essential to liberate individual entrepreneurial skills within an institutional framework “characterized by strong private property rights, free market and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.”²⁶

On one hand, the State shall provide the legal structure and function to facilitate and protect private ownership, and on the other hand, to employ its repressive power to ensure the proper functioning of the market and to eliminate whatever hinders the entrepreneurial process. One good example of these obstacles is the public sector which distorts the rule of the market and therefore must be privatized and deregulated.

²⁴ Map 3 does not show the divisions within the grey areas in the city center or on the fringes of the city; however, it gives a simplified overview on the spatial segregation within Cairo.

²⁵ Ghannam, Farha. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif, 2002. P.29

²⁶ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press. New York;Oxford. 2005. P.2

Additionally, the State must use its power to create markets if they do not exist in fields like education, environment or health care. Beyond these practices, the State shall not intervene so as not to distort the market rule.²⁷ Neoliberalism finally assumes that liberating the entrepreneurial skills will increase productivity and the effects of economic growth will trickle down to everyone and eventually eliminate poverty.²⁸

In April 1974, former president Anwar al-Sadat announced the reorientation of Egypt toward the open door policy. According to Sadat, the economic losses incurred by the Arab Israeli war amounted to 10,000 million Egyptian pounds, and the growing military expenditures during the war years caused the growth rate to drop from 6.7% in 1965 to less than 5% in 1973; thus, the new set of policies were sought to recover the economy and meet the post war development goals.²⁹

The implementation of the neoliberal policies in 1974, as explained by Galal Amin (2000), meant “The opening of virtually all doors to the importation of foreign goods and capital, the removal of restrictions on Egyptian local investment, and the gradual withdrawal of the state from its active role in the economy.”³⁰ It was assumed that the set of policies would succeed in bringing the western know-how, the Arab capital together with the Egyptian manpower to benefit all parties. To facilitate this transformation, the city has to change to accommodate the new investment demands. Real estate developers led the march of progress, and “construction boomed in and

²⁷ ibid

²⁸ Ibid P.64, 65

²⁹ Sadat, Anwar. “October Paper”, *Alyoum*. 19 April, 1974.

³⁰ Amin, Galal A. *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?: Changes in Egyptian Society from 1950 to the Present*. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2000. P.9

around Cairo, hotel chains dotted the Nile Corniche, bridges and new roads were constructed to facilitate the circulation of goods and people, and conspicuous consumption soared.”³¹

However, the above assumption was never materialized because the foreign investors were reluctant to invest in long-term projects in an unstable country that still lacked proper infrastructure³². As a result, investments were of ‘unproductive’ nature, and were directed to the tertiary sector as stated by Hamied Ansari in *Egypt, the Stalled Society* (1987):

The infusion of foreign capital did not contribute in any tangible sense to industrialization efforts. Foreign ventures were mostly concentrated in the tertiary sector. As many as seventy banks emerged, and several hotels were hurriedly constructed amid wild schemes to transform Egypt into a tourist haven.³³

(...)

Boutiques and mini supermarkets sprang up in the more prosperous sections of the sprawling Cairo metropolis. In the public mind, the *Infitah* not only meant a great variety of cheeses on the shelves of stores frequented by the upper classes, but it also meant congested streets thanks to restrictions being lifted on imports of cars and every other object on wheels. Gradually and inexorably, the cars and donkey carts began to impinge the sidewalks, leaving pedestrians to fend for themselves as well as their reflexes permitted.³⁴

The construction sector catered for the housing and urban needs of the middle and upper classes. This again was facilitated by housing policies which, as Timothy Mitchell argues, “Subsidized the rich by supplying them with cheap land and infrastructure to establish semipublic or completely private spaces, such as shopping malls and gated

³¹ Ghannam, Farha. P.29

³² Ansari, Hamied. *Egypt, the Stalled Society*. The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1987.P.186

³³ ibid

³⁴ ibid

communities, to cater for their consumption and habitation needs.”³⁵ While at the same time, the regime privatized the majority of public sector firms leading to massive labor displacement, and reduced public spending on housing and other public services leading to the sprawling growth of informal housing areas which now accommodate about 65% of Egyptians across the whole country³⁶.

The differentiation between the rich and the poor has become “spatially concretized,”³⁷ which has led Leila Vignal and Eric Denis (2006) to conclude that “the face of poverty has changed with the passage from a society of shortages to a society of consumerism, without a redistribution of revenue that would enable either the growth or survival of the middle class.”³⁸ Accordingly, the city of Cairo has become largely divided between gated communities and urban ghettos.

The series of spatial transformations that has taken place in Cairo, and their consequences on the social, political and economic life of the city inhabitants are represented in the literary production of the city. This representation “is not simply a physical presence that writers reproduce; rather, the city is a construct that continues to be reinvented by its inhabitants—in this case, its writers—each according to his or her experiential eye and personal encounter with it.”³⁹ Therefore, it is the focus of this thesis to understand, in Moretti’s words, how novels ‘read’ cities? And by what narrative

³⁵ Cited in Vignal, Leila & Denis, Eric. “Cairo as Regional/ Global Economic Capital?” *Cairo Cosmopolitan*. American University in Cairo Press. P.111

³⁶ Tarbush, Nada. "Cairo 2050: Urban Dream or Modernist Delusion?" *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 65, n° 2, 2012, pp. 171-186.

³⁷ Vignal, Leila & Denis, Eric. “Cairo as Regional/ Global Economic Capital?” *Cairo Cosmopolitan*. American University in Cairo Press. P.111

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Mehrez, Samia. *The Literary Atlas of Cairo: One Hundred Years on the Streets of the City*. P.3.

mechanisms do writers represent the division and segregation as they are witnessed in the city space?

Research Methodology

For the purpose of this thesis, I choose three narratives which represent the city in different moments of the neoliberal epoch, and through which the effects of neoliberalism are obvious on the city space and characters' psyches. In chapter one, I will discuss *The Heron* by Ibrahim Aslan. Set on the eve of the bread riots, *the Heron* catches the details of the life of a Cairene neighborhood on the 17th of January 1977 when the cabinet, facing a huge public deficit, announced subsidy cuts. Through the juxtaposed stories of the *Kit Kat* inhabitants, the plot reveals the history and the present of the whole neighborhood.

In chapter two, I will discuss *Being Abbas El Abd* by Ahmed Alaidy. Set in the turn of the 21st century, *Being Abbas El Abd* exposes the life of a Cairene schizophrenic who attempts to overcome his loneliness by going to a blind date. The fragmented plot is revealed through the movement of the protagonist across new urban spaces that have invaded the city like shopping malls, coffee shops and group therapy sessions. All of which are products of a globalized age that has overwhelmed the economic, social and political spheres of Cairo.

In chapter three, I will discuss *Utopia* by Ahmed Khaled Towfik. Set in 2023, *Utopia* exhibits the division in the city space between gated communities and slum areas. Utopia is a gated community in the north coast where the rich isolate themselves from the poor and declining city outside. The split narrative is told by both the protagonist and the

antagonist who meet when the antagonist embarks on a human hunting trip outside Utopia, through which the plot unfolds.

The three works have been thoroughly studied by different scholars; however, they haven't been investigated by the lens of literary geography before. In *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti studied canonical works from the nineteenth century's European literature which had been studied exhaustively before his endeavor; nevertheless, his tool brought to light aspects of the texts that had not been presented before. On the other hand, this research focuses on the pattern that emerges from mapping the same textual features in the three narratives. Here I share with Samia Mehrez the same conviction that inspired her work in *The Literary Atlas of Cairo*; that literary geography cannot only change the way we read novels, but can also "change the way we read the space in which these novels came into being."⁴⁰

The textual features that I will study in the three plots are (1) The geographical location of the plot and its relation to the wider city. (2) The boundaries of this world. (3) Who crosses the boundaries (4) and how are the boundaries crossed? (5) What is the quest of the central character? (6) Who or What is the third pole? (7) and what is its fate? (8) And finally, does the city's different parts unite or not. These textual features, I assume, will lead us to patterns of exclusion and mobility inside the neoliberal city, reveal how the city is made legible, and how far the attempts of social mediation succeed in bringing the fragmented parts of the city together.

⁴⁰ Mehrez, Samia. *Literary Atlas of Cairo*. P. 2.

In his introduction to *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti quotes two paragraphs from Charles Sanders Peirce's *Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism* (1906), in which Peirce answer a question that was posed on him about the functionality of diagrammatizing thoughts "when the thought itself is present to us"⁴¹ His eloquent answer was:

"One can make exact experiments upon uniform diagrams; and when one does so, one must keep a bright lookout for unintended and unexpected changes thereby brought about in the relations of different significant parts of the diagram to one another. Such operations upon diagrams, whether external or imaginary, take the place of the experiment upon real things that one performs in chemical and physical research. Chemists have ere now, I need not say, described experimentation as the putting of questions to Nature. Just so, experiments upon diagrams are questions put to the Nature of the relations concerned."⁴²

This research poses questions to the nature of the neoliberal city of Cairo, whose active force did not only prevade and shape the literary field, but also shaped the life of millions who inhabited and still inhabit the city. Thus, this work is a humble attempt to understand a complex yet dear space through its intricate stories.

⁴¹ Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.4

⁴² *ibid*

***Imbaba* as a Ghetto**

Mapping *The Heron* by Ibrahim Aslan

In 2007, Ibrahim Aslan published his book *شيء من هذا القبيل* (Something of this Sort) which is a collection of articles and short stories written while the author was moving from *Imbaba* where he lived most of his life and wrote most of his stories. In the prologue of this text, Aslan wrote:

“Now, I am peeled off *Imbaba*.

Like a dry, yet, living bark is removed from its mellow stem,
and patched somewhere else.”⁴³ (My translation)

Aslan was born in a small village in Tanta in 1937 and came to *Imbaba* during his early childhood when his father, a post office employee, sought to move to Cairo to get a salary raise. The family settled in an alley which overlooks the Nile. The alley, Aslan recalls, was too narrow to allow two people to walk together. Thus, the river bank was the meeting spot for the whole neighborhood, where children could play, fish and swim. This is where Aslan developed his interest in reading because his friend’s older brother used to sit alone by the river and read. Curious to discover what was interesting in a book, Aslan read the *Thousand and One Nights* and *Kalila wa Dimna*. Both books are said to have influenced Aslan’s style.⁴⁴

Aslan could not complete his formal education, but during early school years his English teacher Muhammad Abū Yusif (who later became a famous script writer) observed Aslan’s passion for reading. Thus, he helped Aslan fill the subscription form to

⁴³ أصلا. إبراهيم. شيء من هذا القبيل. دار الشروق. 2007. ص5. النص بالعربية: "أنزع الآن عن إمبابة
كما تنزع قطعة لحاء جافة
و إن كانت حية
عن جذعها الطري
كيما تلتصق بجذع آخر"
⁴⁴ المرجع السابق. ص. 11.

Imbaba's library where he could read more books. Done with primary school, Aslan was employed in Egypt Post just one year after the 1952 revolution. As a postman, Aslan discovered the space of downtown while he distributed mail. One night, after his shift had ended, Aslan expressed to his mentor his wish to be a writer, and the latter encouraged him to "read, read and read".⁴⁵ After reading Chekov, Aslan knew he wanted to be a short story writer. He felt this was the form that would contain all his dreams. He published four stories between 1964 and 1965, after which, Ghalib Halsa, Gamil Atiya and Ibrahim Mansour searched for Aslan to celebrate his writing,⁴⁶ and in 1971, Aslan published his first collection of short stories which is titled *بحيرة المساء* (The Evening Lake).

In her article "كتابة القرية في الأدب المصري المعاصر" (The Representation of the Village in Contemporary Egyptian Literature) Samia Mehrez explains that the 1952 revolution had created a new middle class which enjoyed the privileges of this historic moment. The literary production of the sixties was dominated by writers who belonged to the new class, and who emerged within a local culture that contrasted with and departed away from the western model which had inspired their earlier counterparts.⁴⁷ (My translation) After the revolution had nationalized the grand stores of downtown, the space became accessible to more Cairenes of humble backgrounds. Among which were

⁴⁵ المرجع السابق. ص. 26

⁴⁶ سارة. حوار مع إبراهيم أصلان تحت عنوان: "مذبحة الثقافة سبقت الانفتاح الاستهلاكي البغيض". مجلة الدوحة. العدد 10. أكتوبر 1985. ص. 103. رابط الحوار:

<http://archive.sakhrit.co/newPreview.aspx?PID=2034444&ISSUEID=5899&AID=143353>

⁴⁷ محرز، سامية. "كتابة القرية في الأدب المصري المعاصر". *موقف*. فبراير 1993. ص. 165. النص بالعربية: "و مما لا شك فيه أن هذا الإنتاج الأدبي يتميز بالقياس إلى ما سبقه بكونه إنتاجا ثقافيا بلورته طبقة متوسطة صغيرة تكونت في أعقاب 1952، و انتفعت بما أتاحتها لها تلك الحقبة التاريخية. (...) النماذج التي يستخدمها بحثنا هذا تجيء من صميم إنتاج جيل تكون و نضج على ثقافة محلية أصيلة في فترة قد تمثل إنغلاقا يتباعد عن "المثال" الغربي الذي سرعان ما توارى كعامل من العوامل المألوفة في تكوين المثقف المصري."

intellects who met and discussed cultural matters in the cafes, bars and restaurants of downtown. This new pattern of socialization had created, as Dina Heshmat argues, a new bond with downtown that these intellectuals developed beside the initial bond they had with their original neighborhoods.⁴⁸ (My translation)

After publishing *The Evening Lake*, Aslan became known as a short story writer. His writings attracted the attention of the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz whom Aslan used to meet each Friday in Café Riche in downtown to discuss his works. Sometimes, Aslan would miss their weekly meeting due to his work circumstances. When Naguib Mahfouz knew about Aslan's profession, he recommended Aslan to the writing scholarship offered by the Ministry of Culture to promising writers. Mahfouz's recommendation was joined by two others from Latifa al-Zayat and Salah Abd al-Sabbour. As a result, Aslan received the scholarship, and this is how *Malik al-hazin* (1983) (English translation: *The Heron* by Elliott Colla (2005) came into being.⁴⁹ (My translation)

"الأدب المصري في *The Heron* was written between 1972 and 1981. In his article السبعينيات: محاولة لالقاء نظرة عامة" (The Egyptian Literature in the Seventies: An Overview), Muhammad Sayyid Aly argues that the literary production of the seventies had its roots

⁴⁸ حشمت، دينا. القاهرة في الأدب المصري الحديث والمعاصر: من حلم المدينة الكبيرة إلى عزلة الضواحي. المجلس الأعلى للثقافة. 2006. ص 24، 25. النص بالعربية: "و بالإضافة إلى كونها "مكانا شعبيا للترفيه" أصبحت وسط البلد مكانا للقاء المثقفين والفنانين في المقاهي والبارات والمطاعم (...) هكذا انفتحت وسط البلد لأناس من مختلف الأحياء الشعبية يتقابلون في مجموعات "شلل" على أساس ميولهم الفكرية. و خلقت علاقتهم بوسط البلد نوعا من إحساس الانتماء، فضلا عن انتمائهم إلى فضائهم الأصلي."

⁴⁹ أصلان. إبراهيم. شيء من هذا القبيل. ص. 27. النص بالعربية: "كنت قد عرفت ككاتب للقصة القصيرة. و كان العم نجيب محفوظ مهتما و متابعا لما أنشره في ذلك الوقت. كنا نلتقي كل يوم جمعة بمقهى ريش و نتحدث حولها. و في ذلك الوقت كنت أعمل بهيئة المواصلات بنظام الورديات، الأمر الذي جعلني أنقطع أحيانا عن لقاء الجمعة. و هو عندما عرف بطبيعة عملي تكرم بكتابة رسالة يزكيني فيها لمنحة تفرغ من وزارة الثقافة. (...) و سمعت الدكتور لطيفة الزيات بالأمر فكتبت تزكيني هي الأخرى، و كذلك فعل الشاعر صلاح عبد الصبور. و حصلت فعلا على تفرغ لمدة عام قابل للتجديد."

in the 1967 defeat.⁵⁰ Before the defeat, the sixties generation had benefited from the socialist regime which opened the cultural sphere for writers from humble backgrounds allowing them to publish their works in the formal cultural outlets.⁵¹ This newly formed sphere was divided in 1976 between writers who opposed the regime because of the political and military defeat, and writers who supported the regime in spite of it. The division was halted with the 1973 victory. But with the reorientation toward the open door policy in 1974, opposition grew again and the regime sought to silence opposing voices through controlling cultural outlets; a procedure described by intellectuals of the time as a “cultural massacre”. In 1979, Sadat signed the Camp David accords which ignited massive disapprovals from writers and intellectuals whom Sadat firmly punished by putting into jail. In their representation of this period, some writers clearly attacked the regime, while others focused on representing their spaces in the aftermath of the rapid political, economic and social changes⁵². To the latter group, Aslan belonged.

In her article “إمبابة مدينة مفتوحة” (*Imbaba an Open City*), Dina Heshmat (2001) argues that *The Heron* is a novel about *Imbaba*. This is indicated by Aslan’s initial intention to name his novel *Imbaba Madina Maftouha*, and by the actual title that Daoud Abd al-Sayyid chose for the cinematic adaptation of the novel: *The Kit Kat*.⁵³ In *The Heron*, we read about the life of three generations who inhabited *Imbaba* since the beginning of the twentieth century. This aspect inspired the great writer and literary critic Radwa Ashour (2001) to compare Aslan’s narrative to Naguib Mahfouz’s trilogy. Her

⁵⁰ علي، محمد سيد. “الأدب المصري في السبعينات: محاولة لالقاء نظرة عامة.” *الثقافة الجديدة*. العدد 13. 1987. ص. 18.

⁵¹ حشمت دينا. *القاهرة في الأدب المصري الحديث و المعاصر: من حلم المدينة الكبيرة إلى عزلة الضواحي*. ص. 108.

⁵² علي، محمد سيد. ص. 18-22.

⁵³ حشمت، دينا. “إمبابة مدينة مفتوحة: دراسة لرواية مالك الحزين لإبراهيم أصلان.” *مجلة أمكنة*. الكتاب الثالث. أغسطس 2001. ص 96.

main hypothesis in a paper titled: "ثلاثية نجيب محفوظ و مالك الحزين لإبراهيم أصلان" (*The Trilogy* of Naguib Mahfouz and *The Heron* of Ibrahim Aslan) is that both authors depict time differently. While Mahfouz's relation with history is stable and confident, Aslan's is "dialectic, puzzled, illogical, imposes alienation and loneliness, and calls for doubt and questioning."⁵⁴ While Heshmat attributes this puzzled relation to the rapid change brought by modernization, other scholars attribute the change to neoliberalism. In my opinion, both waves influenced the change because *The Heron* is a narrative of three generations who witnessed the transformation of the space from a small village at the beginning of the twentieth century to an industrial neighborhood during the forties and till the sixties. Then in the seventies came the reorientation toward the open door policy which affected the national industries, and allowed a different pattern of social mobility to emerge all over the city and within *Imbaba* itself. Unlike the trilogy of Mahfouz, which reflects the time in the narrative's mirror, Aslan's narrative acts as a convex lens which collects on its surface the diverging times to create one condense moment which is the 18th and 19th of January 1977.⁵⁵ This condensation is built not by following the traditional plot structure (beginning, climax and end), but through multiple narrative miniatures⁵⁶ that when ordered, tell the story of the neighborhood and its relation to the city.

⁵⁴ عاشور رضوى. "ثلاثية نجيب محفوظ و مالك الحزين لإبراهيم أصلان." *صياحو الذاكرة في النقد التطبيقي*. المركز الثقافي العربي. 2001. ص39. النص بالعربية "الفرضية التي أطرحها ملخصها أن العلاقة بالتاريخ في حالة محفوظ علاقة تتسم بقدر من الثقة و الاطمئنان، مصدرها الشعور بأن الأرضية التي يتحرك عليها راسخة و المتغير فيها محكوم و معلوم، و سنة من سنن الوجود الانساني. و هي في حالة أصلان على العكس من ذلك، إذ هي علاقة إشكالية مرتبكة تفتقد المنطق و تفرض الوحدة و اغتراب، و تدعو إلى الشك و التساؤل."

⁵⁵ عاشور، رضوى. 43. النص بالعربية: "تختلف مرآة أصلان، تبدو أقرب للعدسة المحدبة التي تجمع على سطحها المحدود الضيق المتفرق من الأشعة. تتداخل الأزمنة مكثفة و متكاثرة في خلق لحظة في الحاضر تتجمع فيها لحظات عديدة مضت."

⁵⁶ عاشور، رضوى. ص. 44

The Heron Trilogy

“A short period of silence passed, then the voice returned and said that they probably didn’t know who the Baron Henri Meyer was: He used to own *Imbaba* back when it was all just cantaloupe fields.

(...)

Hagg Awadullah arrived from his distant village while we were in the market. (...) (and) worked for the Baron, collecting money from the peasants who rented land and grew cantaloupe on it.”⁵⁷

The first generation is constituted of farmers who came from different places across Egypt to settle in the village of *Imbaba* at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the text explains, the land then was owned by Baron Henri Meyer who rented it to peasants. The grandfather of Sheikh Hosni came to *Imbaba* and planted the big Camphor tree, and Hagg Awadullah arrived from his distant village and worked for the Baron. Then during the thirties, the Baron built the *Kit Kat* Club which later became the leisure place for the king and the political elite of the time. The history of the neighborhood is told by Amm Omran who worked as a chief in the club. While building the *Kit Kat*, Hagg Muhammad Musa, the father of Sheikh Hosni, “got some men together and began to steal wood, bricks, and limestone”⁵⁸ to build a house. The house consisted of three floors, and a basement that was given to Hagg Awadullah in return for turning a blind eye to the theft. Hagg Awadullah turned the ground floor into a coffee shop which became the socializing spot for the neighborhood. Abdullah started his career as a waiter in

⁵⁷ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliot Colla. *The Heron*. The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo; New York. 2005. P. 115. The text in Arabic: "و مضت فترة من الصمت و عاد الصوت يقول إنهم لا يعرفون البارون هنري ماير الذي كان يملك إمبابة عندما كانت مزروعة بالشمام. (...) في أحد الأيام و نحن بالسوق، جاء الحاج عوض الله من بلاده البعيدة. (...) اشتغل عند البارون يلم الفلوس من الفلاحين الذين يستأجرون الأرض و يزرعونها بالشمام و يعطيها له."

⁵⁸ Ibid. P. 116

Awadullah coffee shop, and allowed Sobhi, the young chicken vendor, to occupy a corner in the café to sell his goods.

The readers get introduced to the second generation inside the coffee shop. This generation is composed of Sheikh Hosni (a music teacher), Maallim Ramadan (a pâtissier), Maallim Atiya (the new coffee shop renter), Qasim Effendi (a craftsman), Usta Qadri (a civil servant), Usta Sayyid Tilib (a barber), The Great Haram (Hashish dealer) and Sgt. Abd al-Hamid. This generation witnessed the transformation of *Imbaba* to an industrial suburb in the late forties, and throughout the fifties and sixties. The second generation benefited from the socialist achievements of the 1952 revolution which closed the *Kit Kat* and allowed the people to open small shops in the abandoned space. This was before the contractor demolished the *Kit Kat* completely, and in its place stood Khalid ibn al-Walid mosque.

“When I returned, the Army began their blessed revolution. Then they closed the *Kit Kat* club, but people broke in and began to open up shops inside the place. There was Hagg Muhammad Musa al-Shami’s place; Ahmad Hasan and his partner Muhammad Atiya opened their café there. (...) And the roaster oven where they sold seeds and nuts. It was there till the very end. Until the contractor came and tore it all down, leaving the winter hall for last so he could salvage the wood and marble. People started to pray there on Fridays. Then it was inhabited by Rabia and his children who made fishing nets. But when the contractor tore that down too, where the *Kit Kat* club had once been became a huge vacant lot. Muhammad Atiya couldn’t find a space to open a café. So when Hagg Awadullah happened to die that same week, Muhammad Atiya began to rent the café because Awadullah’s sons had become effendis. They were educated now and didn’t want to work in a café.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ibid. P. 117, 118. The text in Arabic: "و عندما عدت مانتت ببا عز الدين و إحسان عبده و الجيش قام بالثورة المباركة و أغلق الكيت كات و الناس خرمته و فتحت فيه الدكاكين. الحاج محمود الشامي و قهوة أحمد حسن مع شريكه محمد عطية. و قال الاسطى قذري الانجليزي و الخمارة و قال العم عمران و المقلی. و كان المقلی موجودا لآخر وقت، لغاية ما جاء المقاتل و هدمه و ترك القاعة الشتوية للآخر بعدما خلع منها الخشب و الرخام. و بدأت الناس تصلي هناك يوم الجمعة، و ربيع سكن فيها هو و أولاده الذين يصنعون شباك الصيد ثم هدمها هي الأخرى، و مكان الكيت كات أصبح خرابة كبيرة، و محمد عطية أصبح لا يجد مقهى، و لكن الحاج عوض الله مات في نفس الأسبوع و محمد عطية استأجر المقهى لأن أولاد عوض الله أفندية و متعلمون، و لا يريدون أن يشتغلوا قهوجية."

The third generation is composed of Amir Awadullah and Yusif al-Naggar. Both are young men who were born just before the Second World War, and thus remember glimpses of the beautiful past of the neighborhood. Both grew up in a socialist state and, therefore, gained access to formal education. There are also Faruq and Shawqi who are unemployed, and Fatma who is a young illiterate woman who had married a Saudi man for a short period before he abandoned her and returned to his country.

The three generations meet in Awadullah Coffee Shop. *The Heron* consists of two major conflicts that take place inside and outside *Imbaba*. Inside the coffee shop, the first conflict unfolds.

The Neighborhood Coffee Shop and the New World Order

In his book *شيء من هذا القبيل* (Something of this Sort), Aslan differentiates between the coffee shops in downtown and others in popular neighborhoods. The former attracts *flâneurs* and daters, but the latter “is not for strangers, but for the neighborhood inhabitants who sit, in groups, inside the coffee shop, at the entrance and on the sidewalk. Every night, the coffee shop takes its shape (...) (through) clusters of people occupying the same places. The absence of one group distorts the whole shape, and might indicate, for example, that the elders of *al-Maṭba’ah al-Amyriah* (...) are attending a wedding or a funeral.”⁶⁰ (My translation)

⁶⁰ أصلاً، إبراهيم. شيء من هذا القبيل. ص. 104. النص بالعربية: "و لكن المقهى في حي شعبي كيان آخر؛ هي ليست مقاهي للغرباء، و الشلل التي تجلس فيها و على جانبي مدخلها و تحت الرصيف هم جميعاً من أبناء الحي إلا نادراً. و هي في كل مساء تستكمل شكلها. (...) كل شلة في مكانها المعلوم، و إذا لاحظت يوماً أن هناك خللاً في هذا الشكل فسوف تدرك أن سببه يرجع إلى أن الشلة الصغيرة التي تجلس على أحد مدخلي المقهى، مثلاً، غير موجودة. أو أن عازز المطبعة الأميرية القدامى (...) (هم على الأرجح في فرح أو عزاء).

The above passage indicates the central role the coffee shop plays in popular neighborhoods. It is a place that both produces and is produced by the social fabric which keeps the neighborhood parts together. Thus, Awadullah coffee shop emerges in *The Heron* as an urban metaphor⁶¹ which represents the neighborhood, its social cohesion and history.

“And Amm Omran said that that was indeed what happened, that the deeds of purchase fell into the lap of the blind Sheikh Hosni. But because he was so indebted to Haram, the hashish dealer, it was Haram who profited, “Yes sir. Sheikh Hosni’s hash and opium habits cost him the house.”(...) “Yes sir. Maallim Sobhi made a deal with Haram against that hash head Sheikh Hosni. Together they made him use his hash bills to sell the building.”⁶²

The place of the coffee shop is contested in the narrative between the coffee shop people and the coffee shop owners. The house and the coffee shop are now owned by Maallim Sobhi who accumulated his wealth during *Infatih* through real estate development. He “was creeping and spreading like a cancer through the neighborhood. He’d buy old houses in order to demolish them.”⁶³ When Maallim Sobhi finally seizes the building, he transforms Awadullah café into a poultry shop.

Besides being an urban metaphor, the café bears a historical significance. It is the only landmark left from the thirties after the *Kit Kat* and the stone gate were demolished.

“He began to remember more distant times. *Kit Kat* and its giant stone entrance, the writing on the lofty arch: “The battle of the pyramids took place here on the 21st of July, 1798.” (...) Amir recalled the day he’d cried on account of *Kit Kat*. He knew that the contractor had purchased the rubble of the *Kit Kat* club. When he returned from work,

⁶¹ Mehrez, Samia. *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*. Routledge, New York; London, vol. 13. 2008. P.145

⁶² Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliot Colla. *The Heron*. P.118. The text in Arabic: "و غمغم الأسطى قدرى بيضع كلمات و قال إنه الشيخ حسني فقال العم عمران أن ذلك هو ما حدث فعلا، و أن الذي وقع على أوراق البيه هو الشيخ حسني الأعمى، و لكن الذي قبض الفلوس هو الهرم بائع الحشيش لأن الشيخ حسني كان مديونا له بثمنه: "أيوه. شرب بالبيت حشيش و أفيون." "أيوه. المعلم صبحي اتفق مع الهرم على الشيخ حسني المسطول و خلاه يبيع البيت بحق الحشيش اللي شربه."

⁶³ Ibid. P.45. The text in Arabic: "قال الأمير إنه (المعلم صبحي) يتقدم و ينتشر مثل السرطان داخل الحارة. يشتري البيوت القديمة ثم يهدمها."

he saw the massive, shiny stones split into pieces, strewn along the empty plot of land behind it at the entrance to the city of *Imbaba*.”⁶⁴

The history of the neighborhood was inscribed in the *Kit Kat*, its giant stone gate, the house and the coffee shop. Hence, the past of the *Kit Kat* and the personal history of its inhabitants fade with the final loss of the café. The sense of loss is intensified when the boys working at Maallim Sobhi’s slaughter a roped calf in the door step of the empty café, and “(stick) their hands into the blood of the slaughtered calf and (make) hand prints on the walls of the empty café, celebratory harbringers of the new order.”⁶⁵

In the background of selling the coffee shop, an Italian Jewish tourist returns to Egypt and claims his ownership to the neighborhood. Fleeing Egypt in 1956, David Musa returns after the government, in the wake of *Infatih*, issues a law that protects foreign investments against nationalization. On the 18th of January 1977, *Kit Kat* inhabitants do not only lose their social space and history, but are also threatened of losing their physical location. The main factor that stands behind both losses is *Infatih* which made a different pattern of wealth accumulation and social mobility possible, without protecting the poor from the monstrous growth of local businessmen or the exploitation of foreign investors.

Imbaba: Glory Days Bygone

In the *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti repeats that “specific stories are the product of specific spaces.” London is depicted as a divided city in Silver Fork novels, where a

⁶⁴ Ibid. P.113. The text in Arabic: "وذهب بنفسه إلى بعيد. الكيت كات و البوابة الحجرية الكبيرة و الكتابة في قوسها الجليل العالي: "انتهت معركة الأهرام هنا في 21 يوليو 1798" (...) و تذكر الأمير يوم بكى من أجلها. كان يعرف أن المقاول قد اشترى الكيت كات أنقاضا. و عاد من العمل و رأى حجارتها النظيفة الضخمة مفكوكة و ملقاة أمام الأرض التي خلت من ورائها عند مدخل المدينة."

⁶⁵ Ibid. P. 140. The text in Arabic: "و التفت إلى المقهى و رأى صبيان المعلم صبحي و هم يخضبون كفوفهم في دماء العجل المذبوح و يطبعونها على جدران المقهى الخالي."

border is erected between east and west of Regent Street. On the contrary, Balzac's Paris is a plural city where the plot moves across five or six major spaces, "Whose borders are crossed and re-crossed in the full light of the day." This is because Paris has a Latin Quarter where "the social division of labor seems to have literally stamped itself upon the urban surface."⁶⁶ Following the same line of thought, Aslan's Cairo in the seventies is stamped by the neoliberal division which separates *Imbaba* from the rest of the city.

Imbaba is one of the largest informal communities in Cairo, with almost one million inhabitants.⁶⁷ Historically, *Imbaba* emerged as a village by the river side, and had attracted, in the 1930s and 1940s, many rural migrants who sought an economic opportunity in the big city.⁶⁸ Despite the influx of *fellahin*⁶⁹ to the neighborhood, *Imbaba* was integrated inside the larger city because the king and the social elite of the time used to visit the *Kit Kat* club and mingle with some of the inhabitants. Those encounters are mentioned with pride throughout the narrative because they indicate a glamorous past where the characters were connected to Baron Henri Meyer, the English or the king himself.

"During the summer, Amm Omran loved to sit out on the roof in the large chair that Khawaga Kaloumirous gave him when the king praised a dish of grilled meat that he had cooked. Originally, the chair had belonged to the Baron Henri Meyer who gave it to the Khawaga when he came to visit him in his place with a troupe of foreign dancing girls. Hagg Awadullah used to say that the chair tossed away on Omran's roof was the

⁶⁶ Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.87

⁶⁷ Bayat, Asef, and Eric Denis. "Who is Afraid of Ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt." *Environment & Urbanization*, vol. 12, n° 2, 2000, pp. 185-199. P.185

⁶⁸ ابو طويلة، عمرو. "إمبابة." مبادرة التضامن العمراني. 2015. رابط المقال: www.tadamun.info/?post_type=city&p=6736.

⁶⁹ Fellahin means peasants. This is how the word is transliterated in Bayat's and Denis's article cited above.

favorite chair of the Baron and that he'd heard that the Baron say that since he'd let the chair slip out of his possession, he was no longer able to sit in peace or hold a thought.”⁷⁰

“Usta Qadri spoke English just like an Englishman. His bosses, who were English, encouraged him in this. Mr. Macmillan, the company director, gave him an old copy of Shakespear’s collected works.”⁷¹

“I finished my religious studies in the High Institute of Arabic Music. I was the first in the graduating class of 1936 and to this day I have in my pocket a picture of myself being awarded my degree by His Royal Highness, the King himself.”⁷²

The immigration of peasants to the city continued throughout the sixties.

Although the advent of the 1952 revolution had stripped the neighborhood of its old glory, the socialist ideology did allow the inhabitants a degree of social mobility and social cohesion. On one hand, small merchants and craftsmen had the opportunity to open their shops in the empty space of *Kit Kat*; on the other hand, the young generations accessed formal education and were promised jobs in the emerging industrial and administrative sectors. But with the defeat of the socialist regime and the advent of neoliberalism, the divisions between the rich and the poor grew bigger. The regime abandoned its socialist agenda and stopped building houses for the poor. As a result, informal areas mushroomed throughout Cairo and were accused in the formal discourse to have ruralized the city. The state refused to recognize the new urban agglomeration because, according to Asef Bayat and Eric Denis (2000), “doing so would oblige it to make expensive urban provisions such as sewerage, paved roads and running water.

Furthermore, changing the status of a “village” might put certain obligations upon the

⁷⁰ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliot Colla. P. 121. The text in Arabic: "في الصيف، كان العم عمران يحب أن يجلس في السطح على المقعد الكبير الذي أهداه له الخواجة كالوميروس عندما أثنى الملوك على طبق اللحم المشوي الذي بعده. كان المقعد في الأصل يخص البارون هنري ماير الذي أهداه للخواجة عندما زاره في قصره مع فرقة الراقصات الأجنبية. وكان الحاج عوض الله يقول إن هذا المقعد المرمي على سطح عمران هو أحب المقاعد إلى قلب البارون وأنه سمعه يقول بأنه منذ فقد المقعد لم يعد بوسعه أن يجلس بهدوء و يفكر في أي شيء.

⁷¹ Ibid .P.32. The text in Arabic: "كان الأسطى يتكلم الإنجليزية مثل أهلها. ولقد شجعه رؤساؤه من الإنجليز و أهداه الرئيس ماكميلان مجلدا قديما يحتوي على أعمال شكسبير الكاملة."

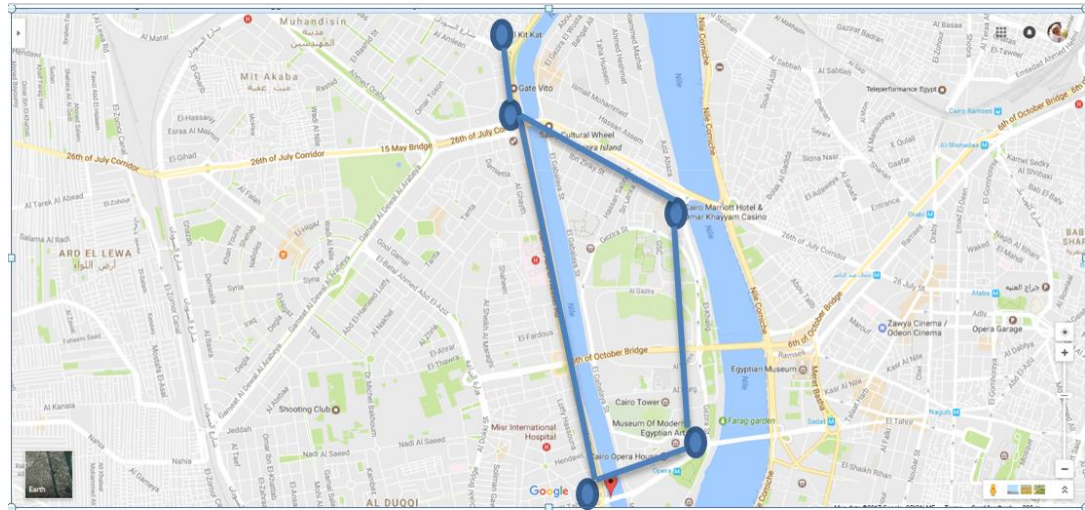
⁷² Ibid. P.23. The text in Arabic: "أما أنا فقد استكملت دراستي الدينية في المعهد العالي للموسيقى العربية، و كنت أول دفعتي سنة ستة و ثلاثين و في جيبتي صورتي و أنا أستلم الشهادة من حضرة صاحب الجلالة الملك."

Yellow: Yusif al-Naggar, blue: Usta Qadri, Red: Amir, Maroon: Fatma, light Green: Maallim Ramadan, Dark green: Sheikh Hosni, Black: Faruq, Grey: Shawqi, Purple: Abdullah, Black and green: Maallim Sobhi.

There are six major places where most of the characters move: they come from *Fadlallah Osman*, *Qatr al-Nada* or *Amir al-Giyush* where they reside, to Awadullah coffee shop in *Kit Kat* square where they socialize, or to *Murad Street* where they work, or to the Nile bank where they fish or relax. Their world is confined between the Nile in the east, *Imbaba Bridge* in the north, *al-Sudan Street* in the south, and *al-Munira* in the west.

These borders are crossed sometimes by some characters. For example, Usta Qadri, who lives in *Fadlallah Osman*, takes the tram to the slaughterhouse to buy head meat, and when the large calf's head was stolen on the tram, he leaves silently, and avoids passing by Awadullah coffee shop for weeks. Instead, he walks from home, to Nile Corniche, crosses to the workers' city in the north of *Imbaba*, and then walks briefly in *Murad Street* before he reaches home again. Gaber also attempts to cross the bridge on his bicycle to *Zamalek* on the eve of the bread riots, but he soon detours because the security forces block his way.

Amm Omran and Yusif used to go on a night walk after the café is closed. They walk along the river bank to *al-Galaa Bridge* and cross it to *Gabaliya Street* in *Zamalek*, then walk along the other bank till they reach *Zamalek Bridge* (the 26th of July bridge) and return to *Kit Kat*.



Map 5- Amm Omran's night walk

Fatma also crosses from *Imbaba* to downtown twice. In the first time, she invites Yusif to the cinema in downtown, and by the end of the night, she tells him they could meet in a locked room on the ground floor of her building in *Fadlallah Osman*. Yusif fails to sleep with her in this room and invites her to his friend's apartment in downtown. On her way there, she thinks that he will sleep with her this time to prove his manhood and then ditches her. She is also hesitant to take off her clothes "in a strange place."⁷⁵ She makes her mind that she will excuse herself and asks him to go to *Imbaba*, but when she reaches downtown, she finds protesters filling the streets, so she gets on the bus again. "After she'd put some distance between herself and downtown and gotten closer to *Imbaba*, she was able to relax."⁷⁶

Despite her boldness, Fatma feels insecure in downtown. It is a strange place that makes her feel tense. And in spite of his relative relaxation, Amm Omran crosses the

⁷⁵ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliot Colla. P. 108

⁷⁶ Ibid. The text in Arabic: "و بعد أن ابتعدت عن المكان و اقتربت من إمبابة شعرت بالاطمئنان و قالت أن الظروف خدمتها."

river bank late at night “after the café closed and everyone went home”⁷⁷ and walk at *Gabalía* Street “where the massive, quiet buildings stood on the right, where a few, scattered little light bulbs were hung in the tangled tree branches along the river’s edge, and where the light was dim on the dirt of the long, empty sidewalk.”⁷⁸ There is something in common between Fatma and Amm Omran; a fear of being exposed to the city. In the first instance, Fatma is afraid to “take off her clothes” outside *Imbaba*, and in the second, Amm Omran does not go on a walk in the light. The city is a strange and distant place that is visited only to purchase something unavailable in *Imbaba*, but not to work at or socialize in. Thus, the two opposing narrative poles in *The Heron* are *Imbaba* and Downtown. There is a psychological barrier that stands between the two spaces and, therefore, limits the urban experience of the characters in the city. The writers of the Chicago school of urban studies define urban experience as:

“Movement from neighborhood to neighborhood, from scene to scene, (is) the essence of the ‘urban’ experience. (...) That experience, however, did not belong to all urbanites of the last century equally; it had a class character. As the structure of the quartier and neighborhood homogenized along economic lines, the people most likely to move from scene to scene (are) those with interests or connections complicated enough to take them to different parts of the city; such people (are) the most affluent.”⁷⁹

This definition highlights the class dynamics between *Imbaba* and the city as a whole. In Aslan’s world, most of the characters are unable to cross the borders of *Imbaba* because they cannot afford the movement and does not have enough interests or connections to move outside of the neighborhood. This makes *Imbaba*, in Moretti’s

⁷⁷ Ibid. P.37

⁷⁸ Ibid. P.37, 38. The text in Arabic: "البالي طويلة كانا يتركان الجميع ينصرفون بعد أن يُغلق المقهى و يذهب كل واحد إلى بيته و يسيران على مهلهما تحت أشجار الشاطئ (...) كانا يعبران الكوبري و يتجهان يسارا إلى شارع الجبلية حيث البنايات الكبيرة الهادئة في الناحية اليمنى، و المصابيح القليلة بين الأغصان المتشابكة على طول الشاطئ، و النور الخفيف على تراب الرصيف الخالي."

⁷⁹ Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.87

words, a “space that catches human beings by their throat, and doesn’t let go.”⁸⁰ It is a space of intricate stories that gives the characters their existence; yet marginalizes them. It is no wonder that Yusif al-Naggar, the main character in *The Heron*, describes *Imbaba* as “that sad, adulterous woman.”⁸¹ It is a sad and marginal space, but this marginality is the main conflict that is woven in Aslan’s narratives. It is this particular aspect that makes *Imbaba* a space that Aslan cannot let go.

The City beyond *Imbaba*

The second main conflict in *The Heron* takes place outside *Imbaba*; this is the bread riots which erupt in the city on the eve of the 18th of January 1977, whereby thousands of protesters demonstrate against the cabinet decision to cut subsidies. As explained in the introduction of this thesis, *Infitah* meant opening virtually all doors to the importation of foreign goods, which led to the accumulation of debt and the rise of budget deficit that reached 1.76 billion EGP in 1976.⁸² To overcome the deficit, the government had to reduce its expenditures on one of the three major recipients of its support: the investors, the military or the poor. Since the open door policy was in favor of creating an encouraging atmosphere for local and foreign investments, and since the Arab Israeli conflict was still at stake, the cabinet chose to reduce its expenditures on the poor.⁸³ Consequently, the bread riots erupted for two days throughout the country.

Both conflicts, inside and outside of *Imbaba*, are linked through Yusif al-Naggar.

Yusif is said to be the most autobiographical character in *The Heron* because he is a

⁸⁰ Ibid. P. 90

⁸¹ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliot Colla. P.155. The text in Arabic: "إمبابة. أيتها السيدة العجوز الفاجرة."

⁸² Hirst, David, and Irene Beeson. *Sadat*, Faber & Faber, London, 1981. P.123

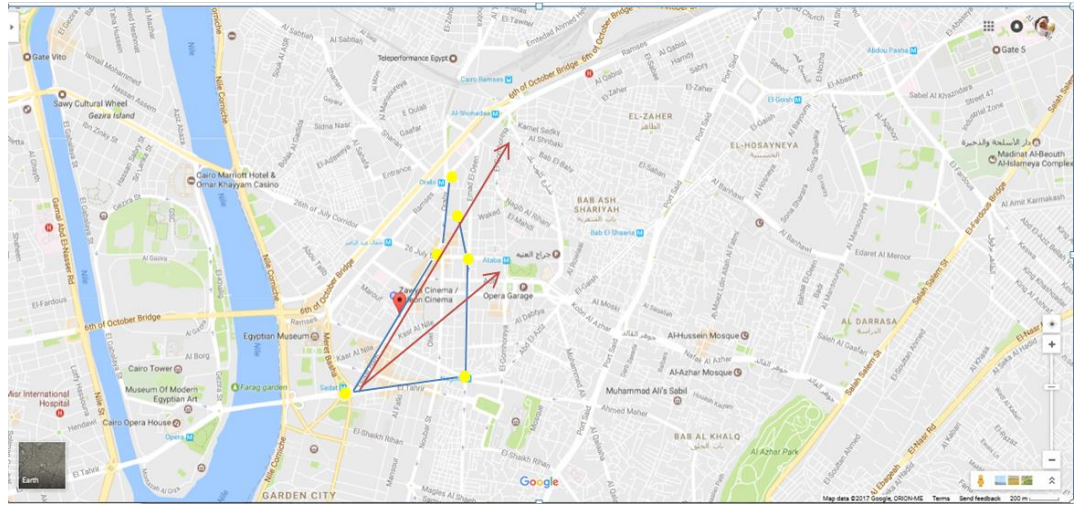
⁸³ Ansari, Hamied. *Egypt, the Stalled Society*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.P. 185.

writer, of the same age as Aslan, and like him, he is connected to the cultural space of downtown. Yusif al-Naggar is the most mobile character in Aslan's narrative. The story of Yusif unfolds as he goes to meet Fatma in downtown in order to take her to his friend's apartment and sleep with her. Unlike Balzac's Paris, which is made legible through the characters' pursuit of desire, Aslan's Cairo is made legible through Yusif al-Naggar's fear of the scandal that Fatma might cause him if he didn't prove his manhood to her⁸⁴. He gets off the bus at *Orabi* Square and heads to 26th of July Street where he is to meet Fatma next to the Supreme Court stop. Stopping at the government bookstore and the pets shop, he hears an echoing sound of a protest. He follows the echo to *Talaat Harb* Square where he sees the demonstration.

"There was a small, dark woman being carried on the crowd's shoulders, her slogans against the regime, against the actress Mimi Shakib, whose prostitution ring had just been exposed, and against the recent price increases. When he could make out her face, he waved to her with his free hand, watching the surging thousands as they broke into two streams. One headed through Orabi Square on its way to Ramsis Square, the other toward Ataba Square. He bent down, jumped to the ground and began following them. He saw his friend Sami walking with his arms clasped behind his back. Yusif accompanied him until the intersection of the 26th of July and Muhammad Farid Streets, then stopped silently in his tracks. He stood listening to the distant slogans and chants, then turned around. (...) He turned right to Orabi Square until he came to al-Alfi Street. The wooden door to the Regal Bar was shut. He pushed on it, entered, and sat at an empty table. Yusif ordered a bottle of rum and began to drink and smoke."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliot Colla. P.53.

⁸⁵ Ibid. P.55. The text in Arabic: "كانت هناك فتاة صغيرة سمراء محمولة على الأعناق تعصب رأسها بإبشارب وتهتف ضد الحكومة و ميمي شكيب و الأسعار. و عندما تبين وجهها راح يلوح لها بيده الخالية و يرى الآلاف الهادرة من الناس الذين انشقوا إلى نهريين اتجه أحدهما إلى ميدان عرابي في طريقه إلى ميدان رمسيس و اتجه الآخر إلى العتبة الخضراء. ثنى ركبتيه و قفز إلى الأرض و راح يتبعهم. رأى صديقه سامي و هو يسير و قد شبك يديه وراء ظهره. رافقه حتى تقاطع 26 يوليو مع محمد فريد ووقف في مكانه صامتاً، و ظل يسمع الهاتفات البعيدة ثم استدار عائداً. (...) اتجه يمينا إلى ميدان عرابي حتى شارع الألفي. كان المدخل الخشبي لبار ريجال مغلقاً. دفعه بيده، و دخل و جلس إلى منضدة خالية. و طلب يوسف زجاجة من الروم، وراح يشرب، و يدخن."



Map 6- Yusif al-Naggar in downtown 1977

The Yellow circles indicate Yusif al-Naggar path from *Orabi Square* to Regal Bar. The red arrows demonstrate the two streams of the demonstration.

The above passage shows Yusif's familiarity with downtown. He knows the names of the streets and he has a routine of passing by the government bookstore and then by the pets shop which "He never went by without looking at the animals, keeping track of which ones were gone and which new ones had replaced them."⁸⁶ He is also familiar with the bar place to which he enters alone. His mobility sharply contrasts with the confinement of the rest of his neighbors, and with Fatma's hesitancy in downtown. His urban experience could be explained by the different status that he and his father acquire in *Imbaba*.

As explained earlier, the 1952 revolution had facilitated the formation of a new middle class which was composed primarily of small civil servants who benefited from the socialist achievements of the regime. The text refers to Yusif's father as Muhammad

⁸⁶ Ibid. P.54. The text in Arabic: "لم يمر من هنا إلا و تفرج عليها. يتابع ما يختفي منها و ما يستجد."

Effendi al-Naggar; a title which is used, according to Elliott Colla, for an educated man or a man who wears western clothes. The same goes for Yusif who is addressed by Faruq as *Ustaz* Yusif, which is again a “respectful form of address for any educated man”.⁸⁷ Both titles suggest the higher status that al-Naggar family possesses in *Imbaba*. Besides belonging to a middle class family, Yusif is a writer who, like Aslan, joined the cultural space of downtown Cairo in the sixties. Both factors, therefore, empower Yusif to cross the borders of *Imbaba* to Downtown, and consequently make him the third narrative pole in *The Heron*. Yusif al-Naggar is the force of social mediation that intersects the narrative line and changes its course. Without his presence, *The Heron* could have been only the story of a coffee shop being sold.

Yusif al-Naggar: The Third Narrative Pole

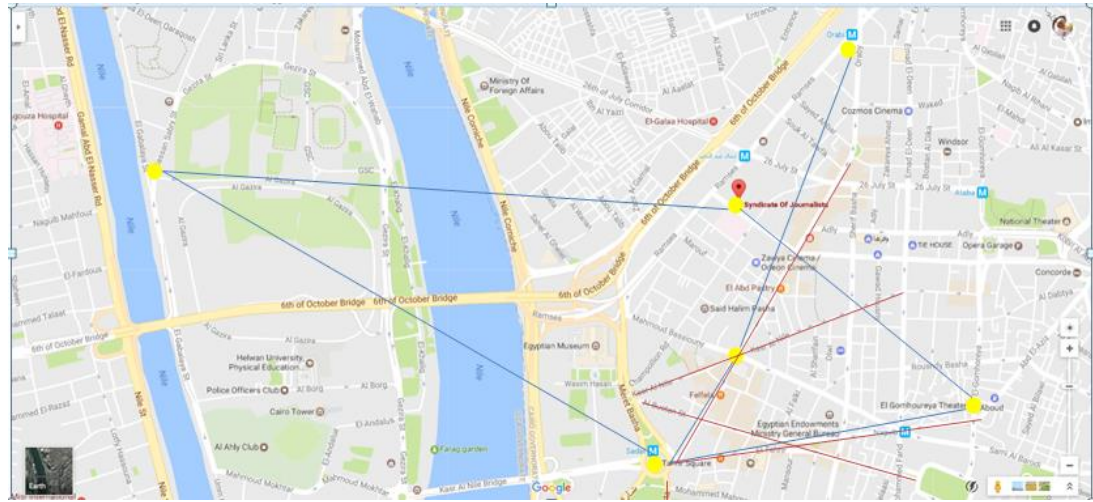
Yusif’s middle position between *Imbaba* and downtown was facilitated by being both culturally and politically engaged. On the background of the bread riots in 1977, Yusif sits alone in Regal Bar and recalls the memory of 1972 and his own participation in the movement.

“It was raining. That’s because you began your novel by talking about the rain, about your leaving the house after having an argument with your father, who was still alive then, and then going to Awadullah’s café and then riding the bus and getting off at Orabi Square and then heading to Talaat Harb Square where the first things you saw were the circles of people gathered around a student, and the large crowd where you stood and the fair man with short brown hair debating that student in a calm voice in front of all the people, talking about the state of the country and the occupation of the Sinai which made it necessary for everybody to disperse and go back to their business.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid. P.160.

⁸⁸ Ibid. P.73. The text in Arabic: "لقد كانت تمطر. لأنك بدأتها بالحديث عن المطر ثم خروجك من البيت بعد أن كلمك أبوك الذي كان حيا و ذهابك إلى مقهى عوض الله و ركوبك التروللي باس و نزولك في ميدان عرابي و ذهابك إلى ميدان طلعت حرب و حلقات الناس أول ما قابلك في

A new space of the city is revealed in this scene where Yusif joins thousands of protesters who take over Tahrir Square and the streets that opened onto it. He moves with others across a large space of the city distributing a ‘declaration of solidarity’, and mobilizing artists and journalists to join and support the movement.



Map 7- Yusif al-Naggari in downtown 1972

The blue lines and yellow circles indicate Yusif al-Naggari path and stops respectively. The red lines indicate the area covered by the 1972 protests.

The vast area covered on this map indicates Yusif’s urban experience that is manifested through political activism. In 1972, the nation still ‘belonged’ to the people. This sense of agency mobilized thousands of students to pressure the regime to fight Israel. Yusif was engaged in the movement, and witnessed the violent dispersal of the sit-in in *Tahrir* Square. His friend Abd al-Qadir met him and explained the transformations that the nation was undergoing with the new regime.

الميدان حول الطالب أو الطالبة و الحلقة الكبيرة حيث وقفت و الرجل الأبيض بشعره البني القصير و هو يجادل الطالب أمام الناس بصوت هادئ حول ظروف البلد و الاحتلال الذي يستدعي من كل واحد أن ينصرف إلى عمله."

"Then Abd al-Qadir found you and invited you to come with him to Venicia Bar, and when you two had drunk some, he told you about how society had changed, and how its people, soil, and trees were there to be exploited by whoever is willing and able. (...) Abd al-Qadir said that the nation was undergoing a profound transformation and that we were the last bastion of the old guard and that the most important thing now was to keep what we'd gained so that the nation would always belong to us."⁸⁹

Despite being politically engaged in the uprising, Yusif could not sing the national anthem with the crowd, and while he was distributing the fliers on the protesters, he felt embarrassed and "out of place." In spite of the bond that had developed between Yusif, as an intellect, and the cultural circle in the city center, he did not feel confident enough to talk with strangers or to sing with them.

The noise had subsided since sunset and you saw everybody from where you were above. They gathered in droves, backs to the monument, the movement at the edges of the square had quieted, and they began to sing "Biladi, Biladi" and Fathi, Mansour and everybody were singing. You wrote about the night and the distant stars and the base of the large stark monument in the heart of the square, and the many banners and the thousands of people moving as if they were a single mythical creature which covered the grass and asphalt and sidewalks, and the singing growing louder and louder like a roar pouring through the wide streets that opened onto the square: al-Bustan, Qasr al-Aini, Sulayman Pasha, Qasr al-Nil, al-Tahrir Street. You wrote about that, but you didn't mention that no matter how much you tried to join in, you couldn't raise your voice and sing and you wondered what was stopping you since no one could hear you or distinguish your voice from the others anyway, and you chanted a line or two from that anthem you love, but something like embarrassment held you back.⁹⁰

On the other hand, Yusif seemed like a "stranger" in *Imbaba*, despite being born there.⁹¹ As Amir thinks of him, he remembers that Yusif had shared with him most of his childhood memories, but as they grew up, Yusif changed. He'd come to the coffee shop

⁸⁹ Ibid. P.77. The text in Arabic: "ثم يلقاك عبد القادر و يدعوك لكي تذهب معه إلى بار فينيسيا و عندما شربتما و أخبرك أن البلد تحولت إلى مجتمع خدمات بناسها و طوبها و شجرها للقادرين و الطامعين من كل مكان. (...) و عندما خرجتما من البار وقال إن الوطن يتحول و أننا سنكون آخر الورثة و أن أهم شيء الآن هو أن نكون حريصين على ما بأيدينا ولا نضيعه أبدا حتى يظل الوطن دائما وطننا."

⁹⁰ Ibid. P.75, 76. The text in Arabic: "لقد هدأت الأصوات عند الغروب و رأيتهم من أعلى و قد توافدوا و أعطوا ظهورهم للنصب و سكنت الحركة عند المنافذ المؤدية إلى الميدان و بدأوا يغنون نشيد بلادي بلادي و فتحي و منصور و الجميع يغنون. كتبت عن الليل و النجوم البعيدة و قاعدة النصب الكبير الخالي في قلب الميدان و اللافتات و حركة الألاف كأنها الكائن الخرافي الواحد يغطي الحشائش و الأسفلت و الأرضة العريضة المتباعدة: البستان، قصر العيني، سليمان، قصر النيل، شارع التحرير. كتبت عن ذلك و لم تكتب أنك حاولت أن تشاركهم و لكنك لم تقدر أن ترفع صوتك بالغناء و قلت لنفسك ما الذي يمنعك؟ إن أحدل لن يسمعك أو ينتبه إليك بين هذه الأصوات التي تملأ الدنيا و رددت معهم مقطعا أو مقطعين من النشيد الذي تحبهو لكن شيئا كأنه الخجل هو الذي منعك."

⁹¹ Ibid. P.56

late at night to sit alone or with Amm Omran or with his friends who weren't from *Imbaba*.⁹² Moreover, Yusif fails to sleep with Fatma in *Imbaba*. According to Dina Heshmat, such relation could not succeed inside the traditional space of the old neighborhood, which explains why Yusif wanted to meet Fatma in the city.

In his movement between the center and the periphery, Yusif acts as a force of social mediation between *Imbaba* and Cairo. He is the third pole who is surrounded by hostile forces in both worlds. On one hand, *Imbaba* is a traditional and closed space that does not allow him opportunities to develop as a writer. On the other hand, the city gives him the urban experience and the opportunity to develop; yet, it is a strange place that he does not know. When he thinks about his novel, he hesitates between writing about the students' movement and writing about what he knows. In spite of the connections he has in the city, and his participation in the students' movement, Yusif does not feel he knows the city as much as he knows *Imbaba*:

"You're drunk. You shouldn't write about them. You should write about the things you know. Write about Amm Omran or Abdullah or the café or your father who died. Write that when a poor person dies, it isn't a death. It's more like an assassination. Better not to write about any of these things. You should write about the river and the stone huts on the banks and say that every house has children who live in it, and you should write about the boys fishing and swimming and the girls washing the mats and the pots and pans while you walk along Effendi Alley going home."⁹³

In 1972, the cultural circle which facilitated Yusif's mediation between *Imbaba* and Downtown was silenced by the regime, and betrayed from all classes. "People from the underclasses (said) that the students were protesting because they were young and had

⁹² Ibid. P.57

⁹³ Ibid. P.79. The text in Arabic: "وقال أنت سكران ولا تكتب عن هؤلاء و اكتب عن الأشياء التي تعرفها أو اكتب عن عمران أو عبد الله أو المقهى أو أبيك الذي مات و أن موت الفقراء ليس موتا و لكنه اغتيال ومن الأفضل أن لا تكتب عن أي شيء من هذه الأشياء أو باليتك تكتب عن النهر و منازل الشاطئ الحجرية و تقول إن لكل منزل أبناءه الذين ينزلون فيه، الأولاد يصطادون و يسبحون و البنات يغسلن الحصر و أواني البيوت و أنت تخرج من حارة الأفندي و تذهب إلى منزل(حوا)".

parents who paid for everything.” After realizing the danger of the situation, the cultural elite “had changed their minds and were now supporting the government.”⁹⁴ The third pole was excluded and silenced in the early seventies. With its silence, the two oppositional spaces of *Imbaba* and downtown were left to confront each other in 1977.

“Yusif heard the gunshots and exploding tear gas bombs. He climbed the riverbank and saw the foul smoke blocking the entrances to *Imbaba*, but he wasn’t able to see exactly where the soldiers were. (...)

The soldiers fired their rifles while dodging the rocks hurled at them from all directions. He saw young Faruq, Shawqi, (...) and Gaber the grocer leading a massive group of young men, picking up the tear gas bombs which the soldiers had thrown and which spewed forth that horrible smoke. They were picking them up and throwing them back at the soldiers.

(...)

When one of the canisters exploded next to the sidewalk, Yusif al-Naggar waited until its nasty smoke emptied out, then picked it up. It was black, made out of a round piece of cardboard and a lightweight metal base. It had a yellow writing in English on it: “F.L.100—Federal Laboratories USA. 1976.” Strange, Yusif thought. He saw the huge demonstration approaching from al-Sudan Street near the Shurbagi Factories. He saw the soldiers streaming out of the alleys located between the Nasser public housing blocks. They fired bullets and canisters, then retreated and disappeared. He saw thousands of rocks raining down on soldiers from inside of *Imbaba*, pushing the troops back across the square.”⁹⁵

Aslan’s Cairo does not unite. The gap between the center and the periphery is deepened when the regime soldiers attack *Imbabans* with an American weapon. Unlike Dicken’s *Our Mutual Friend*, Cairo is not unified through a bloodline that turns the city into a family. Instead, the city is further separated by oppression to the extent that a real

⁹⁴ Ibid. P.77

⁹⁵ Ibid. P.147-152. The text in Arabic: "سمع طلقات البنادق و انفجارات القنابل المسيلة للدموع، و سعد و رأى الدخان الكريه الذي يسد مدخل المدينة، و لكنه لم يستطع أن يحدد مكان العساكر جيدا. (...) (رأى) عساكر الحكومة و هي تطلق النار و تجري أمام الأحجار التي تلاحقهم من كل ناحية، و رأى الولد فاروق و شوقي و ابنه عبده و جابر البقال و هم يقودون مجموعة هائلة من الأولاد و يلتقطون القنابل التي يلقيها العساكر لتنفث الدخان الكريه و يردونها ناحيتهم مرة أخرى. (...) عندما انفجرت واحدة إلى جوار الرصيف، انتظر يوسف النجار حتى فرغ دخانها الكريه الأبيض، و قام واقفا و التقطها، كانت أسطوانة من الكرتون لها قاعدة معدنية خفيفة، سوداء و الكتابة الإنجليزية عليها باللون الأصفر (أف ال 100- فيديرال لابوريتوريز يو أس إيه 1976) و قال يوسف النجار: غريبة، و رأى المظاهرة الكبيرة القادمة من شارع السودان من ناحية مصانع الشوربجي و العساكر يخرجون من الممرات الموجودة بين بلوكات إسكان ناصر الشعبي و يطلقون البنادق و القنابل ثم يتراجعون مرة أخرى و يختفون، و رأى آلاف الأحجار و هي تتدافع من مداخل المدينة نحو العساكر الآخرين و تردهم عبر الميدان."

border is created between *Imbaba* and Cairo, where security forces attack the neighborhood to enforce the division and ghettoization.

Yusif al-Naggar is wounded in the confrontations. He retreats to the river to heal his wound to find that the river bank is eroded, like his own world, by reinforced embankments. As a third narrative pole, Yusif fails to mediate between *Imbaba* and Cairo. The cultural cluster to which he belonged in the sixties was dissipated, and he is left alone and isolated in the face of an oppressing city that is destined to division.

Yusif's distress is resolved by writing about "the river, the children (and) the angry crowds taking revenge on the storefront windows."⁹⁶ Like Aslan, Yusif is a bark on the stem of *Imbaba*. In addition to its proximity to the stem, the bark insulates the stem and the roots from pathogens, injury and environmentally adverse conditions. Yusif, the autobiographical character of Aslan, insulates his *Imbaba* from a decaying change by writing about it.

⁹⁶ Ibid. P. 154. The text in Arabic: "يكتب كتابا عن النهر و الأولاد و الغاضبين و هم يأخذون بثأرهم من فاترينات العرض و أشجار الطريق و إعلانات البضائع و الأفلام."

The “City as Target”⁹⁷

Mapping *Being Abbas El Abd* by Ahmed Alaidy⁹⁸

⁹⁷ The title “City as Target” is inspired by Ryan Bishop’s and Tania Roy’s article “Mumbai: City -as- Target, published in *Theory, Culture & Society* 2009 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore), Vol. 26(7–8): 263–277. The explanation of the concept is presented in the body of this chapter.

⁹⁸ The name of the author and the title of the novel are transliterated as ‘El Abd’ and ‘Alaidy’ in the English translation of the novel by Humphrey Davies, which appeared in 2006. I follow the same format throughout this chapter.

In his article “Urban Transformation and Narrative Form”, Sabry Hafez (2010) compares between the development of the third city in Cairo and the emergence of a new narrative form in the works of the literary generation that has come of age since 1990. The city of Cairo was first divided into two after Khedive Ismail had planned to build a modern city, with wide boulevards and grand parks, which stood at the north and west of the traditional first city built by the Fatimids. The two cities, as argued by Hafez, “represented distinct world views and modes of operation: the densely populated *medina* retaining its traditional order and conservative religious outlook, (and) the ‘second city’ proclaim(ing) its rulers’ faith in ideas of progress, modernity and reason.”⁹⁹ This division influenced the work of the pioneers of realist narrative fiction, like Tawfiq al-Hakim, Yahya Haqqi and Naguib Mahfouz who were born and raised in the old city, but developed their literary talent in the modern one. Therefore, their literary works were produced from the passage between the two worlds and their contrasting visions.¹⁰⁰

The third city developed when the state, in the wake of economic liberalization, had abandoned its responsibility in providing affordable housing for the poor, and left the housing sector to the hands of real estate developers who built for the middle and upper classes. As a result, the poor established the third city to cater for their housing needs. This city is known for its haphazardness, lack of basic services, and the retreat to pre-modern alleyways. Hafez argues that the narrative forms developed by the 1990s literary generation share some characteristics with the haphazard city of Cairo; for example, these narratives do not follow the earlier narrative forms, as they “reject the linear narrative of

⁹⁹ Hafez, Sabry. “Urban Transformation and Narrative Form”. *New Left Review*. 2010. P.57.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. P.47.

the realist novel”, and are built instead on the “juxtaposition of narrative fragments which co-exist without any controlling hierarchy or unifying plot.”¹⁰¹

Being born in the wake of *Infitah*, the 1990s literary generation has faced, according to Hafez, “a triple crisis: socio-economic, cultural and political.”¹⁰² The rising population of Egypt was not met with increased public spending on health, education or infrastructure. In the previous chapter I explained how the cabinet in 1977 chose to reduce subsidies for basic goods; a choice that was remade in 1991 after the regime accepted to implement the World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) whereby the public sector was privatized and public spending on social services was severed.¹⁰³

Politically, Egypt became a marginalized power after Sadat had signed the Camp David Accords, according to which the country became one of the largest recipients of the USAID. In her book *Changing Consumer Culture in Modern Egypt* (2005), Mona Abaza argues that being an aid recipient created the image of Egypt as a “nation of beggars seeking the assistance of international aid because it cannot keep its internal affairs in order.”¹⁰⁴ Also, being a trade partner with the US has transformed the whole country into an aid consumer which in turn has pushed the working population to the service sector.¹⁰⁵ Such developments caused this emerging literary generation to break

¹⁰¹ Ibid. P.55

¹⁰² Ibid. P.48

¹⁰³ Nagarajan, K.V. “Egypt’s Political Economy and the Downfall of the Mubarak Regime.” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. vol. 3, n° 10 [Special Issue – May 2013]. P.31

¹⁰⁴ Abaza, Mona. *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's urban Reshaping*, vol. 101., Brill, Leiden;Boston. 2006. P.25

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

with the romanticized past of the sixties and to “rethink its relation to the social and political identity.”¹⁰⁶

Culturally, Hafez states, that the Egyptian literary establishments campaigned against the nineties generation for a number of years, rejecting their work and accusing them of being poorly educated, nihilistic and lacking interest in public issues.¹⁰⁷ Fortunately, the new information technology, imported to Egypt as part and parcel of the neoliberal project, has opened a window for these writers to publish their work on blogs and gain some exposure. The new medium, as argued by Tarek Arriss (2010) has made “a series of structural and linguistic transformation” to Arabic literature.¹⁰⁸ On one hand, “many young novelists (appropriated) the structure of blogs in their literary production”; on the other hand, “English words left in the Latin script or at times transliterated”¹⁰⁹ reflected the effects of globalization on the literary tradition.

In this chapter, I will study *An takun Abbas al-Abd* (2003) (the English translation; by Humphrey Davies, *Being Abbas El Abd* appeared in 2006) by Ahmed Alaidy, the most celebrated literary achievement of the millennial generation according to Al-Ahram Weekly¹¹⁰. In his review of the text, Youssef Rakha (2004) describes it as an “essay on contemporary middle-class culture”¹¹¹ I add that the text is an ‘essay’ on the

¹⁰⁶ Arriss, El, Tarek. “Hacking the Modern: Arabic Writing in the Virtual Age.” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol.47, n° 4. 2010. P.537

¹⁰⁷ Hafez, Sabry. P.49

¹⁰⁸ Arriss, Tarek. P.533

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

¹¹⁰ “Fictions of the Mind.” An interview with Youssef Rakha. *Al-Ahram Weekly On Line*. 5-11 Febraury, 2004.

Retrieved at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2004/676/cu4.htm>

¹¹¹ Rakha, Youssef. “Pop power: On Ahmed al-Aidi and Abbas al-Abd.” *The Daily Star*, May 15, 2004. Retrieved at: http://www.arabworldbooks.com/Readers2004/articles/Ahmed_alaidi2.htm

life of the millennial generation in neoliberal Cairo, whose experience is shaped by and in reaction to the changing socio-economic, political and cultural orders in the globalized city.

An Takun Ahmed Alaidy: Life and Literary Style

Two months after Sadat had announced the reorientation toward the open door policy, Ahmed Alaidy was born in Saudi Arabia. Alaidy's father was among the Egyptian youth who were encouraged by Sadat's regime to work in the gulf and to invest their work remittances in their home country. When Alaidy was fifteen years old, the family returned to Egypt in order for their older son to complete *Thanawiyya Amma* (national secondary school certificate) in Cairo. The family settled in Nasr City where they built a house in which Alaidy lived on a separate floor with his library. In my interview with him, he laughs as he recalls how his family used to allow him to travel between Saudi Arabia and Egypt with a heavy bag that contained his books. His extra care of the bag used to draw the attention of the custom's officers who would carefully inspect it without paying attention to the rest of the family belongings which contained typical items that Egyptian families used to bring from the Gulf: a fan, a video player and a blanket.

According to Samia Mehrez in her book *Egypt's Cultural Wars*, Alaidy failed to score in the national high school certificate, and was enrolled in a marketing degree in the Open University which gave him a lot of time to "stare at the computer screen, talk to the computer and listen to it talking back."¹¹² One of the fruits of talking to a computer was that Alaidy became a regular pen pal friend to Nabil Faruq who is a novelist best known for his Egyptian pocket novels. When Faruq launched his publishing house *Dar al-*

¹¹² Mehrez, Samia. *Egypt's culture wars: politics and practice*. P.296

mubdu'wn llṭba'ah wa-nashr he asked Alaidy to write with him. Alaidy's first published piece appeared in *Maganin* series, and he then moved to another underground publishing house to write comic strips; however, the publisher sensed Alaidy's different writing style and asked him to write whatever he liked. This is how *Being Abbas El Abd* came into being.

One of the main challenges that Alaidy faced to write literature was financial. In an interview with Mustafa Zikri, Alaidy explains that “getting something published meant paying money, so there was no possibility of my writing literature.”¹¹³ The first draft of the novel was rejected, and Alaidy, passing through a financial crisis, had to bring back the submitted draft from the first publishing house in order to submit it to another publisher because he could not afford printing a new copy.¹¹⁴ Luckily, the novel was accepted by the reading committee in Dar Merit (Merit Publishing House). Moreover, the great writer Sonallah Ibrahim had recommended the novel to the late Gamal al-Ghitani, then the editor in chief of *Akhbar al-Adab*, who introduced the novel and its author to the literary audience of his magazine directly before the novel's publication.

Alaidy considers Chuck Palahniuk to be his mentor, and like him, Alaidy is a minimalist writer. As a literary school, minimalism employs reduced vocabulary, short sentences, few adjectives and abundant dialogue to ‘reveal’ a narrative. Information is not told, but is shown through characters' actions, and the characters themselves are ordinary

¹¹³ An interview with Ahmed Alaidy and Mustafa Zikri. *Bedoun*. Retrieved at: <http://bidoun.org/articles/ahmed-Alaidy-and-mustafa-zikri>

¹¹⁴ A personal interview with the author.

subjects depicted in their everyday life.¹¹⁵ Theorists and practitioners of this school claim that such compromises in the literary style are made to allow for a richer reading experience whereby the reader is engaged in interpreting the text and filling its gaps. This concept is beautifully articulated by Ibrahim Aslan in a short video about writing that Alaidy filmed and uploaded on his YouTube channel. In this short clip Aslan explains that no artistic language could contain or fully express real pains in life; thus, it is crucial for any writer to transform his pains from an experience to write about into a tool to write with. Writing for Aslan (and for Alaidy) gains its value from all what is excluded from the story in relation to what is included. For example, a painting of a girl with one eye will engage the receiver in thinking about the other eye. The value of the artwork, Aslan claims, lies in the absence of the lost eye which gives meaning to the present one.¹¹⁶

Alaidy follows Aslan's formula and writes with his fear. Graduating from an Open University, Alaidy did not pursue a full time job. This is not an easy choice for a middle class Cairene man. In one of the scripts that Alaidy wrote, his character, a delivery man driving a toktok, says:

"This country needs people like trains, put them on tracks so they don't get mixed up.

They'll say yes, certainly, with pleasure.

I'm the track, not the train."¹¹⁷

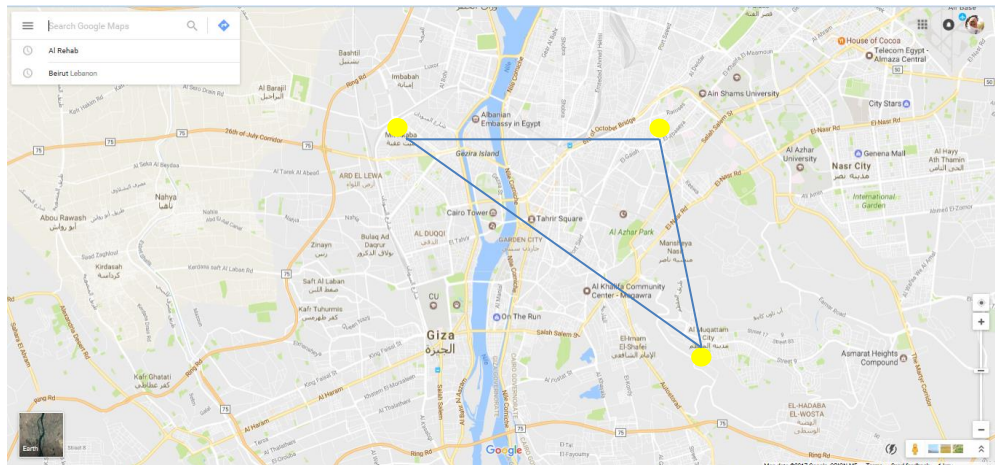
¹¹⁵Greaney, Phil. "An Introduction to Literary Minimalism in the American Short Story". *Wordpress*. Retrieved at: <https://philgreaney.wordpress.com/2012/02/07/an-introduction-to-literary-minimalism-in-the-american-short-story/>

¹¹⁶ أصلان، إبراهيم. "عن الكتابة". مرفوع بواسطة العايدى، أحمد. 16 سبتمبر، 2010. رابط الفيديو: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGHjQObgvN8>

¹¹⁷ Abia, Ibrahim. *Love in the Time of Gum*. 2009. From 2:14 to 2:25. Retrieved at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1zW7_AUqNY

This powerful metaphor indicates the limited options one has in Egypt. In Alaidy's view, one either becomes a train, or the train would pass over him. Alaidy did not attempt to be a train, which makes him vulnerable to marginalization and isolation in the big metropolis. In *Being Abbas El Abd*, Alaidy transforms his fear into a disjointed narrative that is narrated by a schizophrenic narrator. Abdullah, a video rental attendant whose parents died in his early childhood, is the nephew of Awni, an experimental psychiatrist, who uses him as a guinea pig, making out of Abdullah the world's most unusual phobia case. To treat Abdullah, Awni uses a forbidden therapeutic technique whereby he exposes himself to the same experiences which triggered Abdullah's phobias, on the premise that he'd then be able to treat himself and his nephew. Awni eventually fails in treating himself and remains a prisoner of Abdullah's most unusual phobic condition for the rest of his life. This is when Abbas El Abd develops as a nihilistic voice inside Awni/ Abdullah (I will simply refer to Awni/ Abdullah as the narrator) who pushes him to "engage the world around him through angry acts of violence and rebellion."¹¹⁸ Abbas gets into hot relationships over the phone and sets a double blind date for the narrator with two girls with the same name "Hind" on two different floors in the same coffee shop. *Being Abbas El Abd* unfolds as the narrator moves across the city to meet both girls.

¹¹⁸ Arriss, Tarek p.536



Map 8- Abdullah’s movement between his apartment in Muqattam, Ramses Square and Mohandessien where he meets both Hind(s) and then back to Muqattam with one of them.

The “City as Target” to Tourism and Consumerism

The city is made legible through the narrator pursuit to escape social isolation. The narrator rides a microbus from his place in *Muqattam* to *Ramses*¹¹⁹ Square where he takes a taxi to *Mohandessien* neighborhood. The microbus is a cheap mean of transportation that attracts mainly working and middle class Cairenes, and which the narrator uses in the first part of his trip in order to reduce the total fare of his route. This movement from a neighborhood to another and from scene to scene indicates, as Moretti suggests, the narrator’s urban experience which is facilitated by his social class and economic power. As explained in the previous chapter, movement across the city is of class character because “the people most likely to move from scene to scene (are) those with interests or

¹¹⁹ This is how the name of the square is transliterated in the English translation of the novel.

connections complicated enough to take them to different parts of the city; such people (are) the most affluent.”¹²⁰

In his analysis of Balzac’s novels, Moretti follows the protagonists as they move between the two extremes of the city, and the thoughts that accompany them while passing through the public spaces and bridges suspended across the Seine. He concludes that the urban experience of these protagonists is shaped by daydreams:

“Grand projects, erotic fantasies, imaginary revenges, sudden epiphanies... And all this, always in the same space, exactly midway between the world of youth and that of desire. It is the public space of the Tuileries and the Champs Elysees, with its oblique gazes and ephemeral meetings; more icastically still, the no-man’s land of the bridges suspended across the Seine.”¹²¹

In *Being Abbas El Abd* however, the urban experience of the narrator is shaped by violence and exploitation. The narrator lives alone in his apartment, and does not meet his neighbors although he could hear their fights and growls day and night. His first contact with other Cairenes is made in the confined space of the microbus, which he describes as a “canful of performing animals.”¹²² He quarrels with the tout, who makes the passengers’ journey extremely noisy by his non-stop drumming on the microbus door. The driver then quarrels with the tout and fellow drivers on the street. This suffocating condition intensifies when the narrator closes the window after a passenger sitting in front of him spits out of the window, and the air carries the spit to his face. Even after closing the window, the city still displays its violent show when, at a traffic signal, a small bare-foot girl goes up to a red luxurious car and attempts to interest its well looking

¹²⁰ Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.87

¹²¹ Ibid. P.95

¹²² Alaidy, Ahmed. *Being Abbas El Abd*. Translated by Humphery Davies. The American University in Cairo Press. 2006. P.11.

driver to buy a packet of paper hankies. But the guy pushes her fragile body, and the girl falls with the packets of hankies to the ground.

“This is where the ladies of the night are born... in plain daylight.

Soon the little girl’s body will be converted into circles that will accept the geometrical abuse of any miserable oblong.

May the hormonal conscience of our “brother Arabs” guard her well!

God bless the property rights that turn people into things that can be priced and given “use by” dates!

God bless the charity of the credit card!

We like to say that we hold our “little innocents” “dear”. So TEAR AT HER, so long as you’re gonna pay!

Let our tourist slogan in the future be Altruism, Not Egotism!

The little girl cries.”¹²³

“The City –as- Target” is a concept developed by Bishop and Roy in 2009, and indicates the various ways by which cities become targets of different kinds of violence. “Cities become targets for the simple reason that they are the sites of massive, virtually inexhaustible, material and immaterial concentrations of human energy and value, production and consumption.”¹²⁴ The likelihood of violently targeting a city increases as urbanization grows. In their article “Mumbai: City –as- Target, Bishop and Roy (2009) study the terroristic attacks on the city of Mumbai that took place in 2008. Despite being subjected to military violence, the authors do not limit violence to military or paramilitary

¹²³ Ibid.P.12,13. The text in Arabic: "فتيات الليل يُخلقن هنا.. في وضح النهار. "غدا" تتحول الطفلة إلى جسد من دوائر تقبل الإهانة هندسيا من أي مستطيل حقير. فليحرسها الضمير الهرموني "لأي عربي شقيق". بورك التملك الذي يُحول الأشخاص إلى أشياء تقبل "التسعير" و يعطيها تاريخ صلاحية و انتهاء. بورك تكافل "الكريديت كارد". نحن نصف "الضنى" بأنه "غالي". لذا... انهش مادمت ستدفع. ليكن شعارنا السياحي القادم: الإيثار لا الأثرة. الطفلة تبكي."

¹²⁴ Bishop, Ryan & Roy, Tania. "Mumbai: City- as- Target". *Theory, Culture & Society* . 2009. (Sage. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore). Vol.26 (7-8), pp. 263-277. P. 265

forms. They indicate that cities are targeted in both material and immaterial ways, one of which is economic violence.

“The city-as-target continues to operate in several different ways, with military or paramilitary targeting being but one. (...) The city is targeted in material and immaterial ways, through concrete actions and through architectural plans to pour concrete or remove it. The urban vision to renovate industrial mill-lands in order to attract investment in retail, to market high-end leisure activities, or simply to clear ground for real-estate developers, for example, displays targeting strategies in the material environment but also in the immaterial realm of planning and global capital circulation.”¹²⁵

The city of Cairo has become a target for economic violence since the liberalization of the economy in the early seventies. In her book *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*, Farha Ghannam (2002) explains that Sadat’s neoliberal policy aimed at modernizing Egypt by increasing economic growth, encouraging foreign and Arab investment and promoting social development. It was expected that the returns on domestic and foreign investments would fund the construction of a modern country. As a result, “investments in tourism were especially important because they were expected to yield high economic returns and provide substantial foreign exchange and well-paid employment.” Consequently, several spatial changes were made to the city of Cairo to transform it into a tourist haven. As mentioned in the introduction of this work, “hotel chains dotted the Nile Corniche, bridges and new roads were constructed to facilitate the circulation of goods and people, and conspicuous consumption soared.”¹²⁶ This modernization of space did not proceed without, what David Harvey (2008) calls, “creative destruction”, which is a process that

¹²⁵ Ibid. P.271.

¹²⁶ Ghannam, Farha. P.29

employs violence to “build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old.”¹²⁷ The subjects of violence are almost always the poor who are dislocated from their old allies to give way for more modern spaces to get established.¹²⁸

In the same realm, Mona Abaza argues, that since *Infitah*, the meaning of modernization, development and democracy has changed. The word modernization became equivalent to “never ending luxurious consumption,”¹²⁹ and in the mind of the business tycoons, the word development became synonym to the expansion of consumerism through the building of new shopping areas, annexed to international hotels and tourist resorts.”¹³⁰ These developments were made possible when in the wake of the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program, the regime, as Timothy Mitchell argues, reduced its subsidy spending on the poor, and subsidized the rich by supplying them with cheap land and infrastructure to establish semipublic or completely private spaces such as shopping malls and gated communities to cater for their consumption and habitation needs.¹³¹ Thus, the differentiation between the rich and the poor has become “spatially concretized.”¹³² Accordingly, and as Leila Vignal and Eric Denis argue, “The

¹²⁷ Harvey, David. “The Right to the City.” *New Left Review*. September- October 2008. Retrieved at:

<https://newleftreview.org/II/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>

¹²⁸ Much of Harvey’s work explains the role of urbanization in absorbing the capital surpluses. He offers a simple explanation in one of his lectures titled “[The Neoliberal City](#)” in which he argues that the sustainability of capitalism depends on continuously creating channels and opportunities to re-invest money. The failure to find such channels hit capitalism with the crisis of devaluation. One of the ever successful channels for reinvestment is urbanization. Urbanization helps solve capital-surplus absorption problem through converting the city to a center of consumption and tourism; thus building hotels, shopping malls, gated communities and cafés. Such changes in the urban environment yield a vast change in the urban lifestyle and the political landscape, where the subsidized home-ownership for the middle classes changed the focus of community action towards the defense of private property instead of collective political action.

¹²⁹ Abaza, Mona. P.24

¹³⁰ Ibid

¹³¹ Vignal, Leila and Denis, Eric. P.111

¹³² Ibid. P.111

face of poverty has changed with the passage from a society of shortages to a society of consumerism, without a redistribution of revenue that would enable either the growth or survival of the middle class.”¹³³ Under such repressing conditions, the word democracy was reconstructed to mean the “freedom to consume.” As the argument of Mona Abaza continues, “Consume but shut up” became the regime’s strategy in silencing class inequality and social injustice.

“Stop anybody and ask them about their ambitions and then leave them to talk. You’re looking for money, health, beauty, power, without grasping the reality: We’re not looking for hundreds of pounds, we’re looking for what we can buy with hundreds of pounds.

(...)

We’re not looking for money as an end in itself, as we imagine. We’re looking for more options.

Isn’t Hell, to simplify shamelessly, being bereft of options?

(...)

“And those asshole sons of bitches have taken away our options.”¹³⁴

Besieging the City

Shutting up as a strategy meant the enactment of the emergency law which was put into action for thirty consequent years since Mubarak came to power in 1981. The law extends police powers and permits indefinite detention of civilians. At the same time, it limits political activity and prohibits gatherings of more than five people. Integral to those restricting measures, public spaces were fenced off by green long iron walls that control the path of pedestrians in large squares like *Tahrir* and *Ramses*. In his article *Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space*, Mohamed El-Shahed¹³⁵ (2011) argues that

¹³³ ibid

¹³⁴ Alaidy, Ahmed. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P.97, 98. The text in Arabic: أنت "أوقف أي شخص و اسأله عن طموحه و دعه يتحدث. أنت تبحث عن المال و الصحة و الجمال و السطوة من دون أن تترك الحقيقة.. نحن لا نبحث عن مئات الجنيهات، بل نبحث عما يمكن أن تشتريه مئات الجنيهات. (...) نحن لا نبحث عن المال لذاته كما نظن. نحن نبحث عن "أوبشنات" أكثر. أليس الجحيم بتبسيط مخل هو إنتزاع "الأوبشن"؟ (...) "وولاد ملاذيع الكلب دول سحبوا "الأوبشنات" بتاعتنا."

¹³⁵ This is how the author writes his name on the article.

such measures did not only challenge and scare pedestrians, but also led to the decline of the public space and the “erosion of civic pride”¹³⁶

When the narrator gets out of the microbus in *Ramses Square*, he is ordered by a traffic cop to walk the other way.¹³⁷ In my interview with Alaidy, he describes this scene as the “fumes that preceded the volcanic eruption of the 2011 revolution.” He adds that the city space turned to be a huge prison where people were treated like animals whose movement was controlled and besieged by gates. This scene reflects the humiliation that Cairenes experience during their daily movement within the city space:

“RAMSES , LADIES AND GENTS , AND THE END OF THE LINE .”

I get out of the minibus to join forces with my fellow citizens.

A traffic cop stops me from crossing the street. “The other way, sir!”

Shit. Shit shit shit.

“What other way??”

(He shoves me on the shoulder.) “Like I said, mister, the other way —got it? How true the proverb, ‘Verily, He Who Understands is a Comfort and a Joy!’”¹³⁸

Being Abbas El Abd is indeed a text about phobia. The city of Cairo that is revealed through this short trip is violent, repressing and exploitative. It dominates the characters and triggers their fear of both social and political violence. According to Alaidy, “their fear is a shield that both limits and protects them from now, tomorrow and from whatever they are scared of.” Such an overwhelming urban experience further isolates the narrator, not in the confines of a neighborhood as in the case of *The Heron*,

¹³⁶ Elshahed, Mohamed. “Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space.” *Places Journal*, February 2011. Accessed 04 Jan 2017. <https://doi.org/10.22269/110227>

¹³⁷ Alaidy, Ahmed. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P. 21

¹³⁸ Ibid. P.21. The text in Arabic: "رَمْسِيس و الآخر يا حضرات." نزلت من الميكروباص لأنضم إلى زملائي المواطنين، فاستوقفتني واحد من "عسكر" المرور لمنعي من عبور الشارع: "م الناحية الثانية يا أستاذ." هراء. هراء هراء هراء. "أنهي ناحية ثانية؟" زغدني في كتفي: "باقولك من الناحية الثانية يا أفندي، ما تفهم بقه، صحيح اللي بيغهم بيريج."

but inside himself. As Alaidy beautifully puts it: “We live in a city called *al-Qahira* which means the vanquisher. This city should have conquered its enemies, but it turned to be conquering its own inhabitants. The more the city pressures us, the more we become isolated. We are being expelled to our own bodies. The body itself becomes the only site that one can live inside and mind its own business. The body has become our last refuge because any further retreat means death.”¹³⁹

The Opposing Narrative Poles and the Force of Mediation

In *Being Abbas El Abd*, the two opposing narrative poles are, therefore, the city and the narrator himself as an isolated psyche and space. Overwhelmed by phobia, the schizoid narrator is isolated in a room where he recalls his torturous childhood and therapeutic experiences. The borders of his world are the borders of his multi-layered selves:

“The sixth rule for leaving is...

Wave to the others.

Awni claims that there's a superego and a regular ego.

If the World forsakes you- which is more or less what it's there for- that abandonment may seem reasonable. But what happens if what forsakes you is the ego?

“Don't be scared.”

You're just an “I” inside an “I.”

Think of it as between parentheses, working from the inside out: (I(ins(I)de)I).

And Awni asserts- based on what Freud said- that you are nothing but “I inside I inside I.”

Nothing but ten parentheses and a stupid sentence.

(I(ins(I(ins(I)de)I)de)I)”.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ A personal interview with the author.

¹⁴⁰ Alaidy, Ahmed. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P. 65. The text in Arabic: "القاعدة السادسة للرحيل... لوح في الهواء لآخرين. "عوني" يقول. إن هناك الأنا العليا و الأنا الصغرى. لو خذك العالم- وتلك تقريبا وظيفته- فقد يبدو هذا مقبولا و لكن.. ما الذي يحصل لو كان الذي خذك هو "الأنا"؟

himself. As Samia Mehrez argues, Abbas El Abd cuts loose with the conventional icon of the nation and confronts the “impossibility of becoming what (he) wants.”¹⁴³ This struggle is even absent from the narrative. What we see as readers is Abbas El Abd’s attempts to resolve the narrator’s crisis. Like the characters of Balzac’s novels who realized the complication of urban life, and sought relief by plunging deeper into the urban maelstrom, Abbas El Abd fights the urban life of Cairo by getting used to it.

“Abbas says, when he’s feeling good: Don’t fight things by resisting them because they’ll strike back with vengeance. Fight things by doing them—that way they lose their meaning.

Got a problem with smoking or eating chocolate?

Smoke till your lips turn into filters. Eat Cadbury bars till your teeth melt or the factory closes.

Do it till you lose your mind.”

That’s his philosophy, and he practices it to perfection.”¹⁴⁴

This philosophy materializes when Abbas sets a double blind date for the narrator with two girls at the same time on two different floors of the same coffee shop. This attempt should be understood as a challenge, an advanced level of the game that Abbas plays with the narrator in order to encourage him fight his social isolation. The narrator eventually succeeds in convincing Hind the prostitute with his false identity, but he fails in doing so with the other Hind, and so, he takes the challenge to the next level by uncovering his identity and inspiring Hind with an idea to take her revenge from Abbas El Abd.

¹⁴³ Mehrez, Samia. *Egypt’s Cultural Wars*. P.140

¹⁴⁴ Alaidy, Ahmed. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P.40. The text in Arabic: "يقول عباس وهو رائق البال: لا تقاتل الأشياء بمقاومتها، لأنها ستعود و ترد الضربة بوحشية. قاتل الأشياء بفعلها حتى تفقد معناها. إن كانت لك مشكلة مع التدخين أو تناول الشوكولاتة. دخن حتى تتحول شفتاك إلى فلتر. كل قوالب "كادبوري" حتى تذوب أسنانك أو يُقفل المصنع. افعلها حتى تفقد صوابك. تلك هي فلسفته، وهو يجيدها تماما."

SHE WASN ' T A CORPSE YET .

Hind doesn't like wasting time because she's never been like other girls.

Place: Geneina Mall, the Ladies' Toilet.

Hind writes the mobile phone number on the insides of the doors of the toilets with a waterproof lipstick, then passes a Kleenex soaked in soda water over it, 'cos that way, cupcake, it can't be wiped off!

I told her to write it at the eye level of a person sitting on the toilet seat.

Above it two words: CALL ME

Why?

Because these things happen.

The woman goes into the toilet to relieve herself.

The woman goes into the toilet to use something that emerges, from her handbag, to protect her.

Her sin, of which she is guiltless.

A naked fragile butterfly—and

Enter the terrible number.

The number gazes at her weakness.

The number permits itself to intervene instantaneously.

The number asks no permission and has no supernumeraries.

The number is

Zero-one-zero, six, forty, ninety, thirty.

CALL ME

010 6 40 90 30

Arkadia Mall:

CALL ME

010 6 40 90 30

Ramses Hilton Mall:

CALL ME

010 6 40 90 30

The World Trade Center:

Accept no imitations.

Zero-one-zero, six, forty, ninety, thirty.

CALL ME.”¹⁴⁵

“Stories often start from the strangest things.” *Being Abbas El Abd* starts with the

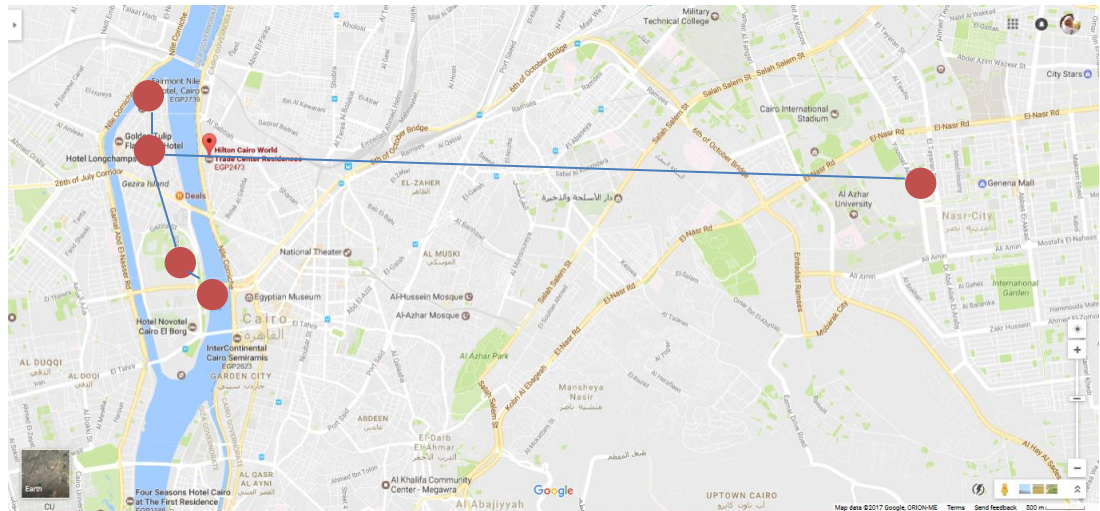
author's fear of sharing his telephone number with strangers. Alaidy initially built his

Alaidy, Ahmed. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P.1, 2. The text in Arabic:¹⁴⁵

"هي لم تكن جثة بعد. "هند" لا تحب إضاعة الوقت لأنها لم تكن كالأخريات. المكان: جنينة مول. حمام السيدات. "هند" تكتب رقم الموبايل على أبواب الحمام من الداخل بقلم الروح المضاد للماء، ثم تمرر ورقة "كليكس" مبللة بالصودا عليها، و هنا يستحيل محوها يا كوكو. قلت لها أن تكتبه في مستوى نظر الجالسة على "الكابينة" .. و من فوقه كلمة واحدة: كلميني. لماذا؟ لأن هذه الأشياء تحدث. المرأة تدخل الحمام لقضاء حاجتها. المرأة تدخل الحمام لاستخدام شيء بخرج، من حقيبة يدها، ليحميها. ذنبها الذي لا ذنب لها فيه. فراشة هشة عارية تقبل الكسر و هنا يأتي "الرقم الرهيب". الرقم يحدق في ضعفها. الرقم يسمح لنفسه بالتدخل فورا. الرقم لا يستأذن و ليس له أعوان. هذا هو الرقم: زيرو واحد زيرو ستة أربعين تسعين ثلاثين. كلميني. 30 90 40 6-010. أركاديا مول. كلميني. 30 90 40 6-010. هيلتون رمسيس مول. كلميني 30 90 40 6-010. الولد تريد سنتر. ليس للرقم فروع أخرى. زيرو واحد زيرو ستة أربعين تسعين ثلاثين. كلميني."

narrative on a personal fear when he asked the famous *what if* question: “*What if my mobile number became written on the doors of female lavatories in Cairo shopping malls?*” The why and how soon followed and the first scene of the novel was complete with Alaidy sharing his personal number with the readers.

In this scene, Hind takes revenge on Abbas by writing permanently his cell number on the doors of the ladies toilets in Cairo shopping malls so that the bothered mall management would try to find the number’s owner. But at the same time, this tactic will increase the number of people calling the narrator and thus breaking his isolation.



Map 9- Abbas El Abd’s mobile number in Cairo shopping malls

The red marks on the above map indicate the places where Abbas El Abd’s cell number is written. If we compare this map to its counterpart in the previous chapter which shows Yusif al-Naggār movement throughout the city we find some interesting aspects. The borders in *The Heron* are the borders of *Imbaba* itself. Yusif al-Naggār is the only character that crosses these borders in the full light of the day. We see downtown

twice with Yusif; during the students' movement in 1972, and during the bread riots in 1977. Both events constitute collective actions, and Yusif could identify with others who share the streets with him. However, in this map, the borders of the character's psyche are crossed virtually through the cell number that covers a wide geographical range of the city. Unlike Moretti's third poles, who are assumed to have the richest urban experience and the vastest social connection and affluence, Abbas El Abd is nothing but an intruder to the very private space of the ladies toilet.

"The "CALL ME" becomes as urging in the text as it is in the ladies toilet. The text is echoing a man's voice that seems to introduce itself inside the ladies toilets, to address the women directly. As prosaic as it is, this place becomes nevertheless a potential meeting space between men and women. While performing "a de-romanticisation that leaves no nostalgia and no regrets", destroying all romantic representations of love or even of dating, the narrator turns the mall, or more exactly its ladies toilets, into a suitable place for making "first contacts."¹⁴⁶

The "potential meeting space" that Dina Heshmat refers to in the above passage is not really a space, but rather a phone network. It was argued by many scholars that, in this text, the mall develops as a possible space of encounter and dating. The main evidence to this conclusion is the assumption that the double blind date was set in a shopping mall.¹⁴⁷ This is untrue because the narrator meets both Hind(s) in Bakery coffee shop at *Mohandisseen* as indicated twice in the text.¹⁴⁸ It is true that Abbas El Abd's cell number is written on the insides of the doors of female toilets in different shopping malls, but this does not make the ladies toilet or the mall a possible space of encounter in this specific narrative because the real encounter, if any, is done virtually over phone.

¹⁴⁶ Heshmat, Dina. "Representing contemporary urban space: Cairo Malls in Two Egyptian Novels". *Arabica* 58. 2011 538-553. P.556

¹⁴⁷ See *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping* by Mona Abaza. P.229-231 and Dina Heshmat's article cited above.

¹⁴⁸ See *Being Abbas El Abd* P. 23 and 72

The City in a Virtual Age

The city of Cairo is dissolved by virtual networks. In her paper “Representing contemporary urban space: Cairo Malls in two Egyptian Novels” Dina Heshmat explains that the spirit of the city and its very ideal is shaped by the confrontation between oneself and the other.¹⁴⁹ This confrontation is displaced in Alaidy’s text to the virtual world of mobile networks and the internet. Both innovations are a direct result of neoliberalism, which, in order to compress space and time, the ideology encouraged the innovation of new technologies, which substituted the traditional forms of communication with other virtual means that both “brought us together and drove us apart”.¹⁵⁰ Unlike previous technological innovations which reformulated distance, the internet and mobile networks have caused distance to die.¹⁵¹ Thus, new technology dissolved spaces into networks that are ‘placeless’ in all senses of the term ‘where’ people around the globe spend most of their time.

The city of Cairo is dissolved in Alaidy’s narrative. As violent as it is to its inhabitants, it is the target of their violence too. Under neoliberalism, the city was both the subject and object of economic violence which commoditized the poor and the middle classes, turning people “into things that can be priced and given “use by” dates.” The fear of public dissent has stripped public spaces of its accessibility, and thus of its public. The same ideology that represses almost all sorts of collective action, creates virtual spaces that substitute and dissolve physical localities; hence, fostering alienation and isolation. Reducing the urban encounter between oneself and another to a virtual network

¹⁴⁹ Heshmat, Dina. “Representing Contemporary Urban Space: Cairo Malls in Two Egyptian Novels.” P.548

¹⁵⁰ Monbiot, George. “Neoliberalism is Creating Loneliness. That’s What’s Wrenching Society Apart.”

¹⁵¹ Agnew, John. *Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*. London: Sage, 2011. P.5

undermines the city spirit and negates the urban experience of its citizens. The more the city is dissolved, the more its inhabitants are expelled to their isolated selves. It is a vicious cycle of violence that eventually ends up with the narrator killing himself.

The (I(ins(I)de)I) vanishes when surrendered by fear, phobia and loneliness. The two narrative poles in *Being Abbas El Abd* do not unify. On the contrary, Cairo overpowers the narrative and solely exists as both, a defeater and a defeated city.

The City as a Battlefield
Mapping *Utopia* by Ahmed Khaled Towfik

In her Newberry Award winning speech, Lois Lowry speaks to her audience about the magic of the circular journey in literature, and says:

“The truth that we go out and come back, and that what we come back to is changed, and so are we. Perhaps I have been traveling in a circle too. Things come together and become complete.”¹⁵²

Like Lois Lowry, I have been travelling in a circle too. I started reading literature twenty years ago when my school mate had given me a pocket novel written by Ahmed Khaled Towfik. That first one was called *Usturat Haris al-Kahf* (The Myth of the Cave’s Guard). It was quite a complicated novel for a beginner because it started at its middle. I was about to give up on reading completely, but my persistent friend kept challenging me week after week with new novels. Towfik captured me on the third week, when I read *Usturat ras Medusa* (The Myth of Medusa’s Head); this short novel was my gateway to the world of literature as a reader, and later as a writer and a researcher. Now I write this chapter of my thesis on Towfik’s first adult fiction novel *Utopia*, and I feel that a journey is complete. I come back to the text and to Towfik’s world after I have changed, and attempted to rediscover his world with the eyes of a literary scholar, a passionate one.

Introducing Ahmed Khaled Towfik’s World

Ahmed Khaled Towfik was born in Tanta in 1962. His father, a cotton trader, owned a vast library which contained British, American and Russian classics.¹⁵³ Towfik gained access to such great works at a relatively young age. His father used to get him British crime and detective stories, which he enjoyed as a child and valued as he grew up.¹⁵⁴ He

¹⁵² Lowry, Lois. Newbery Acceptance Speech. June, 1994. P.7.

¹⁵³ Yaqoob, Tahira. “Ahmed Khalid Towfik, Egypt’s doctor of escapism.” *The National*. April 26, 2017. Retrieved at: <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/ahmed-khalid-towfik-egypts-doctor-of-escapism>

¹⁵⁴ توفيق، أحمد خالد. *اللغز وراء السطور*. دار الشروق. 2017. ص89

started writing at the age of ten, and he mostly wrote poetry and horror stories. As a child, Towfik used to be scared of many things. He jotted his fears down on a piece of paper, only to realize, that writing about horror helps him overcome his fears. In an interview on *al-Jazeera* channel, Towfik comments on this aspect and says: "It is as if horror writing draws a magical circle around one and his family. It keeps me behind the gun and not in front of it."¹⁵⁵

In 1989, Towfik stopped writing poetry after he had come accidentally by Amal Donqol's poems, and found that this *Saidi* poet had said it all "in a much deeper, courageous and brilliant way."¹⁵⁶ Luckily, he continued writing horror stories until he felt the urge to share his writings with a larger public. At the age of 32, Towfik decided he wanted to write for youth; a target group that have been already addressed by more than one series, among the most popular ones were *Milaff al-Mostaqbal* (The Future File) and *Ragul al-Mostahil* (The Man of the Impossible) by Nabil Faruq. Both series were published by the Modern Arab Association, and both were largely spy fiction. Therefore, Towfik thought of presenting a new horror series featuring the old professor of hematology, Rif'at Ismail, who happens to be a ghost hunter.¹⁵⁷ The series name is *Ma Waraa al-ṭabi'ah* (The Metaphysical or The Supernatural), and in each issue, Rif'at Ismail is misfortunately led to a new adventure with some metaphysical power. The series had unmistakably a moral message articulated in a good literary style and an exciting plot.

¹⁵⁵ لقاء مع د. أحمد خالد توفيق. برنامج حالة إبداع. قناة الجزيرة. 2010. الدقيقة: 1:45 و حتى 2:42. رابط الحلقة:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39Tveor0Dzs&spfreload=1>

¹⁵⁶ توفيق، أحمد خالد. *اللغز وراء السطور*. ص. 194. "لكن لنقل بصراحة إن أمل دنقل قال كل ما أردت قوله بشكل أعمق و أشجع و أروع."

¹⁵⁷ لقاء مع د. أحمد خالد توفيق. الدقيقة 2:49 و حتى 3:37

Shortly after, *Ma Waraa al-ṭabi'ah* was not able to contain all of the ideas Towfik had. Therefore, he added Fantazia (Fantasy), a series featuring Abir Abd Al-Rahman, a bookworm, who coincidentally finds a *dream generator*. As its name indicates, the device generates dreams out of the stories Abir reads. In each dream, Abir takes part in one literary work and changes its course. On the cover page of the first novel of this series, Towfik wrote:

“Escape! Escape!
Escape your street landmarks
The smell of papers on your desk
Escape the unchanging faces
Escape your memories, your concerns
Escape from all who were enemies to you, and from whomsoever you were an enemy..
Escape to the worlds of dream
To the city that has never existed and which would never exist except in the imagination of dreamers like me and you
Escape! Escape!”¹⁵⁸

From the world of dreams, Towfik moved to the medical thriller. The new series, Safari, features Alaa Abd al-Azim, a young physician who flees Egypt to work at Safari medical unit in Cameron, and ‘struggles to stay alive and to stay a doctor’ as the cover page suggests.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ توفيق، أحمد خالد. *فانتازيا*. المؤسسة العربية الحديثة. العدد الأول. النص بالعربية: "الفرار! الفرار!.. الفرار من معالم شارعك.. من رائحة الأوراق على مكتبك.. الفرار من أصحاب الوجوه التي لا تتغير.. الفرار من ذكرياتك.. من همومك.. من كل من كانوا لك أعداء، و من كل من كنت لهم عدوا.. الفرار إلى عوالم الحلم.. إلى مدينة لم و لن توجد إلا في مخيلة الحالمين مثلي و مثلك.. الفرار! الفرار!.." ¹⁵⁹ "مغامرات طبيب شاب يجاهد لكي يظل حيا و لكي يظل طبيبا."

Towfik graduated from the Medical School of Tanta in 1985, earned his PhD in Tropical diseases in 1997, and has been a lecturer in the same faculty since then. His medical background has allowed him to explore the genre of science fiction to which he added many works along his career. In an article titled *خيال علمي عربي.. هل هو خيال* (Arab Science Fiction.. Is it a Science Fiction?)¹⁶⁰ Towfik (2017) introduces his readers to different Western and Arabic definitions of the genre, its twenty different themes, and the potential of its development in the Arab world. Among the definitions he includes in his article is one by Robert A. Heinlein, who defines the genre as:

“A realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method.”¹⁶¹

In the introduction of the article, Towfik explains that for reasons related to cinema production and pulp magazines, the genre of science fiction (SF) has been largely dominated by space operas, but this does not mean that the genre is limited to the developments of science and technology. Since the mid-seventies, the term social science fiction has come into use to describe “SF that draws directly upon ideas from the social sciences,”¹⁶² and “engages in sociological speculation.”¹⁶³ As a genre, SF employs its representational capacity to imagine alternative or future worlds, and in this attempt, it

¹⁶⁰ توفيق، أحمد خالد. *اللغز وراء السطور*. ص. 89

¹⁶¹ The definition is written in Robert A. Heinlein own words which are found on ThoughtCo page:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/definitions-of-science-fiction-2957771>

¹⁶² Gerlach, Neil & Hamilton, Shyrl.N. “Introduction: A History of Social Science Fiction.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 30. 2003. P.164

¹⁶³ Ibid. P.165

questions the existing social relationship and political order.¹⁶⁴ To this subgenre, Ahmed Khaled Towfik's first adult fiction *Utopia* belongs.¹⁶⁵

Utopia is Towfik's most celebrated work and the only one translated into English by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing. In this novel, Towfik speculates about the development of the neoliberal city of Cairo in 2023 under the polarizing conditions that divided the society into the rich who isolated themselves in a gated community by the north coast, and the poor who inhabited the decayed city. The dehumanizing relationship that exists between both worlds calls into question the political and economic order that permitted such developments to take place.

Utopia: Writing a Post-Apocalyptic Dystopia

In an interview with Cheryl Morgan on the World Science Fiction Blog, Towfik classifies *Utopia* as a "post-apocalyptic dystopia."¹⁶⁶ Both post-apocalypse and dystopia are two popular themes that recur in many works of SF around the world. Post-apocalypse is the theme that "deals with stories set in the aftermath of catastrophe, whether the upheaval is a natural disaster or a human- or alien-caused Holocaust."¹⁶⁷ The dystopia, on the other hand, is the theme that imagines worlds that are worse than our own. The definition of dystopia in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction denotes that:

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ More about Arabic Science Fiction could be found in Ada Barbaro's book *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*. Read also the translated interview with the author "Science Fiction in Arabic: "It Was Not Born All of a Sudden" on Arabic Literature (in English). Retrieved at: <https://arablit.org/2013/09/30/science-fiction-in-arabic-it-was-not-born-all-of-a-sudden/>

¹⁶⁶ Morgan, Cheryl. The World SF blog. Retrieved at: <https://worldsf.wordpress.com/tag/ahmed-khalid-towfik/>

¹⁶⁷ "Post- Holocaust". The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. 2016. Retrieved at: <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/post-holocaust>

“Dystopian images are almost invariably images of future society, pointing fearfully at the way the world is supposedly going in order to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction. As hope for a better future grows, the fear of disappointment inevitably grows with it, and when any vision of a future utopia incorporates a manifesto for political action or belief, opponents of that action or belief will inevitably attempt to show that its consequences are not utopian but horrible.”¹⁶⁸

Set in 2023, the catastrophe that hit Egypt is the decay of the middle class. There are two major reasons that stand behind this disaster. First, the world has shifted from using oil to using biroil, a synthetic fuel developed in 2010, which consequently reduced the oil-producing countries of the Middle East into peripheral states again. The Egyptian labor at these countries was forced to return to Egypt, which in turn increased the burden on the national economy. Second, Israel has inaugurated an alternative waterway that replaced the Suez Canal, and reduced one of the major sources of Egypt’s national income. Faced with both crises, the state privatized the public sector and sold the Pharaonic antiquities, Egypt’s national past, to fund its need for the new fuel. Soon, the government disappeared, and the imported fuel became exclusively owned by the rich who isolated themselves inside a gated community on the north coast called “Utopia”¹⁶⁹. Deprived of public services and energy, the whole population outside Utopia, the Others, fell into extreme poverty, and the city of Cairo retreated to a pre-modern state.

Long before Towfik imagined *Utopia*, two writers were able to anticipate the diffusion of the great cities of the 19th century, and the development of a post-urban kind of agglomeration. These two writers were H.G Wells, the father of science fiction, and the architect and writer Frank Lloyd Wright. In his 1900 essay “The Probable Diffusion

¹⁶⁸“Dystopias”. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. 2016. Retrieved at: <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/dystopias>

¹⁶⁹ *Utopia* italicized when refers to the novel. Utopia without italicization refers to the gated community.

of Great Cities”, H.G Wells predicted the decentralization of great cities, and the development of urban regions which will consist of a series of villages connected together by high speed rail transportation. Wells based his prophecy on the development of a vast network of railway lines that facilitated movement across wide landscapes and therefore reduced the central pull which characterizes the city in the first place.¹⁷⁰

Thirty years later, and with the emergence of automobiles and trucks, Wright built on Wells ideas and argued that “the great city was no longer modern” and that “it was destined to be replaced by a decentralized society.” He called this new society the Broadacre city which would benefit from the automobile ownership and the network of superhighways, which when combined, replaces the need for the concentration of population in a particular spot:

“Indeed, any such clustering was necessarily inefficient, a point of congestion rather than of communication. The city would thus spread over the countryside at densities low enough to permit each family to have its own homestead and even to engage in part-time agriculture. Yet, these homesteads would not be isolated; their access to the superhighway grid would put them within easy reach of as many jobs and specialized services as any nineteenth century urbanite. Traveling at more than sixty miles an hour, each citizen would create his own city within the hundreds of square miles he could reach in an hour’s drive.”¹⁷¹

Both Wells and Wright imagined the emergence of vast shopping areas within the new urban regions. While Wells imagined that the new city itself would be essentially a bazar, Wright predicted that roadside markets would emerge at the intersection of

¹⁷⁰ Fishman, Robert. “Beyond Suburbia: The Rise of the Technoburb.” *The City Reader*. Sixth edition. 2016. P.86. Retrieved at: <https://books.google.com/eg/books?id=hAltCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA83&lpg=PA83&dq=Beyond+Suburbia:+The+Rise+of+the+Technoburb&source=bl&ots=ON4-G34eZj&sig=nzCkuM5tGyawfoaVnFZiVUCNCQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiuzJnWibHTAhULsBQKHRTiD6UQ6AEI NjAD#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹⁷¹ Ibid

highways, and would be designed as “places of cooperative exchange, not only of commodities, but of cultural facilities”¹⁷² as well. Finally, this design would eventually strip the city of its entertaining function which would probably lead to the disappearance of the city itself.

Utopia Turns into Dystopia

In his essay “Beyond Suburbia: The Rise of the Technoburb”, Robert Fishman describes Wells’ and Wright’s imaginaries as ‘utopian’, “an image of the future presented as somehow inevitable yet without any sustained attention to how it would actually be achieved.”¹⁷³ In his novel, Towfik attempts to show the horrible consequences of utopia as imagined by Wells and Wright. In the novel, Utopia is depicted as a castle of consumption that is protected by giant gates and retired marine officers. This urban enclave is divided into zones: The parks, schools, worship places, palaces, malls and an airport. The rich in Utopia “made their money from the Others’ flesh- from their dreams, their hopes their pride and their health.”¹⁷⁴ The older generation in Utopia is composed of businessmen who monopolize major industries, and offer their products to the huge market outside Utopia at high prices. Their abandoned wives spend most of their time shopping in the malls to overcome their emotional and physical distress. Their kids, now teenagers, are extremely bored of their smooth and adventure-less lives. Sex and drugs are available anytime and for everyone in this contained world. The only mistake that Utopian youth are not supposed to make is destroying the property of their neighbors. When this happens, the parents formally meet to compensate each other and internally

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid

¹⁷⁴ Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, Doha, 2011. P. 12. The text in Arabic: "لقد صنعوا ثرواتهم من لحم الأغيار وأحلامهم وآمالهم وكبرياتهم وصحتهم."

resolve the conflict. Fearing public dissent, the Utopians established an airport inside their gates to facilitate their escape outside of the country in case of social turmoil.

“Then the private airport: the airport is there, of course, so that you won’t be forced to go outside. In the past, my people were obsessed by the notion of having to flee to the airport if the Others on the outside revolted- the trip to the airport would be difficult, terrifying and dangerous. The Others would block the path of their cars and rip their passengers to shreds.”¹⁷⁵

Contrary to Wells’ and Wright’s views, the city outside Utopia does not disappear. Wells assumed that the diffusion of the prosperous classes into the new urban regions would, by default, attract the less affluent, working classes outside the city in search for job opportunities in the new regions. Thus, the old city would be emptied of both the rich and poor populations alike who would scatter on a wide landscape of the new urban regions.¹⁷⁶ This vision does not materialize in Towfik’s *Utopia* due to two main reasons. First, the prosperous classes did not fairly accumulate their wealth, but they benefited from the state corruption and negligence in building their business empires. Second, and as a result of the injustices inflicted by Utopia in the first place, the rich appropriated all means of transportation and communication in this world, which hindered the mobility of the poor within their own city, and limited their opportunity to diffuse into Utopia and work there. Wells and Wright’s models were built on the multiplicity of villages that would stretch along the length of the countryside; hence, offering more jobs to the working classes. But Towfik’s Utopia is the only urban and affluent center in an impoverished circumference. The social structure that Towfik draws

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. P. 13. The text in Arabic: "ثم المطار الداخلي.. هناك مطار طبعاً حتى لا تضطر للخروج.. في الماضي كان يسيطر على قومي هاجس الهرب للمطار لو أن الآخرين بالخارج ثاروا.. رحلة المطار ستكون شاقة و مريعة و خطيرة.. سوف يعترض الأغيار طريق السيارات و يمزقون من فيها."

¹⁷⁶ Wells, H. G. *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*. Harper, New York, 1902. P.57.

in his novel resembles what Sabry Hafez describes as a “dinosaur-shaped social structure: a tiny head—the super-rich—presiding over an ever-growing body of poverty and discontent.”¹⁷⁷ This tiny center permits a little group of workers to commute daily between Utopia and Cairo to do the jobs that Utopians are not supposed to do. This leaves the wider population of Cairo jobless and with no economic opportunity at all. Towfik’s *Utopia*, therefore, depicts the probable *segregation* of a great city. It is not the probable diffusion of the most affluent outside the city that makes up for the dystopian side of Wells and Wright’s utopia, but how the diffusion takes place and who pays for its cost. In Egypt, the poor pays for the cost of the diffusion of the rich into their gated communities, this is another socio-political product of economic neoliberalization.¹⁷⁸

“At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the last census to be held, there were thirty-five million Egyptians living below the poverty line. Unemployment, which reached its highest global level, stood at ten million. Note that 78 percent of those committing rape were unemployed: that is to say, the crime of rape is really a crime by an entire class of society. Not to mention, of course, the dissolution of the middle class that, in any society, plays the role of graphite rods in nuclear reactors: they slow down the reaction and, if it weren’t for them, the reactor would explode.

(...)

That is exactly what happened, but the explosion didn’t do away with the wealthy class. It decimated what remained of the middle class, and turned society into two poles and two peoples.

Only the wealthy class realized that there was no life for it unless it became completely isolated, following the same logic behind medieval castles, when rulers would hold decadent parties while pestilence decimated the sea of poverty outside.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Hafez, Sabry. “Urban Transformation and Narrative Form”. p.48

¹⁷⁸ Denis, Eric. “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital? From Walled City to Gated Communities.” *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo;New York; 2006. P.14

¹⁷⁹ Towfiq, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.108. The text in Arabic: “في أوائل القرن الحادي والعشرين، و في آخر إحصاء أمكن عمله، كان هناك 35 مليون مصري يعيشون تحت خط الفقر، و كذا كانت البطالة التي وصلت إلى أعلى معدلاتها العالمية (10 ملايين عاطل) لاحظ أن 78% من مرتكبي الاغتصاب عاطلون.. أي أن جريمة الاغتصاب هي في الحقيقة اغتصاب للمجتمع. دعك بالطبع من من ذوبان الطبقة الوسطى التي تلعب في أي مجتمع دور قضبان الجرافيت في المفاعلات الذرية.. إنها تبطل التفاعل ولولاها لانفجر المفاعل.. مجتمع بلا طبقة وسطى هو مجتمع مؤهل للانفجار..

In his article “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital? From Walled City to Gated Communities”, Eric Denis (2006) explains that, as a phenomenon, gated communities started in Egypt in 1994 when the Ministry of Housing began to sell lots of land on the desert margins of Cairo. This action was preceded by Egypt’s approval to implement the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program dictated by the IMF and the World Bank. This program aimed at transforming the economic apparatus in Egypt through different economic policies and tools. Privatization was one of the essential tools of economic reform because it aimed at eliminating the burden of both public sector and public services.¹⁸⁰ In order to stimulate the flow of capital, the state “opened vast expanses of territory to be divided up amongst a handful of private developers”¹⁸¹, privatizing an area that exceeded hundred square kilometers of Egypt’s once public land (till the year 2006)¹⁸². Accordingly, “dozens of luxury gated communities, accompanied by golf courses, amusement parks, clinics, and private universities have burgeoned along the beltways like their siblings, the shopping malls.”¹⁸³ Shortly after, the supply of luxurious communities exceeded the demand of middle class Cairenes.¹⁸⁴ Eric Denis argues that, in order to create a need, “promoters (of gated communities) exploit more

(...)

فقط أدركت الطبقة الثرية أنه لا حياة لها مالم تنعزل بالكامل، و بنفس منطق قلاع القرون الوسطى عندما كان الحكام يقيمون الحفلات الماجنة بينما الطاعون يفتك بمحيط الفقر الخارجي.

¹⁸⁰ Denis, Eric. “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital? From Walled City to Gated Communities” *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo;New York. 2006. P. 58

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² Ibid. P.49

¹⁸³ Ibid

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. P.52

and more the stigmatization of the ‘street’ spread by the media on a global scale, and finally of the Arab metropolis as a terrorist risk factory that is necessarily Islamic.”¹⁸⁵

Creating an Internal Other: Throwback to the Nineties

The process of risk construction and criminalizing an internal other, as Diane Singerman (2011) argues, is political in nature and “can only be understood within the context of increased economic, political and social polarization in Egypt.”¹⁸⁶ After the liberalization of the economy, the state has abandoned its responsibility of building public housing for the lower income population, and both the state and the private sector built affordable and luxurious housing for the middle and upper classes. As a result, the lower income population has built informal housing mostly on agricultural land. Despite the huge expanding of informal areas, the state did not address this problem except after it posed a political threat.¹⁸⁷ Various Islamic groups were growing inside the informal housing belt, but the Islamic Group (al-Gama’a al-Islamiah) in *Imbaba* was especially dangerous because it was operating within Cairo and was using a violent rhetoric. The clash between the Islamic Group and the state was inevitable especially after the 1992 earthquake which hit Egypt severely and exposed both the poor housing infrastructure and the poor disaster relief modalities practiced by the state in the face of such catastrophe. Accordingly, various Islamic groups had filled the vacuum of the government authority and raised donations for the affected households. These measures

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. P.49

¹⁸⁶ Singerman, Diane. “The Seige of Imbaba, Egypt’s Internal ‘Other,’ and the Criminalization of Politics.” *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*. I.B.Tauris, London, 2011. P.111

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.115

encouraged the Islamic Group in *Imbaba*, as claimed by many scholars, to confront the state and announce the establishment of the Islamic state, the Emirate of *Imbaba*.¹⁸⁸

Aware of both the ideological and material threat posed by the Islamic Group, the regime had, in Marx words, to reproduce its conditions of production.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, it employed both its repressive and ideological state apparatuses to crush the competing group. On the 8th of December 1992, *Imbaba* was besieged by 16,000 security personnel led by 2,000 officers. Over a period of six weeks, few people were killed and “hundreds of local residents were arbitrarily arrested, harassed and imprisoned.”¹⁹⁰ On the other hand, the state’s media criminalized the whole population of informal areas across Egypt, describing them as “backward, dangerous (and) uncivilized other.”¹⁹¹ In Singerman words, “The stigmatization of whole communities has a political utility and calculus to it that can often be quite effective, in the short term, for shoring up weak regimes and avoiding responsibility of difficult national problems.”¹⁹²

It was therefore in the interest of both the state and investors to associate the city with poverty, violence and criminality. This risk constructing discourse legitimizes the erection of borders and walls. As Blakely and Snyder (1997) argue “the setting of boundaries is always a political act”¹⁹³ because it determines both the inclusion and exclusion of social groups in and from the gated community. Being a sociopolitical

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. P.114

¹⁸⁹ Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” *“Lenin and Philosophy” and Other Essays*. 1970. Translated from French by: Ben Brewster. P.1

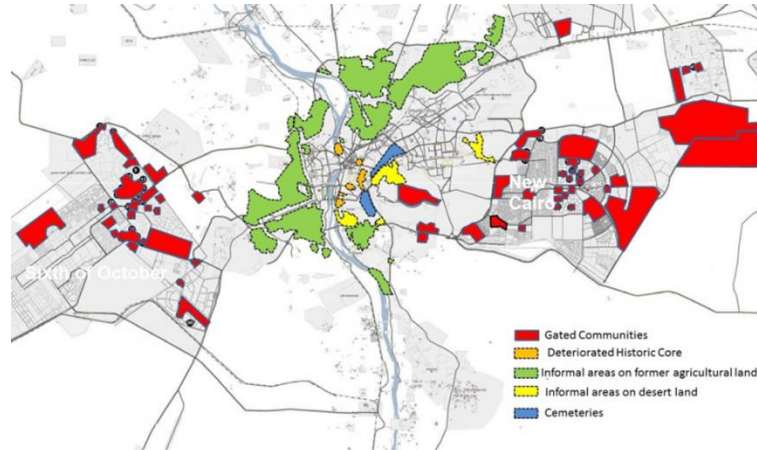
¹⁹⁰ Singerman, Diane. P.113

¹⁹¹ Ibid. P.116

¹⁹² Ibid. P.112

¹⁹³ Blakely, Edward J., and Mary G. Snyder. *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C, 1997. P.1

product of neoliberalism, “the gated communities, as a spatial plan, authorize the elites who live there to continue the forced march for economic, oligopolistic liberalization, without redistribution, while protecting themselves from the ill effects of its pollution and its risks.”¹⁹⁴



Map 10- Urban fabric ruptured in Cairo

While Towfik imagined Utopia to exist almost two hundred kilometers away from Cairo, the neoliberal reality has ruptured the urban fabric of the city itself by expanding Cairo to the east and west deserts. The above map shows the fragmentation taking place within the city space, with the rich inhabiting desert communities in New Cairo and Sixth of October settlements, and the poor inhabiting informal communities established on agricultural and desert lands near the center. It was expected that the 2011 revolution in Egypt would put an end to this spatial injustice; however, the real estate market, as Mona Abaza (2016) argues, has continued to flourish after the revolution.¹⁹⁵ In the aftermath of

¹⁹⁴ Denis, Eric. “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital? From Walled City to Gated Communities.” P.50

¹⁹⁵ Abaza, Mona. "Violence, Dramaturgical Repertoires and Neoliberal Imaginaries in Cairo." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 33, n° 7-8, 2016, pp. 111-135. P.111-112

the revolution, the authority of the army has further consolidated. Through its control of desert land, the army has become more visibly involved in the real estate sector especially after “recently taking over the supervision of the new capital city and Sheikh Zayed, extending to some 16,000 acres.”¹⁹⁶ On the other hand, and as Abaza’s argument continues, the escalating violence taking place inside the city center between the revolutionaries and the counter revolutionary groups has contributed to the increasing centrifugal power expelling the well –to- do classes to the desert cities which aspire to “replicate the utopia of Dubai” in Cairo. As a result, class divisions continued to grow even more widely after the revolution.

“There’s a social imbalance that had led to the state we’re in, but it’s an imbalance that should continue. Everyone who tries to reform it risks losing us everything. This is a situation like McCarthyism in the United States, when Americans in the last century felt that they had to defeat every leftist trend because it threatened their very existence.”¹⁹⁷

Rupturing the Urban Fabric: The City as a Battlefield

The urban space is completely ruptured in *Utopia* with the society bluntly divided between the haves and have nots. The city of Cairo is disintegrated by poverty which erodes morals “just as metal is corroded by dripping water”¹⁹⁸. This deteriorating condition further justifies the isolation of the rich behind the gates:

“After a minute in this world, I concluded that these people were just pretending to be alive. They pretend they’re eating meat, and pretend that they’re drinking alcohol, and of course they pretend they’re drunk and have forgotten their problems. They pretend they have the right to err and sin.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. P.113

¹⁹⁷ Towfiq, Ahmed Khaled and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.7. The text in Arabic: "هناك خلل إجتماعي أدى إلى ما نحن فيه، و لكنه خلل يجب أن يستمر.. كل من يحاول الإصلاح يجازف بأن يفقد كل شيء. هذا وضع شبيه بالمكاثرة في الولايات المتحدة، عندما شعر الأمريكيان في القرن الماضي أن عليهم أن يقهروا كل نزعة يسارية لأنها تهدد كيانهم ذاته."

¹⁹⁸ Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.37. The text in Arabic: "لكن الأخلاق تتآكل في الفقر كما يتآكل المعدن الذي يقطر فوقه الماء."

Only then did I understand why we isolated ourselves in Utopia.”¹⁹⁹

“I saw him standing, worn out by exhaustion. With the loss of blood and hunger wearing him down, he couldn’t undertake this pursuit to the end. I saw him bend over, his palms on his knees, trying to catch his breath. Then I saw him look up as the helicopter slowly and calmly circled around him. It had all the time in the world: there is no target clearer than an unarmed man in the sands of the desert. A man worn out by running. A man worn out by hunger. A man worn out by desperation.”²⁰⁰

"رأيتُه وهو يتوقف و قد أنهكه التعب.. لفقر الدم و الجوع اللذين يفتكان به لا يمكنه أن يخوض هذه المطاردة: Ibid. P.4. The text in Arabic: ²⁰⁰ النهاية.. رأيتُه ينحني ليلاصق كفيه بركبتيه طلباً للهواء، ثم رأيتُه ينظر لأعلى بينما الهلوكيتور تدور حوله في تودة و دون قلق.. إن معها كل الوقت.. لا يوجد هدف أوضح من رجل مجرد من السلاح و سطر رمال الصحراء.. رجل أنهكه الركض.. رجل أنهكه الجوع.. رجل أنهكه القنوط...."

The city of Cairo in *Utopia* does not disappear but transforms to a battlefield. After being a target of economic violence in *Being Abbas El Abd*, the city in *Utopia* is militarily targeted. Militarization of urban space is a term used by urban theorists to refer to the measures borrowed from military to limit movement inside the city space. These measures vary according to the anticipated threats from road blocks and barbed wires to tanks, armored vehicles and fortified walls.²⁰¹ In their joint paper “Living Beirut’s Security Zones: An Investigation of the Modalities and Practice of Urban Security”, Fawaz, Harb and Gharbieh (2012) argue that “militarization of urban space “threatens the very core of what urbanization means in terms of encounters with strangers, the freedom of anonymity, or the potential of political action for which the city has long been celebrated.”

Denied of the urban experience and its associated excitement, the youth in Utopia have devised their own experience in the city. For the youth in Utopia, hunting people has become a test of manhood where one sneaks the gates, hunts a man and amputates one of his limbs as a valuable souvenir to show to his peers. By the end of the adventure, he calls his parents to send a helicopter which collects him and his hunt.

“Azuz entered the ruined buildings to relieve himself one night, when three guys from Utopia seized him. They were forced to kill him when they were unable to abduct him. Three powerfully built young men with cruelty, coldness and condescension in their eyes.

People here only found out what had happened to him when they saw the Marines’ helicopter circling over the ruins, its bright searchlights sweeping over the place. At that point, they knew that one of them had fallen.

²⁰¹ Fawaz, Mona, Harb, Mona and Gharbieh, Ahmad. "Living Beirut's Security Zones: An Investigation of the Modalities and Practice of Urban Security: Living Beirut's Security Zones." *City & Society*, vol. 24, n° 2, 2012, pp. 173-195. P.176

People began pelting the helicopter with stones, and Mursi pulled out the pistol he had manufactured himself in a metal shop and fired off two shots at the helicopter.

The noisy beast rose higher as it pointed its searchlights in every direction, and then descended a little, making it possible for them to see a Marine sitting by helicopter's open door. He had placed the machine gun between his thighs and began firing bullets indiscriminately at the angry crowd.

A lot of them fell dead. Mursi himself fell dead.

The helicopter entered the ruins, then a rope-ladder dangled from it. The three guys climbed out the ladder, shouting wildly, and then the machine ascended. The sons of bitches thought they were acting in a Hollywood movie about the Vietnam War. The boys got inside the helicopter and they looked down on the angry crowds. One of them brandished something bloody in his hand as he let out a stream of curses.

(...)

The helicopter moved off into the distance.

But it left behind more blind, black hatred that could find no outlet to pour itself into.”²⁰²

In his paper “Vertical Security in the Megacity Legibility, Mobility and Aerial Politics”, Peter Adey (2010) explains that “the desire for the helicopter’s elevation has a background in colonial history, high modernist planning and authoritarian regimes.”²⁰³ The helicopter gives a distant perspective that makes the city legible and provides “situational awareness of the battlefield.”²⁰⁴ As a tool, the helicopter avoids ground involvement and targets the city from afar, “symbolically realizing the social

²⁰² Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P. 77 & 78. The text in Arabic: "عزوز دخل الخرائب ليقتضي حاجته في تلك الليلة عندما ظفر به ثلاثة من يتوبيا.. اضطروا لقتله عندما لم يتمكنوا من خطفه. ثلاثة فتية أقوىاء البنية في عيونهم قسوة و برود و تعال.. لم يعرفوا ما حل به إلا عندما رأوا طائرة المارينز تحلق فوق الخرائب، و كشافاتها الساطعة تمسح المكان. عندها عرفوا أن أحدهم سقط.. راح الناس يقذفون الهليكوبتر بالحجارة، و أخرج (مرسي) المسدس الذي قام بصنعه في ورشة خراطة، و أطلق طلقتين على الطائرة.. ارتفع الوحش المزمجر و هو يصوب كشافاته في كل اتجاه، ثم هبط قليلا، و أمكنهم أن يروا جندي المارينز الجالس على باب الطائرة المفتوح و قد وضع البندقية الآلية بين فخذه، وراح يطلق الرصاص بلا تمييز على جموع الغاضبين.. سقط كثيرون.. سقط (مرسي) ذاته.. و الطائرة تدخل إلى الخرائب، ثم يتدلى منها سلم من الحبال.. يتسلق الفتية الثلاثة السلم و هم بصرخون صرخات وحشية، ثم ترتفع الطائرة.. أولاد الكلب حسبوا أنهم يمثلون فيلما أمريكيا عن حرب فيتنام.. الفتية صاروا داخل الطائرة و هم ينظرون من أعلى إلى الجموع الغاضبة.. أحدهم لوح بشيء دام في يده و أطلق سبة بذينة.. (...) ابتعدت الطائرة.. لكنها تركت المزيد من الحقد الأعمى الأسود الذي لا يجد قناة ليسيل فيها..."

²⁰³ Adey, Peter. "Vertical Security in the Megacity: Legibility, Mobility and Aerial Politics." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 27, n° 6, 2010, pp. 51-67. P.53

²⁰⁴ Ibid. P.54

abandonment that renders the favela population ‘non-citizens’, targets and unforeseen or ‘unpreventable’ collateral damage. What is left is a life constantly exposed to death.”²⁰⁵

Hunting takes place three times in the novel: In *Bab al-Shi‘riya*,²⁰⁶ *Ataba*²⁰⁷ and *Shubra*.²⁰⁸ The three neighborhoods are old, popular, crowded and are described in the novel as informal.²⁰⁹ Thus, the helicopter is needed to make such urban mesh legible to the intruders.

Despite being the most affluent, powerful and mobile, the youth of Utopia do not acquire an urban experience in Cairo. Their experience is more of a colonial one. After the city has transformed into a battlefield, those who are still capable of traversing the borders are mostly colonialists. It is important now to note that both *The Heron* and *Being Abbas El Abd* subtly predicted this colonial development of the city. On the eve of the Students’ Movement in 1972, Yusif al-Naggar’s friend Abd al-Qadir told him about “how society had changed, and how its people, soil, and trees were there to be exploited by whoever was willing and able.”²¹⁰ In *Being Abbas El Abd*, the narrator explains that “anyone who reads the history of most Third World countries will discover a painful tragedy. Many have been liberated by the revolution from the ‘foreign occupier’ only to fall into the clutches of the ‘national occupier.’”²¹¹ National Occupation is thus one of the main threats that concerned the writers of the city. In order to produce its conditions of production, the ideology is reinforced by the repressive power of undemocratic regimes.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. P.53

²⁰⁶ توفيق، أحمد خالد. يتوبيا. دار ميريت. 2008. ص 37.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. P.42

²⁰⁸ Ibid. P.102

²⁰⁹ Ibid. P.40

²¹⁰ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliott Colla. *The Heron*. P.77

²¹¹ Alaidy, Ahmed, and Humphrey T. Davies. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P.36

The more repression is applied, the more the city disintegrates. The more the city develops into a battlefield, the more the urban experience of its inhabitants transforms into a colonial one. In such contested space, social mediators become surrounded by ever growing hostile forces which reject any attempt to mediate between the two opposite worlds.

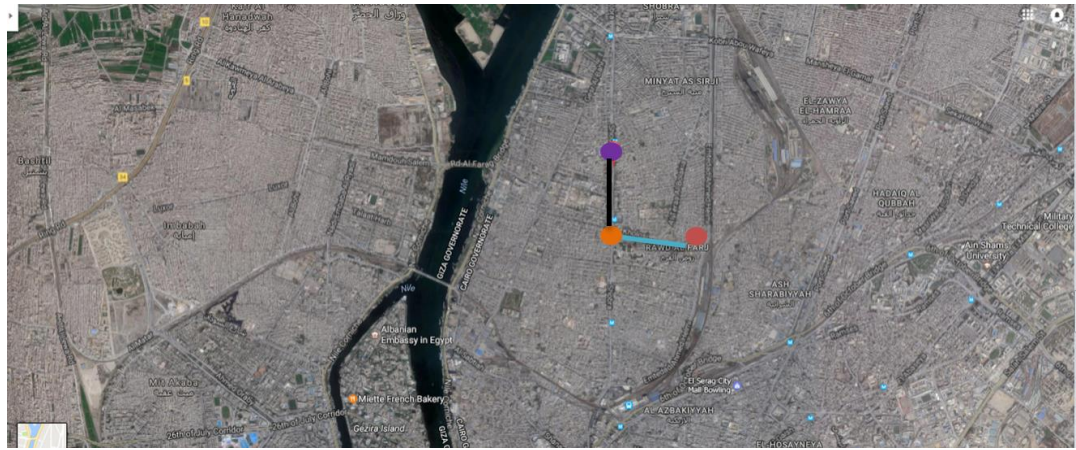
The Third Narrative Pole

The narrative unfolds as Alaa, the narrator from Utopia, pursue to beat his boredom by undertaking the test of manhood. He and his girlfriend Germinal manage to steal the IDs and clothes of two workers in Utopia and ride a bus that carries the workers back to their neighborhoods. The bus stops at *Shubra* where they start their search for a suitable hunt. Alaa finds his prey in Somaya, a prostitute standing at the door of one of the shacks. He approaches her and agrees to take her in the ruins, but when they are alone and he attacks her, he and Germinal are discovered by the guys who watch over Somaya. The guys would have torn them apart, but the sudden intervention of Gaber rescues them.

Gaber is a survivor of the apocalypse. He is a university graduate who entered college at the turn of the 21st century, but couldn't find any job afterwards. However, his relationship with books continued and reading has made him a cultured man "in an environment that isn't his own."²¹² To pursue a powerful position, Gaber joins Abd el-Zahir's gang. Despite being a thug, Abd el-Zaher is a good guy who protects Gaber and his sister Safyia. Worried that Safyia would go hungry, steal or turn to a prostitute, Gaber continues to live and adapt to such crushing circumstances. The boundaries of

²¹² Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.83. The text in Arabic: "أعتقد أنه من الطراز المتقف في وسط ليس وسطه"

Gaber's world are confined between the underground metro stations where he meets Abdel-Zahir's gang, and his shack where he lives and Safyia at a walking distance from the metro line. It is worth noting that this confined mobility is of class character, where inhabitants of Shubra cannot afford going outside the neighborhood because they lack both connections and means of transport.



Map11- The boundaries of Gaber's world: The black line indicates Shubra Street. The orange circle is the first subway station, the purple one is Saint Teresa station. The red circle indicates Gaber's shack (the place of the shack is not clearly determined in Shubra, however, I choose to locate it at a walking distance from the subway station)

On that night, when Gaber sees Alaa and Germinal surrounded by the angry men, Germinal reminds him of his sister. That is why he manages to disperse the crowd and offers to shelter the guy and the girl from Utopia under his roof.

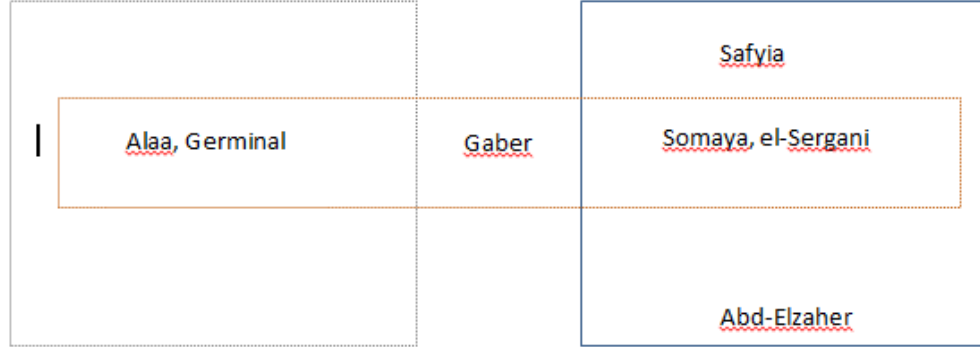


Figure 1- The field of power in *Utopia*

The above diagram is inspired by Moretti's visualization of the fields of power in *Lost Illusions*. In his diagram, Moretti maps the places where characters meet and interact. He concludes that all spaces include some groups *because* they exclude the others, "and much of Balzac's pathos lies percisely in the invisible class lines; in the pressures and counterpressures to traverse them, or to reject the ambitious intruder."²¹³ In *Utopia*, Alaa and Germinal are intruders to the Others' territory. If discovered, they will be violently rejected. Being a cultured man, Gaber protects them, and is therefore threatened by el-Sergani, Somaya's uncle and employer, to inform Abd el-Zaher about the two strangers.

"I wasn't worried about Bayoumi. I was worried about Abd el-Zahir.

Bayoumi and his gang were the enemy and they always represented a danger, while Abd el-Zahir and his gang were the source of my protection and prestige. If they turned against me, then I'd be done for."²¹⁴

Gaber is the third narrative pole. "He intersects the narrative line, and changes its course."²¹⁵ If it was not for his intervention, Alaa and Germinal would have been killed at

²¹³ Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.113

²¹⁴ Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.122. The text in Arabic: "لم أكن أحمل هم (بيومي).. كنت أحمل هم (عبد الظاهر) و شلته يمثلون الأعداء، و هم خطر في كل وقت و كل زمن، بينما (عبد الظاهر) و شلته هم مصدر حمايتي و نقوذي، ولو انقلبوا علي فأنا ضائع.."

the very beginning of their adventure in the territory of the Others. Like Yusif al-Naggār in *The Heron*, his middle position between Utopia and Cairo is facilitated by being a cultured man who does not belong to either place. Gaber describes his position and says: “In every situation, I am strange, different, peculiar, foolish, uncomfortable and unintegrated.”²¹⁶ He is well informed of the history of Utopia and its injustices, but at the same time he does not resolve to violence or revenge because he hated bloodshed. This is not an easy choice in such polarized environment.

As a third narrative pole, Gaber is surrounded by hostile forces that pressure him to take opposite actions. On one hand, his own safety demands he dismisses Alaa and Germinal from his home, but doing so would expose both of them to humiliation and violence. In her article “On Affect and Emotion as Dissent: The Kifāya Rhetoric in Pre-Revolutionary Egyptian Literature”, Christian Junge (2015) argues that “Gaber has not internalized the totalitarian dystopian system like the inhabitants of both Utopia and *Shubra*. Thus, in the midst of total decay, he preserves political memory and resists moral corruption.”²¹⁷ Gaber hates violence, and this hatred is his sole proof that he is still a human being. To stay human is his only line of defense against both Utopia and the Others:

“But in fact, I don’t want bloodshed. I don’t want people killed. That’s the sticking point for everything: the sole proof I have that I am still human, and haven’t turned into a hyena. In that

²¹⁵ Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.108

²¹⁶ Towfīk, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.109. The text in Arabic: "في كل موضع أنا غريب مختلف شاذ أحمق غير متكيف غير مندمج.."

²¹⁷ Junge, Christian. “On Affect and Emotion as Dissent: The Kifāya Rhetoric in Pre-Revolutionary Egyptian Literature.” *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*. Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden. 2015. P.261

regard, I'm superior to them. I'm superior to my family and neighbours. I'm superior to what I was yesterday.

I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed.

The most important thing is that every moment makes me feel that the points of similarity between us are quite strong.

Here and there, we're both in love with violence.

Here and there, we both love drugs.

Here and there, we both avidly watch movies about rape.

Here and there, we both talk about religion all the time.

There they take drugs to escape boredom.

There they practice their religion because they are afraid of losing all of that, and they don't know why or how they deserved it.

Here we take drugs to forget the agony of the moment.

Here we practice our religion because we can't stand the thought that our efforts are nothing but scattered dust with no value. The human mind can't endure a terrifying idea like that, otherwise it would go mad.

So I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed."²¹⁸

Despite, or may be because of being isolated, the two worlds developed in similar patterns. Both worlds resolved to violence and were dehumanized. Segregation facilitates the process of dehumanization which happens, according to social psychology, when "the others are thought not to possess the same feelings, thoughts, values and purposes in life that we do,"²¹⁹ which then could lead to an abusive and destructive

²¹⁸ Ibid. The text in Arabic: هذه هي النقطة التي تحدد كل شيء.. الدليل الوحيد الذي يخبرني أنني مازلت آدميا و لم أتحول إلى ضبع. إنني في هذا أتفوق عليهما.. أتفوق على أهلي و جيراني.. أتفوق على ما كنته أمس.. لا أريد دما.. لا أريد قتلى.. الأهم أن كل لحظة تشعرنني بأن وجه التشابه بيننا قوية جدا. كلانا هنا و هناك نعشق العنف.. كلانا هنا و هناك نحب المخدرات. كلانا هنا و هناك نرى أفلام الاغتصاب في نهم.. كلانا هنا و هناك نتكلم عن الدين طيلة الوقت.. هناك يتعاطون المخدرات ليفروا من الملل.. هناك يحترفون الدين لأنهم يخشون أن يضيع هذا كله، و هم لا يعرفون لماذا ولا كيف استحقوه. هنا نحترف الدين لأننا لا نطبق أن تكون معاناتنا هباء بلا ثمن.. العقل البشري لا يتحمل فكرة مروعة كهذه و إلا جن.. لهذا لا أريد دما.. لا أريد قتلى..."

²¹⁹ Zimbardo, Philip G. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. Random House, New York, 2007. P.223

behavior towards them.²²⁰ Not only does dehumanization facilitate an abusive and violent behavior, but it also gradually transforms the dehumanizer into a subhuman. According to Martin Buber's philosophy, "humanized relationships are "I-Thou," while dehumanized relationships are "I—It." Over time, the dehumanizing agent is often sucked into the negativity of the experience, and then the "I" itself changes, to produce an "It-It" relationship between objects, or between agency and victim."²²¹

"Gaber said that it wouldn't interest me to know everything, which I would agree with. Following the activities of cockroaches is only interesting to entomologists.

I wouldn't ask her about anything. I wouldn't ask her why she ripped up old school notebooks or why she cut up cardboard boxes. I wouldn't ask her about the black liquid or why she collected broken matchsticks. I wouldn't ask her about mending plastic or scraping pieces of soap. I wouldn't ask about the water in the battery or tearing the sponge.

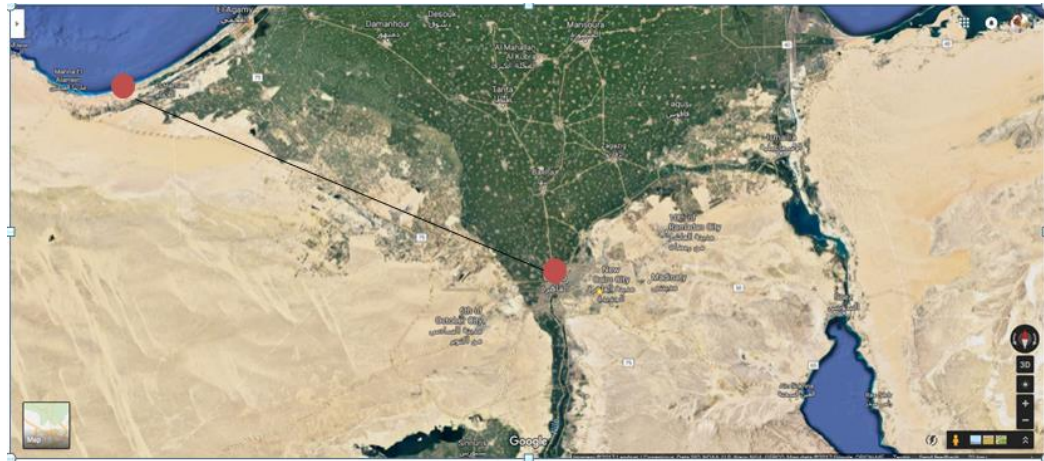
Cockroaches."²²²

Gaber plots Alaa and Germinal's escape to their world, this time through tunnels that the Others dug to connect them to Utopia. Again, the metaphor of the battlefield emerges. The borders of both worlds cannot be simply crossed; they can only be infringed.

²²⁰ Ibid. P.224

²²¹ Ibid. P.223

²²² Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.87, 88. The text in Arabic: "قال (جابر) إنه لا يهمني أن أعرف كل شيء و هذا رأيي. ليست متابعة نشاطات الصراصير ذات أهمية إلا لعلماء الحشرات. لن أسألها عن شيء.. لن أسألها عن تمزيق كراسات المدارس القديمة، ولا عن سبب تقطيع علب الورق المقوى.. لن أسألها عن السائل الأسود ولا عن سبب جمع أعواد الثقاب التالفة.. لن أسألها عن لحام البلاستيك ولا بري قطع صابون.. لن أسأل عن الماء في البطارية ولا تمزيق الليف.. صراصير.."



Map 12- The movement of Gaber between Shubra and Utopia

This story could have been about Alaa if he could give up on his colonial pursuit and replace it with an urban one. Unlike the circular journey of Lois Lowry, Alaa does not depart Utopia psychologically. He could not traverse the class lines and see Gaber and Safyia as humans. He raped Safyia and killed Gaber, and in this pursuit, he dehumanized himself.

The two different poles do not unify in *Utopia*; on the contrary, they confront each other. Shocked by the news of Gaber's assassination, the Others revolt and advance toward the gates. There is more than one possible end to this story, all of which were highlighted in the narrative. The Others could storm into Utopia like the French stormed the Bastille,²²³ or the crowds could disperse "after the first five hundred casualties" fall as the Marine officer anticipates²²⁴. Both scenarios do not save the city from its new framing as a battlefield, and do not permit a different relationship to emerge between the conflicting social groups; one that is based on justice and not exploitation. This time both

²²³ Ibid. P.71

²²⁴ Ibid. P.156

the city and the gated community are defeated. It is a no-win situation for both the colonized and the colonizers.

An Afternote

Given that Towfik writes to overcome his fears, therefore one can easily assume that *Utopia* was inspired by angst. In his interview with Bilal Fadl, Towfik describes *Utopia* as psychological pus²²⁵, and explains in a second interview that he is concerned about the increasing polarization in Egypt.²²⁶ In a third one he elaborates that the novel was based partially on a true story. This is the story that Towfik tells:

“A young man from a relatively poor family had got into university to study engineering. His parents had saved a lot of money to give him this start in life. He was invited by fellow students to visit one of these enclaves. They were out swimming, and some rich people were playing on jet skis. The student was hit by one of these jet skis and killed. There was no investigation or trial. The rich are above that.”²²⁷

As an old reader of Towfik, I can tell that Abir Abd al-Rahman, the heroine of *Fantazia*, and Gaber, the protagonist of *Utopia* share one central quality, that is, both cannot endure life without dreaming: “To wait for something. To be denied it. To shut your eyes at night and hope for something. To be promised something...”²²⁸ Dreams are central in this literary world which is shaped in relation to their presence or absence. It thus appears to me that the main fear that sparks *Utopia* is losing the ability to dream.

Analyzing *The Heron*, *Being Abbas El Abd* and *Utopia*, I am afraid to conclude that neoliberalism threatens the very act of dreaming. In *The Heron*, the novel ends with

²²⁵ برنامج عصير الكتب. الجزء الثاني. من الدقيقة 7:08 و حتى 7:23. رابط الحلقة:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVmtWvN4lhU>

²²⁶ لقاء مع د. أحمد خالد توفيق. برنامج حالة إبداع. قناة الجزيرة. 14 و حتى 14:34

²²⁷ Morgan, Cheryl. The World SF blog.

²²⁸ Towfik, Ahmed Khaled, and Chip Rossetti. *Utopia*. P.52. The text in Arabic: "أن تنتظر شيئاً.. أن تُحرم من شيء.. أن تغلق عينيك ليلاً و أنت تنتظر شيئاً.. أن تتلقى وعداً بشيء."

“The night was over. The calm had prevailed, like these dreams, began to retreat.”²²⁹ In *Being Abbas El Abd* we are told that “Hell, to simplify shamelessly, (is) being bereft of options.”²³⁰ And in *Utopia*, there is Gaber who only allows himself the privilege of dreaming while dying. What this suggests is that the neoliberal dream is not a democratic one. Not in the sense that the benefits of the neoliberal policies would not trickle down to everyone, but in the sense that it suppresses the notion that “man can make himself-- that we are what we choose to be.”²³¹ Collectively, the neoliberal dream makes “bread, freedom, dignity and justice” impossible because the way it is realized, in this nation and many others, is based on injustice and segregation.

The Others revolt in *Utopia*, and their revolt was echoed three years later in Tahrir Square. Revolution, in this sense, is an act of dreaming.

²²⁹ Aslan, Ibrahim, and Elliott Colla. *The Heron*. P.157

²³⁰ Alaidy, Ahmed, and Humphrey T. Davies. *Being Abbas El Abd*. P.97

²³¹ Hafez, Sabry. “Urban Transformation and Narrative Form.” P.57

Conclusion

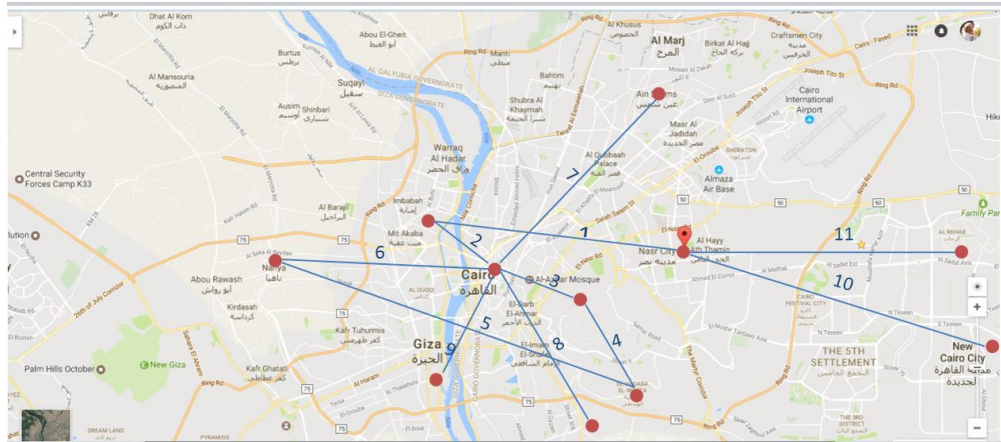
The city of Cairo is made legible through the characters pursuit to escape. Yusif al-Naggar attempts to escape the scandal that Fatma might cause him if he failed to prove his manhood to her. The narrator in *Being Abbas El Abd* escapes isolation by going on a double blind date, and Alaa in *Utopia* escapes boredom by going on a hunting adventure in the territory of the *Others*. In the *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti describes the movement of Lucien, the protagonist of *Lost Illusions* as “less one of movement, than of frustrated movement.”²³² The same description applies to the movement of the three Cairene protagonists who do not ‘desire’ women or money, but they escape isolation with its different manifestations. It is stressed in the different chapters that the essence of urbanization is one’s ability to encounter strangers. This encounter is largely restricted in Cairo because neoliberalism concretizes class lines preventing the majority of the population from meeting, communicating or knowing one another. Given that the novel, in Benedict Anderson words, “provide the technical apparatus “for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation;”²³³ therefore, the three novels could be read as opening the confined urban space to readers from different backgrounds, and creating a different imaginary than the stigmatizing one propagated by the formal discourse and the mass media.

I wrote in the introduction of this thesis that the 2011 revolution inspires the whole work, and that I write to explore how it happened, why it happened, and why it ceased to happen again. It appears to me now that I have always been concerned with

²³² Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. P.90

²³³ Anderson, Benedict R. O. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. P.25

exclusion, and it surprises me that my urban experience was largely shaped by this concern.



Map 13- My movement in Cairo

I was born on the 28th of February 1986 in Nasr City. I belong to a middle class family in which I am the youngest member. I was a quiet child and a very shy one. Maybe this was the real reason why I loved reading. Stories helped me know people without putting an effort in getting introduced to them. Writing was inevitable, and with writing came the desire to publish my work. At high school, I crossed the first psychological barrier and worked as a journalist for a magazine which was located in *Mohandessin*. I spent three summers working in the same place without talking to any of my colleagues. Two of them liked what I wrote and were curious to know me. For these two I will be forever indebted because they taught me basic communication skills, introduced me to subway lines, and encouraged me to explore the world of minibuses in which I became an expert in no time.

The world of journalism soon rejected me. I lacked some skills, and wasn't passionate about this type of writing; thus, I retreated to my medical studies and prepared myself to a different life. Luckily, I found by chance an announcement of a summer school held in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science in Cairo University. The summer school is called *Namaa* for Sustainable Development. *Namaa* was my gate to learn about social injustice, and to connect with people who fight against it on social, political, and economic levels. The city of Cairo expanded before my eyes through community work. The space of downtown became familiar to me because this was where we held our activities. Participating and volunteering in *Namaa* allowed me to visit *Manshit Naşsir*, *Masakin Alzilzal*, *Ain Shams*, *Ezbat al-nasr*, *Dahab Island* and many more urban ghettos across Cairo and Egypt. I didn't realize how stigmatizing and arrogant the official discourse was except when I got to know the people and know their stories. I was the third narrative pole in my story because I could move easily and fluidly between two opposing worlds. It was quite natural then to march from *Nahia* to *Tahrir* on the 25th of January 2011. If it wasn't for the development field, I couldn't have seen the injustices that my family paid every effort to shield me from. If it wasn't for *Namaa* and other activities, I wouldn't have been connected to this huge network of people who filled the square for 18 beautiful days. I think it needs more than courage to participate in a revolution; it needs an urban experience for people to occupy the streets. During the eighteen days, and despite being very supportive of the revolution, my father could not stay in *Tahrir* square because he didn't have a previous urban experience in the city space. After years of confiscating the public space and concretizing class differences, he could not find a place to sit in, or someone to talk to. His connections in the city were

very limited that, amid this collective moment, he, like Yusif al-Naggar, felt odd and out of place.

The neoliberal policies expropriate the urban experience of Cairenes, through erecting both psychological and physical borders. In her paper “Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti”, Mona Abaza (2013) explains that “erecting and destroying walls (...) became a powerful symbol of SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces) and police force oppression as well as of resistance.”²³⁴ Mona Abaza refers primarily to the walls erected in the circumference of downtown after the revolution to protect the Ministry of Interior; however, the practice of ‘zoning’ and ‘dividing’ Cairo had long existed before the revolution as indicated along the length of this work. What is important to highlight here is the rising resistance for walls, by the very act of gathering in Tahrir, and by the Graffiti drawn on the huge concrete blocks that divided the streets of downtown. As I write I recall when in the wake of Port Said massacre²³⁵, protesters marched from al-Ahly Club in *Gezira* to the Ministry of Interior in downtown. The ministry then was completely surrounded by walls, but the protesters managed to make a small hole between the blocks where one can cross to the other side of the street. What is funny here is that one of the protesters wrote on this block "الثغرة" (the gap), which immediately brought to the mind the memory of the 1973 war when Israel counterattacked Egypt through a gap between the Egyptian 2nd and 3rd Armies. But what is sad about this story that the war metaphor was employed in such

²³⁴ Abaza, Mona. "Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 30, n° 1, 2013, pp. 122-139. P.128.

²³⁵ On the 1st of February, 2012, 74 people were killed in Port Said Stadium after thousands of thugs stormed into the stadium attacking the Ahly Club fans with bottles, stones, knives and fireworks while the police forces watched silently and refused to open the gates of the place.

local context. Walls were then perceived by the people as a military measure that is directed against them.

The fate of the third narrative pole in the three novels was an unfortunate one. Yusif al-Naggar retreated to *Imbaba*, Abbas El Abd committed suicide and Gaber was killed. Being surrounded by opposing forces has subjected the three protagonists to hostilities that made it impossible for them to keep their mediating position between the two conflicting worlds. In my story, my mediating position has granted me scholarship to study at AUC four years ago. In August 2013, I was preparing for a new learning journey when a friend of mine was detained for his political affiliation. My friend's name is Ahmed, and he too was a third narrative pole in a different story. Ahmed was crushed between the Muslim Brotherhood and the army. During the past four years, we both learnt a lot about neoliberalism. I, through reading about it and experiencing the centrifugal force that expelled me out of the city, and him through being indefinitely detained in *Tura* Prison. I learnt that erecting borders is a political act, but I didn't mention the walls of prisons throughout this thesis. In the 1990s, Mubarak regime built *al-Aqrab* prison complex to detain his political opponents,²³⁶ and the current regime has approved the construction of 19 new prisons to accommodate the rising population of prisoners in this country.²³⁷ A whole population is made invisible with very few and risky chances of social mediation between the inside and the outside. The two narrative poles of my story changed. I am no longer mediating between the bourgeoisie and the

²³⁶ "Aqrab Prison: a prison for collective punishment Violation of visitation rights threatens prisoners' safety".

Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. Thursday, 2 June, 2016. Retrieved at:

<https://eipr.org/en/press/2016/06/aqrab-prison-prison-collective-punishment-violation-visitation-rights-threatens>

²³⁷ "Egypt has built 19 new prisons in five years - Rights group." *Aswat Masriya*. Monday 05-09-2016. Retrieved at:

<http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/details/17661>

inhabitants of the urban ghettos. I stand in front of the castle-like gates of the Central Prison Complex, waiting for a chance to smuggle a letter or a book to my friends inside. Writing about them is not an option because most probably they would be humiliated by the guards if they are made visible. The space granted for third poles in this story is limited and risky and does not allow much room for one to maneuver.

“Specific stories are the product of specific places.”²³⁸ Exile literature, as Edward Said explains, “Contains heroic, romantic, glorious, and even triumphant episodes in exile’s life, (but) these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.”²³⁹ Neoliberalism, in a similar manner, has produced a wealth of stories that are meant to overcome the effects of segregation in the city space. Despite this wealth, I shall never be grateful to the crippling sorrow it overwhelmed my life with.

²³⁸ Moretti, Franco. P.100

²³⁹ Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2000. P.137.

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