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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**WRITERS AND THE STATE: HETEROTOPIAS OF EXCLUSION IN THE WORKS OF
SONALLAH IBRAHIM AND GHOLAM HOSSEIN SA'EDI**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Comparative Literature

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

by **Sherine Nabil El Taraboulsi**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Amy Motlagh**

December 2011

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Has been approved by

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DEDICATION

To my father, Nabil, (May God bless his soul) whose memory shall always be alive in my heart
and continue to keep me going forward,

And, my mother, Laila, whose indomitable will and unique leadership have always been an
inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An interview with Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim crowned a long journey. I remember reaching a mental and intellectual block; exhaustion had gotten the better of me. I was trying very hard to find that spark again within me, the inspiration. With much excitement yet a shaky heart, and an introduction by Dr. Ferial Ghazoul, Chair of the English and Comparative Literature Department at the American University in Cairo, I went to meet the author behind *The Smell of it*. Up the stairs I went, feeling very small compared to the intellectual figure I was about to meet. Unlike my expectations, I was greeted by a very grounded man, completely devoid of any pretense. The interview went on for more than an hour, fusing new life into my work. I left breathing differently and thinking differently. I shall remain indebted to his generosity of heart and mind; such meetings are to remember a lifetime.

The idea behind the thesis was born around a year ago when I attended a course on literature and human rights by Dr. Ira Dworkin. The course had a community-based learning component that took me and all the other students, both international and Egyptian, outside the walls of the library to the streets of Tahrir Square and downtown Cairo. There, I met with fresh young writers and poets who saw their literary production as an extension of their activism and sometimes at the very heart of it. To them, literature was a cry for change and an expression of discontent towards Mubarak's regime. I was fascinated by that world, which until then had been unknown to me, and could see, back then, the beginnings of social mobilization towards change. Months later, when the January 25 Revolution broke out, I came to witness again firsthand how those artists and writers used their artistic expression as an articulation, not only of distaste towards the regime, but also of their Egyptian-ness that transcended religious and class divisions; "I am Egyptian" reverberated in vibrant graffiti painted on walls in Cairo and Alexandria, and in the hearts of all Egyptians. Having been previously consigned to the margins by the regime; those cadres of authors and artists now moved to the center as active citizens calling for the dawn of a new Egypt and the downfall of a sterile and despotic regime. The role of writers as citizen activists then became an interesting research topic for my M.A. thesis.

Developing my thesis was quite a challenging undertaking. I have often been a woman for all seasons, wearing many hats at the same time – sometimes by choice but often because I had to – which slowly took its toll on me. Juggling my work at the Gerhart Center at the American University in Cairo with my graduate studies was not easy and sometimes, I felt close to breaking down under the heavy weight of my academic and professional commitments. I would like to address special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Amy Motlagh, not only for her guidance during the development of my work but for always believing that I could make it and giving me a push forward whenever I needed one – and that was quite often. Her passion for Iran and Iranian literature was contagious and motivated me to select an Iranian writer, Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi for my comparative study. I would also like to thank both Dr. Ira Dworkin and Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser for their insightful comments on my thesis and their input to get it in its final shape.

I am eternally indebted to the support and good counsel of Dr. Ferial Ghazoul who from my very first year at the department inspired me on academic, professional and personal levels. I thank her from all my heart. I am also indebted to my professors at Alexandria University; Dr. Azza El Kholy, Dr. Sahar Hamouda, Dr. Essam Fattouh, Dr. Nadia Bechay, Dr. Susan Mashaal, Dr. Amira Noweira and all who taught me there. Any success I have had since my graduation is to a

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Last but first in my heart is my appreciation to my family and friends. Through thick and thin, they have always been there for me. I thank my mother, Laila, and my brother, Mostafa, for their continuous support and encouragement in difficult moments. I thank all my friends especially Reem Abdel Barr and Mushira Sabry. I can only hope to make them proud of me.

ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo

Writers and the State: Heterotopias of Exclusion in the Works of

Sonallah Ibrahim and Gholam Hossein Sa'edi

Sherine Nabil El Taraboulsi

Advisor: Dr. Amy Motlagh

In undemocratic regimes, the cultural space is expected to align with the structure of domination, and cultural production is deemed an arm of the state, a vehicle for conformity and indoctrination. Under such circumstances, the personal and artistic choices of writers and artists become highly politicized. This thesis looks at the politics of interaction between writers and the state, specifically focusing on the heterogeneous literary space created by the author in which structures of domination are unveiled, and those placed on the periphery by the state are brought to the center of the literary space. A writer as citizen negotiates his relation to the state by means of his writing thereby practicing a form of cultural activism; the macrostructures of state domination proliferate through the microprocesses of the literary work, and it is this relation that is subject to inquiry. The thesis focuses on two crucial periods in the histories of Egypt and Iran: the period after the 1952 Egyptian Revolution and the period preceding the Iranian 1979 Islamic Revolution; and examines the literary works of two notable writers: the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim and the Iranian Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi.

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Introduction

Forging Democratic Space:

Writers and Citizen Activism

“Now when a book is a piece of art, that is something important. Somebody like me, it is always to do something, to change even a small part of the reality - to write a book about madness, to change even the smallest part of our reality, people's ideas- I am not an artist, I am not a scientist. I am somebody who tries to deal with reality through those things which are always-often far from reality.” Michel Foucault, “Conversation with Michel Foucault”, 1980

“I publicly decline the Prize because it is awarded by a government that, in my opinion, lacks the credibility of bestowing it.” Sonallah Ibrahim, Second Cairo Conference on the Arab Novel, 22 October 2003

Reflecting within the confines of the “notorious” Tora Farm Prison on Egypt’s tortured present, Egyptian democracy activist and professor of political sociology, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, first discovers novelist Alaa Al Aswani. Incarcerated on charges of “tarnishing the reputation of Egypt”, the salutary effect provided by the companionship of the novel is not lost on him; he describes how Al Aswani’s *Imarat Yacoubian* or *The Yacoubian Building* “did much to humanize an otherwise arduous and dreary prison experience” (Ibrahim 78). The novel, as Ibrahim puts it, is a “microcosm of Egyptian society that shocked, entertained and triggered debates among urban elites and ordinary readers alike” (Ibrahim 78). His review of Al Aswani’s *The Yacoubian Building* and *Friendly Fire* ends with a thought-provoking comparison worthy of quoting at length:

Al Aswani and I share the same critical perspective on Egyptian and Arab life at the turn of the century. Yet, whereas his literary daring earned him accolades, my activist dissidence took me to prison three times. I cannot say whether my protests and agitation have meant as much to Al Aswani as his writings have meant to me. But it may be said that our lives complement each other's critiques as visible manifestations of a society that both practices and celebrates a culture of shame and denial. (Ibrahim 80)

Ibrahim is here drawing attention to two forms of citizen activism that espouse different approaches but share similar understandings and aspirations for freedom and change. Literature as a form of activism and as rebellion against the strictures of an undemocratic regime, according to Ibrahim, appears to be the safer choice, one that is more likely to fly under the radar of state security more than sit-ins and protests which elicit direct confrontation with the security forces. While this may be true, writers too have had their share of struggles and conflict with the state.

In undemocratic regimes, the cultural space is expected by the state to align with the structure of domination, and cultural production is deemed an arm of the state, a vehicle for conformity and indoctrination. Autocracies are good managers of concealment and containment of dissidence and the cultural sphere is deemed a conduit of control that they can use to curtail calls for change and encourage people to remain dutiful and blind followers. Under such circumstances, the personal and artistic choices of writers and artists become highly politicized. Politics seeps within the very fabric of people's daily lives; it becomes unavoidable and lines of demarcation separating the personal from the political are blurred. As a result, two groups/categories of writers emerge: those who conform, thereby positioning

themselves as allies to the regime, and those who rebel by pushing against the restricting boundaries of the state and producing works true to the reality of the society, unveiling that which the state had rather kept hidden.

In *What is Literature*, Jean-Paul Sartre associates writing with freedom, and more specifically with democracy; he says: “One does not write for slaves. The art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy” (47). Sartre thus, points towards the potential democratizing effects of a literary work. Literary space, in and of itself, can be regarded as a democratic space, and thus, a challenge to undemocratic regimes by presenting an alternative paradigm within its pages. A literary work is born of the harmonious interaction between the author’s authority and that of his characters. Anything forced upon the work disrupts its flow and, in turn, its impact. It can be argued that not only does a literary work grant a certain freedom to the author but it also has the potential to shape the world around it in order to have “meaning”. This, in turn, explains the need for undemocratic regimes to stifle and control the literary realm, simply because, at the very heart of the literary undertaking, there exists a freedom capable of challenging the restricting structures of the status quo. The freedom of writing, as Sartre put it, “implies the freedom of the citizen” (47).

This thesis looks at the politics of interaction between writers and the state, specifically focusing on the heterogeneous literary space created by the author in which structures of domination are revealed, and those placed on the periphery by the state are brought to the center of the literary space. A writer as citizen negotiates his relation to the state by means of his writing thereby practicing a form of cultural

activism;¹ the macrostructures of state domination proliferate through the microprocesses of the literary work, and it is this relation that is subject to inquiry. The following chapters feature an exploration of two literary works by examining the social space within the works themselves, and the cultural, social and political milieu in which the writer operates and his literary work is born, the “literary field”, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms.² The thesis focuses on two crucial periods in the histories of Egypt and Iran: the period after the 1952 Egyptian Revolution and the period preceding the Iranian 1979 Islamic Revolution, and examines the literary works of two notable writers: the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim and the Iranian Gholam-Hossein Sa’edi.

Both Egypt and Iran are countries that trace their histories back to some of the most ancient civilizations in the world, and at the same time they share a long history of despotism. As such, the role of the intellectual/writer has been heavily influenced by the power struggle between conformity and rebellion, the status quo and the will of the people. Nevertheless, in spite of the similarities that bring them together, each country possesses a certain cultural and historical specificity that has influenced the dynamics of this interaction. This is evidenced in the cultural production of both countries. The following pages will reflect on these two works in light of the environment in which they were produced.

¹ Here, a writer’s citizenship involvement is asserted by means of his cultural activism which as defined by Hofrichter (1993) is a “form of political activity practiced by many grassroots groups that serves as a face for change in that struggle. *It represents a way of giving voice to people in their own language and images, derived from historical memory and current experience*” (Cited in Delicath 256, my italics).

² In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu defines the literary field as “an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth” (163). This social universe he later describes as functioning like a prism “which refracts every external determination: demographic, economic or political events are always retranslated according to specific logic of the field [...]” (164).

The selection of Sonallah Ibrahim and Gholam Hossein Sa'edi for analysis is not random. Ibrahim and Sa'edi are distinguished examples of what Jean-Paul Sartre called the “engaged intellectual”; their literary works are artistic expressions and forms of activism at the same time. As uncompromising depictions of the realities of their time, their works can be regarded as forms of witness or testimony to their times,³ an intellectual citizenship, whereby the depiction of everyday life with all its discontents and frustrations is a powerful call for change and a serious attempt to push the boundaries of repression enforced by the regimes under which they lived. In times fraught with political upheaval and social and cultural changes, both authors departed from an understanding of art for art's sake and saw their literary works as an indivisible part of their citizen activism.

Writing Rebellion

“I never intended to be a writer ... I wanted to become a political activist”, says Sonallah Ibrahim in an interview with Al Ahram Weekly in 2003.⁴ He later describes how “political work” was his “life's mission” and that it was the “need to tell” that prompted him to embark on his writing career. Put in prison under charges of “conspiring to overthrow the regime” in 1959, this need to communicate experience presented itself in the form of heightened imagination that set him mentally free from the confines of the prison walls. This imagination was later crowned by his first novel *Tilka al- rā'iha* (*The Smell of It*), marking his debut into the literary world. The contrast between the “cruel but rich” experience of

³ Critic Moustafa Bayoumi reflects on the role of Sonallah Ibrahim as witness in his book *Sonallah Ibrahim: Witness, not Spectator*. Cairo: Huda Publishing House, 2004. There, he extrapolates on how an author as witness makes courageous choices to confront reality as it is, allowing his work to actively interact with social, political and cultural transitions. Such works bear testimony to their time and preserve historical facts in a creative garb.

⁴ The complete interview is available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/666/cu1.htm>

imprisonment at the age of 21 and the unleashing of creativity is significant. He reflects on it saying:

Maybe it was isolation within the prison precincts, which is imposed on you as part of the torture. To ease the passing of time you automatically exercise your imagination. Day dreams. Fantasies. Plus what you're seeing all around you: people's stories and how they lived outside, their methods of adjusting to prison life. And then there were instances of heroism or cowardice, of people standing up to persecution and people dying of torture - representative, telling instances that I wanted to capture in some form. At the time I would write a new novel every day - in my head.

This wealth of experience explains elements of social realism embedded within Ibrahim's novels and the rebellion perceived there in both content and structure. Rebellion was both within the writing itself and a result of it. In "telling" those stories of confinement, Ibrahim would be exercising what amounts to democratic freedom, one that is privy to his authorial voice but otherwise denied to the public realm. This telling marked the unveiling of public discontents which challenged state control of the masses.

At the Second Cairo Conference on the Arab Novel, Ibrahim gives another instance of his citizen activism. Organized by the Supreme Council for Culture – established by the State and the major government financier for the arts – Ibrahim refuses the second Cairo Prize for the Novel which included a check for LE 100, 000, a substantial amount of money in a country with a struggling economy. His refusal was accompanied by a diatribe against the Egyptian government which, according to him, lacked the credibility of bestowing such a prize. In a personal interview with

Sonallah Ibrahim in December 2011, he recounts how consistency between his own works and personal choices was of paramount importance. “It just didn’t add up”, he said. It is significant how his literary choices are linked to his personal and political choices. In all of them, there was what he called *Ikhteraq* or penetration; making a dent for change by engaging in a process of “unveiling of realities”. He added: “Anything that man does should be unveiled as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone... traditions need to be broken, stories need to be told” (Taped Interview, Cairo, 9 December 2011). Consistency through rebellion in all three, to him, is a way to remain true to himself, his art and his audience.

Critic Richard Jacquemond reads this incident on two levels. On the one hand, he regards it as an expression of “the freedom of the intellectual” and of his mission as the “conscience of the nation”. On the other hand, he regards it as a “political stand and the exact equivalent of a parliamentary vote of censure” (Jacquemond 229). Under the flagrant dictatorship of Mubarak’s regime, all the more revealed now after the January 25 Revolution, Ibrahim was capable of practicing freedom of expression – albeit at a cost – by virtue of his artistry. This freedom allowed him to rebel by bearing testimony to his time and ultimately, by making the subject matter of his works very close to what was happening on the ground and affecting the daily lives of the people.

At about the same time, in Iran, author, activist and psychiatrist Gholam Hossein Sa’edi was fighting similar battles; he too had his literary career mixed with politics. Here again, the personal was political at a time when the relation between the state and intellectuals was thorny in Iran. Critic Ali Gheissari describes how in the 1960s and 1970s, “the gap between the Iranian intellectuals and the state widened to

the point where an intellectual was almost automatically identified as belonging to the opposition” (107). Many of the intellectuals of the time went so far as to uphold armed struggle against the Pahlavi regime and ventured to support what they believed to be a temporary ideological hegemony of religion that would be contained after the ouster of the regime (Gheissari 107). It is in the midst of the unrest and rebellion on political and social levels that Sa’edi produced his works of social realism.

In 1953, Sa’edi was imprisoned in Tabriz after the CIA coup against Mohammed Mossadeq, and again in 1973 when the SAVAK arrested and tortured him for publishing a literary journal. The scars left behind by his imprisonment influenced the rest of his life. In an article in the *New York Times* in 1978, he describes those experiences saying: “The psychological traumas of a person incarcerated, brutally tortured, then released, hardly heal. I knew a bookseller who had been frequently arrested. He was a man stricken by fear” (25).

Sa’edi was also a friend of Iranian writer and critic Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, “a veteran of socialist and nationalist activities of the 1940s and the 1950s” (Gheissari 88) and author of *Westoxication*, a critique of Westernism in Iran. Sa’edi’s social realism has echoes of Al-e-Ahmad’s views on intellectualism, which he defined as “dealing with questions of thought and ideas and involving a particular approach to reality that uses both the power of the written and spoken words to guide and motivate people” (Gheissari 90). Art, according to Al-e-Ahmad, would have to serve a purpose, help solve a “social problem”, in other words, according to him, art and intellectualism was a means to effect change not only by depicting reality, but by also giving people a compass and a sense of direction in the right path.

Forced to flee Iran in the late 1970s, Sa'edi spent the rest of his life in exile, continuously speaking against lack of freedom of expression and stifling censorship in Iran. Restrictions enforced by the Shah's regime and the Islamic republic have been depicted in his works of social realism as in *The Rubbish Heap*. Here again, as is the case with Sonallah Ibrahim, the trials and tribulations that resulted from conflict with the status quo have given birth to unique literary production that was an extension of his citizen activism and within which the author was capable of practicing a freedom that he was denied outside the literary realm.

Heterotopias of Exclusion⁵ in *The Smell of It* and *The Rubbish Heap*

In "An Open Door", democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim describes how liberalism which exists at the heart of a democracy contains various elements such as "free media, competent legal institutions, the rule of law, and ethnoreligious tolerance" that "attune individuals to *the spirit and behaviours of citizenship and predispose groups, communities, and other collectivities to the rules of fair play*" (36, my italics). Fair play is replaced by different modes of exploitation in regimes that lack a democratic infrastructure. In both Nasserite Egypt and Pahlavi Iran, structures of domination engendered structures of exploitation leading to the exclusion of certain groups of the population, economically, politically and even culturally.

⁵ The term "heterotopias of exclusion" is inspired by a paper titled: "Heterotopias of Homelessness: Citizenship on the Margins" by Maria Mendel. The paper explores the citizenship of homeless people in Poland and how they perceive their own marginalization. It looks at urban space as public space in which streets and squares form heterotopias that are juxtaposed to the private spaces of cardboard boxes and informal shelters of the homeless. Mendel's argument is that citizen participation or non-participation of the homeless is "visible in public spaces where they are included as excluded" (155). The thesis focuses not on homelessness but exclusion. It looks at those who have been politically and socially excluded by undemocratic regimes but remain included with perceptible influence on the scene.

Excluded groups forged an interstitial space that existed at the periphery of society but still belonged to the nation with perceptible impact on its future. Those groups existed as much as any other group did but were not on the state's agenda or priorities. They became, what can be called, heterotopias of exclusion. Michel Foucault defines heterotopias saying:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites than can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. *Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.* Because these places are absolutely different from all sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24, my italics)

Foucault identifies two types of heterotopias in “Of Other Spaces”. The first type he calls “crisis heterotopias” which are defined as “privileged or sacred or forbidden places” in which individuals who are “in a state of crisis” with the society or environment live. The examples he gives of this first type include nineteenth-century boarding schools and military service for young men (24). The other type is called “heterotopias of deviation” which he defines as “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25). The examples he gives of this second type include “rest homes and psychiatric hospitals” and “prisons”.

Heterotopias of exclusion are an extension of heterotopias of deviation.⁶ Exclusion is the status quo's response or reaction to contain and control deviation *but the definition of what qualifies as deviant is significant*. Foucault underscores characteristics that help us identify who qualifies to be consigned to heterotopias of deviation, namely those with deviant behavior in relation to the "required mean or norm" (25). But who is entrusted with defining the required norm remains a contested point that he elaborates upon in his book *Madness and Civilization* in which he tells the story of the birth of the mental asylum. There, Foucault urges his readers to "return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself", and to focus on "*the action* that divides madness, and not the science elaborated once this division is made and calm restored" (Foucault xi, my italics). This action that defines the line separating sanity from madness is structured and institutionalized in the shape of the mental asylum. It is rationalized and not haphazard. Foucault's focus, in this manner, is to analyze and examine how power techniques are closely intertwined with political and social structures such as the state or other institutions like the mental asylum. In an interview with Michel Foucault in 1980 he elaborates on this saying:

My problem is the rationalization of the management of the individual. My own work is not a history of institutions or a history of ideas, but the history of rationality as it works in institutions and in the behavior of people. All human behavior is scheduled and programmed through rationality. There is a logic in institutions and in behavior and in political relations. (4)

⁶ Here, the focus on "exclusion" rather than only "deviation" is significant to the thesis. Because the interest here is in the heterogeneous space extant between writers and the state; it is thus important to include both parties in the analysis. Exclusion incorporates both the excluded and excluding parties and so "heterotopias of exclusion" was deemed a more comprehensive term.

That said, modes of exclusion are not accidental; they become worthy of close examination as part of the political calculus and structure of domination. In both *The Smell of It* and *The Rubbish Heap*, the state/status quo is represented in the form of an establishment; an institution with a structure of domination existing in parallel to the macro structures of domination of the state. In Sonallah Ibrahim's novel, the state is represented in the shape of the prison and the policemen that knock on the narrator's door every night to monitor his location. In Gholam Hossein Sa'edi's, the state is represented through the hospital in which cycles of exploitation take place. Both institutions are heterotopias of deviation in Foucault's terms, as they are places in which individuals outside the norm are located, but they are also places located on the fringes of society and suffer from an oppressive loneliness. Consigned to the margins of society, both institutions have little contact with the outside world, and even when there is contact, it is usually based on exploitation which further accentuates the sense of estrangement in both novels.

The prison in Ibrahim's novel and the hospital in Sa'edi's are the invisible present. They are always there but their existence is not validated or acknowledged except insofar as they further the domineering capacity of the state. Their exclusion provides validation and enhances the existence of the state and parallels other modes of exclusion administered by the state: economic and social. In Ibrahim's semi-autobiographical novel, the narrator leaves prison only to move into the bigger and more restricting prison of life. In the personal interview with Sonallah Ibrahim, when asked which prison was more difficult for him as a person, he laughed saying: "The prison outside was far more difficult.... Inside, it was different; there was always the expectation of release". In the outside world, what was more problematic for him was

the struggle between his own personal idealism and the complexity of human relations, his desire to call things what they are, and the restriction provided by a regime that did not tolerate freedom of expression and a community that clung to old traditions of withholding and oppression. A contradiction lay at the very heart of Nasser's regime; while there was a strong feeling of security provided by Nasser's leadership and vision, there was also a strong crack down on freedom of expression.

In Gholam Hossein Sa'edi's novel, the hospital is the place in which and around which a web of interconnected cycles of exploitation take place. Paternal and filial ties are broken and the contrast between the homage paid to religion and spirituality in the verbal, and the dominance of the base needs of the flesh in the practices of nearly all the characters in the novel is staggering. As Iran was being exploited by the West, the people were being exploited by the regime; as the West was sucking the oil of Iran, a thriving business based on the selling of blood was taking place in the alleys of Tehran. The hospital which is more like the prison in Ibrahim's novel, furthers the vicious cycle of exploitation. The corruption of the young narrator in the novel – a young boy of sixteen – only accentuates how the Pahlavi regime encourages more corruption and exploitation.

Heterotopias of exclusion are made relevant within the more democratic realm of literature. The following pages are exploratory; they will reflect on modes and manifestations of exclusion in both novels in light of their author's citizen activism. It is difficult to know whether or not they regarded themselves as activists, while Sonallah Ibrahim sees literature as an important form of activism, Gholam Hossein Sa'edi may have had a different perspective. What is a certainty is that both of them used their works to bring to the foreground a reality that the gaze of the state sought

diligently to conceal, and it is this reality as it exists at the crossroads between writers and the state that is subject to examination in the thesis.

Al Ikhteraq in

Sonallah Ibrahim's *Tilka al- ra'iha (The Smell of It)*

“Is there anyone who does not know bitterness or pain? From the desire to dominate and from weakness to facing up to the world. From being bereft of love and from an inability to deal with it. [...] In the beginning it was a matter of high-mindedness and it has now become a curse. The spring which used to suffer for others has dried up. When he stood with the blood dripping down his back, he was defiant, unshaken, finding a pleasure in his ability to hold out. But people no longer attached any importance to this today, *for the spirit of the age had changed*. [...] He was taking part in the game, understanding its rules and abiding by them. But they applied the rules against him and tears flowed over a lonely seat where he sat. *The most dreadful thing is to start searching for yourself too late.*” (Ibrahim 29, my italics)

In 1964, a young and rebellious Sonallah Ibrahim had recently been released from prison after serving a five-year detention for political activities and published *The Smell of It*. The novel linguistically and stylistically parallels Ibrahim's own personal and political rebellion in an age fraught with contradictions. In the 2003 edition of the novel, Ibrahim writes in his introduction that the language errors he made in the former two editions were not accidental but, in a way, deliberate and indicative of his own rebellion (4) or his *Ikhteraq* as he later called it; a desire to penetrate the literary and political field by representing reality as it is and by experimenting in form and content.

At a critical juncture in her history, Egypt was searching for herself like the characters in Ibrahim's novel and was in the throes of contradictions on political, social and cultural levels. Twelve years after the Egyptian revolution of 1952, being

an Egyptian citizen meant that one had to define his role in relation to the state at a time when the state was busy defining itself on different levels. Egypt's identity under Nasser was nationalist, Arab, Islamic and African. The varying degrees of interface among all four punctuated the age and determined many of the conflicts on the societal and cultural levels as are evidenced later in the chapter. "Finding yourself" was closely tied to defining what it meant to be an Egyptian at a transitional moment in its history. A writer's relation to the state was thus interconnected with historical, political and cultural spheres, all of which were felt at the level of everyday life. The personal was political and vice versa as will be manifested in the following pages.

Henri Lefebvre explains citizenship in relation to the urban through the right to inhabit the city in the broadest sense: "The everyday life spaces of the city – its neighborhoods, parks, streets, and buildings – are thus both the medium through which citizenship struggles take place, and, frequently, that which is at stake in the struggle" (Secor 353). It was in the most mundane daily affairs that the predicament of the Egyptian citizen was felt, and it is within this locale that a writer's citizen activism emerges. As witness to the hopes and disappointments of the people, his writing offers recognition of what the state had rather not acknowledge. Indeed, Balzac describes his role as a writer as the "secretary" of his nation's history by giving to "continual, everyday occurrences, secret and manifest, and to the actions of individual life, to their causes and their motives, as much importance as historians have until now bestowed on the events of the public life of nations" (Lewis 22). As the status quo enforced conformity, literary works of rebellion like *The Smell of It* brought the different modes of exclusion: economic, social and cultural to the foreground. Within the literary realm, heterotopias of exclusion were made relevant

by means of a process of unveiling and penetration. Citizen activism was thus political activism at the same time. As mentioned before, the political was so intertwined with every aspect of the Egyptian landscape post the 1952 Revolution, it was inescapable.

The previous chapter reviewed the role of writers as citizen activists and the tension between the democratic literary realm and the structure of domination, rebellious writers and the state. This chapter explores Sonallah Ibrahim as a citizen activist in light of his work. The first part of the chapter gives a brief overview of the Nasserite period especially as it relates to notions of citizenship circulating in Egypt at the time. The second part is a close reading of Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Smell of It* as an expression and manifestation of the author's own rebellion by depicting Egypt as he perceived it in Nasser's age.

The Spirit of the Age

“We all dream of Egypt strong and free ... We cannot go back to the tenth century. Can we ignore that there is an *Arab circle* surrounding us; that our history has been linked with it and its interests are linked with ours? ... that there is a *continent of Africa* wherein rages the most violent struggle between the white colonizers and black natives for possession of its inexhaustible resources? ... that there is a *Muslim world* to which we are tied by bonds not only of religious faith but of historical fact? I recall Pirandello ... and always imagine that there is (for *Egypt*) in this region a role wandering aimlessly in search of a hero.” Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Cited in Bagley 194, my italics)

Much of the politics of the age were drafted according to Nasser's vision for Egypt and the Arab world, so much so that Fouad Ajami wrote “Egypt gave Nasserism to the Arab world”, in his book, *The Arab Predicament* (Cited in Podeh

19). Indeed, Nasser's charismatic leadership extended far beyond the geographic boundaries of Egypt. Four spheres of influence – and in which Nasser himself was quite an influential figure - are mentioned by him in *The Philosophy of the Revolution* and in the excerpt cited above: the Arab world, Africa, the Muslim world, and Egypt herself (the nation) as she relates to her role in all spheres. Not all were equally influential. The Islamic sphere never really influenced policymaking. As to Egypt's role in Africa, Nasser had strong ties to Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba of the Congo. However, because of the Arab – Israeli conflict and since many African countries were enthralled by Israel as a “model for development”, Egypt, along with other North African countries, were consigned to “the margins of the Organization of African Unity” (Gordon 57). Ultimately, thus, it was the Arab and Egyptian circles that dominated Egypt's landscape on both national and regional levels.

The July 23, 1952 Revolution was a turning point in Egyptian history. It was, as Nasser puts it, “led by the army and backed by the nation” (Nasser 203). The late forties and early fifties had witnessed a stagnant economy with the annual per capita income of the population going down from \$109.50 in 1907 to \$63.50 in 1950. This coupled with an increase in the population from 9.72 million in 1897 to 19.00 million in 1947 were warning signs of an impending revolution. Agriculture which was the main source of employment and foreign exchange was not commensurate with the increase in the population. This was further compounded by British presence and an inequitable distribution of land. By 1952, “65 percent of cultivated land in Egypt was owned by only 6 percent of Egypt's landowners” (Baker 6-7). A declining economy fostered a “growing appeal of radical thought and movements of the left and right”.

Varieties of Marxism “took root” and the Muslim Brotherhood proposed the Islamization of Egypt as the only way to freedom from British presence and internal corruption (Baker 10). Internal and external decolonization was thus sounded by the people and paved the way for the Revolution.

Orchestrated by a group of young officers in the army known as the “Free Officers”, the route taken by the 1952 Revolution changed the power calculus in Egypt. Rising discontents in the period preceding the Revolution were caused by an imbalance in power that took the form of continued British presence, loss of Palestine to a newly established State of Israel in 1948, as well as King Farouk I’s weak governance. Nasser divides Egypt’s problems into both internal and external and it is this division that to a great extent informed changes instituted by Nasser post-Revolution:

The problems confronting the Egyptian nation have thus for a long period seemed to fall into two parts: a struggle between the nation and its rulers on one hand, and a struggle between the nation and foreign intervention on the other. National struggle against foreign influence relates primarily to the sovereignty of the state and derivatively to liberating the financial and economic resources of the state and administering them in the interest of national reconstruction. (Nasser 201)

Thus, foreign intervention and despotic rulers presented variations of one another. Reclaiming sovereignty on both levels meant the restoration of political, financial and economic autonomy and independence. Even more significantly, it meant the birth of a revolutionary “political consciousness” that would help realize national aspirations.

According to Nasser, this consciousness was to pave the way towards democratization; the Revolution was

to end the exploitation of people, to realize national aspirations and to develop the mature political consciousness that is an indispensable preliminary for a sound democracy. The Revolution seeks to bridge the gulf between social classes and to foster the spirit of altruism which marks a cultivated individual and a cohesive group. Our ultimate aim is to provide Egypt with a truly democratic and representative government, not the type of parliamentary dictatorship which the Palace and a corrupt “pasha” class imposed on the people. (Nasser 208)

To that end, a number of radical measures were administered by the Revolutionary forces. On December 9, 1952, Egypt’s 1923 constitution was suspended; on January 16, 1953, political parties were dissolved; on June 18, 1953, the Republic of Egypt was proclaimed; and on January 14, 1954, the Muslim Brotherhood was dissolved (Balgey 195). A new constitution was framed that was “consonant with new national aspirations” (Nasser 203). Furthermore, the Agrarian Reform Bill was passed to “liberate the bulk of peasants from the feudalism which was a corollary of the system of land tenure” (Nasser 204). By setting a ceiling on land ownership and rent, the bill dramatically changed the social scene in Egypt by restructuring the relationship between landlords and tenants, and creating a new rural middle class. Nasser’s regime, as Saad Eddin Ibrahim puts it, also addressed “deep-seated national sentiments by declaring early on, its anti-colonialist, anti-Zionist, and anti-communist orientations” (42).

In short, as the new Egypt was in the making, a transitional period redefined its politics, economics and place in the world. Perceptions and understandings of Egyptian identity and, in turn, what being an Egyptian citizen meant and entailed were also getting negotiated in several circles. Egypt, under Nasser, “had a clear-cut policy for rebuilding the country on new foundations” (Nasser 204). Those foundations required Egypt to turn in upon herself, sever some ties with the outside world, recreate her identity, set new priorities and build herself anew, away from foreign/Western intervention. This manifested itself in trade policies; “non-essential imports” were cut in order to “improve Egypt’s trade balance” and “preserve precious earnings in hard currency” (Nasser 207).

Beyond the statistics, those policies were highly significant on political and cultural levels. They meant that Egypt would not be the same, its identity would shift and the Egyptian citizens of King Farouk’s age would have to adapt to those changes and embrace a different lifestyle with different ideals. The Revolution had altered many of the bearings of its world; titles and honors of “princes, pashas and beys, marks of a privileged class were abolished” (Nasser 208). Egypt under Nasser was at the crossroads between the Revolution’s vision and the facts on the ground. They did not always meet, and at times were found to contradict one another. A new citizenship was born of a new consciousness – and vice versa, one that was caught at those crossroads, desperately trying to cling to the Revolution’s ideals but that also had to deal with political, social and cultural realities.

The 1960s and the Cultural Scene

In the 1960s, the Egyptian government instituted a number of changes. The Socialist Laws were issued abruptly changing the distribution of wealth. An expected

corollary, politics and culture were heavily affected by those changes. An excerpt from a speech delivered at the Festival of Science on December 28, 1961 is significant in that regard and in setting the tone for the cultural scene at the time:

The cultural revolution puts itself at the service of the political and social revolution. We are on the way to building a society based on self-sufficiency and justice. We must have a cultural revolution which will be hostile to imperialism, hostile to reaction, hostile to feudalism, hostile to domination and dictatorship of capitalism, hostile to all forms of exploitation – a cultural revolution which aims at letting people know their rights, their true gains, their hopes, and finally who their friends and enemies are. (Cited in Crabbs 387, my italics)

It is a generally held fact that the cultural scene in any nation, at any point, is intertwined with its political and social spheres. However, what Nasser is accentuating *here* is that culture would *serve* those spheres, and not seamlessly evolve within or from them. Moreover, understandings of “friends” and “enemies” were relative and, to a great extent, situation and time bound. This speech along with the issuance of the National Charter six months later charted a course for an Egyptian’s citizenship under the new order, “The good of the people, rather than the individual, was stressed, and Egyptians were called upon to act not in their own interests but in those of the (governmentally defined) whole” (Crabbs 387). In other words, the individual was to be subsumed by the collective and was to stick to governmentally defined roles. Assuming the role of a surrogate, the government prescribed certain norms and structures that needed to be put in place for the best interest of the nation. More importantly, the government realized the role of culture as a strategic political

tool capable of reshaping society and so it was held that the cultural revolution within this new structure would be there for a purpose, mainly to serve the “political and social revolution”.

That said, according to the state, good citizens were individuals who played an effective role, clearly defined by the government, in society. University professors and academics for example were called upon to come out of their “ivory towers” and to participate in society and to “instill a ‘socialist mentality’” in Egyptian universities (Crabbs 387). “Art for Art’s Sake” became representative of intervening Western, foreign and capitalist forces that were threatening the success of the Revolution and all that it stood for. Art had to have a *utility* in those times, it was to serve the cause, it would be an act of “citizenship” and an emblem of an author’s membership in the “collective,” that is, as defined by the new order. Egyptians were asked

not to lag behind in divesting their minds of everything characterized by riddles, delusions and the dregs of a culture which depends on the capitalist mentality, camouflaged behind [the concept of] the inviolability of individual freedom and the legend of “Art for Art’s Sake” and trying [in this way] to hide its true goal of alienating culture from the masses and utilizing it to serve a given class which can afford its exorbitant cost. (Cited in Crabbs 387)

The Sixties’ Generation and the Realist Paradigm

In Richard Jacquemond’s *Conscience of the Nation*, he describes how generations of Egyptian authors have been engaged “in a kind of permanent effort to rewrite the *Description de l’Egypte*” (88). The more they pushed boundaries against restrictions by the state and traditions, the more willing they were to “reduce the

distance that separates them from ‘reality’” (89). This literary description of Egypt became intertwined with the writing of its national history, a tendency that critics ascribe to the “relative failure of social thought such as history, the social sciences and philosophy, whose development has been frustrated by political constraints” (90). Intellectuals and writers, thus, had more freedom and were well positioned to be what Jacquemond calls “parallel sociologists” or “underground historians” of the nation (90). Tawfiq Al Hakim’s *Yawmiyat na’ib fi-l-aryaf* or *Diary of a Country Magistrate* which was described in *Ruz al-Yusuf* as an “eyewitness account” of “what goes on behind the scenes among the police in upper Egypt” (90), is an example of a realist writer taking up the role of a sociologist, and of a literary work of social realism becoming a historical document of unveiling.

A “description de l’Egypte” in the 1960s involved many layers. The state under Nasser sought to establish “overall intellectual and conceptual conformity” (Crabbs 404). Thus uniformity was deemed part of his vision for Egypt and the Arab world. And it was relatively successful. The cultural scene was broadly shaped by the Revolution and the Nasserite period gave birth to a range of patriotic songs or *Wataniyyat* as they were called (Rosenbaum 324). The state derived much power from the success of those songs and the singers, in turn, gained their popularity by performing them. Popular singers were popular supporters of the Revolution and, in fact, witnessed their popularity grow along with it. Those included: Umm Kulthum (1898-1975), Muhammad Abd al-Wahab (1901-1991) and Abd al-Halim Hafiz (1929-1977), all of which were closely associated with the Revolution. “All performed songs that in the service of the Revolution, Abd al-Halim is the one most identified with its messages” (Rosenbaum 325). He was called “the voice of the revolution” and “the

voice of the president” and Nasser called him a national treasure or *tharwa qawmiyya* (Rosenbaum325).

However, in spite of this, there were waves of rebellion within the structural conformity that the state attempted to institute. Those waves of change mirrored the confusion happening in the nation which Egyptian critic Sabry Hafez succinctly describes saying:

The sixties was indeed a decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition of almost all political activities; massive industrialization and the absolute absence of freedom; the construction of the High Dam and the destruction of the spirit of opposition; the expansion of free education and the collective arrest of intellectuals; the reclamation of thousands of acres and the catastrophic detachment of the Sinai peninsula from Egyptian territory in the defeat of 1967; severe censorship and the emergence of evasive jargon among the intellectuals; the deformation of social values and the students’ and workers’ upheavals; the enlargement of the public sector and the pervasive growth of corruption. (Cited in Mehrez 13)

Those contradictions were veiled by the order but unveiled in writing. In spite of restrictions on freedom of expression, the sixties witnessed the emergence of talented writers who tapped into the malaise of the age through their literary creativity. Later known as the Sixties Generation, those writers included Sonallah Ibrahim, Bahaa Taher, Ibrahim Aslan, Ibrahim Abd al-Majid, Gamal al-Ghitani and many more. Each was affected by the political and social scenes in his own way and reflected this in writing. The confusion of the time translated itself in two literary trends that have been identified by critics Hamdi Sakkut and Roger Monroe: the first trend was

rebellious and emphasized “contemporary society and the very current political scene” underscoring manifestations of power, repression and coercion. This trend focused on the human questions behind the political scene (Sakkut 44). The other trend went in the opposite direction; it was one of *conformity* and *acceptance*, “completely devoid of any criticism of power [...] Or if it exists at all, it is mainly concealed in a generally humane atmosphere and in the framework of social change” (Sakkut 44).

Sonallah Ibrahim’s literary works are an example of the first trend; a generation of writers who created their own space, negotiated the boundaries forced upon them by the regime and developed artistry that dispensed with glorifications of the Revolution to give a depiction of life in writing, a representation of what was happening on the ground. Those writers were later hailed as the “prophets of the defeat” after the 1967 defeat; while the “debacle of 1967 is not advertised in their works, the critical description of a system that meant the stronghold of the state over society, making the latter opaque to itself and fragmenting it, is very much in evidence” (Jacquemond, 92).

In addition, Ibrahim was engaged in a process of deconstructing Egypt’s history at the time through his literary works, thereby constructing an alternative image of Egypt, one that was complimentary – and sometimes contradictory – to the image provided by the Revolution. His literature “detected anomie in place of the ‘positive aspects’ of Nasserism that featured in the official propaganda” and as a result, it “broke with the dominant orthodoxy that reserved all criticism for the ancient regime” (Jacquemond 92). Ibrahim’s citizen activism emanated from the nation itself,

its streets, alleys, problems and people rather than the order governing the nation. His works bear witness to the fact that

If the Revolution of 23 July has had its darker side, there have nevertheless been a number of encouraging signs. There is, first of all, the living reality of Egypt itself, whose vitality and diversity have thus far eluded the Revolution's best efforts at control. *The relationship between Egypt and the Revolution is one of concentricity, not of congruence.* The Revolution can make waves which are felt all through Egyptian society, but it has never been able to remake the society totally in its own image. (Crabbs 419, my italics)

Eluding the conformity encouraged and enforced by the state, Ibrahim's writing experimented in form. Including the Arabic translation of a poem that was given to him by a friend in prison in his *The Smell of It* is an example of this experimentation and his desire to bring reality to the creative and imaginary world of a literary work.

This was in keeping with an efflorescence of new themes and styles of writing during that period. The question of power and freedom of speech on individual and collective levels were particularly dominant in Egyptian theatre.⁷ In 1960, Tawfiq al-Hakim published the play *The Sultan's Dilemma* which, according to critic Sabry Hafez, addresses the dynamics of power and freedom, and in which, al-Hakim masterfully uses "history without being historical, the world of fantasy and the *Arabian Nights* without being fantastic and the abstract without abandoning concrete representation" (Hafez 15). In 1962, al-Hakim published the play *O Tree Climber* in

⁷ According to Sabry Hafez, due restrictions on freedom of expression in Arab countries, the theatre played the role of the "popular parliament" in which both writers and audience debated issues of relevance to them and their society. See: Hafez, Sabry. "The Quest for Freedom in Arabic Theatre." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26.1/2, *The Quest for Freedom in Modern Arabic Literature* (1995): pp. 10-36. Web.

which he brought the theatre of the absurd to Arabic literature. This went hand in hand with a vibrant critical movement led by Muhammad Mandūr, Rashād Rushdī, Luwīs Awad and many others (Sakkut 45). Moreover, Egyptian men of letters were closely following developments in European and American literature: “They were adapting what pleased them and honing their styles. The names Sartre, Camus, Beckett, O’Neil, Kafka and others were frequently seen in the daily newspapers, not to mention the literary periodicals and the abundance of translated works.” (Sakkut 45)

Tilka al- rā’iha: Heterotopias of Exclusion

The role of the writer as citizen activist and as witness to the contradictions of the new Egypt became part of the literary field at the time. Literature found its lifeblood in Cairo’s everyday world; the space wherein citizenship struggled to take place and was, at the same time, challenged. This desire to represent the age as it was without any embellishments is best described through a “manifesto-like statement” signed by a group of young authors, published on the back cover of *The Smell of It* in 1966:

If this novel in your hands doesn’t please you, it is not your fault, but rather that of the cultural and artistic atmosphere in which we live, which through the years has been controlled by traditional works and superficial, naïve phenomena. To break the prevailing artistic environment which has been solidified and hardened, we have chosen this form of sincere and sometimes painful writing. [...]

These names, which you are not familiar with, will present you with an art which also is unfamiliar. It is an art concerned overwhelmingly with the attempt to express *the spirit of an age and the experience of a generation*.

(Cited in Mehrez 14, my italics)

Victor Shklovsky's defamiliarization model – art as a means to defamiliarize the familiar – is, here, turned on its head. *The Smell of It* is an example of a work that seeks to familiarize the reader with an unfamiliar art; one that does not subscribe to “art for art's sake”, nor adhere to the cultural revolution prescribed by the state.⁸ Instead, the unfamiliarity of this art emanates from its role as a blunt expression of the spirit of the age with all its contradictions and the experience of its troubled generation. This was an age of many transitions; the literary scene was no exception. Ibrahim's novel is an example of writing as a social act and a call to see everything for what it was.

In the introduction, Yusuf Idris describes the work saying: “*Tilka al- rā'iha* is not just a story, it is a revolution, the beginning of which is the artist's rebellion against himself.” This semi-autobiographical novel, however, includes many layers of rebellion: the author's rebellion against himself and his novel's rebellion against the status quo, the literary norms of the age and the image of a post-revolution free Egypt. It is this rebellion that enacts the author's citizenship, one that evidently contradicted the state. Thus, written in 1964, those different layers of rebellion prevented it from

⁸ The “unfamiliar art” was born of a shift in the literary scene in the 1960s influenced by political and socio-economic changes. In the beginning of the 20th century, the intellectual elite came from the “privileged classes” but this soon changed with the spread of education and a “surge in the ranks of the bourgeoisie in the interwar period” (Kendall 40). The Sixties generation of writers was a more diverse group. Jamal al-Ghitani, one of the leading writers in the sixties, asserts: “my generation came from the popular classes, . . . therefore we had a new outlook, a new sensibility; we tried to write in another style” (Cited in Kendall 40).

getting its complete edition published before 1986 in Morocco (Mehrez 41). The unfamiliar form and content have been summarized by Ibrahim as follows:

Why is it prescribed for us – when we write – to speak only of the beauty of flowers and the splendor of their fragrance, while excrement fills the streets and polluted sewer water covers the ground and everyone smells it? Or to sketch on paper beings whose genitals have practically disappeared into hiding, so as not to violate a false modesty in readers who know more about sex than the honorable author knows? (Cited in Mehrez 44)

In similar vein, the work dispenses with prescribed paths, experimenting in both content and form. That is why it is significant that Ibrahim cites an excerpt from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "This race and this country and this life produced me [...] and I shall express myself as I am". Ibrahim is informing the reader that the work is what it is: an expression of the author's mind and all the experiences that make him part of this country and a member of its collective, both the good and the bad. It departs from literary, societal and political codes carefully defined by the state. The nameless narrator is released from prison to face an estranged world. He is placed under house arrest and so is required to be home every evening for a policeman to show up at his door and have him sign a page in a little notebook given to him by the police authorities. Outside prison, the narrator spends his time in "crowded public transportation, alienating visits with friends and relatives, and failed attempts to write, compensated for by occasional masturbation in front of empty sheets of paper" (Mehrez 42). The impersonal visits of the policeman, the narrator's continuous failure to write and the scenes of a crowded and inhuman metro

station, all present variations of exclusion in which emotional, physical and intellectual needs are thwarted.

Needless to say, the beginning of the novel sets the tone of the pages to follow, drafting its direction without a specific compass:

“What’s your address?” said the officer.

‘I haven’t got one,’ I said. (1)

Nobody is willing to provide him with a place to stay; neither his brother nor his friend welcomes him. Released from prison, he walks into an unanchored, lonely existence, as oppressive and degrading as the prison itself. In fact, what punctuate the progression of events are the redundant and binding appointments made by the policeman to monitor his location. The regime tries to pin him down and to exercise its control over him: “You’re a real problem and we can’t just let you be” (2). Nevertheless, his mind escapes to its own space and so does the structure of his writing, both of which take the form of flashbacks or fantasies, all shaped by the realities of the author’s existence and his own imagination. The text vacillates between the narrator’s account of his day to day affairs and the conversations he has in *public* with people around him, on the one hand, and on the other, what goes on in his head in *private* and the very personal reflections he has with himself.

The repression he undergoes by the police (in this case representative of the state) stands in contrast to his mind which remains fairly autonomous through the ability to write – though struggling with the reality of his captivity both inside and outside prison. His act of writing enacts a freedom denied to the landscape he describes. His description is both revelatory and rebellious, and as real as the metro

station in which a “man was lying on the pavement beside the wall covered over with blood-spattered newspapers, while on the tram-stop platform in the middle of the street a number of women in their black *milayas* had gathered, gesturing towards the man and wailing” (7). It was also the place where the “crush was terrible and I was almost stifled. I watched the tired faces of the women with their kohl running” (16). Those scenes and many others reflect a broken people stifled by the crushing reality of broken promises, twelve years after a revolution that pledged a “republican and democratic government” in which the Egyptian citizen would enjoy his full political and social rights.

The oppression enforced by the state spread sadness and discontent inside and outside prison. A state of numbness and loss is felt everywhere, even the beautiful girl he used to see at the metro station, he later finds out is “lame” (30). Beauty is tarnished. The narrator’s body is not only held captive, worse, it is his soul, “our hearts hung upon hands that were heavy, stout, cruel, and unthinking, and around us the walls met at four corners. The door was locked, the ceiling near. No way of escape” (31).

The contrast between the Revolution’s call for human dignity and the narrator’s description of his prison cell is startling. The “large splodges of blood” (2) that stain the walls, the bugs running on the floor, the cold and the silence, all speak of the exploitation and degradation prisoners undergo. The narrator’s crime is not larceny, murder, bribery or forgery but “political activity” and as such, he is placed with people who committed those crimes in the same space. The prison cell is representative of the regime’s repressive policies; to them, all of the crimes listed above are equally threatening and need to be contained and controlled.

The narrator's account vacillates between autonomy and captivity, and reality and fantasy. As an autobiographical novel, it depicts life as a narrative, and within that narrative, the author/narrator demonstrates how a narration can be controlled or altered by adding or subtracting to change the reality on the ground or at least prevent it from getting harsher than it already is. His memories of Muna's father and his death are very graphic:

They drove us out of the lorry with sticks. We sat on the ground. We were shuddering with the cold and fear. He was the tallest one of us. I heard someone say: "That's him," and they struck him on the head and said: "*Lower your head, you dog.*" They began calling out our names. Then they called his, and that was the last time I saw him. (7, my italics)

The state had broken its promises of dignity. There was no dignity in his death and so, the narrator chose not to relate this story to his friend's wife. Instead, he created a different story, "I told her that he always used to tell me that he never went to sleep without imagining he was hugging Muna in his arms. He used to clap his hands and say 'I'll get out before you'. He wanted to be free at any price" (7). When asked by her if her husband really loved her, he replies in the affirmative; one last tribute to the dignity of his friend and fellow citizen. He later allows the reader into his mind only to know that he had no other alternative but to respond as such, any other response would have been needless, "What should I say to her? What was the point of going into the matter all precisely when everything had come to an end? Also who knows exactly what goes on inside another human being?" (8)

The novel proceeds to further unveil broken promises and to shed light on the image of a nation on the brink of falling apart. The poem Muna's mother hands to the

narrator only further highlights the state of death in life that Egyptians were going through at the time and the oppressive loneliness;

I am sad, my little girl,
Sad and alone.
In a bed I sleep,
A bed cold and dead.
With no one to talk to,
With all the books read,
With no one to laugh with,
Without tears to shed. (9)

The state of imprisonment depicted in the poem could work as a commentary on the state of loneliness that pervades the lives of all the characters in the novel. Sakhr represents another group of the Egyptian society; far from a political activist, he too feels uprooted and estranged:

When I saw him for the first time he was bare-chested, walking along slowly and every now and again raising a finger to stroke his moustache. In those days the world's leaders grew moustaches in a variety of shapes. It was no coincidence that every one of them had a different-looking moustache. Then it was discovered that these moustaches were cheats. With their owners gone, the fashions went too. *Nothing remained on in the heart. Not once had it been filled. He began striking his head against the iron door until he almost split it open. And he was weeping.* (10-11, my italics)

His loneliness typifies different modes of exclusion at the time, economic, political and social. After a hopeful moment in its history, the narrator could see that the transition Egypt was going through had estranged many of its citizens. Like Sakhr, Muna is equally hurt by the Revolution; having lost her father, she asks the narrator to play the role of her father in public, “When there’s anyone around I’ll say that you’re my father, so don’t say you’re not” (12). Moreover, Shifts in class divisions did not eradicate poverty; the fiancé (of the narrator’s sister) sees the situation as “unbearable”, he says: “I’ve got no chance of making any money. If I were to build anything up, the government would only take it” (26).

Like Muna, other characters in the novel try to cover their own personal tragedies by pretense and alternative narratives that they weave for themselves and sometimes others to make life at least livable. The narrator is aware of the unhappiness gnawing at people’s hearts: “Seldom do I smile or laugh. Everyone I see in the street or in the Metro is glum, unsmiling. What have we to be joyful about?” (17). He is also aware of the denial that people exercise upon themselves and others, and the gap between appearance and reality. Samiyya’s marriage is regarded as a success on account of her husband’s person and position. However, the dialogue between the narrator and his sister immediately flows into a glimpse into the narrator’s mind as he reflects on Samiyya,

And so what if they used to meet up together before marrying? She was twenty-seven years old. She had waited in vain for the knight of her dreams for a long time. [...] She was blamed for not having been able to get herself one. Then one evening she met him at the house of one of her girl-friends. The next day her girl-friend told her he wanted to marry her. After ten minutes’

walk to the gate of her home, and at the door of the flat with its cracked paintwork, she said to her friend: “And why not?” May be the beloved she had been waiting for was an illusion. [...] Perhaps she would find happiness with him. Perhaps – the word that hangs over every new marriage – perhaps this was the awaited man. Perhaps love would come. After one year came the child and thus her everlasting bondage was completed. *She had no choice but to resign herself.* (19, my italics)

Samiyya resigns herself and so does his sister. When asked whether she loved her fiancée, she raises her voice and says: “When we first got engaged I couldn’t bear him, but I’ve come to love him with time” (20). She too is held captive in a situation not completely of her own choosing. She creates her own narrative that is not completely true either, only to stifle the reality inside. The oppression exercised by the state is thus compounded and paralleled by the oppression the society inflicts upon one another and that people inflict upon themselves.

This vicious cycle of oppression and exploitation has created an atmosphere of monotony, death in life. Needless to say, the novel is replete with details of everyday life: shaving, ironing, dressing, eating, sleeping and the list goes on. Ibrahim lives up to his claim that the novel would depict reality as it is; the monotony in the text reflects the monotony of his world as he was writing. Consider the following lines:

Suddenly the bell rang. I took up the book and dawdled about a bit, lit a cigarette, and took the packet along with me. Again the bell rang. I hurried to the door and opened it to the policeman to whom I gave the book, while I extracted the packet of cigarettes and gave him one. He left.

I returned to the room and threw the book on to the desk. I looked out of the window and found that the other window had grown dark. I lay down on the bed smoking till I had finished the cigarette, when I threw it out of the window and went to sleep. (27-28)

The description is Prufrockian; there is the expectation of something to happen, but nothing happens as in T.S. Eliot's celebrated "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". The ringing of the bell, the smoking of cigarettes and his attempts to write are all to no consequence, in fact the showing up of the policeman, along with the brief glimpses we get into the narrator's mind, mark the only progression – or lack thereof – in the novel. The narrator yearns for change, for anything to happen: "The bell rang and I hurried to the door, hoping that something, anything, might happen; and that someone, anyone, might come" (20). Nothing happens and it is only nothingness that he is capable of depicting in writing; he fails to live up to Maupassant's expectations: "Maupassant said the artist must create a world that is simpler, more beautiful than ours. He said that literature should be optimistic, throbbing with the most beautiful of sensations" (32). But he finds it impossible to do within his environment. The world outside is not optimistic or beautiful and that is reflected in his writing.

Egypt is depicted as loveless; none of the characters in the novel are truly in love or really happy. At best, they pretend to be happy only to make their world more palatable. The "most beautiful of sensations" in the novel are frustrated fantasies, representations of "what if". At the metro station, when the narrator "glimpses" part of a woman's face, a complete stranger; his mind escapes into an imaginary world that both the reader and himself know is impossible. That imaginary world is also replete with the contradictions of the narrator's Cairo:

I knew pain when I used to look at her bright eyes and luscious cheeks, and when my fingers stole along her arms and my thighs would draw towards her she would refuse me. The last time I had almost gone mad. I had begun to be certain that she didn't care for me. She took me between her arms, allowed me to touch her breasts and hands, to kiss her cheeks and lips. But she was cold. (36-37)

The narrator's fantasy is thwarted; a parallel to the impeded hopes of the characters in the novel. A pall is thrown over much that is meaningful in their lives, so much so that even their fantasies are unhappy. As is the case with the rest of the novel, the narrative builds up the expectation for something to happen and that expectation is always thwarted. The suffering and frustration that resulted from this is best expressed in the narrator's reaction to the news from his sister that her cousin's wife "had had a miscarriage in the sixth month". To his sister's shock, he replies: "That was the best thing that could have happened to her" (44). The birth of new life is meaningless in a country where life is impeded.

The novel ends with the death of the narrator's mother. One final blow to his lonely existence, he learns that his mother had died a week ago and looks around only to see unfamiliar family members who would not have recognized him otherwise. Alienation is felt everywhere, not only is he alienated by the state on account of his "political activities", but he is also alienated from his own mother within the fragmented social structures of the time. Egypt had fallen apart; and the narrator's world falls apart too. Their fates are intertwined. The novel closes with him heading to the metro still looking for direction, a destination in the same way he did at the beginning of the novel. The cycle of loss comes full circle.

The “dark days”:⁹

Corruption and Exploitation in Gholam-Hossein Sa’edi’s *The Rubbish Heap*

“Listen, boy, I’ve been figuring you out all this time. [...] You weren’t made to work at all. You’re just a hustler. You know what a hustler is? A hustler is a go-between, a pimp, a bat, a dealer in blood, a con man, a thief, *someone who doesn’t work but his pockets are full*, understand? You’re not the only one; there’s lots of them; but what’s it to me?” (*The Rubbish Heap*, 235, my italics)

In the 1960s and at the time when Gholam-Hossein Sa’edi wrote *The Rubbish Heap*, Iran was a decade away from a revolution that would change its history and that of the world. This was a time of many transitions in Iran: political, economic, social and cultural. Indeed, revolutions do not usually occur in stagnant societies, but erupt in countries undergoing multiple waves of social change and in the throes of various forms of injustice and exploitation, in a world in which people with pockets that are “full” are not the hardworking citizens but, instead, undeserving “hustlers” (Arjomand 383).

Revolutions are about massive change; the toppling of governing structures, and replacing them with others that are shaped after the spirit of the revolution – with varying degrees of success. Those structures are what Iran scholar Said Amir Arjomand refers to as a “societal structure of domination”, which he defines as the “prevalent system of authority”. This system of authority is not limited to the state but includes other institutions and corporate entities “that have some measure of autonomous authority in the religious, judiciary or economic spheres” (Arjomand

⁹ See: Nabavi, Negin. *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse and the Dilemma of Authenticity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2003: 19.

383). He elucidates this model by pointing out two sets of factors that precipitate a revolution: the first is internal weaknesses within that structure of domination, the second is the concerted action “of social groups and individuals” against it.

Sa’edi’s work can be regarded as a representation of both factors. It reflects the weaknesses of the structure by unveiling modes of exclusion and injustice and, at the same time, is a testament to an author’s role as an agent of change. Ali, in the novel, is not only the “dealer in blood” or the “thief” but is a painful representation of Iranian youth getting sucked into a vicious cycle of exploitation and corruption. He is no exceptional figure but an average Iranian youth who under different circumstances may have ended up differently; we are constantly wondering if his fate could have been avoided. The progression of the plot, however, shows that his story is a link in the chain of other stories of injustice and exploitation that the novel is replete with; each of the other characters in the novel could be a protagonist in a similar story with very similar themes. Even though Sa’edi does not moralize or plead for or against Ali, his presentation of what happens to an Iranian youth in an atmosphere of exploitation is instrumental in establishing a consciousness or an awareness of the collective discontents depicted in the novel.

The previous chapter explored the citizen activism of Sonallah Ibrahim in light of *The Smell of It*. A similar structure will be used in this chapter. The first part gives the historical backdrop of the novel with a brief overview of the Reza Shah period leading up to the 1979 Revolution with emphasis on the Mossadeq coup. The second part is a close-reading of Gholam-Hosseini Sa’edi’s *The Rubbish Heap* as an expression and manifestation of the author’s own citizen activism and a reflection of

the dynamics of exclusion and exploitation in Iran during that period of time as seen through the eyes of the author.

The Mossadeq Coup

Upon the reclamation of the Peacock Throne in 1953 with American and British help, the Shah of Iran thanked Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, saying: “I owe my throne to God, my people, my army – and to you!” (Cited in Zahrani 93) This is a key statement because it sheds light on the different players who had influential roles in the political scene in Iran in the 1960s and even later: the West, religion and the *ulama*, the army and the people. Which took precedence over the other changed a number of times depending on the circumstances, but the players generally remained the same. It also points out to one major contradiction that set the tone for the political and social changes that would transpire; while there was much distrust against the West, the Shah of Iran, in fact, owned his throne to the very part of the world that his nation rejected.

The August 1953 coup that overthrew the Iranian nationalist leader Mohammed Mossadeq can be regarded as a historical compendium of the complex and often intertwining forms of loyalties that existed in Iran back then and continue to exist to this very day. God, the people, the army and the West were all part of a struggle over Iran’s sovereignty. To Mossadeq and his National Front Party, Iran’s nationalization of a British oil giant that had rights to drilling and selling the country’s petroleum, was an assertion of its sovereignty as a nation. British presence and monopoly of Iranian oil meant that Iranian economy and politics were dependent on and subordinate to the West. It was a battle for freedom; Mossadeq put it to the Shah quite bluntly saying: “Did the Shah desire to carry on the battle to victory [...] or to

compromise and again fall under British rule?” And indeed, his fears of foreign intervention were to a great extent justifiable; in 1907, Britain and Russia had reached an agreement to divide Iran into “zones of influence” without any consultation with the Iranian government. The southern areas became the British zone and the northern region, including Tehran, went to Russia (Zahrani 94).

To the British, their interest in Iran had started in 1901 when exclusive rights to explore oil in Iran’s southern provinces were granted to Willian Knox D’Arcy, a British investor. All through the 1930s, the British paid 16 percent of the profits of the company to Iran and “did little to replace expatriate technicians with Iranians” (Zahrani 94). In 1932, Iran cancelled the contract and concessions were made by the British to increase royalties; this lasted for another 32 years. In the 1950s, however, the world’s oil economy changed and Saudi Arabia and the Arabian-American oil company established a 50-50 revenue split. The grievances of what was now called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) escalated, so much so that on March 15, 1951, the Majlis “approved a measure that required the government to take all necessary steps to regain for Iran the rights to its own natural resources” (Zahrani 94). To guarantee the implementation of this measure, the proposed the premiership of Mossadeq and the Shah complied (Zahrani 94). The Shah would later regret his decision.

This was a critical situation for the British. By 1949-1950, the AIOC had in Iran “the world’s largest refinery, the second largest exporter of crude petroleum, and the third largest oil reserves”. It gave the British Treasury 24 million pounds in taxes and 92 million pounds in foreign exchange and supplied 85 percent of the fuel needs of the British navy (Abrahamian 185). The nationalization of the AIOC was a heavy

blow to British economy and control over much-needed petroleum. Needless to say, the British Ministry of Fuel had warned the foreign office saying:

The strength of British oil lies in the fact that we hold concessions all over the world, in which we are ourselves developing the oil and controlling its distribution and disposal. It would weaken our position if countries began to develop their own oil. If Persia began to develop her own oil in the north, it might not be very long before she would want to do this in the south also. We *should not encourage them to develop their own oil.* (Cited in Abrahamian 185, my italics)

The apparent fixation on not allowing Iran to develop “her own oil” points towards the imperialist dimension of the British presence in Iran. It was not necessarily about the petroleum but about “control” and holding “concessions” around the world. This solidifies Mossadeq’s perspective that the nationalization of the AIOC was a battle for sovereignty, nationalism’s struggle against Western imperialism.

To the incoming Eisenhower administration in Washington, it was a somewhat different story, their fear was “a possible Soviet takeover in Tehran” orchestrated by the Iranian Communist Tudeh party. Mossadeq, in this manner, was a threat to US interests. Woodhouse succinctly put it to the Americans saying: “Even if a settlement of the oil dispute could be negotiated with Mossadeq, which is doubtful, he was still incapable of resisting a coup by the Tudeh [Communist] Party, if it were backed by Soviet support. *Therefore he must be removed*” (Cited in Zahrani 95, my italics). This prompted the Americans to join forces with the British in the coup against Mossadeq.

The influence of religion and the *ulama* or the clergy is important and was perceptible especially in the postcoup period. By contrast to Sunni Islam, Shia jurisprudence did not “articulate an authoritative position on politics”. However, in the 1960s, this started to change with the revolt of the clergy against the Shah. In 1962, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who rose to become a powerful dissenting voice against the Shah said:

We speak to the regime in its own accepted terms – not that the Constitution is, in our view, perfect. Rather, if the *ulama* speak in terms of the Constitution, it is because Article 2 of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws does not recognize any legislation opposed to the Koran as law; other than that, the only accepted law is the law of Islam and the traditions of Prophet Mohammad and the Imams. *Whatever is in accord with Islam we shall accept and whatever is opposed to Islam, even if it is in the Constitution, we shall oppose.*

(Cited in Zahrani 98, my italics)

Here, an important distinction is to be made between a constitution as a binding legal document that defines the functions and limitations of the government and constitutionalism; the actual application and enforcement of this legal document on the ground. While Khomeini recognizes the Constitution, he limits its application by presenting yet another governing “legal” document from his own perspective, the Koran. The political calculus, in this manner, rapidly shifts and a new citizenship is presented that owes its allegiance not to the nation (as represented in its constitution) but to God and the Koran with the clergy as the gatekeepers of this new thinking. This would later play a critical role in the Iranian 1979 Revolution.

The Shah was caught in the midst of the confusion that resulted from the presence of all those players with what he perceived as a precarious throne, especially after bringing Mossadeq as Prime Minister. In his own words, he acknowledged Mossadeq's threat to his throne: "The worst years of my reign, indeed of my entire life, came when Mossadeq was Prime Minister. [...] Every morning I awoke with the sensation that today might be my last day on the throne" (Cited in Zahrani 94).

The British and Americans too recognized that Mossadeq had to be ousted. This was their only way to a settlement that would allow them control of and access to Iran's oil. Operation Ajax was to remove Mossadeq and bring the Shah back to his throne. A propaganda campaign launched the coup against Mossadeq; British and American newspapers profiled him as a "Robespierre fanatic", "a tragic Frankenstein" with a "gigantic head" impervious to "common sense" and "obsessed with one xenophobic idea" (Abrahamian 193). On August 15, Colonel Nematollah Nassiri, Commander of the Imperial Guard, delivered to Mossadeq a *firman* from the Shah dismissing him. Mossadeq rejected the *firman* and, instead, had Nassiri arrested. The Shah then escaped to Italy for safety and was later brought back after a successful implementation of the coup, orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This was a turning point; in the words of Kermit Roosevelt, this coup was a "cooperative venture. It allied the Shah of Iran, Winston Churchill, Antony Eden and other British representatives with President Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, and the Central Intelligence Agency" (Cited in Zahrani 96).

The new alliance threw a pall on Iranian politics; much turbulence on social and cultural levels ensued. Iran had lost its autonomy and was tethered to Western interests which, Iranian citizens, were, in turn, bound to. The Shah owed his throne to

the West and his indebtedness heavily informed his decisions and so in the postcoup period, Iran moved into a period of authoritarian rule and political repression.

Iranian oil was mixed with Iranian blood. The denationalization of the oil industry mirrored the political repression acutely felt by the people and manifested in the cultural production of the time. A concession was given to a consortium of major companies allowing it to control the management, refining, production and distribution of oil at the National Iranian Oil Company. In this consortium, “40% of controlling shares went to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, renamed British Petroleum; 14% to its ally Royal Shell (thus giving majority vote to the British); 40% to a group of American firms; and the remaining 6% went to the French state company” (Abrahamian 211). The control forced upon the economy percolated into every aspect of Iranian life and artistic production. The cultural milieu too was part of the insidious and vicious cycle of repression.

The Intellectual Milieu

In an editorial in the summer of 1958 in *Sadaf*,¹⁰ “dark days” are said to have blackened the hearts of intellectuals and young generations causing those “architects of the future” to “smile mockingly and indifferently at the distressing picture that they had drawn of themselves” with “lowered heads and wounded spirits” (Cited in Nabavi 19). Reasons for this state of depression are not explained in the editorial, however, to its readers, the message would have been quite direct that “the coup and its aftermath had swept away the days of hope and resourcefulness and replaced them with despair”. Iranian writers and intellectuals had to determine their position in relation to

¹⁰ *Sadaf* is a monthly literary review that lasted for no more than twelve issues. It was published by Mahmud E'temadzadeh Beh Azin (Nabavi 165).

the outside world as represented by the West which supported the dictatorship in Iran and the Shah. They also had to create their own role in society; many writers were “searching for a sense of purpose in difficult circumstances while distrusting political authority” (Nabavi 19). Those who had supported the oil nationalization movement suddenly had their hopes and ideals dashed.

Under the Shah’s rule, writers and poets were scourged by repression in the postcoup period. Their works either succumbed to it or reacted against it. The political police SAVAK cracked down on any dissent; “there were arrests, detentions, torture and executions” (Sandler 247). The government sought to control the cultural production of the time in order to guarantee control of political and economic spheres. The Shah owed his throne to the West and so Western influences on Iranian art became insidious and prevalent. This situation was painful to serious writers who saw it as “their duty to depict Iranian life in all its poverty, unhappiness and ignorance” (Sandler 247). Citizen activism, thus, was closely tied to the need for freedom of expression and the freedom to express their country’s “true culture and true aspirations” as perceived by them.

Oppression made out of writers and intellectuals, agents of change. Writing about aspects of Iranian life became a political act of activism and a call for freedom that brought writers in conflict with the regime (Sandler 247). There were also examples that inspired Iranian intellectuals. Sartre’s concept of the “engaged intellectual” along with his own personal stand when he rejected the Nobel Prize for Literature, gave him much credibility within Iranian intellectual circles (Nabavi 76). The “intellectual of the left” was discussed and upheld in several circles; an example of this is Al-e-Ahmad’s treatise on intellectuals, *Dar khedmat va khiyanat-e-*

rawshanfekran in which he distinguished between an intellectual and common man, “while the common man was said to be concerned only about his own private life and remained indifferent to developments like the Vietnam War, or at most he would pray for it to end, the intellectual would be outspoken, question the reasons behind the war and ultimately condemn the colonialism responsible for it” (Nabavi 77).

Al-e-Ahmad’s treatise is only one example of many others. Haj Seyyed Javadi also wrote extensively on the role of the intellectual as an activist and changemaker. He wrote, “I believe that in short the intellectual is one who can feel injustice, all the injustices of the world. He feels [them] as if all the treacheries and oppressions ... had taken place before his very eyes ... The intellectual does not content himself with feeling and understanding human pains and injustices; he does not remain silent” (Cited in Nabavi 78). Thus, what is critical to an engaged intellectual is his ability to *communicate* those injustices, which in the case of a writer is through writing.

Third Worldism also influenced intellectuals and writers’ role at that point in time. With successful revolutions happening in Algeria and Cuba, in addition to the “moral dilemma that Vietnam had created for the United States”, and the prevalent perception that the Third World was a revolutionary world, Iranian intellectuals felt the need to be part of those movements and fight their own battles against the indirect colonialism of the Western world.

There were major discernible trends; one was enforced by the regime and sought to cultivate a sense of citizenship that owed its loyalty to a Westernized Iran; which they argued was modern but in reality, was lacking in autonomy and freedom. The other citizenship was advocated by activists, some of which were writers who owed their allegiance to the Iran of the people and depicted the woes of Iranian life.

Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi made the distinction between two groups of artists: true artists and pseudoartists (Talattof 68). Pseudoartists succumbed to the regime and found inspiration outside Iran thereby producing art that had no authenticity, no flavor or identity of its own; it was neither Iranian nor Western but something incomplete and in-between.

Serious writers, however, showed fortitude and grappled for an alternative direction to remain true to their mission. Using artistic devices such as allegory and symbolism, they managed to fly under the radar of the SAVAK. Themes of equality, justice and freedom were abundant in their literary production. This also manifested itself in 1946 at the First Iranian Writers' Congress which was held at the Iran-Soviet Union Cultural House in Tehran and in which Marxist literary theory was discussed, and poets recited works that called for sociopolitical change and that predicted an upcoming revolution (Talattof 68). The following lines are from a poem recited at the Congress by Faridun Tavaluli; it captures the spirit of the time:

The morrow of the revolution
enthusiastically and with glamour
from a point in distance
reaches my ears.

It calms me,
gives me hope,
revives me.

It is the summons to move.

It is time to fight. (Cited in Talattof 69)

Writing was another means to announce a summons to move and that it was time for a political and social overhaul. Through allegorical representations, writers ingeniously managed to overthrow the regime many times within the pages of their works. Writers such as Sa'edi saw it as their duty to depict the Iran of their time, at their peril, of course.

Another two significant and opposing trends that helped shape the intellectual atmosphere of the age were the emphasis on the power of the collective and Ali Shari'ati's emphasis on the individual as an agent of change. The first trend was endorsed in different and somewhat contradictory ways; on the one hand, the regime focused on the collective to reinforce its power and sovereignty by "projecting itself as the successor to the great Persian empires – the Achaemenids, the Sassanids, the Safavids – and was promising future greatness if the *people* were to follow the lead of the Pahlavi establishment" (Chatterjee153), on the other hand, there was a prevalence of Marxist and socialist political discourses that were upheld and propounded by the Tudeh socialist party.

Khalq (the people) was another keyword used to encapsulate Marxist ideology in Iran and, in turn, the call for change. Mashayekhi, explains *Khalq* in light of Iran's socialist groups saying: "Strongly influenced by a populist-nationalistic perspective rooted in the Third-Worldist ideology of the 1960s, young radical Iranian intellectuals increasingly identified themselves with the "anti-imperialism" project, defining the central political question as the liberation of the nation (from imperialist domination) by the *Khalq*. They called their Utopia: *the People's Republic*" (Cited in Fazeli 126, my italics).

Socialist discourses, thus, were intricately connected to discourses of anti-imperialism. The role of the Iranian citizen was informed by a new mode of thinking that emphasized the importance of social justice, and the will of the people as a collective force that would end years of injustice and exclusion. Prevalent socialist discourses, in this manner, promoted citizenship as belonging to or being part of the people. Writing was also influenced by those trends in thought and writers sought to depict the Iranian people as they were in an attempt to mobilize the people towards a free and just Iran.

Shari'ati's voice went in a different direction; he did not talk of systems but of individuals that make up a people. To him, the process of change starts with the individual, not the collective; agents of change are individuals primarily. His political thinking confronted "the aggregative Pahlavi construct of the *mardom-e Iran* (Iranian people) with an alternative individualist construct – that of the *Irani* (Iranian)" (Chatterjee 154). The individual Shari'ati describes is "a distinctly modern being, conversant with all the debates pertaining to the human condition – the charm of conservatism, the limits as much as emancipating potentials of liberalism, the predicament of modernity, the substance yet the lonesomeness of existentialism". He would also be an engaged activist, "political through and through and would engage with his society and its problems, and would be the building block with which the ummah, that is, a just society, could be built" (Chatterjee 155).

The urban youth of Iran found a new voice in Shari'ati's thinking. Their potential to become agents of change held much promise for freedom. Social realism within the literary realm, on the other hand, found itself engaged in how the individual in Modern Iran was getting corrupted by a vicious cycle of exploitation condoned and

administered by the state, as will be evidenced in the analysis of Sa'edi's novel. In that case, the agent of change was, in fact, the writer himself who use writing as a citizen activism tool. The following pages will reflect on Gholam Hossein Sa'edi's role as citizen activist and agent of change in light of his novel *The Rubbish Heap*.

***The Rubbish Heap* and the Cycle of Exploitation**

Set in the obscure alleys of Tehran and its hospitals, *The Rubbish Heap* depicts the dehumanization of the Iranian people under the Shah's regime in the period preceding the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and after the Mossadeq coup. The novel gives an unembellished rendering of Iranian life, shedding light on the different forms of exploitation that existed. The repression exercised by the state against its people percolated into other forms of repression, felt most acutely, by the poor and dispossessed in Tehran. At a critical moment in his nation's history, Sa'edi's writing was born of the discontents of the age and a solid belief in his duty as a citizen, to use writing as a vehicle for change. By unearthing social malaise, he was effectively calling for concerted action against the societal structures of domination of the time.

Sa'edi espoused an approach to literary representation that used art as a tool to give a voice to individuals who were excluded socially and politically by the regime. Having been imprisoned for his political activism by the Shah, he felt the repression exercised by the regime first hand. By unveiling the lonely existence of the Iranian people, he was actively calling for social and political upheaval; literature was an extension of his own political activism. He strongly believed that an artist had a responsibility towards his people that transcended the gift of artistic expression; art was to mirror reality and affect it on the ground. It was to get closer to the people and to what was unfolding within areas excluded by the regime. His works sought to

reintegrate those excluded and silenced voices, simply by acknowledging their existence.

In *The Rubbish Heap*, a predatory environment based on exploitation and symbolized by the practice of selling blood in return for money is depicted. A vicious and continuous cycle of exploitation has precipitated a sterile and static existence in the novel. This, however, is characteristic of Sa'edi's other works; Rivanne Sandler describes Sa'edi's literary world saying:

The world as pictured by Sa'edi is one in which clocks are forever marking the passage of time, a world with no clear lines, where shadows and shapes merge together. It is a world where clouds obscure the sky, where sounds of music are muffled and muted. It is an unfriendly world where neighbors peek out at the trials and tribulations of others from behind the curtains of their own homes. [...] Images of suffocation, death and burial abound. Strange noises and phantoms invade the lives of the characters, symbols of their fears and anxieties. (248)

The passage of time is thwarted in Sa'edi's world, because it is cyclical and involves no real change or progression. Time in *The Rubbish Heap* is punctuated by varied accounts of abuse; the practice of selling blood in return for money and the exploitation of Ali by his father, Zahra, Gilani and the SAVAK. Those characters too, we find out, are abused, each in a different way; the perpetrator is also a victim. In the process, Ali, himself, learns how to manipulate those around him for profit, an indication of the vicious cycle of exploitation in the absence of an alternative. Ali becomes the oppressed oppressor like many other characters in the novel. Sa'edi

however, presents the reader with resistant, good examples like the young doctor and the truck driver who refuse to be corrupt.

The choice of “Ali” as the name of the protagonist is significant. It functions on two levels: on the one hand, it is a name common in Iran and that the majority of the population would identify with and thus, Ali’s experience is intended to relate to that of the Iranian people in general. The other is religious, it evokes the betrayal of Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib, considered by Shi’a as the first Imam, and who was attacked during prayers and died a few days later. It also brings to mind the entire history of the first fitna when Muawiyah attacked Ali for not taking revenge for the murder of Uthman. The Ali in the novel, was also, betrayed by the regime that left him in a state of dispossession and degradation.

Interestingly enough, the novel opens with an “I”, an assertion of the protagonist’s existence as an individual, but slowly, the reader discovers that this announcement of individuality, is, in fact, engulfed within the shadows of complete disempowerment. Characters in the novel are abused in different ways, sometimes a result of the environment (as is the case with Ali) and sometimes a form of self-flagellation and self-hatred (as is the case with his father). Both of which, however, it should be pointed out are highly interconnected with the economic gap under the Shah’s reign; a gap that kept widening and led the poor into further poverty and the rich into more wealth. People are treated more like commodities than human beings and there is an oppressive lack of sympathy and understanding. Iran had split into two worlds that although may have been connected and bound to one another geographically, were quite remote from one another.

The dynamics of the relationship between Ali and his father bear witness to this gap. In their state of poverty, Ali's father "imagined that human kindness could only be found in the slums" (160). A gap between the rich and the poor had widened, so much so, that no communication existed between both worlds and thus, no hope for kindness. This is further compounded by the father's apparent self-hatred exhibited in a negative attitude towards himself and his son, "When he got tired he'd sit down; and when he did sit down, it was in the worst places: under the blazing sun, in the middle of an alley, at the foot of a lamppost, beside a heap of refuse – places where no living creatures passed by and where the stench was suffocating" (160). A sick Iran is portrayed, "If some left-over scraps of food came our way, my father swallowed most of them, then vomited them up. He constantly cursed at me and at the world" (161). It is as if the father is deliberately inflicting pain upon himself and his son, and yet a sense of numbness abounds in the novel, a lack of feeling born of hardship and a lack of belonging; an absence of citizenship in a world that cannot afford lofty ideals and in which man's loyalty is to his basic physical needs and nothing beyond that.

Against this overwhelming presence of the physical, God and religious figures are repeatedly mentioned. The profane is contrasted with the divine only to further accentuate the characters' demeaning existence. Examples abound: "Ya Ali", "Lady Zahra, give us plenty!" are constantly invoked by the characters in the novel on occasions that are remote from the religious and close to the profane. Ali has a vision of Mr. Gilani taking him away from his father in return for money; the vision ends with Mr. Gilani saying over and over: "Do you want to be rich? Do you want to be rich?" (166) In a world in which, happiness is "for the hell of it" (162), parental duties towards their children are not binding ties but instead come second to financial needs.

The practice of selling blood is a metaphor that further highlights the theme of exploitation and demonstrates how Iranian blood is being drained just as its oil. Both are sold for money and both rob the people of their freedom, and more importantly, their dignity. Normal father-son roles are besmirched by the practice and a perverted relationship results wherein a father is willing to sacrifice his son for money and food. When asked for blood, the father refuses to sell his blood but urges his son to: “There’s nothing wrong with him; he eats and walks around healthy as a buffalo” (175). Good health becomes a means through which Ali is exploited by his father, Mr. Gilani, and the regime that condones such acts and, in fact, plays a role in feeding their presence. Sa’edi’s description of the huge scope of this industry churning human blood is extremely graphic:

I got up. The bottle on the tripod was full of blood. The man removed the tube which was attached to the bottle and threw it into the bucket. The bucket was quite full of bloody tubes curled about one another like worms. Sometimes a drop of blood would fall, and join another drop of blood; sometimes something bubbled and stirred. (176)

Something was, indeed, bubbling and stirring under the surface – the 1979 Revolution would later prove it. The drops of blood coming together in the excerpt bring to mind images of rebellion; voices aggregating expressing frustration and a call for change; rebellion was indeed in the making. The more drops of blood joined one another; the closer Iran was getting to a revolution.

Blood and the profane crowd the pages of the novel, giving the reader different flavors of abuse. There is hardly any presence of love and sex too, is portrayed as exploitation. Zahra exploits Ali sexually in return for the medical

treatment of his father and food. Again, the name Zahra like Ali is significant. Here, the sacred is polluted and irrevocably damaged. Zahra is the name of Fatimah, Prophet Muhammad's daughter. In Islamic history, Fatimah is married to Ali Ibn Abi Talib and is an exemplar for men and women. In the novel, Zahra has illicit sex with Ali, not out of love but out of mere lust and their relationship is based on exploitation. She exploits him physically to satisfy her lust. He, in return, uses her to get a "hot lunch" (183) or access to the hospital.

Sa'edi, nevertheless, allows for flashes of humanity that demonstrate how those characters are shaped by their environment. Under different circumstances, they may have been different. They are not inherently or intrinsically bad, but their loneliness has engendered an environment in which exploitation is the norm. Zahra's description of the hospital allows the reader to see another, more sympathetic, dimension of her character:

Let me tell you what kind of place the hospital is. Some people think that the hospital is a place where sick people go and either die or get well. *But for us, the hospital is a good place.* I mean it's a garden, a big park, full of trees and flowers, lots of buildings, rooms full of people all stretched out on beds and twisting around – and whatever's the matter with them is no concern of yours or mine. Just look at them without feeling sorry for them, that's fine. And it's full of good-looking doctors, good-looking girls, nurses, all kinds of people. Every moment of the day there's something to see. (186, my italics)

Iran to its people will always be "a good place". It is like this hospital; a beautiful place with parks and trees, but also with people who are sick but who also have the potential for recovery if treated. It is paradise lost. Zahra goes on to give a somewhat

romanticized description of the hospital as a place where love is born but in the end, we still know it is a hospital. The very romanticized description has no real bearings in reality and it is within the hospital walls that much of the exploitation in the novel takes place: emotional, mental, physical and even sexual. The hospital, in this manner, is a microcosm of the cycles of exploitation administered by the state at the macro level. Like the rest of the novel, the setting is dismal, but Sa'edi provides a flicker of hope for change.

Esmail Agha is such an example. He represents the would-be changemakers of Iran. He found himself tethered to a cycle of corruption but is not willing to get too engulfed into it and still holds onto some principles. This is demonstrated when he suggests to drink a couple of beers with Ali but then goes back on his suggestion when he finds out that Ali has never drunk before. His drinking, he then adds, is a mechanism to numb his soul and to allow time to pass without feeling the pain of stasis:

Even if I drink it, it's because I ask myself, why shouldn't I drink it? Aren't I going to croak myself afterwards anyway? Well, I'll drink it and croak. Life is really a bitch, you know? A person just hangs around; there's nothing worth living for. You yourself, aren't you just hanging around? If you're not, tell me you're not. (193)

The stasis in the novel is broken by death or another incident of exploitation such as the selling pilaf to the poor. The emotional numbness of the characters in the novel is disturbing and bears witness to the processes of dehumanization they have undergone. The corpse of a dead body is carried by Ali and Zahra at the hospital to get the "poor soul" (201), as Zahra puts it, to the mosque. The apathetic and clinical

way they approach death is disturbing; this is further accentuated when Zahra actually attempts to have sex with Ali in the presence of the corpse. Ali is only released when footsteps are heard and two women enter holding a coffin. The sanctity of death is broken.

The selling of pilaf to the poor is another account of dehumanization and the cycle of abuse in the novel. The pilaf sold is mixed with pus and blood from the hospital and yet people gather around Ali to buy the food for two rials. When an old man intervenes to rebel against the selling of contaminated food; one of the customers yells: “Go get lost, you old dog; what’s it to me what’s in it, if it fills my stomach?” (210) As mentioned before, the novel portrays a people who struggle for their basic needs and have been reduced to animals under a regime that has failed to recognize their humanity by condoning such practices of corruption. Some even cannot afford the two rials and a young man offers Ali “a pill” in return for two bowls. Crime breeds crime and the cycle of corruption proceeds unabated.

In the midst of this environment, Ali’s induction into crime is completed. Esmail Agha helps Ali’s father to set a tea shop, but even this attempt to allow Ali and his father to make an honest living miserably fails. The tea shop, like Ali and the characters in the novel are polluted by their environment. The shop later becomes the place where Ali acts as a broker for the selling blood business. His induction into the business is complete as he learns how to play the game and profit from other people’s needs. The tea shop becomes the location where other people are brought into the business and where a place in which “they take a few drops of your blood and give you twenty tumans in exchange” is publicized to potential customers. Ali reaches a point where he is capable of bargaining with Mr. Gilani one how much he money he

would get (227). His transformation scares Esmail Agha who tells him: “I’m beginning to be afraid of you” (229). The regime has successfully produced monsters who will in turn, produce others. As Ali identifies himself to Mr. Gilani as his “servant” – which echoes Dr. Faustus selling his soul to the devil, we know that his corruption is irreversible.

The novel is somewhat open-ended, but the readers still see the cycle of exploitation continuing to go forward. Ali refuses to tell Esmail Agha about his work with the SAVAK and when he does not, Esmail Agha gives him a beating. Ali then informs the SAVAK that Esmail Agha is preventing him from doing his work for them. Somebody at the other end of the phone then says: “All right; we’ll take care of him”. The novel closes with Esmail Agha with “bloodshot eyes and clenched fists” coming forward to Ali who had just made a phone call to the SAVAK. Ali, with “legs trembling” sits in the floor of the booth.

Conclusion

Remapping Social Space:

Writers Bringing the Periphery to the Center

“I intend to show that art is a religion, a transcendent and sacred truth, a savior of humanity. It has a responsibility which is great indeed and which rises above materiality. It is a responsibility which is totally human.” Ali Shari’ati, *Art Awaiting the Savior*

Stories from the literary realm can often be interwoven with the lives of their authors and the lives of those around it. In 1994, six years after winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz was attacked with a knife on his way out from his apartment. His attackers were later identified and arrested. They justified it by “citing a *fatwa* pronounced by Sheikh ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman” who led a radical faction of Egyptian Islamists. The *fatwa* accused Mahfouz of apostasy against Islam in his novel *Awlad haratina* or *Children of the Alley* as translated in 1959 (Jacquemond 1). This novel is not a work of social realism as would be expected or as is the case with the works addressed in the previous chapters, but, interestingly enough, is an allegorical work typifying either Nasser’s regime or humanity as a whole (Jacquemond 2). That said, what is of significance here is that this incident bears witness to the fact that the impact of a literary work is perceptible beyond tangible boundaries of its pages.

For Sartre, a writer’s impact transcends that of a painter or a composer. He says, “The writer can guide you and, if he describes a hovel, make it seem the symbol of injustice and provoke your indignation. The painter is mute”. The key to impact is communication of meaning, and it is this communication that allows the author to

create a space that is capable of extending far beyond the limited boundaries of a book. Iranian intellectual Ali Shari'ati in *Man and Islam* describes the impact of this communication of meaning by comparing a free-thinker to a “director of his society; that is he must constantly feel and be the designer of his society” (108). Such a director, he says, needs to have an insider’s knowledge of his people, their problems, pains and ideals in order to be able to effectively communicate his message to them.

Works like those addressed in this thesis reverberate within the social space around them and within them. They provide a dynamic space in which those placed on the margins of the state’s interests are brought to the center. Heterotopias of exclusion are brought to the very heart of their works. In this manner, authors are thus, capable of recreating and reinventing the tangible space outside their works in writing. As they write, they are remapping the space outside the literary realm by espousing different priorities from the ones upheld by the status quo or the equally restricting norms enforced by societal pressure. Indeed, the obscure labyrinthine streets of Tehran and Cairo, ignored and sometimes unknown to the state, are made the very center of works by authors like Gholam Hossein Sa’edi and Sonallah Ibrahim and others. By unveiling truths about their communities, they give a voice to the silenced and present an authentic call for change. Writing, in this manner, becomes an expression of the author’s citizen activism and also a means by which change is set in motion through the reader.

An intellectual or writer’s capacity to effect change by means of his writing is not new. History has born witness to their capacity for change; their citizen activism is articulated within the pages of their works and sometimes even in their own personal choices as is the case with Sonallah Ibrahim and Gholam Hossein Sa’edi.

Their works are a testament to their age and to the social malaise that existed in the environment they depicted. Indeed, intellectuals and authors have indeed been adamant orchestrators of change; Romantic nationalism in Germany was the product of a generation of frustrated intellectuals; and the English and French revolutions were “shaped by disgruntled and unemployed intellectuals (clerics, lawyers, literati) whose ranks had been swollen in the decades preceding the revolution” (Boyer 111). Thus, through the process of literary creation, an author is not only capable of taking stock of the dynamics of the national consciousness of his time of which he is part, but he is also an active agent in the actual formation of this consciousness.

Both *The Smell of It* and *The Rubbish Heap* were written at transitional and key moments in their nations’ history. Egypt had just been through the 1952 Revolution and Iran was headed towards the 1979 Revolution. Both events would have dramatic reverberations inside and outside the geographic boundaries in which they took place. They would also define spheres of influence that would determine the dynamics of citizenship in each country. In Egypt, those spheres reflected themselves in the multiple notions of identity of the Nasserite period: Arab, African, Muslim and Egyptian. In Iran, spheres of influence represented the different players in the politics of the age and the structure of domination at the time: the West, religion and the *ulama*, the army and the people.

Each set of influences forged loyalties and allegiances that created rebels and followers or conformists, the dynamics of which are clearly reflected in two trends in the literary production of the age. In both countries, intellectual and cultural production was not allowed free agency but was deemed as a means to support and serve the regime and there were those who conformed. There was a cadre of writers,

however, that remained true to the realities on the ground, struggled to push the boundaries enforced by the regime and strove for intellectual and cultural autonomy.

Both Ibrahim and Sa'edi belong to the second trend. They dispensed with a view of art for art's sake and regarded their literary production as part and parcel of their intellectual citizenship and activism. Their political consciousness was indivisible from their civic consciousness. Their works found their lifeblood in the day to day affairs of the people and their hopes and disappointments. Instead of sit-ins and protests, they used writing as their means and readers as the location wherein change would be transferred from the tangible space of a book to the intangible space of the reader's mind and from there to the world.

Literature provided them with a space wherein their stories became the story of a generation and a nation. Their protagonists are not presented as outstanding individuals but are used as cameras taking snap shots of everyday life. Each protagonist/narrator thus becomes an "everyman" and an example of the loss Egyptian and Iranian citizens were going through as they struggled to determine their relation to their country as a *state* and a *home*. State enforced citizenship prescribed fixed norms that estranged the people from their own country.

Finally, this thesis is an exploration of two works as examples of their authors' role as citizen activists under undemocratic regimes. It sheds light on an author's role as a parallel historian or sociologist of his nation. However, while writers have diligently documented and critiqued their times, there remains to be written a history of the writers themselves as agents of change and as representative of what Richard Jacquemond called the "conscience of the nation". Much is yet to be written not of the

craftsmanship of their works, but of their impact beyond the pages of a book and their ability to remap the social space around them.

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