KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND

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PRECURSORS OF THE ARAB SPRING: A STUDY OF *IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN, AUTUMN QUAIL, MEMORY IN THE FLESH* AND *THE EARTHQUAKE*.

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, KUMASI, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY (ENGLISH) DEGREE.

BY

HAMZA ISSAH DANJUMA

JUNE, 2015.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that except for references which I have duly acknowledged, this essay is the result of my own research and that this dissertation has neither in part nor in whole been presented elsewhere for another degree.

....

DATE HAMZA ISSAH DANJUMA

(STUDENT)

PG4531410

I declare that I have supervised the student in undertaking this study, and I confirm that he has my permission to present it for assessment.

....

DATE DR. (MRS.) FREDERICKA DADSON

(SUPERVISOR)

....

DATE DR. ESTHER SERWAAH AFREH

(HEAD OF DEPARTMENT)

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DEDICATION

For Gifty and Theresa.

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Secondly, I am sincerely grateful to my supervisor, Dr. (Mrs.) Fredericka Dadson, whose guidance and encouragement have contributed immensely to the successful completion of this thesis. Dr. Dadson encouraged me to do something different from what has been the norm in terms of the areas of discussion postgraduate students of the department venture into. This led both of us to agree on a topic relating directly to the causes of the current phenomena being unveiled in North Africa and the Middle East which have come to be known as the 'Arab Spring'; I am happy I ventured into Arabic literature since it has opened my eyes to the rich corpus of literature that exists in that region but which, to a large extent, has gone unacknowledged. The cost of the primary texts for this thesis was borne by Dr. Dadson without my paying a penny and I am extremely grateful to her for the gesture. She told me she was very interested in my area of research; and so even though we were finding it difficult to lay hands on the primary texts for the research, Dr. Dadson took the trouble to have the texts sent down from the United States (US). All I can say, Doctor, is thank you for showing the interest in what I set out to do, and for painstakingly reading through my work to fine tune it for presentation for assessment.

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ABSTRACT

The 'Arab Spring' is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests occurring in the Arab world (North Africa and the Middle East) that began on Saturday, 18th December, 2010. The movement originated in Tunisia and quickly took hold in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon and Iraq. To date, political rulers have been forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

This thesis discusses the causes of the 'Arab Spring' as we are currently witnessing it, and aims to draw a correlation between these causes and the preoccupation of selected works of some North African writers. The current causes of the 'Arab Spring' are not new. They have existed since time immemorial. What we are currently witnessing is only a culmination and outburst of pent up emotions; emotions which have been held back for decades by members of most Arab societies. The works of four North African writers have been discussed to show that these writers have, previously in their various works, discussed issues affecting the masses of most Arab societies which, if they were given the needed attention and consideration, would not have brought us to the current state of unrest within most North African and Middle Eastern countries. In other words, Hisham Matar in In the Country of Men, Naguib Mahfouz in Autumn Quail, Ahlam Mosteghanemi in Memory in the Flesh, and Tahir Wattar in The Earthquake, give insights into the dissatisfaction of Arab peoples at the treatment meted out to them by their various governments as well as the poor conditions of life they live under in their own countries while a few minority groups continue to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority population.

The works under study discuss a number of issues that underpin the causes of the on-going 'Arab Spring.' Issues such as dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty, and a number of demographic factors, such as a large percentage of educated but dissatisfied youth within the population have been extensively discussed. Literature therefore has been put to mimetic use by the writers whose works are under study. These writers, through the use of literary and linguistic devices like symbolism, description, rhetorical questions, allegory and comparison, provide a vivid picture of what is going on in most Arab societies. In the end these literary works provide evidence of the rich corpus of Arabic literature which for decades has not been given due recognition like its counterparts in Europe and America.

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A grand colonialist future has been destroyed...But what on earth has taken its place?

Tahir Wattar, *The Earthquake.*

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INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Arabic Literature, literature written mostly in the Arabic language, and translated into other languages (especially French), by writers from the Arab region, started from the 6th century. This literature has its roots in semi-nomadic societies on the Arabian Peninsula. Its spread is linked to the rise of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. The influence of the Arabic language and Arabic culture eventually expanded with Islam throughout the Middle East, as far east as Afghanistan and as far west as Spain and northern Africa's Atlantic coast. Arabic literature today crosses geographical and national boundaries and includes numerous genres. [1]

Major historical events have played a pivotal role in the development of Arabic literature. The Arab-Islamic conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries created a vast multinational empire in which scholars and writers flourished. The literature created within this empire surpasses in scope and sophistication the literature of medieval Europe. The influence of the West on Arabic literature and culture started at the end of the 18th century with France's invasion of Egypt in 1798. The revival of Islam around the world in the late 20th century has also had an enormous effect on Arabic literature, both secular and religious. Writers today often draw upon early Arabic texts and conventions for inspiration, perpetuating the vibrant and rich tradition of Arabic literature. [2]

The theme of change has been an important issue of the Arabic novel since its birth. Political, economic, social and cultural changes have taken place in the modern Arabic society, which is still evolving. The theme of change revolves around the conflict between ancient and modern. This conflict arises with the realization that modernism and modernity are compatible.

The aim of the writer of this thesis is to discuss the developments taking place in the Arab world today as reflected in selected writings of the Arab world. The current developments, that is, the wave of change that has come to be known as "The Arab Spring", has attracted the attention of the whole world. In particular, literature from the North African region would be critiqued with a view to bringing to light issues that underlie what is currently taking place in the Arab world today. The works of renowned North African writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Hisham Matar, Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Tahir Wattar would be the primary texts for this study.

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OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The 'Arab Spring' is a phenomenon that has caught the attention of the entire world. However, developments in North Africa and the Middle East did not happen overnight. Numerous factors have led to the current protests, including issues such as dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty, and a number of demographic structural factors, such as a large percentage of educated but dissatisfied youth within the population.

It is the objective of this study to establish, first, that writers from the Arab region did, and do not write in a vacuum; in other words, literature is put to mimetic use and mirrors the goings on in society. Second, the study would seek to establish that the current wave of protests in North Africa in particular is not an entirely new phenomenon. The series of events happening now is only a culmination of what had been foretold and predicted in the works of the writers under study: Hisham Matar in *In the Country of Men* [3], Naguib Mahfouz in *Autumn Quail* [4], Ahlam Mosteghanemi in *Memory in the Flesh* [5] and Tahir Wattar in *The Earthquake*.[6]

RELEVANCE OF STUDY

It is hoped that this study would better aid the appreciation and understanding of the rich literary tradition of Arabic literature. The importance of the Arabic literary tradition cannot be over-emphasized and becomes clear as one looks at the shelves of bookshops in Middle Eastern and North African capitals. It is further hoped that this study, coming on the heels of the 'Arab Spring', would make clear the deep-seated problems in the Arab region, in particular North Africa, and bring to public attention the rich diversity of culture that has pertained to Arabic literature.

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ORGANIZATION OF WORK

* Introduction which would entail a statement of purpose, objectives of study, relevance of study, organization of work and research methodology.

* Chapter One would present a literature review of the subject area, theoretical frameworks for the study (New Historical and Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Criticism) and background information to the 'Arab Spring.'

* Chapter Two would be a critical analysis of Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* with a view to bringing out the issues of discontent, oppression, insecurity and betrayal as they relate to current happenings in Libya in particular and the Arab world in general.

* Chapter Three would be a discussion of Naguib Mahfouz's *Autumn Quail* taking into consideration such topics as alienation, political and personal downfall, bribery and corruption, and moral responsibility.

* Chapter Four would critique Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* in relation to Algeria's struggle against foreign domination as well as its post-independence struggle with itself and the fate of revolutionary ideals in a post-revolutionary society.

* Chapter Five would discuss Tahir Wattar's *The Earthquake* bringing out the eschatological notions of struggle, death and sacrifice.

* The study would then end with a conclusion of all subject matter discussed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objectives as stated above would be achieved by examining, inter alia, information sourced from books, reviews, newspapers, journals and the internet. The primary source of information, however, will be the novels under consideration and other scholarly works by the writers under scrutiny, namely, Hisham Matar, Naguib Mahfouz, Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Tahir Wattar. Literary theories such as New Historical and Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Criticism would be applied to the analyses of the works under consideration. The literary works of prominent Arab writers such as Jamal al-Ghitani and Yusuf al-Qa'id will be discussed in a bid to understand the on-going 'Arab Spring.'

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ENDNOTES

[1]Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. "Arabic Literature." Microsoft Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

[2]ibid

[3] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006.

[4] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985.

[5] Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003.

[6] Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1798 French general Napoleon Bonaparte and his army invaded Egypt. This event heralded a new phase in Arabic literature. Western imperialism brought with it new genres: the novel and the short story. More importantly, the subsequent emergence of independent countries in the Middle East and North Africa meant that a multiplicity of viewpoints populated the Arabic literary scene. [1]

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The literary scene began to come alive in the 19th century, although many writers continued to employ older genres. Lebanon's Nasif al-Yaziji, for example, composed *maqamat* (literally translated as 'assemblies'; a collection of literary gems written in rhymed prose but also including poetry) in imitation of the medieval forms of literature such as anecdotes, stories, philosophical essays, theological texts, bibliographies, literary criticisms, and writings on geography and history. These *maqamat* served as a model for literary experiments by early 20th century prose writers such as Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, Ahmad Shawqi, and Hafiz Ibrahim of Egypt. Shawqi and Ibrahim are also famous for their neoclassical odes. [2]

The prose tradition underwent fundamental transformations in the 20th century. The first Arabic novel is generally considered to be *Zaynab* (published in1913), by the Egyptian writer Muhammad Husayn Haykal. The novel, along with the short story, continued to grow in importance throughout the 20th century. Egypt's Naguib Mahfouz, one of the best-known Arabic novelists of the 20th century, was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. His *al-Thulathiyya* (*The Cairo Trilogy*), which chronicles the travails of an Egyptian family, won him critical acclaim and, according to some critics, was the major contribution to his winning the Nobel Prize. The trilogy is composed of *"Bayna al-Qasrayn"* (1956;

published in English as “Palace Walk” in 1990), *“Oasr al-Shawq”* (1956; published in English as “Palace Desire” in 1991), and *“al-Sukkariyah”* (1957; published in English as “Sugar Street” in 1992). Yūsuf Idrīs of Egypt has been the acknowledged master of the Arabic short story, with his powerful narratives on sexuality and male-female roles.[3]

Palestinian writer Emile Habiby is best known for his novel *al-Waqa'i' al-Ghariba fi-Ikhtifa' Sa'id Abi al-Nahs al-Mutasha'il* (1974), published in English as *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* in 1982). He uses humour and irony to describe the plight of Palestinians living in Israel. Habiby is one of a group of Arabic writers who have moved away from realism as a literary mode. Many of them have drawn upon centuries-old literary traditions for material. A prominent example is the novel *al-Zayni Barakat* (1974), translated into English in 1988) by Jamal al-Ghitani, which employs 15th and 16th century texts to create a postmodern narrative. The writer, Yusuf al-Qa'id, is another important figure. His three-volume *Shakawa al-Misri al-Fasih* (*The Complaints of the Eloquent Egyptian*, 1981-1985) demonstrates that the textual tradition a writer mines can hark back a few thousand years to Egypt’s past under the pharaohs. [4]

The wave of revolutions sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East today bears a striking resemblance to previous political upheavals. As in Europe in 1848, rising food prices and high unemployment has fuelled popular protests from Morocco to Oman. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, frustration with closed, corrupt, and unresponsive political systems has led to defections among the elites and the fall of once powerful regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The revolutions of 1848 in Europe sought to overturn traditional monarchies, and those in 1989 were aimed at toppling communist governments. The revolutions of 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East are fighting something quite similar: "sultanistic" dictatorships. Although such regimes often appear unshakable, they are

actually highly vulnerable because the very strategies they use to stay in power make them brittle, not resilient. [5]

It must be noted that on the literary scene, attempts have been made to predict and actually foretell what is currently happening across the Arabian Peninsula; the works of some writers from this region have explored and continue to discuss pressing issues in the Arab society, such as access to national resources, youth unemployment, food shortages, alienation of a critical mass of the elite and, above all, government corruption and mismanagement of state resources. These and many other issues have provided fertile ground for writers to engage the attention of all, and to make clear the plight of the masses at the receiving end of ruthless political dictators.

The last five years has seen a lot of insurrection in North Africa and the Middle East. The phrase "Arab Spring" has come to be associated with these developments in the world. When the Egyptian people began to gather in Tahrir Square in February, 2011, the embers of the immolation that consumed Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi had already sparked the fire that overthrew the dictatorial ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The protest in Tahrir Square was the first manifestation of that fire in Egypt but certainly not the last. The fires of protest in Egypt tossed out their president, Hosni Mubarak, less than two months after Ben Ali was deposed. The feat of that overthrow was not only momentous within the borders of Egypt itself; its repercussions were felt as far as Arabia, Asia, Africa and the Americas. In Washington, Tel Aviv, London, Berlin, Paris, and Rome, and on Wall Street, there was plenty of catching up to do. Neither the eavesdroppers at the National Security Agency (NSA) in the United States, nor the operations managers of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) perhaps predicted the end of the Mubarak regime. Indeed, it was not until getting to the end that the political powers in the aforementioned capitals begun to side with (and subtly

subvert) the popular uprising in the streets of Egypt and other Arab countries that were to follow next. [6]

It is important to state at this point that the writer of this thesis has attempted to do an extensive research on the undercurrents of the 'Arab Spring' as we are currently witnessing. In the light of this, the researcher tried to find out if there has been any previous literature written on Arab societies generally that has a direct link to the issues underlining the present wave of demonstrations and protests sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East. What the researcher realised in the course of this research of gathering literature on issues affecting most Arab societies that directly relate to the on-going demonstrations is that not much research and criticism can be found in this area. This struck the researcher, and set him thinking as to what could be the reasons behind this phenomenon, and a number of factors were found to be true.

To begin with, Arabic literature has not attracted that much attention as English literature, American literature or African literature. Though a lot has been said about the Arab peoples and the subjects of concern in their various societies, both in works of fiction and non-fiction, not much commentary and criticism can be found on these works. These Arab works were not even known in the first place, due to the inconspicuous Arabic language they were written in. It is only after the invasion of Egypt by France in the 18th century that attention was drawn to the rich diversity of Arabic culture and literature, and some works of literature begun to be translated into French and English. Others were published originally in French. Following from these developments, Egypt's Naguib Mahfouz, one of the best known Arabic novelists of the 20th century, had his 1956 classic, *al-Thulathiyya*, translated into English as *The Cairo Trilogy*. In spite of this new phase in Arabic literature, there is still a lot of research and criticism that can be carried out in this area of writing.

Secondly, and closely connected to the preceding point, the limited amount of information and criticism on works of literature produced by Arab writers prevents serious issues discussed in some of these literary works from being critiqued and commented on by scholars and critics. And so there has been a number of works of literature in the past, especially novels, which have talked about and actually predicted what is presently happening in North Africa and the Middle East, that is, the clamour for change of governments and an improvement in the living conditions of the majority populace. However, since attention was not paid to these works of literature, the issues discussed were glossed over and not given the seriousness they deserved. What compounds the issue is the fact that these works of literature were considered as mere fictional tales and did not have any deep significance as can be seen from the causes of the 'Arab Spring.'

This lack of attention and criticism of works of literature by Arab writers has pushed this researcher to discuss and critique some of these literary works written in times past but which have a direct correlation to the causes of the 2011 Arab revolts sweeping across the entire Arabian Peninsula. The absence of research and criticism on the causes of the 'Arab Spring' as they predate the present time gives further impetus to why the current study by this researcher needs to be carried out. There is still a lot of research and criticism that can be carried out in the area of Arabic literature to bring out and discuss pressing issues such as those in 2012 in the form of the 'Arab Spring.'

This thesis is therefore carried out to fill part of the void of the lack of criticism and research carried out in the area of Arabic literature. Arabic literature has existed for decades. A number of literary works produced in Arabic have been translated into English, French and other languages. Some criticism and research on works of literature produced by Arab writers can be found but this is not sufficient enough. It is in light of this lack of criticism of Arabic

literature that this thesis is being carried out to help shore up already existing but not sufficient critical analysis of the works of Arab writers. Arabic writers have produced literary works on prose, drama and poetry. Their literary works to a large extent has mirrored what goes on in their various societies: their social, economic, political and religious life. This researcher hopes to open up Arabic literature, and by extension, the Arab society, to criticism, by adding on to knowledge, and in the process showing the rich cultural diversity of the Arab peoples.

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It would be observed that all the texts cited for discussion in this part of the study are by Egyptian writers, and are set in Egypt. This is not intentional. In the process of information gathering for the literature review, most of the materials the researcher came across pertained to works authored by Egyptians. This is not denying the fact that there were few works of literature by other Arab nationals which explored themes similar to those underpinning the current wave of demonstrations across North Africa and the Middle East; the themes and issues in these works were not extensively discussed as those of the works included here. However, most of the works by other Arab nationals discuss other issues of importance to the Arab people. For a long time Egypt was the literary centre of the Arab world, producing most of the literary works coming from that region. Most young and emerging writers came from Egypt. Egyptian writers were among the first Arab writers to produce works of literature dealing with the plight of the intellectual class in a time of unrest, the issue of political instability, repression, human rights abuses, poverty of the masses and government corruption and embezzlement of funds by public officials.

The works of the writers which will be discussed constitute a very important shift from established norms and offers a series of clear understanding into Arab culture and society. The Egyptian, and to a large extent, Arab literary establishment, have been unanimous in

condemning the dictatorial tendencies of successive governments. Some of these writers have criticized their various governments at the peril of their lives. Others have had to flee into exile for fear of being hunted down and tortured. Hisham Matar is one such writer. Most of the works of these writers have been the product of the broader social and political environments. This shows that Arab writers do not write in a vacuum but put literature to mimetic use.

At this point an attempt would be made to discuss literature the researcher came across that relates to the topic under study: issues underpinning the present political and social turmoil across North Africa and the Middle East.

In a recently published non-fiction entitled, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*, Vijay Prashad attacks western interpretation of the transitions in Egypt and Libya, and explores the actual events leading to the overthrow of the governments in those countries from a perspective that explains the players in terms of their allegiances, holdings and politics. In Prashad's work, the differences between the fighters on the ground (who fought day and night in a bid to overthrow corrupt governments that were unresponsive to their needs), and the suits on television (representing the leadership of opposition parties) are not only acknowledged; they are examined in terms of their meaning to the future. In discussing Egypt, Prashad describes the urgency of America's imperial needs, Israel's paranoid perception of its security, and the Mubarak clique's desire to maintain power. He gives a lie to the West's claim that it is interested in democracy, explaining that in Western mind-set democracy does not mean democracy; it means a guarantee that the interests and holdings of capitalist Europe and America will not be upset. The common term one hears, states Prashad, is stability. Yet the West only seeks stability in Arab countries where they know they would benefit massively. And so they close their eyes to atrocities going on in such countries. [7]

Most of this book, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*, is about the battle for Libya. Prashad's text provides the most detailed description of the events both on the ground and in the office suites. He exposes the humanitarian intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for what it was—a means for the western powers to regain unfettered access to Libyan oil and rid themselves of an, at best, erratic dictator—Muammar Gaddafi. Unlike many on the left, Prashad does not take sides for or against the rebellion. Instead, he explains the uprising as a popular and positive thing that was manipulated by the forces of the Great 7 (G7) and NATO. Simultaneously, he discusses Gaddafi's reign as one that began with many positive changes yet, ultimately, was a victim of its own excesses and greed. If there are any good persons in his narrative, it would be the masses that risked their lives to overthrow the autocracy that had Gaddafi at its helm. Their opposite would be the men on both sides of the battle whose only real interest was in keeping their bank accounts plush while serving their masters in the stock exchanges of the neoliberal world. [8]

The important story about the 2011 Arab revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and the larger Arab region, is not how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters' aspirations. Nor is it about how activists used technology to share ideas and tactics. Instead, the critical issue is how and why these ambitions and techniques used by protesters resonated in their various local contexts. The patterns and demographics of the protests varied slightly. The demonstrations in Tunisia spiralled toward the capital from the neglected rural areas, finding common cause with a once powerful but much repressed labour movement. In Egypt, by contrast, urbane and cosmopolitan young people in the major cities organized the uprisings. Meanwhile, in Libya, ragtag bands of armed rebels in the eastern provinces ignited the protests, revealing the tribal and regional cleavages that have beset the country for decades. Although they shared a common call for better conditions of living and responsive governments, the revolutions across these three countries reflected quite different economic

grievances and social dynamics—legacies of their diverse encounters with modern Europe and decades under corrupt regimes which ruled with iron fists. [9]

One revolutionary novel that attracts the attention of the writer of this thesis is Radwa Ashour's *Specters*, translated from Arabic to English in 1999. Radwa Ashour's half-memoir-half-novel is about many people, places and events. But one of its central locations is Tahrir Square, and one of its central themes is revolt and its repression. Tahrir Square is important to Ashour both personally and politically: she spent much of her girlhood near the square, and notes that many Egyptian calls for freedom have been issued from there.[10] *Specters* tells the story of two women born on the same day: one is a professor of literature who bears the same name as the author, 'Radwa Ashour'; the other, Shagar Abdel Ghafar, is a respected fictional college professor and historian, and the author of a non-fiction book entitled 'The Specters', an account of the 1948 massacre in the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin. The first protagonist in *Specters*, the professor of literature, is currently writing a novel also called 'Specters.'

Written from the first-person narrative point of view, it quickly becomes impossible to distinguish between Ashour the author and Ashour the character, especially when she (Ashour, the author) interrupts the narrative to express her doubts about her fictitious characters and the direction in which their story is heading. The fact that both story-lines unfold at random—as opposed to a chronological order, is also questioned by the author herself. *Specters* is hard to categorize. It is not purely an autobiography, despite the fact that Radwa Ashour and her family feature heavily in the story, neither is it a work of pure fiction, even though the college professor, Shagar Abdel Ghafar, is a fictional character. Rather, *Specters* is about a world in which Palestine, with all the atrocities and injustices committed against its people, exists. *Specters* is ultimately about loss, oppression, and the indefinable

essence of identity. According to Barbara Romaine (who translated the novel from Arabic to English), Ashour's documentation of Egyptian resistance (as seen in *Specters*) to repressive institutions is and always has been of great importance, but now it resonates powerfully with the events of last winter, when Mubarak was at long last brought down. *Specters* also paints a portrait of how corruption on the national level is duplicated in other realms, such as the university, and this is an issue in which Ashour continues to be very involved as an activist, a reformer within the university. [11]

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Specters is a heartbreaking story of powerlessness, and the seemingly inevitable death of hope in the face of a lifetime shaped by events that are ultimately beyond our control. More than anything though, *Specters* is about choices—a concept echoed in Ashour's parallel story-lines and their inhabitants, and her decision to share with readers her uncertainty as an author. *Specters* combines invention, unofficial history and human abyss in an elliptical novel in which Ashour articulates an ethics rooted in Arabian and ancient Egyptian cultures. With all the events now surrounding the 'Arab Spring', *Spectres* reflects on education and activism in Egypt as part of the background narrative. Ashour chooses a refractory format to blend in two narratives: one of herself (autobiographical) and the other of Shagar. There are many Shagars, as there are several beginnings. Ashour finally settles on a Shagar in her fifties, an academic in the midst of overseeing exams and grading a large number of examination scripts.[12]

In a review in the "Jordan Times", Sally Bland says *Specters* discusses a myriad of themes and historical events that are woven together: the challenge of being a teacher in a corrupt system, the development of consciousness, exile, and the Egyptian people's struggle for freedom from the time of British colonialism up to today. Though well written, many sections of the novel appear hazy, replicating the non-linear workings of memory. One is not always

sure of who is speaking, or where or when the event in question is happening. Yet, in the end, the threads come together in a coherent pattern replete with implications for the contemporary Arab world. In telling the story of two women, Ashour protests all forms of repression, victimisation and disempowerment. More importantly, she highlights people's industriousness and their ability to show that there is an alternative. While laying bare the corruption and class divisions in Arab society, Ashour stresses the unity of the causes that really matter to people, the causes that lead a people to rise up for their rights. [13]

According to Mona Zaki (an Arab literary critic), in a review of *Specters*, the early part of the book is a memoir of the education of a young girl attending a French co-ed school in 1956. The scenes reflect the nationalization of schools, with Egyptian teachers hired to teach history, geography and civics or National Instruction. Ashour aptly describes this post-colonial era—the few Europeans teachers who stayed behind, bullying and bestowing contempt on their students. Politics in those early years was not far behind: an innovative young history teacher (Shagar) is arrested on charges of communism. Ashour successfully brings together various threads – the backgrounds of grandparents who moved from the Delta to the city, the culture and importance of education to the middle class. None of the details are forced, whether it is Umm Kulthum or the clunky furniture that overcrowds her grandparents' salon. [14]

Zaki goes on to say that politics affects the life of ordinary Egyptians. Radwa Ashour, who is a professor of English and Arabic literature at Ain Shams University in Cairo and married to the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti, remembers and relates the many junctures where she was forced to part with her husband and son, and was later able to reunite with them. One can always link one juncture or another with events that have marred the political consciousness of Arabs for the past fifty years. Ashour covers activism in *Specters*: Egyptian student sit-ins

in 1972, and arrests and imprisonment of intellectuals and academics by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat. Teaching is also a political act, and the university (and its politics) reflects the corruption of society at large – here again, the students seek guidance. Egyptian students show up to lectures in overcrowded auditoriums, barely able to hear the lectures, under yellowish light. This tells of the unfavourable conditions in which the people lived. These and many other issues of discontent among the masses have contributed to the larger 'Arab Spring' we are witnessing today. [15]

Secondly, *"Al-Bab al-Maftooh"* (*The Open Door*, published in 1960), is Egyptian female writer Latifa al-Zayyat's first novel. *The Open Door* deals with the multiple layers of experience. While not strictly autobiographical, the author revisits her university days and creates a heroine after her own heart. The novel tells the story of Layla, a young woman from the Cairean middle class. Layla's psychological, social, and political growth takes place in the context of the years from 1946 to 1956—years that witnessed the revolt against British colonial rule and the Royal Palace of Egypt, the Free Officer's Revolution of 1952 led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, and the Israeli-British-French attack that followed. According to the "Kirkus Review", *The Open Door* is set after the years following World War II, when agitation for independence from continuing British rule led gradually to the 1952 revolution and the 1956 Suez Crisis, and concentrates on the complex, solidly realized characters of al-Zayyat's activist heroine, Layla (a probable authorial surrogate) and her brother Mahmud. Despite employing them (and several other characters) as representative politicized figures, al-Zayyat builds this increasingly absorbing novel into a searching examination of the conflicting (and conjoined) claims of individual liberty and national destiny. The oppressed citizens begin to take matters into their own hands and demand better conditions in their country, which had for a long time been dominated by colonial masters. [16]

The "Kirkus Review" goes on to talk about the events leading to the 1952 Egyptian revolution; the specific period covered in *The Open Door* starts on February 21, 1946, when there were massive demonstrations against the British (the Ismaliya Square episode mentioned in the opening pages). Meanwhile the British continued to occupy the Suez Canal Zone, which by a treaty from 1936, should have reverted to Egypt in 1949. The continued unhappiness resulted in increased numbers of youth (including Layla's brother Mahmud) joining the civilian Fedayeen in guerrilla warfare in the canal zone. The Fedayeen youth were very highly regarded in Egypt, and were tacitly supported by much of the army and police. On January 25, 1952 the British army massacred dozens of weakly-armed Egyptians at a police barracks harbouring some Fedayeen youth in the town of Ismailia (on the Suez). The one-sided killings led to widespread riots, called the 'Cairo Fires', in which seven hundred and fifty (750) buildings were looted and many of them set afire. [17] The scenes of violence in 1952 reflect current happenings witnessed in Egypt today between January and July, 2011, and which is still on-going, that is, the agitation of the masses for better conditions of life in their own country.

Layla's personal travails begin when she menstruates for the first time, an event which brings tears of humiliation and distress to her father's eyes. Determined to guard his honour against any future stains, he restricts his daughter's movement and arranges for her to marry her cousin. For al-Zayyat, the father represents not only an older generation unable to cope with the realities of life, but also a rotten middle class with no future vision to guide the country. Layla, however, is the 'New Woman' who, thanks to the education her class gives her, develops a different sense of self from the one prescribed by her conservative upbringing. [18] One of the women characters describes her generation's dilemma this way:

> Our mothers knew their situation, whereas we are lost. We do not know if we are in a harem or not, or whether love is forbidden or allowed. Our parents say it's forbidden,

> yet the government-run radio sings day and night about love. Books tell women they are free, and yet if a woman really believes that, a catastrophe will happen and her reputation will be blackened. [19]

Layla begins to feel empowered when she takes part in anti-British demonstration: "She was fused in a whole, pushing her forward, embracing her and protecting her. She shouted anew in a voice different from hers, a voice which unified her being with a collective one." (*The Open Door*, 105) Eventually, she becomes a school teacher in Port Said. [20] When the Suez Canal Crisis occurs in 1956 [21] she participates, and gains the courage that allows her to break up with her conventional fiancée and attach herself to a revolutionary colleague.

The Open Door is a pioneering work on many levels. According to the critic Farida al-Naqash it "was an expression of a new wave in the Arabic novel, one that combines poetic realism with committed literature." [22] In probing the relationship between nationalism and feminism—in showing their interdependence—al-Zayyat dealt with a complex issue that is still a hot topic of debate among Arab feminists. *The Open Door* expresses the optimism of the post-1952 revolutionary period, when a young generation of Egyptian men and women looked forward to a hopeful future. [23]However, according to Amitabha Mukerjee [24](a literary critic, in a book review of the novel), this has not been the case. When Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in July 1956, the Arab world heralded him as a hero. This feat ended a decade of turbulent political activity in Egypt, a country that was trying to free itself from British oversight and political control that saw decades of struggle, of disillusionment, hardship, of youth activism and of popular optimism. However, with the new government of Anwar Sadat in place, conditions of life remained the same. A large majority of the Egyptian people lived in poverty while only a privileged few enjoyed the resources of the nation.

The programme of Arab nationalism, as espoused by the 1952 revolution, was idealistic and ambitious. It affirmed an ideal rather than a reality—the existence of an Arab nation that

possessed a political and economic unity. The revolution promised the creation of a new social order, based on state planning and control of major industries, financial institutions and utilities which would in the long run lead to economic liberation. However, the citizenry were handed a raw deal. *The Open Door*, which is set in this revolutionary period, chronicles the struggles of Layla and her brother. Layla, representing the younger generation, has her hopes dashed as her struggle for a better Egypt ends in disappointment. The political leadership had once again taken the people for a ride. The events leading to the demonstrations as recorded in *The Open Door*, and the disillusionment that follows are no different from the causes of the current wave of protests sweeping across the Arab world, the issues of economic deprivation, poor standards of living and dynastic and corrupt governments. [25]

Moreover, *The Open Door* is simultaneously a product of its time and ahead of it. The factors that led to the overthrow of the monarchy in Egypt in 1952 are similar to those that have led to popular uprisings today culminating in Hosni Mubarak's stepping down. Just as Layla, a young person, got vigorously involved in the demonstrations against the British, the youth have been at the forefront of demonstrations against the Mubarak regime. Issues such as absolute monarchy, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty, and a large percentage of educated but dissatisfied youth within the population have led demonstrators mainly stationed in Tahrir Square to seek a share of the national cake. The protests have shared techniques of civil resistance in sustained campaigns involving strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies, as well as the use of social media to organize, communicate, and raise awareness in the face of state attempts at repression. *The Open Door* is a landmark of women's writing in Arabic. Published in 1960, it was very bold for its time in exploring a middle-class Egyptian girl's coming of sexual and political age, in the context of the Egyptian nationalist movement preceding the 1952 revolution. The novel traces the pressures on young women and young men of that time and

class as they seek the right leadership for their country. [26]Poor leadership has been one of the main factors for the 'Arab spring' of today, which is the subject of discussion in this thesis.

Thirdly, Ibrahim Aslan's *The Heron* (published in Arabic in 1984 as *"Malek al-Hazin"*) is another revolutionary novel that fits into the subject of discussion of this thesis: a critique of works of literature that gave hints of popular uprisings of Arab peoples against their governments, as is currently being witnessed in North Africa and the Middle East. Translated into English by Elliott Colla, *The Heron* is set on the eve of the January 1977 "Bread Riots", the popular uprising that took place in major cities in Egypt from January 18-19, 1977. The riots were a spontaneous uprising by hundreds of thousands of lower class people protesting World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) mandated termination of state subsidies on basic foodstuffs. [27] *The Heron* depicts life in the Imbaba district of Cairo, where its protagonist, the writer Youssef al-Naggar observes the every-day lives of men and women preoccupied by their own sorrows but also celebrating important events. Willing to transform the inhabitants of Imbaba into personae of a novel he is writing, and describe in detail their activities, streets and haunts, among which was the Kit-Kat night club frequented in past times by the King, Youssef is caught mid-stream in student demonstrations and protests against corruption and rising food prices. [28]This wave of demonstrations in Egypt against the stifling conditions of living nearly brought down the then government of President Anwar Sadat as it has Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The Heron presents Egypt in the mid-stream of its modern history. The Cairo neighbourhood of Kit Kat stands at a crossroads. Poised like herons fishing on the banks of the Nile, the characters of this novel wait and watch as opportunities swim by, past their reach. They have no control over their destinies. Some gaze on as their local café is stolen before their eyes. One character studies how the *nouveaux riches* make their money, while others try their own

hands at swindling. Still others read the empty rhetoric of state-run newspapers and wonder what it all means. [29]Eventually, the unbearable living conditions forces many of the inhabitants of Kit Kat to join in demonstrations against the government of the day. It is significant to note that Tahrir Square held a central place in the 1977 uprisings as it does in the current wave of protests across Egypt. The narrator describes a scene in the square thus:

> And Qasim who purchased five yards of white cloth and a bottle of blue ink and how he told you not to give a copy of the declaration of solidarity to every single person because there weren't enough copies to go around and that instead you were to give one copy to each group, and you telling him that you wanted to go with one of them and Qasim telling you everybody would go in pairs and you taking your share of the fliers and going with them to Tahrir Square where you saw the students who'd taken it over. [30]

It is clear therefore the important role Tahrir Square has played in the lives of the people of Egypt. Not only has it been the rallying point for demonstrators, it has been a symbol of strength and preparedness on the part of the common people to fight for their rights.

Closely related to the "Bread Riots" of 1977 as discussed in *The Heron* is the novel *Awan al-Qitaf* (published in 2002) by the Egyptian, Mahmoud Wardani. Translated by Hala Halim in 2008 as *Heads Ripe for Plucking,* and published by the American University in Cairo press, the novel features a set of decapitation stories. In *Heads Ripe for Plucking,* a severed head seeks solace in narrating to itself stories of others who have sustained a similar fate of losing their heads. Beheadings, both literal and metaphorical—suppression of rights, corruption, torture, murder, decapitation and brainwashing, are the subject of the six stories that unfold over the three sections of this novel. The unnamed narrator of the novel, dancing for unexplained reasons on the roof of a moving train, forgets to duck and ends up getting his head chopped off by an iron bridge, leaving his body on the tracks below. The severed head begins Chapter One thus: "This was not the first time I parted with my head; I had parted

with it several times before, just as others who preceded me had likewise parted with their heads." (*Heads Ripe for Plucking*, 1) The long-suffering head goes on to tell a series of intricately interlocked tales of headlessness—the helpless, stifling effects of oppression that existed in the Egyptian society then, and to a large extent today. The title of Wardani's novel comes from an infamous remark by an official of the early Egyptian Caliphate, just before he brutally suppressed an uprising: "I see heads before me ripe and ready for plucking." [31]

Wardani's novel, which relays six stories of decapitation, sets one of its most engaging portraits during the 1977 uprisings in Tahrir Square. These uprisings led to the "Bread Riots". A good part of the action takes place in Tahrir Square, narrated by a Cairo teenager caught up in the riots, unsure of how he should position himself. He and his friends come across a boy who is chanting: "Parliament's all cronyism and spin while people's freedom is reined in." (*Heads Ripe for Plucking*, 52) It is significant to note how the masses felt their government had let them down by not seeing to their welfare. The narrator continues:

> Not only did we keep chanting back the slogan, we didn't put him [the student] down until there were only three of us left. Everyone else was running toward Tahrir Square, though we hadn't seen a single soldier since the massacre in front of Sayyida Zaynab Police Station...The clock on the Arab League building showed 2:00 p.m. The smell of tear gas was so overpowering I reckoned it meant there were soldiers lying in wait nearby. [32]

. This quotation gives a glimpse of the rioting going on in a bid to demand better conditions of living of the common people. However, just like today, attempts were made by the government to suppress demonstrators by engaging the military and other state law enforcing agencies who used lethal force in an attempt to silence them. This, however, did not cow demonstrators demanding a share of the national resources to relent in their efforts at demanding a positive change in their circumstances.

No list of revolutionary Arabic literature would be complete without the mention of leading Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim's *Zaat*. *Zaat* (published in Arabic in 1992 and translated by Anthony Calderbank in 2004) offers a glimpse of Tahrir-based uprising, but also a sharp portrait of the corruption of Egypt's political and business classes. *Zaat* employs humour to bring out the absurdities of living under a corrupt and greedy authoritarian regime. The novel follows the life of a simple Egyptian woman named Zaat (which translates as "self" in Arabic) who works in the archives of a government newspaper, through the presidential eras of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. In between the regular plot-line is a montage of press extracts including headlines, news items, photo captions and advertisements that portray the ridiculous and meaningless nature of modern Egyptian society. [33]Living conditions are poor and the common people have no say in how the various governments govern the country. The majority of the poor are at the mercy of corrupt government officials and politicians who have no idea what leadership is all about. In one news report, Hosni Mubarak is quoted as saying, "We should not be ashamed that there are poor people in Egypt. What we should do is work to make our country appear suitably civilized because we need to attract tourists." [34] This quotation shows how bereft the leadership had become of ideas. This eventually leads to popular revolt against the government of the day. The incidents described in *Zaat* foretell exactly what happens in Egypt nineteen (19) years after its publication; President Hosni Mubarak resigned on 11th February, 2011 after eighteen days of massive protests against his government, ending his thirty-year presidency.

It is clear from the above discussion that literature from the Arab region has to a large extent reflected the goings on in the Arab society. The rich cultural, social, political, economic and religious life of the people has become clear in the works of majority Arab writers. Issues such as the family unit, communal living, colonization, absolute monarchy, state corruption,

mismanagement of national resources, and the masses revolting against their governments have been extensively deliberated on. Major historical events have played a pivotal role in the development of Arabic literature. The Arab-Islamic conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries created a vast multinational empire in which scholars and writers flourished. The influence of the West on Arabic literature and culture started at the end of the 18th century with France's invasion of Egypt. The revival of Islam around the world in the late 20th century also has had an enormous effect on Arabic literature, both secular and religious. Writers today often draw upon early Arabic texts and conventions for inspiration, perpetuating a vibrant tradition of Arabic literature. [35]

A number of novels and other works of literature that were written before the current wave of revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East have tackled such themes as dire poverty, shattered dreams, despair, the use of religion as a sanctuary, sexual deprivation, political oppression, torture in prisons, and suppression. All these issues were boiling in the cauldron of a silent society that was waiting for the moment to mobilise and ignite. Those novels and other works of literature illustrate the catastrophes resulting from dictatorship. Some even prophesied such rebellion and insurrection. The fact that the 'Arab Spring' happened in the streets through insurrections and riots leads some to underestimate the role played by writers in this 'Arab Spring.' This might be related to the lack of emphasis placed on literature produced in the Arab region. But those writers who chose to denounce dictatorship in their works have contributed in one way or another to this larger 'Arab Spring' currently been witnessed. Samuel Johnson once said: "Little things grow by continual accumulation." These novels and other works of literature could be considered as one of the bricks that led to the build-up of these revolutions through the formation of 'revolutionary consciousness.' It should be noted that in the later years, some writers disseminated their ideas and some of their writings through blogs and other tools of social media, which were effective media to

relay their work and messages to the youth. The ‘Arab Spring’ will challenge the engaged writer because the path is still long. Writing the revolution is not just depicting scenes of confrontations with the police or depicting torture in prisons; it is also a painstaking journey that necessitates deeper thought and deeper discourse.[36]

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1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The works of the writers under consideration would be analysed using a number of approaches. "Literary theory" is the body of ideas and methods used in the practical reading of literature. By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what texts can mean. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand texts. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of his/her thematic presence within texts. [37] Literary theory offers varying approaches for understanding the role of historical context in interpretation as well as the relevance of linguistic and hidden elements of the text. Literary theorists trace the history and evolution of the different genres—narrative, dramatic, lyric—in addition to the more recent emergence of the novel and the short story, while also investigating the importance of formal elements of literary structure. Lastly, literary theory in recent years has sought to explain the degree to which the text is more the product of a culture than an individual author and, in turn, how those texts help to influence and re-create the culture. [38]

In this regard, this thesis would employ New Historical and Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Criticism in doing a critical analysis of the works under study, that is, Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*, Naguib Mahfouz's *Autumn Quail*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* and Tahir Wattar's *The Earthquake*. The New Historical school of thought, or the New Historicists departed from the old ways of reading history based solely on facts. The proponents of this school of thought, who begun their theorizing in the late 1970's, believed that we do not have a linear access to facts in understanding a text. According to them,

different ideas circulate to affect what we think are facts. New Historicists therefore tell us that there is nothing like pure facts. Facts go through different stages and are therefore influenced by individuals, their beliefs, ideas and cultures. To New Historicists therefore, there is only interpretation and not presentation of facts. True interpretation is however difficult to produce. Our subjectivity as interpreters is shaped by and it shapes the culture into which we are born. Any given event is shaped by the culture which gives birth to it. We influence culture by who we are and culture or society also influences us.

New Historicists break down the traditional opposition between literature and history. To them cultural artefacts, that is literary and historical texts, are inter-related and both espouse ideologies. Ideology to New Historicists plays a huge role in the formation of groups. This led them to be interested in the work of anthropologists and sociologists in relation to cultural products and how they influence the people's views. New Historicists therefore believe that the text and the context are very important since they are cultural products and are mutually constitutive. To them, like traditional historicists, biography and personality studies are all important in the act of interpretation. Furthermore, proponents of New Historical and Cultural Criticism argue that power is not confined to a single group of people in society but circulates by means of exchange. This led critics such as Michel Foucault to state that power does not emanate from the top; in other words, the upper class cannot always dominate and rule over the masses. This argument has brought to the mainstream hitherto marginalised cultural products (historical and literary) such as Feminism, African-American Criticism and Arabic Literature Studies. [39]

Closely related to New Historicism is Cultural Studies. Proponents of Cultural Studies argue that history and culture are very dynamic in that they keep changing and dovetail into other fields. Characteristically interdisciplinary, Cultural Studies provides a reflexive network of

intellectuals attempting to situate the forces constructing our daily lives. It concerns the political dynamics of contemporary culture, as well as its historical foundations, conflicts, and defining traits. Researchers concentrate on how a particular medium, message or text relates to ideology, social class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or gender; in other words the number of times a text has shaped the minds of its members. Cultural Studies approaches subjects holistically, combining other fields such as feminist theory, social theory, political theory, history and philosophy to study cultural phenomena in various societies. Thus Cultural Studies seeks to understand the ways in which meaning is generated, disseminated, and produced through various practices, beliefs, institutions, and political, economic, or social structures within a given culture. [40]

Cultural Studies is more political in nature. It can be said to be an outgrowth of Marxist Criticism. Cultural critics are interested in class hierarchy; the upper class that dominates and the lower classes that have to obey the dictates of the superior. Cultural Studies aims to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power. For example, a study of a subculture (such as working class youth in Cairo) would consider the social practices of the youth as they relate to the dominant classes. Again, Cultural Studies has the objective of understanding culture in all its complex forms and of analyzing the social and political contexts in which culture manifests itself. [41]Cultural Studies concerns itself generally with art and literature produced by identifiable ethnic groups either marginalized or in a subordinate position to a dominant culture. For example Arabic literature, though very rich in ideas and literary quality, was for a long time ignored. Translations of Arabic literature into the dominant languages of the literary world (English and French) only begun in the mid-20th century as can be seen from the duration of time it took to translate the first part of *The Cairo Trilogy* from Arabic to English; *"Bayna al-Qasrayn",* published in 1956 was translated and published in English as "Palace Walk" in 1990. Ethnic and minority

literary theory emphasizes the relationship of cultural identity to individual identity in historical circumstances of overt racial oppression. More recently, scholars and writers such as Henry Louis Gates, Toni Morrison, Homi Bhabha and Kwame Anthony Appiah have brought attention to the problems inherent in applying theoretical models derived from Euro-centric paradigms (that is, structures of thought) to minority works of literature while at the same time exploring new interpretive strategies for understanding the vernacular (common speech) traditions of racial groups that have been historically marginalized by dominant cultures. [42]

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Postcolonial Criticism is another theory by which the works under study would be read. Postcolonial Criticism focuses on the influences of colonialism in literature, especially regarding the social, economic and historical conflicts resulting from the exploitation of less developed countries and indigenous peoples by Western nations. Literally, postcolonial literature refers to literature written and published in the period following the decline of colonialism, that is, the end or lessening of domination by European empires. In its use as a critical approach, Postcolonial Criticism refers to a collection of theoretical and critical strategies used to examine the culture (literature, politics, history) of former colonies of the European empires, and their relation to the rest of the world. Among the many challenges facing postcolonial writers are the attempts both to resurrect their culture and to combat preconceptions about their culture. Edward Said, for example, uses the word "Orientalism" to describe the discourse about the East constructed by the West. Though not the first writer to explore the historical condition of post-colonialism, the Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is generally regarded as having inaugurated the field of explicitly "Postcolonial Criticism" in the West. Said focuses mainly on the Orientalism [43] found in Western depiction of the East. Orientalism is found, for example, in Western depiction of

Arab cultures. The depiction of Arabs as violent, irrational, menacing, untrustworthy and anti-Western, are some of the ideas which Orientalist scholarship has focused on.

These notions are very much trusted as foundations for both ideologies and policies developed by the Occident (the group of people or forces that have framed these biased ideologies about the Orient). Said's rejection of Orientalism entails a rejection of generalisation, negative cultural constructions as well as racial and religious prejudices. Said's view is that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts or reality but from preconceived archetypes. Often, such knowledge about the Orient is constructed within literary texts and historical records that are often of limited understanding of the Orient. For example, we wonder how much knowledge the first whites who touched down on the shores of Africa had to have claimed that Africa before their arrival had no civilisation, no culture and no history. Unfortunately, the presentation given of Africa by the West is far from reality. Postcolonial theory tries to reverse this historical centre/margin direction of cultural inquiry. Moreover, theorists like Homi Bhabha have questioned the binary thought that produces the dichotomies—centre/margin, white/black, and colonizer/colonized—by which colonial practices are justified. Postcolonial Criticism pursues not merely the inclusion of the marginalized literature of colonial peoples into the dominant canon and discourse but also offers a fundamental critique of the ideology of colonial domination, and at the same time, seeks to undo the stereotypes of Orientalist thought that produced conceptual as well as economic divides between West and East, civilized and uncivilized, First and Third Worlds. [44] In this respect, Postcolonial Criticism is activist and adversarial in its basic aims. Postcolonial theory has brought fresh perspectives to the role of colonial peoples—their wealth, labour, and culture—in the development of modern European nation states. While Postcolonial Criticism emerged in the historical moment following the collapse of the modern

colonial empires, the increasing globalization of culture, including the neo-colonialism of multinational capitalism, it suggests a continued relevance for this field of inquiry. [45]

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1.3 BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO THE ARAB SPRING

The 'Arab Spring' is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests occurring in the Arab world (North Africa and the Middle East) that began on Saturday, 18th December, 2010. To date, there have been revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt; a civil war in Libya resulting in the fall of its government; civil uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen; major protests in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman; and minor protests in Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Western Sahara. Clashes at the borders of Israel in May 2011 have also been inspired by the regional Arab Spring. These protests have shared techniques of civil resistance in sustained campaigns involving strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies, as well as the use of social media such as Facebook to organize, communicate, and raise awareness in the face of state attempts at repression and internet censorship. Many demonstrations have met violent responses from authorities, as well as from pro-government militias and counter-demonstrators. A major slogan of the demonstrators in the Arab world has been *"ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam"* (the people want to bring down the regime). [46]

The 'Arab Spring', sometimes known as the "Arab Spring and Winter", the "Arab Awakening" or the "Arab Uprisings" was sparked by the first protests that occurred in Tunisia on 18th December, 2010 following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest at police corruption and ill treatment. With the success of the protests in Tunisia, a wave of unrest sparked by the Tunisian "Burning Man" struck Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen, then spread to other countries. The largest, most organised demonstrations have often occurred on a "day of rage", usually Friday after noon prayers. The protests have also triggered similar unrest outside the Arab region. [47]

As at November 2011, governments have been overthrown in three countries. Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on 14th January, 2011 following the Tunisian revolution protests. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned on 11th February, 2011 after 18 days of massive protests, ending his 30-year presidency. The Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown on 23rd August 2011, after the National Transitional Council (NTC) took control of Bab al-Azizia. He was killed on 20th October 2011, in his hometown of Sirte after the NTC took control of the city. [48]

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Numerous factors have led to the protests, including dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty, and a number of demographic structural factors, such as a large percentage of educated but dissatisfied youth within the population. The catalysts for the revolts in all Northern African and the Gulf countries have been the concentration of wealth in the hands of autocrats in power for decades, insufficient transparency of its redistribution, corruption, and especially the refusal of the youth to accept the status quo. Increasing food prices and global famine rates have also been a significant factor, as they involve threats to food security worldwide. [49]

The current outburst of demonstrations is not an entirely new phenomenon, resulting in part from the activities of dissident activists as well as members of a variety of social and union organizations that have been active for years in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and other countries in the North African area as already referred to. In Algeria, discontent had been building for years over a number of issues. In February 2008, United States Ambassador Robert Ford wrote in a leaked diplomatic cable that Algeria is 'unhappy' with long-standing political alienation; that social discontent persisted throughout the country, with food strikes occurring almost every week; that there were demonstrations every day somewhere in the country; and

that the Algerian government was corrupt and fragile. [50] Some of these issues talked about by Ambassador Ford are what Ahlam Mosteghanemi explores in her 1993 novel, (published in English as *Memory in the Flesh* in 2003). Mosteghanemi's novel discusses the cultural decolonization of her country. However, the novel is not only about the Algerian struggle against colonial rule, it is also about the myriad post-independence problems facing the emerging nation. Problems such as unemployment leading to social discontent, economic deprivation of the masses, government corruption and long and autocratic regimes. Ahlam Mosteghanemi uncovers the disillusions, deviations and displacements of revolutionary ideals. However, she does not harp on these social and political predicaments directly; she uses them as a narrative framework for the romantic affair between Khalid, a militant middle-aged Algerian, who turns to painting after losing his left arm in the struggle for Algerian liberation from colonial rule, and Hayat, a novelist and the young daughter of Khalid's friend and political leader. Hayat ends up marrying a character who embodies the new Algerian bourgeois class, a class set on accumulating wealth and status.

Protests in Egypt began on 25th January and ran for eighteen (18) days. Beginning around midnight on 28th January, 2011, the Egyptian government attempted, somewhat successfully, to eliminate the nation's internet access, in order to inhibit the protesters' ability to organize through social media such as Facebook. Later that day, as tens of thousands protested on the streets of Egypt's major cities, President Mubarak dismissed his government, later appointing a new cabinet. However, this did not appease the masses; they wanted a total change in government. Eventually, this happened on the 11th of February, 2011, when Mubarak announced his resignation from the presidency and transferred power to the Armed Forces of Egypt. [51]The events unfolding in Egypt today bear a striking resemblance to events described in Naguib Mahfouz's 1962 novel, *al-Summan wal-Kharif*, published in English in 1985 as *Autumn Quail*. *Autumn Quail* is set during the 1952 Egyptian Revolution which witnessed a

lot of upheavals on the part of the masses. Issues such as dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, government corruption, unemployment and extreme poverty suffered by a greater percentage of the population, which underline the current series of protests and demonstrations sweeping across Egypt and the Arab world generally, are the same issues that led to the 1952 Egyptian Revolution as discussed by Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail* focuses on Isa ad-Dabbagh, a senior civil servant during the last days of the Egyptian monarchy. Isa is retired off prematurely after the revolution for taking bribes and embezzling state resources. Isa represents the larger, though, minority Egyptian political class squandering the nation's resources and living lavish lifestyles. Issues of inequality and the wide disparity between the rich and the poor as highlighted by Mahfouz have triggered the current wave of civil unrest sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East.

After the success of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, a protest on poor living conditions began on 14th January, 2011 in Bayda, Libya, where protesters clashed with police and attacked government offices. Anti-government protests began in Libya on 15th February, 2011. By 18th February, the opposition controlled most of Benghazi, the country's second-largest city. The government dispatched elite troops and mercenaries in an attempt to recapture it, but they were repelled. [52]The activities of these mercenaries and elite troops are no different from the activities of the Revolutionary Committee men in Hisham Matar's 2006 novel, *In the Country of Men*. These men in Matar's novel act with impunity, and without regard for due process. At the heart of the novel is the issue of discontent against the ruling government. The issue of discontentment is one of the key issues that plays a significant part in the events leading up to the Libyan civil war in 2011 and the eventual overthrow of the Gaddafi regime; the Libyan people for a long time had no say in matters that directly affected them, and reeled under the iron fist of Col. Moumar Gaddafi. In *In the Country of Men* as well, the issue of discontentment on the part of the citizenry against the government is very

central to the story line. The military government led by the Guide (possible reference to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi) rules with despotic control and is oblivious to the needs of the people. While the country is relatively well off in terms of resources, the citizens do not have an equal share in what they are entitled to. This leads to political unrest, student protests and growing dissent among the common people. Even the few prosperous people among the masses are accused of being traitors and are arrested arbitrarily and tortured in government controlled facilities and detention camps.

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On 29th December, 2010, minor protests began in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, over the lack of housing, quickly escalating to violent confrontations with the police. In Syria, there is an ongoing violent internal conflict. Public demonstrations across Syria began on 26 January, 2011 and developed into a nationwide uprising. Protesters demanded the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, the overthrow of his government, and an end to nearly five decades of Ba'ath Party rule. These demands were made due to a number of factors; high youth unemployment and economic disenfranchisement of young adults, socio-economic complaints such as a deterioration in the country's standard of living, a reduction of state support for the poor resulting from the gradual transition towards a free market economy, the scraping of subsidies for basic goods and agriculture, and free trade without suitable support to the local industry. Furthermore, the state of human rights in Syria has long been very poor. The country was under emergency rule from 1963 until 2011, effectively granting security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention. Rights of expression, association and assembly are strictly controlled in Syria. [53]

Similarly in Yemen and Bahrain, there has been a crackdown on protesters demanding better conditions of life in their own countries. In Yemen, protests occurred in many towns in both the north and the south starting in mid-January, 2011. Demonstrators initially protested

against governmental proposals to modify the constitution of Yemen, unemployment, poor economic conditions and corruption, but their demands soon included a call for the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The protests in Bahrain started on 14th February, 2011, and were initially aimed at achieving greater political freedom and respect for human rights; they were not intended to directly threaten the Bahraini monarchy. The protests in Tunisia and Egypt are cited as the inspiration for the demonstrations in Bahrain. [54]

The issues playing out in the ongoing 'Arab Spring', such as a demand for greater political freedom and respect for human rights, a demand for jobs and economic prosperity, and an improvement in living standards of the majority poor, are the same issues discussed in Matar's *In the Country of Men* as well as Mahfouz's *Autumn Quail*. Again, *The Earthquake,* by Algerian writer Tahir Wattar, and translated by William Granara, is a walk in the mind of Shaykh Boularwah and in labyrinthine Constantine. Boularwah's mind is one of high trust in God and God's promised earthquake; a symbol of the end of one thing and the beginning of another. Wattar sketches scenes shaped by conversation fragments of Boularwah's present and past. Street vendors, child shoe-shiners, food sellers, soothsayers, and prostitutes recount their daily hardships in a relatively well-off Constantine while the Shaykh's expletives illustrate the dichotomy of the thoughts that dwell within him; thoughts of hatred and unconcern for the marginalised in society. What Tahir Wattar has put to pen is an illustration of the hatred the self-titled 'elite' feel for all Algerians who do not belong to their class, and which continues to slowly strangle the country today, just as Shaykh Boularwah strangles his child-wives. The Shaykh explains, "My father was fiercely proud of being an Algerian, even though he was totally insensitive to other Algerians whom he regarded merely as servants and workers, like stones in a valley suited only to be trampled on." (*The Earthquake*, 45)

Protests in many countries affected by the 'Arab Spring' have attracted widespread support from the international community, while harsh government responses to such protests have generally met condemnation. It is believed that the 'Arab Spring' has been one of the factors that triggered off the Occupy Wall Street (OWS), a series of protests that began in New York City's Wall Street financial district. These protests have bore a semblance to the protests across the Arab world in relation to the issues raised. The issues underpinning the OWS have been social and economic inequality, greed, corruption and the undue influence of corporations on government, particularly from the financial services sector. [55] Some critics have accused Western governments, including those of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, of hypocrisy in the way they have reacted to the 'Arab Spring.' While they have supported and provided logistics to the protestors in certain of the uprisings, they have kept a blind eye and tried to talk down demonstrations and mass public disenchantment elsewhere in the Arab world. For example the United States was heavily involved in the overthrow and killing of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi while at the same time keeping a blind eye to mass protests taking place in Saudi Arabia because she is a close ally of Washington.

The above background to the 'Arab Spring', as it is being unravelled, is significant, and fits into this thesis in a number of ways. First and foremost, this background is to lay the foundation and prepare the minds of readers about what to expect in this thesis. The 'Arab Spring' is a phenomenon that has caught the attention of the entire world. However, the current developments in North Africa and the Middle East, as the above discussion has shown, did not happen overnight. Numerous factors have led to the current protests we are experiencing, including issues such as dictatorship, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, and extreme poverty. It is clear from the discussion that the various countries where these protests and demonstrations have taken place have had something in common. North Africa and the Middle Eastern region, which are

predominately Islamic societies, have had years of single individuals or parties ruling their various countries for decades. This has led to dissatisfaction among the masses. It is this dissatisfaction that has led to the current wave of unrest and demonstrations we are experiencing. The novels under consideration, that is, Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men,* Naguib Mahfouz's *Autumn Quail*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* and Tahir Wattar's *The Earthquake,* share a lot of similarities with the issues leading to this popular unrest within the Arab region. While two of the texts under consideration, that is, Matar's *In the Country of Men* and Mahfouz's *Autumn Quail* are set in countries where there have been popular uprisings and change of government, (set in Libya and Egypt respectively), the other two, Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*, and Wattar's *The Earthquake*, are set in Algeria, a country that has not experienced a direct change of government, even though there have been hints of dissatisfaction among the masses.

Again, it is the hope of the writer of this thesis to strike a balance between the causes of the 'Arab Spring' of today and the issues discussed in the texts under consideration. It is significant to note that the first of these texts to be published happened as late as 1985, and yet the underlining factors leading to the current wave of protests across North Africa and the Middle East share a lot of similarities with the themes discussed in the four novels under consideration as would soon become clear. In all four novels under consideration, the issues discussed seem to foretell and dovetail into the current issues underpinning the 'Arab Spring'; issues such as dictatorship, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, and extreme poverty. It is imperative therefore that before one begins a critique of the primary texts for this thesis, an analogy is drawn by way of current happenings or events; this is to situate the current thesis in its proper context. Therefore, what one finds by way of this background would not be so different from the analyses that will follow thereafter. It is not out of place to say that the writers' whose works

are under study could qualify as prophets since in a way they predicted what we are currently witnessing in the Arab world; the series of protests and the demands for better conditions of life. This whole background therefore fits into this thesis and makes clear the fact that the texts under study predate current happenings in North Africa, just as the causes of the larger 'Arab Spring' travel back in time.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. "Arabic Literature." Microsoft Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

[2] ibid

[3] ibid

[4] Information contained in this paragraph was culled from "Al Jadid" (A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts). <http://www.aljadid.com. 2 January 2012>

[5]Understanding the Revolutions of 2011. Weakness & Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies. <http:www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67694/jack-a-goldstone. 24 March 2015>

[6] "Revolution by the Book." The AK Press Blog. <http://www.akpress.org/revolutionsinthe arabworld.html. 20 April 2012>

[7] Review of "Arab Spring, Libyan Winter" by Ron Jacobs, on Counter Punch. <http://www.counterpunch.org/arabspring.html. 15 April 2012>

[8] ibid

[9] Kenan Engin. "The Arab Spring: The 5.0 Democracy Wave." Hurriyet Daily News. 28 October 2011.

[10]5 Novels on Revolution & Tahrir Square. M. Lynx Qualey. <http:www.egyptindependent.com/news. 20 March 2015>

[11] Arabic Literature (in English). <http://www.arabliterature.wordpress.com. 20 February 2012>

[12]ibid

[13] Sally Bland Reviews "Specters." Jordan Times. <http://www.arabiabooks.co.uk/product/bland/specters/321.html. 29 December 2010>

[14] Banipal (Magazine of Modern Arab Literature). <http://www.banipal.co.uk. 5 March 2012>

[15] ibid

[16] www.KirkusReviews.com. 5 January 2012

[17] ibid

[18] "Al Jadid" (A Review & Record of Arab Culture & Arts). <http://www.aljadid.com. 15 February 2012>

[19] Latifa al-Zayyat. *The Open Door*. Trans. Marilyn Booth. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002. p 87

[20] Information contained in this paragraph was culled from "Al Jadid." (A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts). <http://www.aljadid.com. 15 March 2012>

[21] In 1956, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had overthrown Egypt's King Farouk in a coup, nationalized the Suez Canal Company. Assisted by Israel, which the Arabs regarded as a colony of Europe and the United States, France and Britain invaded Egypt in 1956, while Israel occupied the Sinai, which was considered as an important national asset by Egyptians. This led to hostilities and armed combat.

[22] "Al Jadid." (A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts). http://www.aljadid.com. 15 February 2012>

[23]ibid

[24] Amitabha Mukerjee. (*The Open Door* Book Review).<http://www.cse.iitk.ac.in/users/amit/books/al-zayyat-2002-open-door-albab.html. 20 April 2012>

[25] ibid

[26]Al Jadid." (A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts).< http://www.aljadid.com. 13 April 2013>

[27] www.KirkusReviews.com 10 February 2012

[28]ibid

[29] ibid

[30] Ibrahim Aslan. *The Heron*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1983. p 87

[31] "Al Jadid" (A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts). http://www.aljadid.com/content/vol-16-no 62.html. 20 March 2012>

[32] Mahmoud Wardani. *Heads Ripe for Plucking*. Trans. Hala Halim. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008. p 52

[33] <www.complete-review.com/reviews/egypt/ibrahims.htm. 20 March 2015>

[34] Sonallah Ibrahim. *Zaat*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004. p 150

[35] Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. "Arabic Literature." Microsoft Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

[36] <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4466. 24 March 2015>

[37] Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

[38] ibid

[39] Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[40] M. H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Seventh Ed. Massachusetts: Earl McPeek, 1999.

[41] ibid

[42] Information contained in this paragraph was culled from Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. "Arabic Literature." Microsoft Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

[43] A Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient [the culture or group of people against whom these biased ideologies are held])

[44] Moore-Gilbert, Bart, et al. *Postcolonial Criticism*. New York: Longman, 1997.

[45] ibid

[46] Uriel Abulof. "What is the Arab Third Estate?" The Huffington Post. 1 May 2011.

[47] ibid

[48] "Democracy's Hard Spring." The Economist. 10 March 2011

[49]ibid .

[50] Robert Ford. "An Ailing and Fragile Algerian Regime Drifts in 2008" <http://www.wikileaks.com/07ALGIERS1806. 4 January 2011>

[51]<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab-Spring. 24 March 2015

[52]ibid

[53] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/syrian_uprising_(2011-present) 11 June 2012>

[54]<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/bahrain_uprising_(2011-present) 11 June 2012>

[55] <http://wikipedia.org/wiki/occupy_wall_street#section_1 11 June 2012>

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CHAPTER TWO

In the Country of Men is Libyan writer Hisham Matar's first novel (published in 2006). The story begins with the simple declaration: "I am recalling now that last summer before I was sent away. It was 1979, and the sun was everywhere. Tripoli lay brilliantly and still beneath it." (*Country of Men*, 1) It is a simple start to a story of startling depth. Told through the eyes of nine year old Suleiman, we experience a child's often misguided attempts to make sense of the adult world. Suleiman's mother is an alcoholic; his father is being hunted by the Libyan revolutionary regime; and neighbours may disappear at any time and return badly bruised. In this chapter of the thesis an attempt would be made to analyse Matar's *In the Country of Men* with the view to bringing out the issues of discontent, oppression, insecurity and betrayal as they relate to current happenings in Libya in particular, and to the Arab world in general. Through the character Najwa, Matar is able to show how her subjugation and long suffering under a male-dominated family mimics the larger Libyan society of the '70's and, to a large extent, the Libyan society of today. Najwa is subdued by male authority, when, as a fourteen (14) year-old girl, she is married off to a man almost twice her age after being seen holding hands with a boy in a coffee shop. Najwa's life at the hands of domineering men portends the long suffering undergone by the majority of Libyan citizens under an authoritarian regime. As a result of this, this chapter would employ Hisham Matar's style of using Najwa's long suffering to mimic the suffering and suppression undergone by the majority of Libya's population, to discuss the issues referred to above.

It is significant to note that *In the Country of Men* is not a presentation of facts. Though it is set during the erstwhile Gaddafi regime, it does not detail whatever happened at that time but only tries to interpret certain significant events in the lives of the Libyan people. And so Matar is only following the trailblazing feat of the New Historical school of thought that broke down the traditional boundary between literature and history. On one level, *In the*

Country of Men is a highly crafted political piece. While some events in the novel may be based on real happenings in Gaddafi's Libya, Matar's presentation is only an artist's fictionalized interpretation of these events.

In interview after interview, Matar insists that Suleiman's story is not his story. However, says Matar,

> I deliberately placed the action in the landscape I remember. The house is very much our house, the sea very much the sea I remember...The book was in a way an attempt to revisit the haunts of my youth and thus to try to wean myself of the country I had left and haven't been able to return to for over twenty eight (28) years now...I failed, of course. [1]

According to Matar, the backdrop of Suleiman's story—the political unrest that was taking place is based on things that did happen. But, Matar goes on,

> When I was Suleiman's age, it [the political unrest] was very subtle. I sensed there were some things you could not say. You'd be sitting around the dining table and one of your uncles would say something and everyone would fall silent because they suddenly remembered there was a child at the table and he might carry these words elsewhere and then somebody would get arrested. [2]

It is important to note that Matar's father was actually arrested by operatives of the Al Fateh (1st September) Revolution for being perceived to be against the Gaddafi regime.

To begin with, *In the Country of Men* reveals the dominance of men and the impotence of women through, first, the relationship of Suleiman's mother (Najwa) to her extended family, and later on, the relationship between Najwa on one hand and Faraj (her husband) and Suleiman on the other. The men in Najwa's family, whom she refers to as the 'High Council', take a decision to marry her off to a man she barely knows, based on what they describe as protecting the family's 'honour.' The fact that the men folk can take such a personal decision on her behalf without consulting her tells how powerless women are in the larger Arab society. The Arab society, about which Matar writes, is largely skewed towards the male

gender. In this regard men have more of a say than women in most aspects of social life. It is significant to note that the decision to marry off Najwa to a total stranger was arrived at because Najwa's elder brother had spotted her in the company of a boy and other friends at a coffee shop. This brother, who comes to report this incident to their father and the other male relatives in the family, had, ironically, only recently returned home with an American wife of his choice. Not even a native Arab; yet no one criticizes him for taking that decision. Najwa, however, has no luxury of choice in determining whom she marries. This leads her to describe the day of her marriage to Faraj as that "black day." (*Country of Men*, 11) In other words a day which is supposed to be a happy day in the life of every woman ends up being a sad day for Najwa. She does not enjoy this day; rather she sees it as a nightmare which she prays ends quickly.

According to Najwa, on the wedding day,

> I walked up and down the room in my wedding dress wondering what kind of face my executioner [Faraj] had. Because that's how I saw it: they [the men folk] passed the judgement and he, the stranger armed with the marriage contract signed by my father, was going to carry out the punishment. [3]

Najwa sees her forced marriage to Faraj as a form of punishment. For daring to conduct herself in a way considered improper by the men in the family, she is placed on the 'right' path. However, she is not happy with the treatment meted out to her by her family. She has no option but to expect the worst from what is supposed to be a contractual relationship. It is little wonder, therefore, that she describes her would-be husband as 'my executioner.' She has no idea who he is or what he looks like. All she can think about is that the person she is about to get married to is a killer ready to execute a punishment tantamount to death which has been passed on her. The comparison here is very apt since a person sentenced to a death punishment is helpless and only looks forward to an end to his/her ordeal. Najwa, here, can be compared to a criminal awaiting sentence. Marriage should bring happiness and satisfaction to both the groom and the bride but here it is only the groom who relishes the

occasion while the bride detests it. Apart from the fact that the bride has to cut short her schooling, she does not love the man she has been betrothed to. This is the fate of Najwa and a majority of women living in a society where patriarchy determines how their lives are led.

Najwa goes on to narrate to her young son Suleiman, the events leading to her marriage to his father, Faraj Bu Suleiman el-Dewani. The hurry with which Najwa's marriage to Faraj is consummated tells how the male gender rules supreme. Once they (men) take a decision, it is carried through irrespective of the person at the centre of affairs (and in most cases females are at the receiving end of such male-biased decisions). In the words of Najwa,

> "They rushed the wedding through as if I was a harlot, as if I was pregnant and had to be married off before it showed. Part of the punishment was not to allow me even to see a photograph of my future husband. But the maid sneaked in to tell me she had seen the groom. 'Ugly,' she said, 'big nose,' then spat at the ground. I was so frightened. I ran to the toilet ten times or more." [4]

Najwa sees the events leading to her wedding as a blatant show of disrespect towards her person and feeling. She cannot do as she wishes. Her life is in the hands of the men in her family and she has to kowtow to their demands. Najwa decries how she is reduced to a 'harlot', a person paid for sexual intercourse. If the males in her family see her as a harlot, the likely implication is that nothing good can come from her. The earlier then she is married off to a responsible man who can take care of her and expect she does his bidding, the better it would be in preventing a scandal that would bring the family's name into disrepute. As a harlot, it is believed that Najwa would move from one man to another; and so the best way to prevent this happening is to quickly take a decision that would tie her to the apron strings of one man by way of marriage irrespective of whether she would be happy in such a marriage or not. If Najwa is truly a harlot, then she could be pregnant for one of her numerous alleged sexual partners. And so to prevent the shame that would befall the family should it be detected that she is pregnant when she does not have a husband, the 'High Council' finds a

husband for her; a husband described as 'ugly' and having a 'big nose.' If physically Najwa does not like the appearance of her would-be husband, then how can she possibly live with him not knowing his inner character (which cannot be seen from looking at the person's outward appearance)? This, and many more are the nagging questions which come up when one considers how a woman could get married to a man she has never set eyes on, not even his picture. The mention of how Najwa's would-be husband looks like makes her throw up. This tells how terrified she is at the thought of spending the rest of her life with a total stranger whose appearance does not attract her in any way.

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At the heart of the story is the issue of discontentment against the ruling government. Set during the Gaddafi regime, *In the Country of Men* is about the dynamics of power play. While the masses hail the overthrow of a perceived corrupt government (the monarchy), the current military regime repeats the ills of the erstwhile government. The military government led by the Guide (possible reference to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi) rules with an iron fist and is oblivious to the needs of the people. While the country is relatively well off in terms of resources, the citizens do not have an equal share in what they are entitled to. This leads to political unrest, student protests and growing dissent among the common people. Even the few prosperous people among the masses are accused of being traitors and are arrested arbitrarily. For example, a clothing factory owner who is "accused of being a bourgeois and a traitor" (*Country of Men*, 32) is interrogated and tortured on national television. While the discontent of the common people is portrayed subtly from the initial stages, it finally culminates in an outburst of anger as seen in the student demonstrations on university campuses across the country. The irony of the matter is that when the people try to speak out against the injustices taking place in the society, they are branded traitors, people who should be severely dealt with. This crushing of dissenting voices by the military regime instils fear in

the masses. Suleiman gives a hint of how anti-revolutionary elements operate under the cover of darkness:

> Somebody, a traitor, was printing leaflets criticizing the Guide and his Revolutionary Committees. They came in the middle of the night and placed them like newspapers on our doorsteps. I say somebody, but there must have been hundreds, maybe even thousands of men. [5]

Such activities against the government show that all is not well with the majority of the people. However, because of the excesses of the regime they are forced to hide their discontentment and only make it known in a way that would prevent them from being victimized by hiding their identity. Um Suleiman (Suleiman's mother) is therefore surprised to hear of university students demonstrating and holding placards some of which read: "We are not against the revolution, we are against the extremes of the revolution." (*Country of Men*, 52) To her these demonstrating students are only risking their lives in a venture that will bring no results. According to her, "What are you people thinking: a few students colonizing the university will make a military dictatorship roll over? For God's sake, if it was that easy I would have done it myself." (*Country of Men*, 52) The underlining rhetorical question in Najwa's statement shows how hopeless the citizens are, herself included, due to the peculiar situation she finds herself at home. The only hope is to wait "until God rescues us. Nothing lasts forever." (*Country of Men*, 52)

Again, the relationship between Najwa, her son, Suleiman and Faraj brings out the effects of the long arm of male dominance. Najwa has been socialized to depend so much on her husband that in his absence she feels insecure and oppressed, and as a result consumes illegal alcohol (grappa) as a stimulant to calm her nerves. This leads to her behaving strangely, which Suleiman refers to as 'her illness.' It is at such times when Najwa is in a delirious state that she tells Suleiman of the gloomy events that led to her marriage to Faraj. Apart from feeling insecure when her husband is not around, Najwa also fears Faraj could get in trouble

with the Revolutionary regime and therefore not be able to discharge his role as man of the house. Consequently, Faraj becomes a source of worry and stress to Najwa. This imposes a harsh form of domination on her. Najwa knows about the opposition of her husband to the ruling government and what that implies. And so any time Faraj is out on supposed business trips, Najwa becomes scared at the possibilities of his arrest by the henchmen of the Revolutionary regime, and therefore not returning home. Najwa's mannerisms and show of pleasantness whenever Faraj is at home shows how dependent she has become on him; Faraj is like a torchbearer without whose presence Najwa cannot function properly. Whenever Faraj is at home Najwa is hale and hearty, singing and going about her household chores in a normal way. According to Suleiman,

> I heard her move around the house. I could tell she was bored. She often, during those empty days when Baba was away, walked aimlessly around the house. And she never sang to herself in that soft, absentminded way she often did when taking a bath or painting her eyes in front of the mirror or drawing in the garden...I wanted so much to make her happy, as happy as she seemed when Baba was home. Except it wasn't happiness that came over her then but something like confidence: she moved faster and sounded more self-assured. [6]

It is clear from the above that Najwa is not comfortable whenever Faraj is away. The days pass without her notice. She never sings to herself but instead becomes a walking shadow. When Najwa is in this agitated state, when she is 'ill', she can only brood and become incapacitated. On numerous occasions, Suleiman has to wake up deep in the night to put out cigarettes she has been smoking; or turn off the gas which has been left on. Suleiman has to practically sleep in the same bed with Najwa just to keep an eye on her and make sure she is well provided for since in such agitated states she can barely lift a hand to do anything for herself or perform a household chore. Young Suleiman assumes the role of man of the house and tries to make her mother happy, 'as happy as she seemed when Baba was home.' This state of degeneration on the part of Najwa in the absence of her husband proves how most

women in the Arab society have been socialized to see men as demigods. Their whole life is in the hands of these men and they obey their commands to the letter. When these men are absent, a gap is created; and this gap creates untold pain and suffering on the part of the women who serve these men. As Suleiman succinctly declares, it is not really happiness Najwa feels when her husband is around but rather 'something like confidence.' In other words, when Faraj is away on his supposed business trips, Najwa lacks the assurance or belief in her ability to succeed. Her whole belief and trust has been put in Faraj to act in a proper, trustworthy and reliable manner.

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The story of Najwa's marriage to Faraj brings to light an aspect of the Arabic culture: arranged family marriages and the powerful hand of patriarchy. Najwa is a fascinating character whom the reader is allowed to understand much better than her son is able to, at his age. In her fierce mental resistance to the familial patriarchy that married her off in her early teens to a stranger – for the mere fact of having held hands with a boy of the same age in a café—she comes across as a startlingly outspoken feminist, irrepressibly denouncing oppressive males ranging from what she calls 'the High Council' (her father and brothers who forced her into premature marriage and motherhood) to the henchmen of the regime. [7]It is significant to note that the Arabic society, to a large extent, is patriarchal in nature. Women do not really have much of a say even in matters affecting their own persons. But here, Matar seems to be charting a new path for women in that Najwa is able to air her views without any fear of the consequences that might come from her men folk. The fact that the young Najwa is found in the company of a boy, something which is frowned upon in the Arab society, tells how headstrong she is. Again Najwa is bold enough to refer to the henchmen of the revolutionary regime in such terms as: "I don't want those rats in my house" (*Country of Men*, 65) and hisses at her husband's best friend, Moosa, when he is doing his best to placate the secret service search team, who have come searching for her husband. Najwa goes on to

describe her condition as a house wife in a typical Arabic and, to a large extent, Islamic community: “But no, I must be a good wife, loyal and unquestioning, support my man regardless.” (*Country of Men*, 96) Najwa has no choice but to suffer the pain and oppression of a male-dominated family and society.

Likewise, oppression is with us right from the opening pages of *In the Country of Men* in the form of the unbearable summer heat from which humans run into hiding: “Every person, animal and ant went in desperate search for shade, those occasional gray patches of mercy carved into the white of everything.” (*Country of Men*, 1) This foreshadowing is very revealing as it gives a vivid picture of the difficulties characters would go through in the course of the novel. Even nine year old Suleiman is not left out of the oppressive tendencies of the revolutionary regime led by the Guide. Nothing in Suleiman’s childhood is ordinary or safe. Suleiman and his friends witness the day light arrest of his friend, Kareem’s father. Ustath Rashid is taken captive by guards of the Guide. Suleiman is unable to give the arrested man’s only son, who is his best friend, the necessary emotional support. This is the first sign of his own increasing acts of betrayal. Matar's depiction of the brutal Libyan regime gains power from being viewed from Suleiman's guileless perspective. The child is cruelly exposed to its worst excesses, as public executions are broadcast in all their obscenity on the television screen. But more subtly, Matar also suggests how political terror stains everyone who lives under it: dissident Baba, who crumbles under torture; Suleiman's mother, who must grovel to neighbours she detests in order to protect her family. Even Suleiman himself, just an ordinary child with all a child's unruly and passionate impulses, can be tempted into acts of betrayal. [8]

Soon after the arrest of Ustath Rashid, Suleiman witnesses, in the dead of the night, the televised torture of his friend’s father. The whole scene of Ustath Rashid’s interrogation is described in graphic detail by Suleiman. According to him this is not the first time he is witnessing a live interrogation on the television: “I had seen such interrogations before

broadcast on television. They are meant to show the nation the 'faces of the traitors.' " (*Country of Men*, 115) Intimidation and torture is a normal tool used by cohorts of the revolutionary regime to force people into making false confessions. However, despite Ustath Rashid being treated "like a schoolboy in detention," (*Country of Men*, 113) he does not implicate Faraj. He abides by the bond of unity that exists between them. Just like a child summoned before school authorities, Ustath Rashid trembles and is not able to utter any audible words. It is significant that Suleiman watches the entire scene from beginning to end without crumbling in pain or fear. In a country where children have to grow up into men, incidents like these are needed to bring out the masculinity in innocent children as young as Suleiman.

Later, Suleiman watches, uninhibited, the staged execution of Ustath Rashid. Every detail of this incident is not missed by Suleiman. This incident would have a telling effect on Suleiman's life throughout the course of the novel. One gripping truth that In the Country of Men emphasises is that good manners disappear under tyranny. Suleiman tells us the most lasting impression that the public execution of Ustath Rashid leaves on him is "a kind of quiet panic, as if at any moment the rug could be pulled from beneath my feet...I had no illusions that I or Baba or Mama were immune from being burned by the madness that overtook the National Basketball Stadium." (*Country of Men*, 197) This 'quite panic' is what follows Suleiman to Egypt to the effect that even in a different country, his eyes have to watch over his shoulders whenever he is walking. He does not feel safe, and is always reminded that misfortune and ill-fate were always lurking and could at any time befall him, just like a rug suddenly being pulled from beneath his feet.

This insecurity felt by Suleiman is one that afflicts majority of characters in the text, including Najwa his mother. Even when exiled to Egypt, Suleiman feels insecure and has to

always look beyond and behind him. Psychologically, Suleiman caves in and does things alien to his nature. He yields to the evil and tyrannical society he finds himself in. Suleiman is not able to do anything to change the state in which he has degenerated into. Gradually, we begin to understand the ways in which any despotic system is like any young person's inner life.

Furthermore, the issue of secrecy and insecurity is one that runs through *In the Country of Men*. Mama shares with Suleiman, in the form of stories, the difficulties she started going through after her marriage to Faraj. These stories should be kept a secret between them. Suleiman is duty bound (as an only child and son) to act as man of the house during his father's frequent absences—a burden too heavy for Suleiman:

> The things she told me pressed down on my chest, so heavy that it seemed impossible to carry on living without spilling them. I didn't want to break my promise—the promise she always forced me to give, sometimes over thirty times in one night, not to tell, to swear on her life, again and again, and then be warned, "If you tell a living soul and I die my life will be on your neck." [9]

Though this secret that Suleiman is burdened with is in fact not directly political, it is nevertheless both shameful and dangerous in the context of a Muslim state: Suleiman's mother seeks refuge in alcohol, that is, smuggled grappa, when unable to cope with the fears and imagined horrors resulting from her husband's secret political activism in opposition to the reign of the Guide.

Mama's secret consumption of alcohol further underscores the toll the ruling military regime's style of governance has on the family system. Faraj has to always be away because he does not side with the government and this could lead to his arrest. Any time Faraj is away Mama falls 'ill': "When Baba was away and Mama became ill, we didn't answer the door, pretended we weren't in." (*Country of Men*, 39) As a result, Mama has to take solace in

grappa in the absence of her husband's tender loving care and somehow domineering personality.

The grappa, though it is an illegal commodity to be sold and bought, is a symbol of the ways in which people like Najwa who cannot openly express their views about the ruling government go about showing their resentment. There is no telling how many other people in the Libyan society consume grappa. Unlike Faraj and Ustath Rashid who openly, though subtly, criticize the government, (which leads to their arrest and torture), people like Najwa can only hope to vent their anger and loneliness in alcohol consumption. When Faraj is forced to go into hiding after Ustath Rashid's arrest, Najwa shouts at Moosa for having "inflated [her husband's] chest with his adoration," (*Country of Men*, 94) denouncing their participation in what she describes as the political posturing of "children playing with fire" (Matar, 95). Instead, she tells them: "Walk by the wall, feed your family, stay home, let them [the ruling military regime] alone, look the other way, this is their time not ours." (*Country of Men*, 95) Najwa's peculiar state of living under the heavy arm of men makes her understand the larger political situation of suppression and silence. And so her advice to Moosa, her own husband, Ustath Rashid and other political dissenters may just have to be taken in good faith. The idea of children playing with fire shows how exposed to torture and other forms of pain the opponents of the ruling government are. Without the might and logistics to measure up to the revolutionary regime (and therefore seen as 'children'), they only helplessly stand up to an adult with all the state resources to inflict pain on them. Najwa, in her hopelessness continues to berate Moosa: "Don't patronize me. You are all fools, including Rashid and Faraj...I'll support nothing that puts my son in danger." (*Country of Men*, 96)

At the start of the novel, Suleiman has been told that his father is away on business, but during a shopping trip with his mother he glimpses him in Martyr's Square wearing dark

glasses and followed by his office clerk, Nasser. His father enters a building, and Suleiman sees him at a top floor window hanging a small red towel on the clothesline. He is a rather distant figure whom Suleiman wishes could be more like Ustath Rashid, his father's best friend, or Moosa, the Egyptian judge's son who provides Suleiman with affection. We as readers, and even Suleiman, do not know what particular business Baba is engaged in until later on in the course of the novel when we are made aware that Baba's business trips are really a cover up for his political activities. Apart from Martyr's Square, which Suleiman refers to as the headquarters of political opponents to the ruling government, secret meetings are held in Baba's study. Baba, who increasingly seems the leader, Ustath Rashid (before he was abducted), Moosa and Nasser are forced to speak in undertones in Baba's study, for fear of being seen and heard by members of the Revolutionary Committee, who are constantly on patrol. According to Suleiman, "their conversation was suspended from the moment Mama had knocked on the door, they were eager for me to leave." (*Country of Men*, 37) These "secret meetings" (*Country of Men*, 36) could be the source of leaflets ostensibly printed to topple the ruling government. The idea of 'suspension' tells of a short break but not a complete stop to agitations for better standards of living. So in spite of the torture and killings going on in the Libya of 1979 and after, perceived silent voices such as those of Faraj (Bu Suleiman el-Dewani) and Ustath Rashid continue to represent, and talk on behalf of, the masses even at the peril of their (Faraj and Rashid) own lives. This is exactly what happens when protestors took to the streets in the major Libyan towns of Tripoli, Benghazi and Misrata between February and October, 2011. Though they faced stiff opposition from the Gaddafi region, they never gave up. The protestors fought for their rights right through to the end in spite of the heavy casualties suffered and the occasional breaks in fighting to take stock of how far they had gone in their bid to topple the Gaddafi regime.

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Insecurity forces Faraj to be absent from home all the time. Libya is in the midst of a revolution. The Guide, a wicked dictator, has come to power. Intellectuals such as Suleiman's neighbour, Ustath Rashid, are viewed as traitors who must be silenced. The same goes for Suleiman's father, Faraj, who is quickly becoming an underground opposition leader who believes in democracy. Much of the tension of this novel is based on the slow revelation of Suleiman's father's fate. Questions circle around him. Is Suleiman's father really a rebel? Will he be caught? These series of questions create suspense that keeps the reader glued to the novel. This is characteristic of Hisham Matar, whose story telling ability is very adept. Matar is able to combine fiction and reality in a skilfully woven pattern. When Faraj finally disappears, the questions about his whereabouts change: Where have operators of the dictator taken him? Will he survive? Questions about Faraj are much more present throughout the novel than the man himself. It is Najwa and her relationship with Suleiman that holds the characterization of the story together. Faraj's absence from home causes a void in Suleiman's life, the absence of a father-figure to look up to. And in a country where children must grow up to be men in order to understand the goings on, this absence can be psychologically defeating. No wonder Suleiman complains a number of times about the absence of Baba. According to him, "I hardly ever did something alone with Baba...He was away so often, and when home he was usually distracted by a book or a newspaper." (*Country of Men*, 143) However, Baba's absence is to be expected. According to John L. Esposito, Libya at this time (in the aftermath of the 1969 Al Fateh Revolution led by Col. Moumar Gaddafi) is a country where organized dissent is extremely dangerous. [10] So dangerous is it that dissenters could be abducted from their homes at any time of the day. Baba's activities qualify him as a dissenter and so it was only tactful for him to be on the run for his own safety, though his family is harassed in his absence. To protect Baba from revolutionary investigators, Najwa, with the

help of Moosa have to even burn his books and papers on democracy that could put him in trouble.

In protecting Suleiman from the danger of Libyan life, Najwa opens him up to the art of betrayal. Betrayal is an important issue discussed in *In the Country of Men*. Since both Faraj and Najwa make Suleiman believe he can be the man of the house, he emerges as a very selfish child. Najwa's influence on Suleiman makes him lose his closest friends as his guilt of betrayal is very clear. Throughout the novel, Suleiman asks a series of questions, the majority of which are directed at himself. It is through Suleiman's questioning of himself that the deep roots of betrayal slowly take shape. Suleiman betrays his best friend, Kareem, his mother, Najwa, and his father's typist, Nasser. Suleiman, after each episode of betrayal, feels weak with shame. But when morning comes, what he experienced recedes, and he fails to learn any lessons. After Ustath Rashid's arrest, Suleiman abandons Kareem and keeps to his mum indoors. When Kareem questions his whereabouts, Suleiman immediately feels a heavy sense of guilt descend on him: "I immediately felt guilty. I had withdrawn from him ever since his father had been arrested, I was sure he had noticed." (*Country of Men*, 105) It is clear that Suleiman is ashamed of a wrongdoing and blames himself for that. Matters get to an apogee when Suleiman hears imaginary voices accusing him of betrayal:

> "You know what you've done, don't you?" "You know it or do you need us to tell you?" "You betrayed him [Kareem]." "That's what it was: betrayal." "There's no other word for it." "Why, Suleiman? Why did you do it?" "You are wrong about yourself." "You are a terrible person. You thought you were good, always believed it, but the truth is that you are a traitor." [11]

The above rhetorical questions raise a number of issues. First, does Suleiman really know who he is? In a country where terror reigns, one's character is likely to be tainted by events on the ground. It becomes increasingly clear therefore that any boy's inner life could mimic the despotic ruling government's. This is what happens to Suleiman; he finds it difficult to

understand how he is able to think and behave in a way which is hurtful to those closest to him. Second, the degeneration in Suleiman's behaviour is so fast moving that he becomes ashamed of himself. Yet he is not able to completely extricate himself from these disloyal tendencies.

Furthermore, another question that pops up for discussion is whether Suleiman likes and enjoys hurting other people. This question arises because Suleiman does not only betray Kareem, his best friend, but goes on to betray his mother and Nasser. In the case of Najwa, Suleiman divulges confidential information about Baba's activities to Sharief (the secret service agent who keeps an eye on the el-Dewani household) when Najwa had warned him against it. Najwa's reaction is that of fear and surprise: "As soon as I was inside she slammed the door shut. She went down on her knees and gripped my arms hard. "What were you doing with that man? I saw you don't lie" She tightened her grip. I never saw her so frightened." (*Country of Men*, 132) Najwa fears for what can happen to Faraj if his underground battle against the ruling military regime is known. Again, she finds it difficult to fathom why Suleiman would disregard her advice and mingle with a dubious character like Sharief.

But the string of betrayals does not end there. Nasser, Baba's clerk and typist is another victim of betrayal. Nasser, who is very loyal to Baba and his underground movement to topple the government, finds himself in the same shoes as Faraj; he goes missing after Suleiman had disclosed his and his compatriots hiding place at Martyrs Square. According to Nasser's father, people around the square told him "they had seen a young man run across the square with a typewriter under his arm, chased by a group of Revolutionary Committee men." (*Country of Men*, 154) When Suleiman hears this incident (after eavesdropping on a conversation between Nasser's father and Najwa), he feels guilty and banishes the idea of ever getting married to Nasser's young sister, Siham, since he had painfully betrayed Nasser

by giving out information about his whereabouts to a Revolutionary Committee member on the phone. Obviously ashamed, Suleiman poses the rhetorical question, "How could I ever marry her [Siham] now when I had betrayed her brother [Nasser], the man who was to be an uncle to my children." (*Country of Men,* 154) Suleiman's future aspirations are therefore dashed as a result of what he ironically refers to as "a lame attempt at retreating." (*Country of Men*, 140)

Moreover, a family pattern of betrayals continues to draw our attention. Najwa tells of how she was betrayed by her brother, Khaled, and the effects of that betrayal. According to Najwa, "Betrayal was a hand squeezing my throat." (*Country of Men*, 13) After Khaled leads the crusade to marry Najwa off, it is she who bears the brunt of that forced marriage. Najwa literally suffocates in this marriage and has no way out of it. In other words Najwa is strangled in her marriage as a result of her brother giving her out. Therefore the betrayal of Khaled and the other men in Najwa's family causes great harm to her.

Again, Najwa herself engages in the art of betrayal; she courts the favour of the wife of a politically powerful official, Ustath Jafer, who is their neighbour across the road. Um Masoud is a woman Faraj detests for her readiness to criticize those in political disagreement with the regime, but Najwa bakes her a cake ostensibly to attract attention and sympathy from her husband, Ustath Jafer, in finding Faraj who at this point is believed to be in the custody of the military government. Ustath Jafer is a government official and member of the Mokhabarat, an agency of the ruling military government that determines "who was to remain in front of the sun and who to be fixed firmly behind it" (*Country of Men*, 161). In other words, Ustath Jafer's far-reaching powers could set one free or put one behind bars. It is therefore not surprising that this formal act of submission on the part of Najwa contributes to Faraj's release eventually. Faraj, however, before his release also betrays his co-conspirators. We are

told that he did so under extreme torture—as his bruised body testifies when he gets back home. Without taking into consideration how they are adding to the horror of the situation, Suleiman's parents initially attempt to keep Faraj's presence and his disfigured state from him. But Suleiman witnesses the bitter outburst of Moosa, against what the latter sees as the 'betrayal' of Faraj:

> "I can't bear looking at him [Faraj]," Moosa said. "The betrayal in his eyes—I am sorry, I am sorry—his voice scorches me, this is worse than death...They [military regime] killed the students closest to us. Rashid is dead, whereas Bu Suleiman is...People are talking, saying terrible things about him." [12]

The above quotation shows how the ruling military government uses torture to cow people into submission. Though Baba may have stood his ground, he finally caves in and betrays his friends.

The series of betrayals discussed above only serve to symbolize what the Libyan people felt was a betrayal of their trust by the government of the Guide which came to power through a coup d'etat. In 1969 a dramatic coup brought the Guide to power. The rationale of the coup was socioeconomic reform necessitated by the failure of the Western-influenced monarchy of King Idris. The action of the story begins from 1979, ten years after the seizure of power on the first (Al Fateh) of September, 1969. Libya, which discovered oil in 1959, became a very prosperous nation. According to John L. Esposito,

> Libya's modern development has been profoundly affected by two events. In 1959 oil was discovered there, and so this poor nation of one million inhabitants, which had become economically dependent upon Britain and America, became a leading oil producer within a decade. In 1969 a dramatic coup d'etat brought Gaddafi to power. [13]

However, after the assumption of office by Col. Gaddafi, who we could say is symbolically represented as the Guide in *In the Country of Men,* the conditions of poverty and deprivation which existed in the erstwhile King Idris regime continued to prevail as only a few people in government continued to enjoy the wealth of the nation while the majority of the common

masses wallowed in poverty. This, the masses felt, was a betrayal of their trust after massively hailing the government of the Guide hoping for better conditions of life.

Though the majority of the people who live in Gergarish on Mulberry Street are working class people, they are still, to a large extent, dissatisfied and discontented with the conditions in which they live because what they were promised is not what they are currently receiving or experiencing. Ustath Rashid is a university professor who, one can say, is well off as compared to other working class Libyans, yet still he agitates for a better Libya. Faraj is a businessman who travels in and out of the country. Though we are not privy to what Suleiman's father really does for a living, it is beyond doubt that the family lives in luxury. A lot of the times Faraj comes home with gifts, for Najwa and Suleiman. However, Faraj is still dissatisfied and teams up with others such as Ustath Rashid, Moosa, Nasser and the uncountable number of students on the various university campuses across the country to demand better conditions of living as had been promised them when the Guide assumed office. While people like Faraj and Ustath Rashid may be seen as individuals fighting for their own parochial interests, the stream of agitations across the country tells of the groundswell of voices against the government. And the irony of the situation is that instead of the government dialoguing with the citizenry which it governs to find a common ground, the government rather goes about gagging and physically restraining the people from expressing their views openly. Incidents such as the hanging by the neck of some students who demonstrate against the harsh policies of the Guide remind the people of same atrocities that took place in the erstwhile King Idris era. Incidents like these and others drum home the point of how betrayed the common people feel.

Besides, one theme running through *In the Country of Men* is Suleiman's obsession over questions of masculinity and what it means to be a man. Suleiman is an only child, and when

his father is away on his numerous business trips he is forced to become the man of the house and to care for his mother. He sees manhood as something spectacular which he must aspire to reach. In his own words, "I will be a man, heavy with the world. I imagined my life without Baba, I imagined doing all of these things alone." (*Country of Men*, 143) Suleiman hopes to grow up and act as a matured person because he believes, and to a large extent rightly so, that the current world in which he lives has no place for children. His treatment as a child is something he detests vehemently: "Unlike Mama and Moosa, he [Sharief] answered my questions. He didn't treat me like a child." (*Country of Men*, 130)

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The symbol of manliness, which represents maturity, is very significant. Suleiman is caught up in a world he does not understand—where the sound of the telephone ringing becomes a sign of grave danger; where his mother, with the help of Moosa, burns his father's cherished books. The Libya in which Suleiman lives, as the title says, is a 'country of men', a place where adults reign supreme. The importance of adults comes to light in an encounter between Suleiman and Sharief, the secret service Revolutionary Committee member stationed outside the el-Dewani household. When Sharief questions Suleiman about providing a list of Faraj's friends who could vouch his innocence, Suleiman volunteers to vouch for his father but Sharief laughs him off. According to Sharief, "We need men, adults;" (*Country of Men*, 131) children do not have any role to play. It is men who feature prominently throughout the novel. However, Suleiman is oblivious to what the grown ups, as he calls them, do. Their actions are confusing to him. And these men's particular characteristics, from their breath to their chest hair, are unappetizingly described by Suleiman. According to him,

> The stink of smoke heavy with sweat and old stale breath, breath like the breath of fasting men...the smell of old socks and cigarettes made me dizzy. The weight of the stench struck me as a sign of manhood...Perhaps to be a man was to be heavy, I thought. The V of his [Sharief] safari jacket revealed the beginning of his chest. His skin was brown-red from the sun, glazed in sweat. [14]

Descriptions like the above strike fear and awe in the young Suleiman and his peers. Everything about men is strange and confusing to Suleiman. In attempting to decipher the ways of men, Suleiman feels 'dizzy' and therefore decides to bid his time till he can also call himself a man.

Moreover, there are strange meetings between the grown-ups and whispered words of political dissent. Suleiman sees his father crossing the street in Martyrs Square when he is supposed to be on a business trip abroad. More men turn up in the el-Dewani household to interrogate Najwa and search the house. The presence and actions of the Revolutionary Committee men in the el-Dewani household have a profound effect on Suleiman. He is so frightened at the possibility of what the family could suffer at the hands of these men "dressed in dark safari suits" (*Country of Men*, 7) that he urinates on himself. We sympathise with Suleiman because as a child he does not understand the ways of the grown-ups who make up his world. In a rather moving tone, Suleiman tells us:

> I was still glued to my place. I was wet beneath my clothes and realised what I had done. The pee felt warm and cold and sticky on my skin. I could detect the sullen smell of mulberries, rotten and heavy. It turned my stomach. I pressed my thighs tighter together. [15]

The alliterative 'thighs tighter' in the last line tells of Suleiman's effort to conceal what he had done from the grown-ups, especially Mama and Moosa. This incident brings to mind Ustath Rashid's trial. Under the strain of torture and humiliation, Suleiman tells us Ustath Rashid "cried like a baby." (*Country of Men*, 185) It is worth noting that even as a man, Ustath Rashid suffers from the over-bearing influence of other men. In the eyes of the Revolutionary Committee men conducting his trial, Ustath Rashid is a 'baby' since he can do nothing to help himself. All he can do, like Suleiman, is to wet himself. Acting as a man, since he lives 'in the country of men', Mama and Moosa allow Suleiman to witness Ustath Rashid's public execution at the National Basketball Stadium. Suleiman pays keen attention

and is able to detect the wet spot on Ustath Rashid's trousers: "We could see now that his [Ustath Rashid] trousers were wet." (*Country of Men*, 188) This incident, as recalled by Suleiman, and no different from what he actually suffers himself, makes clear the formidable image men represent in *In the Country of Men.* It is obvious then that it is not only Suleiman who does not understand and suffers from, the actions of 'men'; to a large extent all grown-ups in the novel do. Ustath Rashid, Faraj, Moosa and Najwa all suffer from the authoritative, robust and domineering nature of men of the revolutionary regime. In a rather crisp metaphor, Suleiman paints a vivid picture of the situation Ustath Rashid finds himself in. According to Suleiman,

> He seemed to be begging the men dragging him towards the hanging rope. He reminded me of the way a shy woman would resist her friends' invitation to dance, pulling her shoulders up to her ears and waving her index finger nervously in front of her mouth. [16]

Ustath Rashid's demeanour in agony is likened to a shy woman resisting an invitation from a friend to dance. It is interesting that a man going through pain would be described as being a shy woman. What possibly Suleiman means is that Ustath Rashid is not mature enough to demand better treatment from his men folk and therefore has to be a woman (believed to be the weaker sex) acting shyly. Instead of stamping his feet and standing his ground, Ustath Rashid can only hope to helplessly wave his 'index finger nervously.' In a futile attempt to understand the ways of men, Suleiman finally declares: "It's a sign of madness, I know, to claim to know what is in another man's heart." (*Country of Men*, 244)

Finally, through Suleiman's nine year old perspective, we are ushered into a world where people are easily put "behind the sun" (*Country of Men*, 65) once they do not agree with the ruling government. Suleiman's limited first person narrative point of view is affected by the people who dominate his life. In this involving, multi-faceted narrative, twenty-four year old Suleiman looks back to his nine-year-old self trying to make sense of the confusing family

and political events that broke around him in Tripoli in the summer of 1979, "that last summer before I was sent away." (*Country of Men*, 1) By making Suleiman tell the story, Matar is able to reduce the tension in the story to an extent, even though in certain instances he is not able to. Serious incidents are somehow given a light touch. For example, in describing Ustath Rashid's arrest, an otherwise serious incident, Suleiman makes it appear as though because Ustath Rashid had not bled in the process of his capture, he did not deserve the pity of Kareem, his son, and the other boys gathered:

> His [Sharief] men reappeared, holding Ustath Rashid between them. He didn't struggle. Auntie Salma trailed behind as if an invisible string connected her to her husband. The man with the pockmarked face slapped Ustath Rashid, suddenly and ferociously. It sounded like fabric tearing, it stopped Auntie Salma...His shirt was torn. But no blood. I was surprised by this, and later thought that if he [Ustath Rashid] had bled—even a little—it would have made it easier on Kareem, because we all would have respected a bleeding man. [17]

As a child, Suleiman expected to see blood oozing from a man who was being manhandled. But it is clear that despite the absence of blood, Ustath Rashid still goes through extreme pain and deserves the sympathy of Suleiman and his friends.

Again, in an interesting twist, Suleiman gives some insight into the institution of marriage as he has grown to know it. His light-hearted manner of presentation creates dark humour. When Suleiman meets Siham (Nasser's younger sister) for the first time, what immediately comes to his mind is the issue of marriage and whether Siham is of the right age for her to get married to him:

> She [Siham] must be Nasser's sister, the one who is nine years old, I thought, exactly my age and therefore too old for me to marry. The acceptable age difference had to be at least three years...A woman had to be young and strong enough to bear children and serve the man well into his old age, so that her locks would remain black as coal when his head was bald as the moon. [18]

An even more comical incident is Suleiman's description of Um Masoud, the wife of Ustath Jafer and mother of Masoud and Ali. According to Suleiman, "Her[Um Masoud] buttocks

were the size of giant watermelons. Although I never tried it, of course, I was certain I could balance a glass of water on one of them." (*Country of Men*, 31) The metaphor is very apt since it succinctly paints a clear picture of Um Masoud, whom we are told is fat.

To conclude, it is clear from the above discussion that *In the Country of Men*, to a large extent, is a political novel. It is an evocative portrayal of the anxieties suffered by a nine year old child exposed to the dangers and deceits of politics under a brutal regime. Throughout the novel there is a sense of fear, danger, betrayal and oppression that nine year old Suleiman would choose to escape from. Politics remains vague to him—he has no clear idea what his father is involved in. Suleiman is confronted with the excesses of the Libyan Revolutionary regime—a secret service agent watching their house, tapped phones, torture inflicted on those who oppose the regime; but Suleiman does not seem to recognise it as evil. Najwa and Faraj do not do much to socialize their son into the Libyan society of the '70's. It is when things have gotten completely out of hand that Suleiman complains: "You[generally to the adults in his life, but specifically to Najwa, his mother] always lie. I am not a child and you always lie." (*Country of Men*, 201) Suleiman feels he should be told exactly what is happening in his immediate family, and, to a large extent, Libya, since he also is a member of that country. It is no wonder therefore that Najwa begrudgingly allows Suleiman to witness the public execution of Ustath Rashid as broadcast on national television.

Under the Gaddafi regime, (here symbolised by the Guide), Libya had become a place where dissent was dangerous. Counter-revolutionaries were rounded up for interrogation; people "vanished like a grain of salt in water" (*Country of Men*, 61) and were never seen again. Najwa tells Suleiman Baba is on a business trip when in actual fact he is in hiding due to his strong but subtle stand against the regime of the Guide. In an oddly mixed world of grown-ups, it is Suleiman who is exiled to Egypt, out of the lives of Najwa and Faraj. Surely

Suleiman is being saved from a brutal regime, but he is also separated from his family and friends. This has been the fate of majority of Libyans escaping the harsh realities of the erstwhile Gaddafi regime. Suleiman grows into a man at the end of the novel, but one with emotional scars that would never heal. Hisham Matar writes convincingly, and from direct experience. His own father disappeared many years ago, and to this day Matar does not know his whereabouts or what happened to him.[19] When he describes the impact of the televised execution of Ustath Rashid on Suleiman, you know he is also talking about himself:

> Something was absent in the stadium, something that could no longer be relied on. Apart from making me lose trust in the assumption that "good things happen to good people," the televised execution of Ustath Rashid would leave another, more lasting impression on me, one that has survived well into my manhood, a kind of quite panic, as if at any moment the rug could be pulled from beneath my feet...I had no illusion that I or Baba or Mama were immune from being burned by the madness that overtook the National Basketball Stadium. [20]

Suleiman is now aware, and painfully so, of the effects of a brutal regime on the people. As a twenty-four year old, he knows that the fate Ustath Rashid suffered can befall anyone, including Baba, Mama or himself.

Very rarely would one come across such a book about Libya, its everyday life and its regime. In one of his interviews Hisham Matar says: "I would have liked to write a book that had nothing to do with politics… I'm not really interested in politics, but politics was part of the canvas. I had to say something about it, otherwise all the different forces that are shaping these characters would be abstract." [21] It is clear therefore that politics plays an important role in the lives of the characters of *In the Country of Men*. Even Najwa, who frowns on Baba's underground politicking, pays a politician (Ustath Jafer) a visit in order to pray the politician to intercede for the release of Faraj who at this point was being tortured by elements of the revolutionary regime. But this formal act of submission on the part of Najwa nevertheless contributes to Faraj's release. Without recognising how they are adding to the

horror and of the situation, Suleiman's parents attempt to keep Faraj's terrible state from him. However, in the end, Suleiman becomes aware that it is as a result of Baba's dabbling in politics against the ruling regime that leads to his sad state. Symbolically significant also is the book *Democracy Now*, which Suleiman salvages from Baba's burning books. It is noteworthy that this book does not get burnt. It is the only lingering hope that one day the people of Libya will have a say in who becomes their leader and partake in an equal access to the nation's resources. Dictators would be a thing of the past.

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In this chapter, an attempt has been made to discuss Matar's In the Country of Men with a view to bringing out the issues of discontent, oppression, insecurity and betrayal as they relate to Gaddafi's Libya in particular and the larger Arab region in general. The overthrow of the erstwhile Gaddafi regime did not happen in vacuum; it has been the culmination of a series of activities and actions suffered and/or implemented by the Libyan people. These are the issues talked about in Hisham Matar's 2006 classic, *In the Country of Men*. Among the issues discussed is the discontent of the Libyan people against the ruling Revolutionary Libyan regime; so unfair was the distribution of national resources that a minor group of politicians and government officials lived in wealth while a greater percentage of the ordinary citizens lived in poverty. However, people are intimidated by operatives of the government to prevent them from speaking out against the harrowing conditions they lived under in their own country. There was therefore suppressed ill-feeling and anger among the people. This anger was to burst out in torrents later on.

Again, in this chapter, an attempt has been made to discuss the issue of betrayal as felt by the people against their government. The issue of secrecy on the part of the ordinary people of Libya and the insecurity felt by them was also discussed. Furthermore topics such as

masculinity, exile and phone tapping by agents of the Revolutionary Libyan regime have been deliberated on.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Hisham Matar. 2010. The Books Interview: Hisham Matar. Available online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/01/interview-father-prison. 14 February 2012>

[2] ibid

[3] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 13

[4] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 12

[5] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 33

[6] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. Pp 122-123

[7] <http://www.givengain.com/cgi-bin. 24 March 2015>

[8] ibid

[9] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 19

[10] John L. Esposito. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[11] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. Pp. 110-111

[12] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 208

[13] John L. Esposito. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. p 80

[14] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. Pp. 65...131

[15] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 64

[16] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 187

[17] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 35

[18] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 151

[19] Matar's family had to go into exile from Libya to Egypt when he was a boy of nine. When Matar was a student in the UK, his father (a Libyan pro-democracy activist) was abducted from Egypt to a Libyan jail. Matar's father was believed to have been killed in a jail massacre in the late nineties, although quite recently there were signs that he might still be alive. (From "Al Jadid" [Magazine of Modern Arab Literature, November, 2011 Edition).

[20] Hisham Matar. *In the Country of Men*. London: Viking Press, 2006. p 198

[21] Hisham Matar. 2010. The Books Interview: Hisham Matar. Available online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/01/interview-father-prison. 14 February 2012>

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CHAPTER THREE

Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), is one of the greatest Arab writers of modern time. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988 for his lengthy work, *al-Thulathiyya* (*The Cairo Trilogy*). *Autumn Quail*, one of Mahfouz's later works, was published in Arabic in 1962 as *al-Summan wal-Kharif* and translated by Roger Allen in 1985. Set during the 1952 Egyptian Revolution and the years immediately following, *Autumn Quail* focuses on Isa ad-Dabbagh, a senior civil servant during the last days of the Egyptian monarchy. The novel is a fictionalization of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution and the years immediately succeeding. In other words Mahfouz employs historical retrospect by placing the action of the novel during the revolution itself and after. A number of issues discussed in the novel bear striking resemblance to events of the 1952 revolution as well as the 2011 'Arab Spring' events unfolding in Egypt currently. This chapter would therefore analyse issues such as alienation, political and personal downfall, bribery and corruption, and moral responsibility with the purpose of showing the strong connection of these issues with the realities of both time and place in relation to the Egyptian nation of the 1950's and now. This would be achieved by discussing, making use of the several literary devices and symbols, the myriad references to actual historical events and places in Egypt's development as a nation trying to wean itself from decades of French imperial rule and mismanagement by indigenous Egyptians.

Autumn Quail is couched in a fictional mode heavily overlaid with symbolism. We get to know the meanings of some events and activities by the mention and telling of things that signify these events and activities. In other words, meaning is not arrived at merely from the surface value of the story. One needs to probe further to get the underlining meaning. The intensity of Mahfouz's distress with the direction his country is taking becomes increasingly clear as the story unfolds. In a crisp rendition, he tells of the positives and negatives of the

Egyptian revolution. While extolling the positives, he condemns the negatives. Mahfouz traces the relationship of the past and the present within the 1952 Egyptian Revolution and the possibilities of cooperation and co-existence in the future. The story provides readers with sentiments and insights on the revolution put into play by the language and actions of the various characters who are from different social backgrounds and varying political affiliations. While people like Isa are against the revolution, because it does not benefit them in any way, Hasan and others like him espouse the idea of a change in the governance system, a system which has been in place for decades, but has not benefited a majority of the population. This refusal to cater for the needs of the citizenry therefore leads to unrest and agitation on the part of the masses as is currently being witnessed across North Africa and the Middle East. Now as then, the masses have taken matters into their own hands by organizing series of demonstrations and protests in a bid to demand an end to unemployment, extreme poverty in the face of plenty, dictatorship, human rights violations, government corruption, increased food prices and class stratification.

Autumn Quail opens with the famous 'Cairo Fires' which followed the massacre of Egyptian policemen at the Suez Canal by British soldiers in 1952. The novel provides a devastating image of revolution: "Flames were spreading everywhere, dancing in windows, crackling on roofs, licking at walls, and flying up into the smoke that hung where the sky should have been. The burning smelled hellish, a concoction of wood, clothes, and different kinds of oil." (*Autumn Quail*, 19) This widespread destruction is a premonition of the downfall and destruction that befalls Isa and other members of the old political regime in Egypt. Isa's transfer from his position in a minister of state's office to the archives department is the first sign of a train of tribulations yet to come. The Egyptian Revolution of 1952, also known as the July 23 Revolution, began on July 23, 1952 by a group of young army officers who named themselves "The Free Officers Movement." The revolution was initially aimed at

overthrowing King Farouk I. However, the movement had more political ambitions, and, moved to abolish the constitutional monarchy and establish a republic. The Egyptian monarchy was seen as both corrupt and pro-British, with its lavish lifestyle that seemed provocative to the "Free Officers Movement" whose living standards did not compare to that of the Egyptian monarchy. The monarchy's policies completed the image of the Egyptian government being a puppet-figure in the hands of the British government.[1] Earlier on January 25, 1952, British troops attacked the Egyptian police barracks in Ismailia after the police refused to surrender. Fifty Egyptian police officers were killed and one hundred were wounded. Egypt erupted in fury. The riots that followed, 'the Cairo Fires' are seen generally as the beginning of the end of the Egyptian monarchy and, by extension, the government put in place by King Farouk.

Mahfouz's vivid description of 'the Cairo Fires' at the start of the novel tells of the breakdown of the traditional opposition between literature and history. Though the incident of 'the Cairo Fires' is based on real facts, Mahfouz's rendering of it is largely interpretational. Facts go through different stages and are therefore influenced by individuals, their beliefs, ideas and cultures. Mahfouz makes clear one of the significant early incidents that led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the government therein. One is able to picture the burning going on throughout Cairo. The flames were not only "spreading everywhere," (*Autumn Quail*, 19) it was "dancing in windows" as well. (*Autumn Quail*, 19) The idea of 'dancing' tells of ease at doing something. The fires spread easily and rhythmically in measured movements, and in the process devoured every and anything in its path. And so though the fires may have been started haphazardly, the ultimate aim is a carefully orchestrated destruction of British owned interests, and by extension the old regime of the monarchy and its cohorts. It is significant to note that the "young men and boys" (*Autumn Quail*, 19) who participated in the burning spree targeted British interests, airline offices,

hotels, cinemas, bars, and department stores. Foreign observers who witnessed the burning said it looked less like an unruly mob and more like a well-planned and disciplined action. [2] Again, the replacement of the sky with smoke ('the smoke that hung where the sky should have been') intimates not only the toxicity of the event but also that of the new taking the place of the old.

When the new government takes over the reins of power, sweeping changes are made to the government machinery: "The minister had been dismissed, and the new minister had removed him[Isa] from his job, along with many other people, especially anyone who had been connected with the battle at the Canal." (*Autumn Quail*, 28) Senior civil servants like Isa are demoted by way of transfer. This demotion is the beginning of Isa's gradual slippery slope to destruction. Though we are told this is not the first time Isa suffers a demotion at the office, he does not recover from this particular demotion this time round. It is worth noting that everything seems to be against Isa. Isa's inability to recover from the decree "transferring me from my position in the minister's office to the archives" (*Autumn Quail*, 28) is made symbolically clear by the ominous nature of the weather: "Beyond them [Isa and Umm Shalabi, his mother] clouds stretched away into the distance, bunched together, foreboding. Like the political situation." (*Autumn Quail*, 28) The signs therefore tell that this particular revolution is going to have a long lasting effect on a majority of the people, with Isa hugely encapsulated in that bracket. The foreboding clouds 'stretching away into the distance' is symptomatic of the long suffering and alienation Isa and a lot more politicians of his rank and below eventually go through. Majority of them are dismissed from office. Some go through trials and others face imprisonment terms and torture. Isa tells us he is "an old friend of police truncheons and prison cells," (*Autumn Quail*, 45) and though in this particular case Isa does not go to prison, the blow he is dealt as a result of the change of government is overbearing.

Isa's political ruin symbolically represents the end of corrupt politicians in Egypt at the time and by extension corrupt politicians of today as is currently being witnessed through the current 'Arab Spring' in North Africa and the Middle East with the overthrow of long-serving leaders like Ben Ali of Tunisia, Mubarak of Egypt and Gaddafi of Libya. Though as a civil servant Isa is not supposed to engage actively in politics, he confesses himself that he is an active politician and a party man: "I've become an important civil servant—no, politician even—at a very early age." (*Autumn Quail*, 43) On countless occasions Isa refers to the toppled regime in the plural 'we.' On one such occasion when Isa complains about the worthlessness of the current military regime to his mother, he pontificates about the old regime of which he was very much a part of. According to Isa,

> "It's incredible," said Isa listlessly, "that we have hardly settled into the business of running the government for a year before we are thrown out again for four. We are the legitimate rulers of this country and there are no others besides us." [3]

It is worth noting therefore that the end of Isa's political career is representative of the demise of the old regime of politicians who had been in office for decades. Closely linked to the Egyptian monarchy, the old regime of politicians lived in luxury, while the majority of the populace lived in penury. Isa's gorgeous house in Dokki easily comes to mind. At a time when there are troubles, and the British are fighting the Egyptian people for possession of the Suez Canal (a key national asset), we are told the political leaders are abroad. This goes to tell how unconcerned the political leaders are to the prevailing conditions on the ground. While foreigners are prospering at the expense of the masses, the political leadership looks on indifferently. Shukri Pasha Abd al-Halim, a Member of Parliament, has cause to question Isa about what the citizenry think of how they are governing the country. Isa' answer is ironic to what the political leadership think of themselves. According to Isa,

> Nationalist feelings are running very high [among the masses, who are supposed to be led by people like Isa, who call themselves 'nationalists' and have the interest of the

> common man/woman at heart]. Our enemies are saying that we manufactured a battle [the armed struggle at the Suez Canal] to take people's minds off us. [4]

And people would rightly think so since the entire government machinery seems to have ground to a halt. Abd al-Halim Pasha's series of questions tells it all:

> "Where's the minister? No one knows. Where's the army? No one knows. Where's the police? No one knows. The public security system has disappeared and meanwhile the devil's [possible reference to the rioting youth or even the British] on a rampage." [5]

The long suffering of the masses bursts out in torrents in the form of mass demonstrations and destruction of foreign-owned property (the Egyptian monarchy was largely perceived to be in bed with the British) as seen at the outset of the novel in the 'Cairo Fires.' Eventually a coup removes the old political regime (which was constituted by the monarchy) from power and the king, we are told, flees from the country.

Furthermore, Isa's political downfall negatively affects his personal fortunes and life; his engagement to Salwa, "the only thing of value he had left," (*Autumn Quail*, 61) ends in a bitter breakup. After announcing his dismissal from office to Salwa and her father, Ali Bey Sulaiman, the latter in particular does not see Isa fit to marry his daughter. Isa, who describes himself as "a political victim," (*Autumn Quail*, 65) gets into a heated confrontation with the Bey when the Bey gives hints that Isa's dismissal could have been a result of corrupt practices while in office. It is ironical how Isa denies any wrong doing: " "I don't care how things are...or how grave the evidence is you've mentioned. I've never been an opportunist for a single day" ." (*Autumn Quail*, 66) This statement as we know is not entirely true.

The above statement runs counter to earlier statements Isa had made to the effect that he had had cause to take one or two gifts from some *umdas* (heads of village communities in Egypt) to influence some decisions he took. Eventually, Ali Bey Sulaiman is able to turn his daughter against Isa; the love Salwa has for Isa dies out. Isa wonders whether Salwa had

really loved him. This is due to the quick nature the former slams the phone on him when Isa had called her busking in the joy of a happy life with her in the near future, despite the political crisis he found himself in: "She had been very quick to slam the phone down in his face." (*Autumn Quail*, 71) Though Isa feels dejected and bruised, there is nothing he can do about his ill luck of losing the woman he has loved "tremendously" (*Autumn Quail*, 42) for ten years. It is interesting how the tables turn against him within a twinkle of an eye. Not long after Salwa breaks up with Isa, she gets engaged to Isa's cousin and arch rival, Hasan. Eventually, Hasan (who belonged to the 'new world', and had recently been selected for an important post in the new government) marries her to the chagrin of Isa. Isa feels betrayed at Salwa's sudden change of heart and becomes a walking shadow of himself:

> Isa started on his way home. He looked at people with curiosity as though he were seeing them for the first time. They were strangers and had nothing to do with him; nor had he anything to do with them. He was an outcast in his own big city, banished without really being banished. He was amazed at the way the ground had suddenly collapsed under his feet like a puff of dust and how the pillars which had withstood fate for a quarter of a century had crumbled. [6]

The comparison here is very apt. Isa had moved through the ranks of the civil service so speedily that within a short time he was at the second grade, only a step away from a ministerial portfolio. His success is the envy of others. In the same swift way as his climb up the political ladder, Isa's engagement to Salwa and eventual bitter loss of her is so quick—like the sudden rush of dust. In the end, Isa becomes apathetic and grief-stricken and this is a source of worry to his mother and his three sisters.

It is significant to note that Isa's eventual political ruin can be attributed to corruption on his part. When the old regime led by the king is overthrown, the new government that comes to power after the 1952 Revolution begins a nationwide cleansing exercise to rid the country of all corrupt elements. Isa is one such victim of this 'house cleaning' exercise. When a purging

statute is announced, Isa is dismayed and frightened at the possible outcome of such a decree since he knows his past life as a senior civil servant has not been a clean slate:

> Then the purging statute was announced. He [Isa] read it with a frenzied attentiveness and bitter despair: the destruction threatening the parties and leaders would destroy him as well: the roots [political abuse, corruption, mismanagement of public funds, etc] that kept him fixed to the ground would be torn up one by one. [7]

The above quotation tells that Isa has a guilty conscience. In spite of this guilty conscience, one realizes how the words contained in the above quotation connote violence and a threat. With the Purge Committee in place, Isa, and members of his party, who represent the old regime, face ruin and annihilation. Not only are they threatened of an end to their political careers, they also face possible prosecution and imprisonment. These hints of witch hunting and possible violence against members of the old regime put some fear in Isa. This fear and guilty conscience on the part of Isa is proven right when the Purge Committee begins its sittings. The number of allegations and complaints of abuse of office brought against Isa in particular, and the government, in general are legion: "Complaints piled up in the office of the Purge Committee like so much refuse. Isa gathered that most of them were aimed at him. This did not surprise him however, in view of the nature of the situation." (*Autumn Quail*, 52) The comparison of the allegations brought against Isa to waste on a refuse dump brings to mind the years of dissatisfaction among the masses. Just as refuse is thrown away as being of no value or use, and in the end piling up into a mass, the petitions come in their numbers with no hope of justice ever getting served in favour of the suffering masses. And so the symbolism here is very apt. Though the petitions keep coming in their numbers, like refuse being dumped in a dumping ground, there is no hope of a positive change in the conditions of life of the petitioners; they can only pray and hope that something positive can come out of their dissatisfaction in the form of the numerous petitions presented. In spite of the fact that the Purge Committee's mandate is to punish public officials who are found to have misappropriated public funds, it is not likely they can overhaul the entire corrupt system in

place. The huge number of petitions, however, proves that with a new government in place, the citizenry are at least voicing their dissatisfaction with the previous regime, here represented by Isa.

When the trial of Isa by the Purge Committee begins, matters get worse. There are heated confrontations between Isa and the committee members when they try to prove that he abused his office as a senior civil servant; Isa on the other hand feels that most of the allegations he is accused of are a normal practice engaged in by most people in the civil service and by extension people in the whole government set up. The allegations levelled against Isa range from the appointment of *umdas* on the basis of party bias and extortion of gifts to exceptional promotion of civil servants. To these allegations Isa disagrees and sees it as rather performing his normal duties as a civil servant: "I consider that it was quite normal." (*Autumn Quail,* 55) On the specific charge of taking gifts from would-be *umdas*, Isa asks to see any shred of evidence that can be used to prove that he really took gifts from them before their appointment: "I'd like to see one piece of evidence." (*Autumn Quail*, 55) This outburst from Isa is quite justifiable since corruption is practiced on a large scale in every governmental agency. In other words corruption is practiced on so large a scale that it is considered normal. Isa therefore wonders what might qualify to stand out as evidence of his corrupt deeds. He therefore dares the Purge Committee to come up with any such evidence. While a majority of the Egyptian people live in poverty, their leaders, from the lowly placed to the highest on the political ladder amass wealth right, left, centre, and are oblivious to the suffering of the larger populace. Isa feels, and rightly so, that he is only a victim of circumstances. This feeling on the part of Isa leads to his final flared-up comment thus: "Show me a single government civil servant who deserves to stay on." (*Autumn Quail,* 55)

Significantly, the scene of Isa's trial can be compared to a funeral parlour, in effect signifying the end of Isa. The appearance and chirping, or rather, bewailing of a kite before the trial begins is a foreshadowing of Isa's eventual political and emotional demise: "Through the glass of the locked door, he [Isa] saw a kite land on the outside balcony and then take off again at great speed, making a noise like a dirge." (*Autumn Quail*, 53) Even animals mourn and sympathise with Isa. The trial by the Purge Committee is really the beginning of Isa's gradual descent into abyss, and it is therefore not surprising the note of warning served by the kite at the outset of the hearings; it is here that Isa's real problems begin: he loses the woman he loves following from his trial; and added to that, he has to live a secluded life. Life becomes tedious. Even the future holds no prospects for Isa. According to him, "My future's a thing of the past." (*Autumn Quail*, 76)

Again, one cannot but remember the speech of the person who reads the petitions brought against Isa. According to the omniscient narrator, "The voice of the person who was reading them [petitions] out became as monotonous as the *faqih* [a reciter of the Qur'an] who intones advice to the dead at funerals." (*Autumn Quail*, 54) The comparison here is very appropriate. The allegations levelled against Isa are so myriad that their rendering has become repetitious and uninteresting to the ear. Not only are these accusations dreary, their repetitious nature is likened to a funeral oration. Once again, the image of death and loss are conjured up—the symbolic death of Isa in all aspects of his life as result of the political tragedy he suffers. Nothing seems to work for Isa from this period onwards. After the Purge Committee hearings, Isa is pensioned off, crediting him with a two-year additional salary to his period of service. Isa's inability to live the life he used to live after he is laid off from work tells of his luxurious lifestyle as a civil servant.

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The demonstrations and rampaging by the youth at the beginning of the novel tells how power can easily change hands, and is not the preserve of a particular group of individuals as posited by the New Historicists and Cultural critics. Proponents of New Historical and Cultural Criticism argue that power is not confined to a single group of people in society but circulates by means of exchange. In other words, power does not always emanate from the top, with the upper class always dominating and ruling over the masses. Interaction between the various members and hierarchies in society leads to the formation of ideology and this serves as a rallying point for a change to the status quo. Ideology, to New Historicists, plays a huge role in the formation of groups. The wide disparity in society, and in this case the Egyptian society, as recorded by Mahfouz, leads to a closely organized system of beliefs, values and ideas shared by members of the disadvantaged and suppressed group. These values and beliefs shape the way members within the group think, act and understand the world.

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The Egyptian society about which Mahfouz writes his novel is one that is sharply divided along poverty lines. According to Ira Lapidus,

> World War I, the political strife of the inter-war years, the Great Depression, and finally, World War II exposed Egyptians to the failings of the constitutional and liberal governments of Europe [which controlled most governments in Africa], the ruthlessness of the powers, their indifference to principle in manipulating non-European peoples, and their contempt for their subjects. These events shook the confidence of many Egyptians and the future belonged to the West, and left others disappointed and alienated. Furthermore, the failure of the liberal regime [Egyptian monarchy]...to deal equitably with the country's political and economic problems also undermined faith in parliamentary regimes and in the value of Individualism. [8]

This situation, according to John L. Esposito, created two ideological orientations or movements, both of them populist in nature: the Islamic activism of the Muslim Brotherhood and Arab nationalism/socialism of Gamal Abdel Nasser (who was a major architect of the 1952 revolution). Both ideologies emphasized indigenous Arab-Islamic roots and sources,

stressed Arab unity, and were critical of the failures of liberal nationalism and the West. Both the Brotherhood and Nasser would not only capture the imagination of Egyptians (young people and the youth forming an important part) but also impact the Arab world and beyond. [9]

Isa's political downfall alters his personal life and turns him into a solitary person. After trying without success to recover from his political nemesis, Isa decides to leave Cairo for Alexandria away from all his troubles. Cairo had become a place of pain, and constantly reminds Isa of his loss:

> Cairo was now no more than a memory clouded by sadness, loneliness, the bitter experience you needed to keep from seeing the faces of people who would make you distressed and sleepless, or signs of triumph that would arouse your sense of loss. [10]

Isa's problems are so many that even away from the place they emanate, he still thinks about them. In Cairo, Isa does not feel at ease; he rather feels a deep sense of sadness, pain and a threatening and very hostile environment. With a new government in place, Isa falls from grace to grass. He can no longer live the luxurious life he lived before, and everything seems to have conspired against him. Isa can only brood and fall into trances, with the faintest hopes that he might recover from his catastrophe. According to Isa in one of his mental delusions, "Anxieties like mountains, the mind overwhelmed by rust, and the road to consolation, which is beset with folly, is paved and ready in the face of your [referring to himself] ill-gotten gains and daydreams in which torture leads eventually to victory." (*Autumn Quail*, 79) The comparison of Isa's apprehensions to a mountain only goes to tell how large and extreme his worries are. Just as a mountain is a high and often rocky area of a land mass, Isa's anxieties and worries are at their highest peak; Isa's life is characterized by difficulties, obstacles and troubles. There is nothing he can think about than to be preoccupied with troublesome, miserable and unwelcomed thoughts. His mind is in a state of 'rust', in other words, in a very deteriorated and neglected state for lack of positive use. The only use to which he can put his

mind is to engage in the unproductive act of brooding. Isa's worries, most of the time, make him absent minded. He wonders from one negative and sad thought to another so often that he is oblivious of what happens around him. According to the omniscient narrator, in a vivid description of one of Isa's hallucinations,

> Moments follow each other without any regulation, he [Isa] thought; you don't know the time and hardly even remember what day it is. And so you look up bewildered at the sun's tranquil diamond disk appearing behind the light clouds of autumn, life flirting with you even though you are too morose to respond. It's as though you were seeing the world—and the people in it—for the first time after waking up from a fever, an illness caused by struggle and ambition, its essential values uncovered, revealing the brilliance of creation. [11]

Isa has lost track of time because his present circumstance does not permit him to know and understand the things that go on around him. Just as sickness takes hold of a person and makes him/her inefficacious, Isa' world is totally blurred by misfortune and predicament. He is totally a stranger to the world. Nothing seems familiar to him; Isa is a walking shadow of himself.

It is important to note that Isa concedes to the fact that the wealth he amasses as a civil servant is "ill-gotten." (*Autumn Quail*, 79) Isa's trip to Alexandria serves as a period of introspection; he takes stock of all that has happened in his life. After pondering for a while away from public eyes in a largely Greek quarter in Alexandria, Isa comes to the conclusion that the wealth he made as a senior civil servant has some stains of corruption on it. What Isa does not seem to understand is why people like him have to take the fall for the mishaps of the erstwhile regime while officials within that same regime who were even more corrupt than him, and amassed a lot of the country's resources are walking free:

> All of those objects decorating the entrance [to his plush residence in Cairo], the reception room, the library were "gifts" [from umdas, to put them in a better stead for appointment] too. Certainly the crooks outnumbered the people who had been dismissed for crookedness. He [Isa] was guilty, though, and so were his friends: what

> happened to the good old days? Gifts were forbidden, after all, a mark of corruption. [12]

Isa, though he might be described as a patriot for his love of Egypt (as is clear from some of his utterances and actions), gets consumed in the larger corruption going on around him. He is not able to stay away from the looting of the country's resources taking place at all levels. To this effect, Isa considers the gifts and other perks he receives in the line of duty as a normal practice. He even contemplates whether the issue of corruption is not a global one:

> He [Isa] had stomached all kinds of corruption and taken part in it himself; his bank balance was still there to prove it. Why couldn't purity prevail? What was it that had prevented it for so many centuries? Was there a single man anywhere on the face of the earth living without fear or blemish? [13]

The above rhetorical questions show that even though corruption may be practiced on a large scale, it is still wrong to engage in it. It cannot be justified no matter the circumstances.

Isa's introspection in Alexandria, the reason for which he travels there, leads him down further another slippery slope of destruction. He succinctly describes the state he degenerates into while in Alexandria as a "disgraced outcast." (*Autumn Quail*, 92) While in Alexandria, Isa's loneliness leads him into the web of Riri, a young prostitute. Isa's relationship with Riri brings up just another of Isa's failures and existence in a world he has totally lost touch with. As Isa confesses himself, his co-habitation with Riri constantly reminds him of the state in which he has degenerated:

> The worst thing that would happen while he was living with her [Riri] was that sometimes she would suddenly strike him as a symbol of the utter humiliation into which he [Isa] had sunk. When that happened, he would keep out of her way and start insulting her at the least opportunity. [14]

Isa's co-existence with Riri is totally devoid of emotion, since, according to him, he "distrusts everything." (*Autumn Quail*, 94) The tortures and sufferings he goes through as a person, after, according to him, politics "had swallowed him as a hero and then spat him out as a corpse," (*Autumn Quail*, 95) makes him oblivious to his immediate environment and the

Egyptian country as a whole; just as a corpse, Isa cannot reason. On the intellectual level Isa seems to become reconciled to the idea of accepting the revolution and the changes which it is bringing about. But on every occasion his basic emotional instincts hold him back, at least until the very end of the novel. Isa suffers an internal conflict between mind and emotion, and it is in the latter area that the women in his life play an important role. If Isa's marriage to Qadriyya, with its literal and figurative barrenness, is doomed from the start, then his relationship with Riri represents Isa's real fight with emotion, his total failure to meet his moral responsibilities, and his eventual realization through a very bitter lesson of what those responsibilities are. Isa's relationship with Riri is as creative—literally—as that with Qadriyya is not.

Apart from Isa getting Riri pregnant, he is sometimes able to get her engaged in conversations about Egypt's political situation. Although Riri knows nothing about the world of politics, at least Isa is able to seek her views. On the other hand, Isa's marriage to Qadriyya can at best be described as escapist. Isa tries to look at his marriage to Qadriyya as a way of hiding from the numerous problems that plague him. The only reason why Isa marries Qadriyya is to enjoy her wealth and continue to live the life of a 'notable' as he had done in the past. There is no attraction between them, and Qadriyya does not in any way dispel Isa's feeling of loneliness and boredom: "Qadriyya was not the wife he [Isa] had been looking for, and he still felt bitterly sorry about Salwa, even though the love itself had died long since." (*Autumn Quail*, 137) Riri, who on the other hand shows some emotion towards Isa, does not get a like-mannered emotion returned. Isa's failure to regain his real family (as he comes to call it [that is, the child Ni'mat, and her mother, Riri]) symbolizes the failure of his emotions to act responsibly to the circumstances in which his own past has left him. As he realizes this bitter fact and its consequences for the future, his life with Qadriyya emerges as the sham which it really is and always has been; in Isa's own words, he has no home with

her: “It was pure agony for him [Isa] every time he remembered that she [Qadriyya] was spending money on her home [which she shared with Isa] while he was not spending a penny of his pension, except, that is, on himself. Even his bank balance did him no good at all in his family. So what was the point of all this sponging?” (*Autumn Quail*, 138) The rhetorical question makes clear how Isa sees the futility in living off the wealth of Qadriyya when he does not feel at home with her. Though Isa feels let down, he had prepared himself for the worst when he decided to enter into a relationship with Qadriyya.

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Just as Isa feels let down by Qadriyya, and, ironically to a large extent by the Egyptian nation, so the Egyptian people also feel betrayed and let down by their government, headed by King Farouk I. Isa, and other politicians like him, such as Shaikh Abd at-Tawwab as-Salhubi (a member of Isa’s party and Member of Parliament) feel they have served their country with distinction and do not deserve the treatment meted out to them when a new government assumes office after the 1952 Revolution. In the words of the Shaikh, “How can this renegade nation [Egypt] have forgotten us? How can it forget the people who used to treat it as a sympathetic mother treats her only child?” (*Autumn Quail*, 144) It is clear how members of the old regime feel betrayed by the country they claim to have sacrificed so much for; as a mother, their love for the child Egypt is immeasurable. But this child later turns its back on the only mother it ever knew, and even tries to devour her. This thinking by members of the old regime is clear in their daily outbursts. For instance in an explanation to Qadriyya’s mother about his current state of affairs, Isa gives reasons for his sack from the civil service as merely based on political partisanship and nothing to do with a lack of honour and service to the Egyptian people:

> At the moment, I haven’t got a job, but it’s possible that I’ll find a decent job in the future. I was expelled from the government, not for reasons having to do with honour but because of blind political partisanship. It wasn’t possible for the present regime to spare someone like me whom it regards as being very dangerous. [15]

This position held by Isa as we know is not exactly true. The Purge Committee had found him and other senior politicians guilty of bribery and corruption. So Isa, and other senior politicians like him, having feelings of been betrayed, may be misplaced.

The common masses however, to a large extent may be right in their feeling of been let down by the government of the old regime. When King Farouk I ascended the Egyptian monarchy in 1936 (at the age of sixteen), he was hailed by the populace due to his youth. A greater majority of the youth and the population generally believed that as a young person he could better identify with their problems and therefore find solutions to them. This however was not to be the case as a greater mass of the Egyptian people lived in poverty throughout the reign of Farouk I while he and the people who made up his government lived in luxury. However this situation of basking in the wealth of Egypt was not the same with some Egyptian politicians and elected government officials with whom Farouk quarrelled frequently, despite their loyalty in principle to his throne. During the hardships of World War II, criticism was levelled at Farouk for his lavish lifestyle which ran parallel to that of his people who lived in privation. This, the people felt, was a betrayal of the trust reposed in the leadership ability of King Farouk I. And so with the overthrow of the British-dominated regime of Farouk by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers in the July 1952 coup, the Egyptian people (especially the youth) poured out in their numbers to cheer this single event as a repayment for their lost trust, a repudiation of European colonial influence, the failed policies of Western liberal nationalism and capitalism (which Farouk practiced), and the ignominy of Egypt's defeat in Palestine in 1948, led by Farouk I. This is the scene of the 'Cairo Fires' as vividly described by Mahfouz at the outset of *Autumn Quail*. [16]

Finally, Mahfouz's vivid description of Egypt's war with Israel and the happenings therein further tell of the upheavals Egypt goes through as a nation and the role of politicians in

serving the needs of their people; this episode, as captured by Mahfouz in *Autumn Quail* also serves to bridge the gap between history and literature. Isa's reaction to the news of the attack of the Sinai (which the Egyptians regarded as a key and important territory) by the Jews tell of the concern he has for his country and his fears of the current revolution not succeeding as the others before it. Isa, may after all, be considered a patriot if his response to the news of the invasion of Egypt is anything to go by:

> Thoughts spun around inside his [Isa] head till he felt dizzy. Yes indeed, he thought, the fate of the revolution is swaying in the balance. However, his own nationalist feelings burst out and overwhelmed everything else; he showed a rage worthy of an old nationalist almost overtaken by death, an old nationalist who was suffering even though he had been tarnished because of Egypt. [17]

The struggle with the Jews for Sinai is something Isa considers unfathomable. After President Gamal Abdel Nasser's seizure and nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, the British, French and Israelis began coordinating an invasion of Egypt. In October 1956, the Israelis struck across Sinai toward the canal. Egyptian troops resisted fiercely, repelling several attacks by larger Israeli forces. The performance of many of the Egyptian units was determined and resourceful in the face of qualitative and numerical superiority of the invaders. Nasser claimed that Egypt had not been defeated by the Israelis but that it had been forced to abandon Sinai to defend the Suez Canal against the Anglo-French attacks. Some of these failings following the revolution is what makes Isa pessimistic that any positive result will come from the much touted 1952 Revolution. [18]

In Isa's estimation, the root cause of this Jewish invasion is the failure on the part of Egypt's current political leadership to live up to expectation by protecting what rightly belonged to the Egyptian people. Isa's friends, Samir Abd al-Baqi, Abbas Sadiq and Ibrahim Khairat, agree with Isa that the revolution does not solve all of Egypt's problems, and, even in certain instances, is worse than the British-influenced government led by the monarchy.

The cycle of dashed hopes of the masses due to the weak policies and programmes of the people at the helm of affairs continues unabated. It is the common people of Egypt who suffer as a result of the failure of the political leadership to put in place measures that would lead to a united and prosperous nation. In a conversation about the wave of bombardment going on following Israel's invasion, Ibrahim Khairat admits that the intervention of the English and French in settling the problems connected with the Near East, and by extension, a reversion to colonial rule, would be better, compared to Egypt's current state of affairs, where cronyism, bribery, corruption and embezzlement of public funds still persist. According to Ibrahim Khairat, "That's [that is, the involvement of the English and French] better than the present situation, at any rate." (*Autumn Quail*, 129) This is the same Ibrahim Khairat who writes in praise of the revolution.

Mahfouz's employment of descriptive language in capturing the raid scenes following Egypt's battle with Israel goes further to, by way of fiction, to chronicle Egypt's history, a history Mahfouz has been very much part of, and has written extensively about. Egypt's battle with Israel for the Sinai has been perfectly fitted by Mahfouz into a novel largely and arguably a historical account of Egypt's revolutionary years. The bombardment tells of the turbulent times the Egyptian people have lived through in their journey to freedom and independence:

> The Cairo sky was crisscrossed with planes day and night. The incredible thing was that daily life in houses, offices, shops, and markets carried on as usual, even though planes were screaming incessantly overhead and explosions kept going off. People still felt that the bombs were not falling indiscriminately, but there were many rumours of casualties. They carried on as usual, but death was looking down at them from a nearby window; [19]

Though the people seem to go about their daily activities without hindrance, the current state of affairs does not help in any way. The whole city seems to be in a state of war, with no one sure what would happen next. The fact that 'death was looking down' at the masses tell of

how exposed they are, just like the fragile new regime. 'Death' could strike them at any point in time. In other words, insecurity permeated the Egyptian society. Mahfouz is able to draw a balance, by way of a vivid description of the air attacks on Egypt, between the insecurity of the masses and the strained efforts of the political leaders to prove that they are in control of affairs. However, Egypt's defeat in the 1956 battle with Israel for the Sinai drums home the point of how susceptible and weak the new regime can be in the face of adversary. The change in government does not therefore mean an end to the challenges facing Egypt as a country. For the country to build on its gains it needs to act with a common purpose and goal.

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It is clear from the on-going treatise that *Autumn Quail* can been seen as a condemnation of Egypt's old regime, but, it also shows the new regime, represented by Hasan, as just as greedy and corrupt. Isa is, of course, a symbol of all that the immediate Egyptian past stands for. In his defence before the Purge Committee Isa excuses himself by pointing out that everyone behaved exactly as he did, and asks why it is that he is being singled out for punishment. It is significant to note that in spite of Isa's rapid and heavy fall, the past which he symbolises throughout the novel does manage to display positive characteristics as well. For, unlike his friend, Ibrahim Khairat, who almost immediately sets about penning hypocritical articles in praise of the revolution, Isa remains stubbornly loyal to the old regime and adamantly refuses to consider accepting the offer of a job from his cousin Hasan, who has become an important figure because of the revolution. This positive aspect of Isa's character, his sense of loyalty and concern for his country, is perhaps best seen through his relationship with Qadriyya, the woman whom he eventually marries. At the outset Isa is aware that the marriage may not work and so leaves himself an escape route by overlooking Qadriyya's previous marriages. But as the couple live through the Suez Crisis of 1956, Isa is amazed by Qadriyya's total lack of concern with politics and the fate of Egypt. Qadriyya, the barren, glutinous nonentity, brings out the positive side of Isa's attitude.

Autumn Quail provides insights and reflections on the causes of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, and by extension the Arab revolution of 2011. It is clear that majority of the causes of the 1952 Revolution in Egypt are repeating themselves in the current wave of demonstrations across North Africa and the Middle East. Issues such as dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, dire poverty, shattered dreams, political oppression, government corruption, unemployment, and a large percentage of educated but dissatisfied and alienated youth within the population have cut across previous and current revolutions in the Arab region. *Autumn Quail* traces, event by event, the progress of the 1952 revolution. The action is put in the mouths of Egyptian characters from different backgrounds and with varying social and political attitudes. Indeed, several issues that run through this work—civil disobedience, personal and political downfall, alienation, exile, moral responsibility, betrayal, bribery and corruption, physical combat—transcend the boundaries of independent national literary tradition and are to be found in much of contemporary Arab fiction. Mahfouz's narrative world is peopled with characters from all walks of Egyptian life, from beggars to aristocrats, with a special place reserved for the intellectual class with whom Mahfouz identifies. On the literary plane, Mahfouz's career spans the whole process of development of the Arabic novel from the historical to the modernistic and lyrical as well as the revolutionary spirit of Egypt, and by extension, most Arab countries. Mahfouz has earned the Arabic novel respect and popularity and lived to see it flourish in the work of numerous writers throughout the Arab world.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Egyptian Revolution. <http://www.news.egypt.com/en/egyptian-revolution-of-1952.html. 6 March 2012>

[2] ibid

[3] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 29

[4] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 24

[5] ibid

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[6] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. Pp 59-60

[7] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 51

[8] Ira M. Lapidus. *A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Pp 625-26

[9] John L. Esposito. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. p 69

[10] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 79

[11] ibid

[12] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 60

[13] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 114

[14] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 94

[15] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 120

[16] Information contained in this paragraph was sourced from McLeave, Hugh. *The Last Pharaoh: Farouk of Egypt*. New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1970. p 115

[17] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 125

[18] <http://www.onwar.com/aced/data/sirra/sinai1956.htm. 27 May 2012>

[19] Naguib Mahfouz. *Autumn Quail*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. p 133

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CHAPTER FOUR

Memory in the Flesh, published in Arabic in 1985 as *Dhakirat al-jasad* and translated into English in 2003, is the first novel written by an Algerian woman in Arabic. It was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1998 in recognition of its distinction. Ahlam Mosteghanemi articulates the drama of contemporary Algeria in the language denied to colonized Algerians, that is, Arabic. Her novel partakes in cultural decolonization of her country on two levels: it re-appropriates Algerian history and presents the ravages of colonialism from the point of view of its victims, and she repossesses the mother tongue by writing in the language of the victims with passion and mastery.[1]

However, the novel is not only about the Algerian struggle against French settler rule; it is also, and more importantly, about the complex post-independence problems facing the newly independent Algeria. Mosteghanemi exposes, by way of the love affair between Khalid and Hayat, the disappointments, disillusion and displacement of revolutionary ideals held by the pioneering fathers of the newly independent country. In chapter four therefore, the passionate affair between Khalid, the militant middle-aged Algerian who turns to painting after losing his left arm in the struggle against colonial rule, and Hayat, the novelist and young daughter of his friend and political leader, Si Tahir, is used as a framework to show the reasons for the displacement and disregard for revolutionary ideals following the independence of Algeria from France, thus leading to disillusion and unrest within sections of the population.

Memory in the Flesh is narrated in the first person by the male protagonist Khalid, in a stream-of-consciousness style. The protagonist knew Hayat, the heroine, when she was a child living in Tunis away from the war zone in Algeria. Khalid meets her again two decades later when she is a young woman adorned in traditional Algerian jewellery at the opening of an exhibition of his paintings in Paris. Hayat's bracelet reminds him of his dead mother, and

the very identity of Hayat as the daughter of a militant martyr brings back to Khalid's mind the past of Algeria and present disappointments. The novel is a long letter written by Khalid and dedicated to his beloved, Hayat. Through the wording of the novel Mosteghanemi allows us not only to delve deep within Khalid's innermost feelings but she also allows us to feel his pain as he narrates the story of his life. [2]

From the start of the novel we are able to tell the enormous amount of pain Khalid experiences. He uses very strong words to describe his love for Hayat: "When today I look back through my life, I find that the only real exceptional event was meeting you." (*Memory in the Flesh*, 5) These words not only show how attached Khalid has been to Hayat but also how special he considers her. Hayat is not only a woman in a relationship with Khalid; she reminds Khalid of his dead mother and, more importantly, symbolizes the Algerian nation and its aspirations and revolutionary ideals of old. Having fought alongside Hayat's father against the French in the battle for independence, Khalid, meeting Hayat decades later brings back to his mind how the Algerian nation organized itself into a formidable force and fought French colonialists against the principles of government dictatorship and extreme poverty due to the wide gap between white colonial subjects and indigenous Algerians, unemployment due to the large mass of educated but dissatisfied citizens within the population, and human rights violations.

Khalid talks of the pain he experiences in his relationship with Hayat. In his words,

> The wound was just beginning to heal, and the heart that had been loaded with memory of you was gradually liberating itself from you. You were packing up the baggage of love and leaving soon to take possession of the heart of another. [3]

The 'wound' in question here is the emotional and psychological injury Khalid suffers as a result of Hayat leaving him for another man. After investing his entire being in loving Hayat, Khalid is heart-broken and is unable to recover from this tragedy of being dumped for another man, Ziad, and eventually Si X, the man she finally gets married to. Anytime Khalid

casts his mind back to the wonderful time he had with Hayat, what he remembers is a memory not so much of the mind but a 'memory in the flesh' of Hayat; though she may not be present, Khalid still pictures the physical body of Hayat in front of him on a daily basis. This tells of the attachment of Khalid to Hayat, and the magnitude of pain and disappointment he feels when he loses her. The most traumatizing aspect of Khalid's life was losing his left arm in the battle with the French for independence. However, because of Hayat and what she represents, Khalid is able to overcome his pain of feeling incomplete. She, in a sense, transports him to a place where he feels whole. In her presence he does not feel that part of his body is missing. In-as-much as Khalid would have wished to bask in Hayat's "spontaneous warmth that mothers back home [in Algeria] had in abundance, and was ready with words that gave you in one sentence enough tenderness for a lifetime" (*Memory in the Flesh*, 55), their love affair is short-lived, and what follows is bitter sorrow for Khalid. Khalid's pain extends to his feeling of betrayal by the political leaders of Algeria. Having gained independence from France, all the things the revolutionary leaders fought against are being repeated by the current crop of political leaders.

Khalid tells of the speedy nature at which the vision and aspirations of the martyrs who laid down their lives for the liberation of Algeria from French colonial rule have been abandoned for individual selfish interests. According to Khalid,

> Between the first and the last bullets, objectives changed. Aims changed and our country changed. That is why tomorrow will be a day of mourning for the loss of the dues that have already been paid. There will be no military parade, no receptions, no official commemoration. People will just hurl accusations at each other while we go and visit the graves [of martyrs]. [4]

So it is clear that right from day one the aspirations held by the fathers of the newly independent nation dissipate into thin air because of their inability to enforce these goals and aspirations. And so with the appearance of Hayat, Khalid is reminded of the dashed hopes of

the Algerian people. His heart bleeds for the wrongful turn his beloved country, represented by, Hayat is taking. The 'bullets' in question are in reference to the shelling that took place between the guerrilla movements of Algeria and the French army in the battle for colonial independence. The inclusion, by Mosteghanemi, of incidents reminiscent of the Algerian National War of Liberation, as it has come to be known, shows how history can be fused into literature to better enhance understanding. The Algerian war for independence began in 1954 and ended in 1962 when French President Charles de Gaulle pronounced Algeria an independent country on July 3. This war was one of many wars for independence which occurred during the 1950's and 1960's. The movement for independence came from Algerians dissatisfied with being treated as second class citizens by the French colonial government. The revolution's philosophical foundations came from privileged Algerians who were Gallicized by the French educational system. However, the leaders of the revolution and those who came after them lost control of the movement for independence when the concessions they secured from the French government benefitted themselves only. [5]

Just as Khalid 'mourns' the loss of Hayat, so do the majority of the Algerian population, 'for the loss of the dues that have already been paid.' The lives they lived under French colonial rule is no different from their current way of life. While those in political office and other high echelons of society live in wealth and luxury, the majority of the population lives in poverty. This, however, is not what the martyrs like Si Tahir who laid down their lives for Algeria's independence fought for. Khalid, like the common man and woman on the streets of Algeria, feels betrayed at the turn of events. Khalid, in a crisp description, gives a vivid picture of the feelings running through the hearts of a majority of the Algerian people:

> My feelings switched into new feelings, a mixture of jealousy, bitterness, hatred, and probably disdain as well. What had gotten into you? Are women really like nations, forever being feebly seduced by military uniforms, even ones that were fading? I still wonder to this day why I consented to go to Constantine for your wedding. I already

> realized that the invitation was not just a friendly gesture from a man to whom I was bound by more than one tie. Above all, he [Si Sharif] was abusing Si Tahir's memory and using one of the few names still untarnished at a time when corruption was rife. [6]

Feelings of anger and extreme disgust run through the length and breadth of the country; this is as a result of the double standards exhibited by the current crop of political leaders of Algeria. Khalid finds it difficult to understand how Hayat, and by extension, the political leaders of Algeria, could change all of a sudden. The above rhetorical questions drum home this point of everything changing for the worse. Si X, the man Hayat finally marries, is a soldier hence the seduction 'by military uniforms.' The allusion could also be to soldiers-turned-political leaders repeating all the atrocities suffered under French colonial rule. We get a better understanding of subtle hints of things going wrong in the emerging Algerian nation when we are told that the military uniforms worn by the leaders of the newly independent nation is 'fading.' It is clear at this point that the 'military uniform' has lost the shine it exuded in earlier times, times when people in those uniforms threw caution to the wind and stood neck to neck in battle against French imperialists. The masses have been disappointed by their political leaders because these leaders have reneged on their promises and betrayed the principles and aspirations they stood for. Khalid is therefore shocked and angered that Hayat would choose to leave him and go ahead to marry a man who is tainted with so much corruption.

It is interesting to note that the issue of corruption and abuse of power has been at the forefront of the current wave of revolutions sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East. Most Arab governments that have been in office for decades have tended to misappropriate and embezzle public funds. People engaging in this practice are referred to as 'thieves' by Khalid. So debased had political leadership become that the people at the receiving end had no hope of their living standards ever improving until something drastic and dramatic was done. Instances of corruption have been on the rise in Algeria. Cases of

political corruption are rife mainly due to a transitional economy that has been weakened by decades of declining political legitimacy of its leaders leading to outbursts of civil discontent. In a country with a vast territory that is dripping in natural resources, almost half the population continues to live below the poverty line. [7] Conversely, the caste of the newly rich within the circles of power, such as Si Sharif and Si X, grows daily. While the poor continue to grow poor, the few rich continue to grow richer. Many young Algerians such as Hassan, Khalid's younger brother, struggle to make ends meet while a few selfish politicians loot the public coffers. Despite the persistence of all kinds of violence and violations of human rights, the struggle for survival and freedom on the part of the masses continues. The Algerian society is not unaware of the extent of the corruption that is eating up the country and jeopardising the prospect for development. This awareness will later culminate in civil unrest and demonstrations within the population, especially by the youth.

In a conversation between siblings on the state of political corruption and embezzlement of public funds taking place in the Algeria of the 1960's and present day, Hassan succinctly presents the situation. In his words, "As for the groom [Si X] being someone who's dipped his hand into state funds, they've all done it and are still at it. Some have been exposed and some know how to keep a low profile." (*Memory in the Flesh*, 227) It is clear therefore that the misappropriation of funds by political figures continues unabated. One of the sources of Khalid's pain at Hayat leaving him is the man she chooses to marry.

Closely related to the issue of political corruption and misappropriation of public funds is unemployment and political persecution. Building a nation proves to be very difficult after one hundred and thirty (130) years of French colonialism. Disappointed intellectuals, like Khalid, are forced to make their home abroad. This shows how gradually the dream of Algeria becomes a nightmare. The hopes of young people who were promised jobs by the

leaders of the infant nation are dashed because these jobs are non-existent. The status quo that existed during French colonial rule continues to be the guiding principle of governance. Against this backdrop, personal passions cannot be dissociated from national dreams. The only time Khalid is employed in his own country is when he is drafted into the guerrilla movement to fight for his country against the French. In the process of serving his country he loses his left arm. Hassan, Khalid's brother, on the other hand, presents an individual case of demoralised Algerians who turn to religion for relief. Having nothing to do in terms of employment, Hassan's last resort is to cloak himself with the comfort that religion provides. The current state of affairs in Algeria aggravates Khalid's pain of losing his arm and becoming incomplete. Khalid's pain is symbolic of the pain of other common people like him when, after independence, things revert to what they were before independence.

Moreover, while there are no avenues for citizens to live decent lives and make ends meet, the courageous ones among them who dare to speak out against their deplorable conditions are gagged or witch-hunted. Very likely Khalid leaves the shores of Algeria to avoid falling prey to the political persecutions that befall a number of people who dare to speak out against the direction their beloved country is taking. Asked by Hayat why he left Constantine for Paris, Khalid's response points to the betrayal of the aspirations and goals pioneered by the founding fathers of the infant Algerian nation. Since these values and goals had been disregarded in the building of the new nation, people like Khalid do not feel comfortable living in a city where one has to look over his/her shoulder in order to make sure operatives of the government are not eavesdropping on what one is saying, which could put the one in serious trouble of harassment and torture. Khalid talks about how people in high positions flaunt their wealth in public while a majority of the populace live in penury. However, the populace cannot speak out about the harsh conditions under which they live because that would be inviting physical intimidation and persecution. These pent-up emotions experienced

by the majority of lowly placed Algerians would later burst out in torrents as we are currently witnessing across the Arabian Peninsula.

The wedding scene of Hayat's arranged marriage to Si X, a ceremony Khalid refers to as his 'funeral', gives a vivid picture of the debasement that drives Khalid away from Constantine to Paris:

> More ululations and money is tossed to the music makers. Strong and loud are the voices of those specially-hired throats. Generous are the hands that give, as easily as they take. There they are. All of them, as always. Big bellies, Cuban cigars, and double-breasted suits. Friends of every regime, people with diplomatic bags and shady missions. Excellencies and debasement. People without references. Thus are they known. There they are, once and future ministers, once and future thieves, opportunists, administrators, and other opportunists looking for something to administer, former spies, and soldiers disguised as ministers. [8]

The money and wealth stolen from the people is given back to them in the form of tips. The irony of the situation is that these are the same people who criticized the French colonial administrators and organized clandestine and open forces to overthrow them. Once independence was won, the new indigenous political leaders and important members of the society, who had a say in how the society was to be, and who were 'former spies and soldiers', repeat the ills of the erstwhile colonial masters and, even in certain cases, go overboard. You can easily identify these 'thieves' who have looted the public purse for their own personal benefits. They have 'big bellies', smoke 'Cuban cigars' and wear 'double-breasted suits.' You find them in 'every regime in any era'; they are people who occupy high positions in government and enjoy all the diplomatic gratification that come with such offices. Woe to you that stands in their way.

Khalid tries to enforce the positive values and aspirations of people like Si Tahir who fought and died for their country. According to Khalid,

> When I went back to Algiers afterward [after the independence war] I was filled with words. And as words were not neutral, I was filled with ideals and values, with a great desire to change minds and start a revolution in the Algerian mind that had not been changed by historical earthquakes [such as the gaining of independence]. But the time wasn't right for my big words, together or separated, would lose any meaning. [9]

Those like Khalid who decide to stay back in Algeria and who share the same aspirations as he does, and dare to speak out against their current predicament, are intimidated and oppressed into accepting the status quo; a status quo that existed in the colonial days: indigenes treated as second class citizens, economic deprivation, human rights abuses and torture. This is what leads Khalid to attempt 'to change minds and start a revolution' since the people at the helm of affairs had become oblivious to their own values and lost the meaning of what independence meant. However the current state of affairs will not permit him to propagate such a change of minds on the part of Algeria's political leaders. Instances have been cited where people who had dared to protest against their miserable conditions have been heavily and summarily dealt with. We are told Hassan, Khalid's brother, "was targeted by bullets" (*Memory in the Flesh*, 252) coming from his own countrymen; this shows the unfriendly atmosphere in which citizens lived. One could not express himself by demanding rights he was lawfully entitled to. In a bid to get a better job than his current teaching appointment and escape the misery and penury of living in a single room flat with his wife and six children, Hassan is deemed to have overstepped his bounds by participating in what looked like a demonstration. As a result, he is gunned down by operatives of the government: "he died by a stray bullet on the pavement of his dreams", (*Memory in the Flesh*, 253) dreams that were never fulfilled. The manner of Hassan's death shows that other possible demonstrators against the stifling living conditions under which they lived could experience the same fate as Hassan. Just as Khalid broods silently in pain as a result of losing his beloved Hayat, so do the Algerians have to keep mute and suffer in their very wretched living

conditions. Khalid's reward of 'utter destructiveness' suffered at the hands of Hayat is no different from what the people of Algeria suffer at the hands of their political leaders.

It is significant to note that the return of Khalid to Constantine to participate in the excellent wedding of Hayat to a nouveau rich points to the frustrations of a father/lover possessiveness and to the militant/artist disappointment at the wrongful turn of Algerian development. Khalid contemplates whether to attend the wedding or not because he is in a confused state of mind. He cannot believe Hayat has really left him; and not only left him but is about to get married to no one else but a personality who represents the negative trend Algeria is taking after independence. According to Khalid,

> The only object of this wedding was to give a hand to upstarts. It was simply political. He [Nasser] was against his uncle's choice of this bridegroom whose reputation, both morally and politically, was bad. Everyone talked about the various deals he had made, about his offshore accounts, his Algerian and foreign girlfriends. [10]

The objective of the marriage between Hayat and Si X, as Khalid tells us, is to fulfil a political goal of securing a bright future for Hayat and, more importantly, for her uncle, Si Sharif, who is only interested in amassing wealth and putting himself in a better stead to selfishly enjoy the nation's resources, resources which should benefit the entire populace. The 'bad' moral and political reputation of the groom is what angers Nasr and discourages him from attending his elder sister's wedding to such a shady individual who reminds the country of the betrayal of its goals and aspirations. Si X's 'bad' reputation is the talk of the public. Not only has he engaged in corrupt deals, he has actually stashed the money accrued from such corrupt deals in foreign 'offshore accounts' to prevent his thievery from being noticed. However, the truth always stands out and this does not go unnoticed. Khalid, and by extension Nasr, are infuriated at the fact that a debased character like Si X, representative of the current Algerian political and social leadership, is on the verge of tainting their beloved

Hayat, a woman symbolically referred to as "the consciousness of a nation." (*Memory in the Flesh*, 249) In other words, Hayat is one of the few surviving symbols of the lofty goals and aspirations held by the pioneering fathers of Algerian independence such as her own late father, Si Tahir.

Furthermore, Khalid's return to Constantine signals the break with nostalgia and idealization. The first break signalled by Hayat's invitation to Khalid happens on an emotional level, as Khalid is still madly in love with her. The wedding ends any possibility of a future for the two of them. The wedding also brings about an ideological break: Hayat forms a partnership with the new elite, marrying a rich and influential man because her uncle's legacy demands it. While Khalid and Ziad try to hold on to the old ideals of a liberated and honest homeland that makes room for all of its citizens, Hayat joins the new elite regardless of her father's ideals. In addition to these painful realities on the part of Khalid, the wedding brings about a very important break: the return home. Khalid is forced to go back to his home country and confront the city and country he has been dreaming about and reconstructing from a distance. The return to Constantine heightens Khalid's disillusionment but also brings a sort of liberation as it constitutes the last destination in his search for national belonging. Rather than a happy and romantic celebration, the wedding is a political sales point where new titles are sold to the highest bidder. For Khalid, it is a painful awakening.

In the eyes of Khalid the dream of Algeria has become a nightmare. The people who should have seen to its fulfilment have lost sight of it, and the mass followers of that dream only suffer in vain with no hope of a better future. Khalid succinctly summarizes this feeling of loss of hope:

> We did not die of injustice. We died of desperation and sorrow. Only humiliation has killed people. In the prison cells, we were all united by singing the same anthem. It came from one cell, then was taken up and repeated in other cells by other prisoners

> who were not there for political offences. The words had a great power to bring us together. By chance we discovered we had one voice. We shook the walls of the prison and our tortured bodies at the same time. Did our voices become hoarse with time? Or was there one voice that drowned the others, when the country became the possession of just some people? [11]

From the above extract we get to know of how galvanized the people are towards a common course before independence. In very distressing conditions they forged ahead with a common voice led by their leaders; the entire group of prisoners inspired one another by 'singing the same anthem.' The oneness of purpose resonates with the entire group of people. And so even with 'tortured bodies' the goal the people seek, led by their bold and selfless leaders, of freeing themselves from the shackles of colonial rule and its attendant negative effects is never lost on them. However, after independence is gained, the conditions of a majority of the Algerian people, hopeful as they are, does not improve for the better; it rather even gets worse than the prison conditions suffered under French colonial rule. The series of rhetorical questions posited by Khalid, and by extension the common people of Algeria, tells of the demands of the people as to what could have possibly gone wrong in the young nation. They ask the question whether independence meant a lowering of their goals, or a demise of their strong will power of perseverance by time. On the other hand the people wonder whether a few voices among the ground swell of voices had drowned the majority voice. Again they ask if their beloved country had become 'the possession of just some people', instead of the possession of all the people. It is clear therefore how Algerians feel disappointed at the manner in which their own indigenous leaders are managing their affairs. A distinction could not be drawn between their conditions under colonial rule and under independence.

For Khalid, the beliefs fought for during the war of independence have not prevailed; the blueprint created by the founding fathers of Algeria has not been executed. As the nation thus moves further away from the war in time, the explanatory context of his amputated arm has

faded and people have forgotten its purpose. Only when standing next to his paintings, Khalid says, is he again (like just after the war) unconscious of his handicap. His art completes him and renders him whole by recalling a vision of an idealized Algeria. His paintings of Constantine's bridges similarly recall the context of his amputation, of the war, and of his first painting, *Nostalgia*. His art, through its reality-conferring and fiction-generating function, is a means of creating a blueprint for Algeria. However, Khalid's blueprints point exclusively backward in time, rather than forward. The constant return to the war of independence and its ideals is a means of recreating the rhetorical context of war, to provide an explanatory context for the wounds that continue to plague Algerian society.

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Mosteghanemi uses Khalid's painting as a means of criticizing certain static approaches to writing that glorify the past at the expense of realistic treatments of the present. In contrast to Khalid's repeated insistence on memory (a word repeated not less than forty times throughout the novel he is writing about his beloved Hayat), Hayat's own novel is entitled "The Corner of Oblivion", emphasizing her desire for change and a clean break with the past. Hayat sees writing as a means to "kill off heroes and do away with people whose existence has become a burden." (*Memory in the Flesh,* 8) As a result, Hayat has no difficulty in moving on with her life by getting married to a different person when she feels her relationship with Khalid (whom she confesses she loved) had hit a snag. Khalid on the other hand sees writing as a means "of giving immortality to those whom they had loved." (*Memory in the Flesh*, 9) In this vein Khalid engages in a game of glorifying the past. The notion of the fullness of the past, versus the emptiness of the present, as perceived by Khalid, dominates the novel's imagery and is expressed through various kinds of nostalgia; Khalid has a deep sense of nostalgia for his dead mother, for Hayat, who represents the Algerian homeland, and above all, for the high ideals and unity of purpose of the revolution.

Khalid transposes each of these types of nostalgia onto the image of Hayat, as she becomes associated with imagined perfection. The novel progresses through a series of flashbacks leading further and further back into Khalid's past, with Hayat as a chain of transmission through them, leading him back through time and space. The temporal and the spatial are superimposed on Khalid's perception, for he has been living in self-imposed exile in Paris for over two decades. For him, the past is a place, Algeria, Constantine, his childhood home. His preoccupation with the bridges in his paintings represents his desire to traverse this breach in time and space. When he first meets Hayat in Paris at an exhibit of his work, she is standing next to his earliest painting, *Nostalgia*, depicting the view from his childhood home in Constantine. Hayat is closely associated with this painting: she not only stands next to it during their crucial moment of connection at the exhibit, but was born around the same time it was painted. When Khalid paints Hayat later in his novel, he reworks *Nostalgia*, then goes on to render her as a series of eleven paintings of the bridges of Constantine. *Nostalgia* represents the central point of *Memory in the Flesh*, between a whole and truncated body, between home and exile, between past and present, between ideal and real. While recovering from the amputation of his arm in Tunis, Khalid paints *Nostalgia* in an attempt to combat the depression that afflicts him, dreaming of escape from his pain, loneliness, and homesickness. In this sense, the painting is an imaginative transport, a spatial, temporal, and physical return to a more whole, harmonious world.

Hayat is a living embodiment of that past harmonious world dreamed of by Khalid. Hayat's significance within Khalid's story derives primarily from this association with the various periods of his life. The principal temporal framework of Khalid's yet to be published novel is the period of the romantic relationship between Hayat and him and its anguished aftermath. Hayat's birth coincides with the breach in Khalid's life, since the gap is also between generations, between the old Algeria and the new. For Khalid, however, Hayat is emblematic

not of the dreams of the future, but the dreams of the past and of the period of the war. When he sees her twenty-five years later at the opening of an art exhibition in Paris, she is wearing the traditional bracelets of Constantine that his mother used to wear. He exclaims to himself,

> O child wearing my memory, wearing my mother's bangles on her wrist. Let me gather up all those I have loved in you. Looking at you, Si Tahir's features come back to me in your smile and the colour of your eyes. How beautiful is the return of martyrs in your look. How beautiful is the return of my mother in the bangle on your wrist. And the nation returns in your arrival. [12]

Khalid's nostalgia for Si Tahir and for the ideals of the revolution are intertwined with his nostalgia for his motherland and childhood. Childhood and adolescence in his beloved motherland becomes the symbol of perfection in the past, and it is this period that is the root of Khalid's nostalgia and his inability to divorce himself from that past.

Written of lyrical passages, descriptions and meditations from Khalid's perspective, *Memory in the Flesh* is a highly emotive piece of writing. Throughout the work, Khalid reflects on the deep wounds inflicted by Hayat's 'cruelty', his theories about the meaning of art, his ideas about the political and social disappointments in post-colonial Algeria, and about the failures of his country's ruling elite. The text abounds in speculative questions that infuse the work with an emotional tone. The doubts of an unrequited lover are reflected in an atmosphere of mourning: for Si Tahir, for Hassan, and for Ziad, a Palestinian poet who dies at the hands of the Israelites. Although Khalid is portrayed as highly principled in his relations with Algeria's ruling elite, he is consumed by a blind admiration that renders him blind to Hayat's ambivalence. In the end, the unconsummated nature of Khalid and Hayat's love affair is symbolic of the misfortunes that befall post-colonial Algeria: corruption, unemployment, economic deprivation, a wide gap between the rich and the poor, alienation, violence against political enemies and human rights abuses.

Mosteghanemi's ability to sustain Khalid's male point of view throughout the novel is quite remarkable. Her ability to embody convincingly a male voice who constructs an extraordinary tale of passion has received great acclaim. According to Abdel-Moneim Tallima, a foremost Arab literary critic, "Ahlam Mosteghanemi goes beyond the common notions of the masculine and the feminine to present a humane horizon." [13] Ahlam Mosteghanemi has said in an interview that she opted for a male narrator partly because she did not want to be classified under the label of 'womanist writer', and partly because she wanted to cover episodes in the political history of Algeria in which men were instigators. [14]

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The bitterness Khalid feels towards Hayat further deepens his thoughts of the loss of the ideals of the independence movement pioneered by Hayat's father, Si Tahir. As a result of this disillusion, Khalid's cycle of paintings of Constantine's bridges while in Paris in different shades seems less a representation of natural landscapes than an effort to bridge psychological and political chasms. Khalid's much hoped-for reunion with the Algeria of his past proves to be a complete disappointment. Khalid stakes his entire emotional structure on Hayat, only to be shattered by inevitable disappointment. Although she is Si Tahir's own daughter, she cannot be the symbolic bridge leading back in time to Algeria's past, nor can she be the bridge to a better future. She belongs to a new generation that "found all things too heavy to carry, that exchanged old Arabic dresses for modern ones, that summarized all of history in one or two pages." (*Memory in the Flesh,* 198) In other words the current generation of young people and political leaders sidestep the very exalted ideals held by those who came before them. Khalid's paintings of Constantine's bridges tells of his feelings of nostalgia and a yearning to return to his homeland and put things right. Khalid's brush, and the paintings that come out of it literally compensate for the loss of his arm. Not only has painting, and more importantly, painting of Constantine's bridges, played a major role in Khalid's recovery from amputation, but painting and the brush become physical extensions of

his body. While his missing arm signifies a changed and broken relationship to his country, the painting of Constantine's bridges as a therapy should help to restore a balance between Khalid and his surroundings. Dr Capotsky explains this to him:

> "You've got to build a new bridge with the world through either painting or writing...If you prefer painting, then paint. It can reconcile you to things around you and to the world that has changed in your view because you have changed and are looking at it, touching it with only one hand." [15]

Only by accepting and actively engaging with what he is missing, can Khalid at least heal himself, even though things are not well back home.

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When Khalid returns to Algeria for Hayat's wedding he fails to recognize the Constantine he left behind decades ago. As a result, he wonders around the city in search of his homeland by looking "at every stone with love. I greet every bridge, one by one. I ask news of families, of the saints, and of their menfolk, one by one." (*Memory in the Flesh*, 237) Though Khalid feels a stranger in Constantine, he wilfully makes it his homeland again. The painter in him observes and investigates the small things and people surrounding him. He has stopped using his memory as inspiration and thus refuses to remain stuck on bridges, suspended between here and there, Constantine and Paris. He physically gives his body back to Algeria and starts to paint his memories and ideas onto the city. He is no longer absent, but the object of his desire is right in front of his eyes, and Khalid realizes that he needs to learn to love Constantine with all its complexity. He sacrificed his arm for the country once, but she now demands his whole being with all her contradictions.

Khalid's use of flashback in telling his checkered love tale with Hayat brings to light the good times as well as the pain and sorrow he cannot forget; pain and sorrow suffered at the hands of Hayat that literally translate to the ills committed in Algeria's past and present by those at the helm of affairs against their own citizens. Through the use of flashback, we see how Khalid's perception of the present is governed almost exclusively through reference to

the past. The novel's title, *Memory in the Flesh*, evokes this relationship of Khalid's past ingrained into the lived experience of his body. Yet the title is purposefully ambiguous, intimating both 'the body's memory' and the remembrance of a certain body, Hayat's (the meaning of whose name is 'life'), which is a form of incarnation. Again, the memory of 'flesh', or body, could be Khalid's own body, before the amputation of his arm during the war of independence. These bodies, Khalid's and Hayat's, are somehow intertwined within the text's imaginative landscape: as Khalid projects his desires onto Hayat, she begins to embody them both literally and figuratively. The framework of Khalid's yet to be published novel is most succinctly expressed through Khalid's body itself, wounded and disfigured in the present, leading Khalid to nostalgically romanticize the past as a time of wholeness and harmony. The belief in the perfection of the past shapes not only his perception, but the way he represents reality, both in writing and painting.

In conclusion, *Memory in the Flesh* remains much more than a love story; it is an allegory about the tortured fate of Algeria, in its struggle for freedom and better conditions of life. Though there has not been a direct change of government in Algeria as we have witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there have been signs of dissatisfaction among the Algerian people against their government. There have been snippets of demonstrations to prove the unhappiness of the masses at their lot. What Mosteghanemi is advocating is a system that benefits the majority of the populace and not just a select few. Again, the values and aspirations of the founding fathers of Algeria must be carried through and fulfilled by the current crop of political and social leaders. When the daughter of an honoured revolutionary ends up in a marriage of convenience with a shallow young representative of the corrupt nouveau riche of Algerian society, it is a serious indictment.

ENDNOTES

[1]<http://www.amazon.com/Memory-Flesh-Modern-Arabic-Writing/dp/9774247345. 25 March 2015>

[2]ibid

[3]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 7

[4]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 12

[5]Frantz Fanon. "Algeria Unveiled" in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*. ed. Presenjit Duara. London: Routeledge, 2004.

[6]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 178

[7]<www.indexmundi.com/algeria/population_below_poverty_line.html. 15 November 2012>

[8]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. Pp 231-231

[9]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 97

[10]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 225

[11]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 208

[12]Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. p 66-67

[13]http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1998/409/cu2.htm 24-30 December 1998. Issue No. 409

[14]ibid

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[15] Ahlam Mosteghanemi. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. Pp 35-36

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Earthquake, by Algerian writer Tahir Wattar, and translated by William Granara, is a walk, in the mind of Shaykh Abdelmajid Boularwah and in Constantine, Algeria. Wattar paints pictures of scenes of fragmented conversation of Boularwah's present and past. *The Earthquake* presents a conservative character who is opposed to modernity. In a bid to prevent the government's confiscation of his land, Shaykh Boularwah, a zealous religious scholar and teacher, sets out on a peripatetic mission to find his estranged relatives in Constantine, to allocate his land to them. Constantine, populated by half a million people who sit on "top of this great big rock", (*The Earthquake*, 28) has a centripetal force which provides the reader with a sense of instability. In this chapter this writer will investigate the use of religious rhetoric and Qur'anic verses to bring about the eschatological notions of struggle, death and sacrifice in Algeria. In doing so, Wattar's use of alternating narrative voices will help to critique the prevailing Algerian political and social milieu—the so-called socialist policies implemented by various political regimes, particularly agrarian and industrial reforms, and the utter poverty and squalor seen in every nook and cranny of Constantine, and by extension Algeria as a whole.

Right from the outset of the novel, Shaykh Boularwah begins his religious and Qur'anic expletives. In his wanderings through the streets of Constantine, he contemplates the vast majority of people walking here and there and shoving him in the process. In his words,

> There is no power or strength save in God! What makes people walk in such a way in this city? And here I am, finally, after I nearly had to abandon my car in the middle of the street. I was so afraid that they'd swarm over it like flies on the Day of Resurrection. What possesses these people to push and shove the way they do, coming and going, back and forth, alone or in crowds, and in such hot weather? [1]

As a Shaykh, Shaykh Boularwah puts all his trust and hope in God, hence the elaborate reverence to God. The series of rhetorical questions that follow only go to tell the confused

state of mind in which Shaykh Boularwah finds himself. Having been absent from the country and Constantine in particular for sixteen years, things have changed drastically in his view. The city has become so overcrowded that movement of people has become very difficult. Most of the rural folk have migrated to the cities to find non-existent jobs. Shaykh Boularwah talks of how he cannot find a place to park his car due to the population explosion and therefore has to abandon it 'in the middle of the street.' The 'Day of Resurrection' in question is reference to the Judgement Day as described in the Qur'an, a day on which on all those who did not live righteous lives when on earth, as prescribed by the prophet Mohammed, would be condemned to suffering and death; while those who lived righteous lives and had died would be resurrected to eternal life in Paradise. Based on an actual earthquake that shook Constantine in 1947, and the Qur'anic foretelling of the earthquake of 'the Day of Resurrection', Wattar maps apocalypse onto Algeria through both prolepsis and analepsis. This temporal manipulation of narrative structure is also reflected in the novel's reworking of the classical Arabic genre of the *Rihla*, or 'journey novel', here recast as a contracted journey to hell. [2]

The picture of the inhabitants of Constantine swarming 'like flies' on Shaykh Boularwah's car is an allusion to the Day of Resurrection described in the Qur'an. So self-righteous and pious does Shaykh Boularwah consider himself that it is his car that serves as the symbolic object to deliver the people from their sins and grant them eternal life. On the Day of Judgement, the dead people in the graves will be called out by God to account for their actions. There will be huge numbers of the dead, swarming out like locusts. According to the Qur'an, "They shall come out of the graves with downcast eyes like locusts scattered abroad." (Qur'an 54:7) This is the picture Shaykh Boularwah has in mind when traversing the streets of Constantine. In his view, all the inhabitants of Constantine, ranging from street vendors, child shoe-shiners and food sellers to soothsayers, are all sinners except people like

himself. And so on the Day of Resurrection the souls of all these people will be scattered like locust in search of deliverance and eternal life. It is religious and pious people like Shaykh Boularwah, whose car is here a symbol and epitome of piety, that the sinful people of Constantine will run to for intercession in order to enter God's promised holy kingdom. Shaykh Boularwah has so much contempt for the ordinary masses of Constantine that he does not want to mix with them: "They left their villages and deserts and invaded our city. They filled every inch of it until there wasn't any space left to breathe. They've sucked up all the air and left in its place the stench of their armpits." (*The Earthquake*, 28) So incensed is he at the overcrowding and what he calls 'debasement' of the city that he advocates a seclusion policy by which the unholy and defiled masses would be allocated their own quarter, separate from those of the spiritually upright and pious people like himself and the other spiritual scholars he holds in high esteem, such as Shaykh Ibn Badis. In his words, "They [the government] should put up a wall here like the Berlin Wall to keep everyone in his place." (*The Earthquake*, 52) Boularwah cannot stand all these 'invaders' who fill the air and space, and contaminate the pure past of Constantine with impiety, corruption and debauchery. The reference to the Berlin Wall tells of the barrier Shaykh Boularwah wants created, a massive barrier that will prevent people from the rural areas migrating to the cities, and in this case Constantine.

Reference to the earthquake of suffering and doom as anticipated by Shaykh Boularwah in his Qur'anic expletives run through the novel. During the Friday prayer that Boularwah attends immediately upon arriving in Constantine, the sermon is on the Qur'anic description of the Earthquake of Doom:

> 'Every suckling female will forget her suckling, and every pregnant female will discharge her burden, and you will see men drunk, yet it will not be in intoxication.' There will be disorientation, confusion, restlessness and the feeling of a dark shadow invading men's souls. This is how Almighty God has described the condition at the

> end of time, and he has used the earthquake to illustrate how that final hour will come. [3]

The Imam uses the images of destruction and upheaval to describe the moral implications of the end of time. The Imam invokes the Qur'anic metaphoric use of the earthquake to describe a more spiritual and psychological experience. It is Shaykh Boularwah who interprets the passage literally and envisions an actual earthquake destroying Algeria due to the 'backward' policies being implemented by its political leaders and the debasement practiced by the masses. Even though Boularwah interprets the earthquake physically, he himself experiences it physically, spiritually and ethically as precisely a darkness invading his soul. Boularwah complains of a viscous liquid that spreads throughout his body: "The dark shadow was moving inside him. That viscous fluid was melting. It was getting hotter. He was growing weak in the knees. His neck was getting stiff and his head was pounding. He felt an enormous weight on his shoulders." (*The Earthquake*, 87) At times such as these, Boularwah enters an epileptic-like trance and is mostly driven to violent thoughts and actions.

In accordance with *The Earthquake*'s eschatological register, the novel uses the grotesque to reconfigure Algeria both symbolically and materially. While Boularwah manipulates religious discourse to serve his own personal and financial interests, it is ultimately the Qur'anic *sura* (a chapter of the Qur'an) that turns on him. The Day of Judgement forces Shaykh Boularwah to confront his past and, ultimately, be defeated by his former indiscretions, both ethical and religious.

Closely connected to the suffering and pain that will be experienced on the Day of Judgement on the part of the 'sinful' inhabitants of Constantine as captured in the Imam's sermon (to which Shaykh Boularwah subscribes and agrees totally with), is the poverty and squalor of the majority of Constantine's inhabitants. Every nook and cranny of the city shows signs of economic decline and how the masses struggle to make ends meet:

> 'All year long hordes of people who live in the caves, old people, middle-aged, youngsters, men and women, swarm around the Boulfarayis dump and rummage through the garbage. They pick out bones that people throw away and make soup out of them. It's a whole other world out there, with its own network of merchants, middle-men and gang leaders. They have their own laws and security system, set up by people who don't even wear shoes.' [4]

People cannot find decent housing and so they live in 'caves'; 'old people, middle-aged, youngsters, men and women.' These people are reduced to scavengers roaming rubbish dumps just to find food. Left-overs are what they are forced to survive on. As a result of the prevailing stifling conditions people have had to adapt and make the best of it. And so these suffocating conditions under which a majority of the inhabitants of Constantine live become breeding grounds for 'gang leaders' who fashion out their own rules and regulations. According to Shaykh Boularwah, "in fact, the city has been turned upside down" (*The Earthquake*, 27), and everything has changed. *The Earthquake* is a journey which leaves behind what Algeria used to be before independence from France in 1962 and leads readers through the alleys where poverty and affluence, French and Arabic, Islam and socialism, Europe and the Arab world battle for supremacy and triumph. Although the colonizer has left, the postcolonial reality seems to undergo other forms of colonization which perpetrate disenchanted feelings and suggest the idea of history as a recurring cycle, "and here we are now beginning and ending once again." (*The Earthquake*, 81) "The masses are suffocating. They feel great distress" (*The Earthquake*, 40), just like in the days of French colonial rule. Wattar testifies to the political, cultural, and more importantly, the economic changes that the Algerian society is going through in his crisp descriptions of squalor and death.

In the view of Shaykh Boularwah, the postcolonial economic problems facing Algeria can be blamed on the masses and Algeria's political leaders (described by him as "that government of atheists and heretics", *The Earthquake*, 37), who have failed to listen to the wise counsel of God and pious people like himself; wise counsel to the effect that "private property is

guaranteed to us in the holy Qur'an. People are content with their lot in life, satisfied with the blessings God has apportioned to them, except that they blindly rush to the Day of Judgement." (*The Earthquake*, 28) In other words, what Shaykh Boularwah advocates is that the poor accept the condition in which they find themselves while the government on its part should not try to equitably distribute the country's resources among the whole populace by confiscating the property of rich and affluent people like himself. In the eyes of Shaykh Boularwah, if this should happen there will be unrest within the populace and the city would be 'turned upside down.' This would lead to looting, and ironically, eventual economic deprivation. In one of his internal monologues, Shaykh Boularwah prescribes a solution to the economic woes of Algeria in response to the loud cries of an old townsman for a purge of the city:

> He says that they left the villages and deserts and invaded the city. What does he expect them to do in the villages and deserts? Did they descend upon people's property and seize it from them? It's true that they're lazy and no longer satisfied with working the land. But they came to the city so that the government would give them jobs. The government has to build factories for them and put them to work. Or at least they should send them abroad, allow them to leave, something that has become more and more difficult of late. Instead of taking care of these people, the government decided to preoccupy itself with pious people to whom God has bequeathed His land. [5]

It is clear from the above passage how selfish Shaykh Boularwah is. He claims to be sympathetic to the plight of the people who have migrated from the countryside to the city in search of non-existent jobs but is not willing to share his property with them. Shaykh Boularwah's series of rhetorical questions tell of his hypocrisy at pretending to be concerned with the plight of the common masses. According to him either the government finds them jobs or they be sent abroad to fend for themselves. Shaykh Boularwah's anti-government position contrasts with what, at first glance, seems to be Wattar's support of the socialist reforms. However, as one continues with the reading of the novel, it becomes clear that

Wattar's support of the state policy of confiscation and redistribution of land to peasants and poor families is only a facade behind which a sharp critique is hidden. Wattar criticizes the double standards exhibited by the political leaders of Algeria: they continue to live in wealth and luxury while paying lip service to the majority of the Algerian populace. He agrees with Shaykh Boularwah that the socialist policy of the government is superficial. Boularwah cannot but curse the "damned government of atheists and heretics" (*The Earthquake,* 37) since he sees his personal interests challenged by the radicalism of the agrarian reforms that will not benefit ordinary citizens as it is meant to but rather increase the wealth of selfish politicians. He firmly believes that "they've [the government] gone too far. They deceived us. At first they introduced socialism with simple slogans, but then they started to take it more literally until it became a word which had to mean something." (*The Earthquake*, 27) Socialism implied the control of state resources by the government in the interest of society, of state ownership and direction of production as well as the equitable distribution of income and the provision of social services. This lofty ideal is however mere rhetoric as the masses continue to wallow in poverty while those at the helm of affairs continue to enrich themselves.

It is ironic that one of the first signs to attract Shaykh Boularwah's attention is the fact that Constantine is an agricultural city. In the midst of this "greenness" (*The Earthquake*, 26) and so-called agrarian and 'Agricultural Revolution,' however, is poverty and squalor. Shaykh Boularwah finds himself looking at:

> The odd-shaped granary, built for the sole purpose of serving as some everlasting proof that the city was first and foremost an agricultural centre. Perhaps its builders meant to remind the citizens that there existed storage space for wheat and barley, and that if they ever found themselves under a prolonged state of siege they would not die of starvation. [6]

In spite of the availability of 'storage space for wheat and barley', Constantine's inhabitants, though not 'under a prolonged state of siege', 'die of starvation.' The sheer number of beggars at the entrance to the Grand Mosque tells of how people cannot feed and fend for themselves. These beggars "stood in a row against the wall" (*The Earthquake*, 29) and peer into Shaykh Boularwah's face as if he is the messiah to deliver them of all their problems and needs. Shaykh Boularwah, however, pushes and shoves them away in order to make his way to the mosque. He bursts out in anger: "God help us! What a disaster! Where did they all come from? Why don't you all go back to your villages and deserts?" (*The Earthquake*, 30) These beggars had migrated to the city because they believed there was plenty to eat and support their families with. Their hopes are dashed, however, as they find out that their glorified 'agricultural centre' of Constantine, a place where they could eat to their satisfaction and find better paying jobs that could support their families, is rather a rock that "will bring us all down." (*The Earthquake*, 43) So crowded and unstructured is Constantine, a place where "the sense of smell overwhelms all other senses. You are assaulted by one odour or another with every step, every glance and every breath you take. It's usually an obnoxious odour that grates on your nerves and weighs heavily on your heart" (*The Earthquake*, 25), where humans and vehicles struggle to fit onto 'narrow sidewalks', where the voices of beggars drone in people's ears while the stench of their dirty bodies assault people's noses that, "at any moment the rock will announce its own way that it is no longer able to support all of us." (*The Earthquake*, 43) There is no hope that Constantine can fend for its numerous inhabitants, despite the radical agrarian reforms embarked on by the government and the "everlasting proof that the city was first and foremost an agricultural centre." (*The Earthquake*, 26)

Postcolonial Algeria faced a number of challenges in terms of its internal reorganization after one hundred and thirty (130) years of French colonial rule: economic policies needed to be

restructured, as well as a national and cultural identity created. What Wattar does in *The Earthquake* is to put literature to mimetic use to reflect a critical period of development in Algeria's history as an independent state. In *The Earthquake*, just like in Algeria's real history as a state, political leaders have not helped much; and this a continuing trend, leading to the current wave of unrest sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East.

General Houari Boumedienne became President of the Republic of Algeria in 1965 after overthrowing the weakened presidency of Ahmed Ben Bella (1962-1965). President Boumedienne began an active economic plan of state capitalism. The Government invested in the development of the urban and industrial sectors of the economy by using petroleum revenues to finance an industrial revolution. In 1971 Boumedienne embarked on a reform of the agricultural private sector which meant that the overwhelming majority of French estates abandoned after the war for independence came under state control. The reform implied the redistribution of these lands to peasants organised in production cooperatives. [7] Obviously this programme was largely unwelcome by the landowners—described in *The Earthquake* as 'backward looking, exploitative, corrupt, selfish, morally depraved, and anti-nationalist.' Thus the goal of landowners like Shaykh Boularwah is to prevent the government from taking away their estates. According to Shaykh Boularwah, "If the government wants to give people some land, then it should raze these mountains and divide the land among them. What good is it to be friends with the Russians if they can't level the mountains and build dams on them?" (*The Earthquake*, 58) Obviously, Shaykh Boularwah is against the government taking his land and giving it to some "herders, sharecroppers, woodcutters and coal miners." (*The Earthquake*, 39) He would rather prefer that virgin mountainous land is exploited for the benefit of the masses. The mention of 'the Russians' brings to mind the Soviet-influenced economic policies of the Ben Bella administration. The cycle of poverty that still prevails among the common masses of Algerians, whether in the forlorn rural areas or the more

developed and industrialized urban centres, tells of the failure of successive governments to improve their poor living conditions.

According to Wikipedia, there have been a number of protests in Algeria by the masses, led by organized groups, against the government's handling of basic issues that affect their daily lives. The general 'Arab Spring' has taken its toll on Algeria. Between 2010 and 2012 there have been a series of protests and demonstrations taking place throughout Algeria. These protests and demonstrations started on 28th December, 2010. They have been inspired by similar protests across the Middle East and North Africa. Causes cited by the protesters include unemployment, lack of housing, food price inflation, government corruption, restrictions on freedom of speech and poor living conditions. While localised protests were already commonplace in previous years, extending into December 2010, an unprecedented wave of simultaneous protests and riots, sparked by sudden rises in staple food prices, erupted all over the country starting in January 2011. These were quelled by government measures to lower food prices, but were followed by a wave of self-immolations, most of them in front of government buildings. Opposition parties, unions, and human rights organizations then began to hold weekly demonstrations, despite these being illegal without government permission under the ongoing state of emergency; the government suppressed these demonstrations as far as possible, but in late February, 2011 yielded to pressure and lifted the state of emergency. Meanwhile, protests by unemployed youth, typically citing unemployment, *hogra* (oppression), and infrastructural problems, resumed, occurring almost daily in towns scattered all over the country. [8] These same issues suffered by the masses and their inability to continue in that path are what Wattar discusses at length in *The Earthquake.*

The suffering and pain predicted in the Earthquake of Doom as described in Qur'an 22:1-2, "Every suckling female will forget her suckling, and every female will discharge her burden,

and you will see men drunk, yet it will not be in intoxication" (*The Earthquake*, 33), is what is currently being witnessed by majority of Algerians as a result of failed political and social leadership that stretches across the Arabian Peninsula. The current political upheavals in North Africa and the Middle Ease can therefore be said to be prophetic since they had been foretold long ago. The masses in Algeria and most Arab countries continue to suffer under the iron fists of dictatorial governments with no hope of better living conditions in the near future. They live like second class citizens in their own countries while a minority few continue to enjoy the abundant oil wealth and other resources of the country. And the citizens cannot speak out against their various governments since they will be brutally suppressed. Shaykh Boularwah seems to suggest that the order of the city of Constantine during French colonial rule, the scent of the European and Jewish girls, the peace and quiet after the hustle and bustle, offered a sense of security and certainty which actually gave way after independence to chaos, poverty, and pungent smells that consequently provide feelings of anxiety, confusion, and malaise. Shaykh Boularwah's apocalyptical vision of the earthquake as a physical destructive force that is coming to establish an old-new order is in contrast with the novel's interpretation of the Qur'anic verse, an interpretation conversely much closer to the original meaning as thought of in the Qur'an that sees the earthquake as an internal turmoil, which takes possession of every individual's soul: "The real earthquake is something everyone will feel." (*The Earthquake*, 43) Shaykh Boularwah's literal interpretation of the Qur'anic text shows how he hopes to benefit from the total annihilation of all the people he considers "sheep herders, sharecroppers, woodcutters and coal miners", political leaders making up a crust of that group. According to Shaykh Boularwah, a new nation of pious and religious people like himself will be rebuilt after the Earthquake of Doom has done its part; a new nation "populated only by us, the noble classes, people of good stock." (*The Earthquake*, 116) Though Shaykh Boularwah is a member of the Islamic religious establishment, he is

nonetheless a hypocrite who uses Islam to justify class difference, property ownership and the exploitation of the poor and needy around him. He wants everyone exterminated: "Get rid of the government, the poor people, the workers, students and unionists. Rebuild a new nation, populated only by us, the noble classes, people of good stock." (*The Earthquake*, 116) It is ironic that Shaykh Boularwah, who has a heart as dark as the government he seeks to destroy, can hope to rebuild a new Algerian nation where there will be an equal distribution of state resources.

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The Earthquake's eschatological register ties in with a destructive representation of Constantine, and in effect Algeria, as a site of suffering, ruin, decay, sacrifice and death. Boularwah's account of the goings on in Constantine is highly fragmented and alternates between dialogue, within himself and with others, stream of consciousness, memories, and hallucinations. This is further interrupted by the frequent intrusion of voices representing the masses of Algerian society. The novel's constant shifts between speakers, past and present, as well as reality and fantasy, generate a disorienting narrative structure. Shaykh Boularwah paints a glowing picture of the past, a past devoid of confusion, and wishes that destruction befalls the current citizens of Constantine whom he perceives as a nuisance. This disorienting narrative structure mimics the Algerian society. In the course of Shaykh Boularwah's one-day journey, he comes across a number of different people speaking at the same time and saying totally different things. This makes Shaykh Boularwah dizzy and wonder whether the end of time has not come:

> At one end you can hear Ferghani singing and at the other Umm Kulsoum. Across the way you can hear a religious sermon on the radio. Close by is the voice of Issa Jarmouni and a few steps away Faraid al-Atrash. In the midst of all is the sound of: *This is London*. And a cacophony of odours fills the air...hands are outstretched, tongues wagging, bodies rock back and forth, but the feet are not moving. [9]

So bewildering and confusing has the Algerian society become that at any one point in time so many things happen to the extent that one is thrown overboard:

> Someone came along and shoved Shaykh Boularwah with his shoulder and pushed him off the narrow sidewalk. At that moment a car came to a screeching halt as the driver slammed on his brakes and shouted at him in anger. A succession of screeching tires followed, along with the thumping of scraping fenders. People began to gather and children started to yell and scream. [10]

Shaykh Boularwah finds himself lost in a city he has not visited for more than a decade. The hustle and bustle forces him to curse the city and pray for total destruction to befall it. It is little wonder therefore that the 'upside down' nature of Constantine does not permit Shaykh Boularwah to think straight. He seems to be different people fused into one; at one moment he is having an inward dialogue with himself, at another time he is thinking aloud. Yet at other times he is hurling curses and is mixed up in the polyphony of voices of Constantine's inhabitants going and coming.

Again, the movement between first person and second person narrations tell of how Shaykh Boularwah is thrust into a world he does not understand due to the fact that he has lost track of time and space. Starting with the second person narrative point of view, the novel travels through to the first person narrator: "The sense of smell overwhelms all other senses in Constantine. You are assaulted by one odour or another with every step, every glance and every breath you take." (*The Earthquake*, 25) The first person narrator tells us exactly what Shaykh Boularwah is thinking about upon his arrival in Constantine: "All these people, all these cars moving about all at once. I nearly forgot what life is like in Constantine." (*The Earthquake,* 25) Finally on a personal level, Shaykh Boularwah shares his difficulties at finding a parking space: "And here I am, finally, after I nearly had to abandon my car in the middle of the street." (*The Earthquake,* 26) These various extracts give a vivid picture of the unstructured nature of the narrative, and by extension Algeria. Like Boularwah's confused

consciousness, the city of Constantine occupies a threshold past-future temporality; a past-future temporality due to the quick changes that have taken place in the city, in the opinion of Shaykh Boularwah, and the fact that he finds it difficult to live in the present time but rather prefers to live in the past.

Furthermore, engaging with the long history of travel writing (*Rihlah*) in the Arabic literary tradition, *The Earthquake* uses geography and time to re-orient social, historical and political ideologies. In addition to Shaykh Boularwah's journey from Algiers to Constantine being a *rihlah* or a voyage, it also figures as a *Hijrah* (the Prophet Mohammed's flight with his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622BC due to persecution). Indeed Wattar re-signifies the Qur'anic *sura*, demonstrating Shaykh Boularwah's spiritual journey as one towards religious disillusionment rather than enlightenment. Constantine, the urban backdrop of Shaykh Boularwah's *Hijrah*, provides the ideal setting for *The Earthquake*'s apocalyptic unfolding. In the novel, Constantine is suspended between unfulfilled dreams of colonial grandeur and the harsh reality of post-revolutionary contradiction, as the promise of modernity has been replaced by the destruction of the very idea of a future: "This is what happens to every netherworld. It deteriorates, crumbles and dissolves, until nothing of it remains except its lowliness." (*The Earthquake*, 109) Structured over seven chapters, each named after one of Constantine's bridges, the novel's temporality mirrors the spatiality of the city. Relics of the French colonial past, the architecturally impressive suspension bridges were constructed as part of the French geo-political domination of Algeria. The bridges function as physical signposts along the way to Constantine's foretold demise. Beginning with Bab al-Qantara (The Bridge at Qantara Gate), the reader then moves to Sidi M'sid (The Sidi M'sid Bridge), Sidi Rashid (The Bridge at Sidi Rashid), Majaz al-Ghanam (The Bridge at Flock Crossing), Jisr al-Mis'ad (The Elevator Bridge), Jisr al-Shayatin (Demons' Bridge), and finally Jisr al-Hawa (The Bridge of the Abyss). The successive movement across these

threshold bridges mirrors the eschatological overtones of the novel, which ends with the psychotic breakdown of Shaykh Boularwah and the possible demise of the city of Constantine. [11]

With an almost ethnographic focus on identifying phenotypes and dialects, Boularwah criticizes the hybridization of the city and interprets it as a sign of the coming apocalypse:

> The faces are all different in Constantine. Facial features vary from one person to another, as do people's physiques. At the time of the occupation, people looked either European or Arab, but not now. Today, you can tell the difference between the Shawi Berber from Ain Baida or Ain M'lila, from Banta, Khanshala or Shalghoum al-Id. You can tell who is from Fajj M'zala, Milia of Collo, or from Skikda, Zenah and Azzaba. Their facial features, like their odours, reveal their true identities in loud screams that echo throughout the city. [12]

Boularwah's recent awareness of Constantine's diversity reveals a reality previously occluded, at least for him, by the racial dynamics of French imperialism; Algeria is not simply 'Arab.' His emphasis on the ethnic diversity of the Imazighen (Tahir Wattar was born to an Amazigh [singular of Imazighen] family in Sedrata in eastern Algeria) not only demonstrates the heterogeneity of Algeria's 'Berber' populations, but also their increased presence throughout the country. While Boularwah's surprise exposes his own perceptual blindness, it also reflects the evolving social and economic realities of post-revolutionary Algeria, fuelled in large part by socialist policies that nationalized and centralized industrial and agricultural development. [13]

Wattar's satirical portrayal of Shaykh Boularwah's inability to reconcile himself with post-revolutionary Algerian socialism calls into question the complicity of the religious elite in defiling Algerian national identity. More crucially, *The Earthquake*'s use of eschatological symbolisms allows Wattar to critique these modes of thinking from within the very discourses themselves. Through the novel's complex reworking of the Qur'an, Arabic and Islam, Wattar seems to be proposing a more nuanced vision of the role of Islam and Arabic in

post-independence Algeria. To illustrate this argument, in the passage below, Shaykh Boularwah explains Constantine's fate as the epicentre of the Earthquake of Doom by invoking the country's repeated occupations:

> Maybe that's the history of the city from the first day. It ended with the Berbers and started with the Romans. It continued beginning and ending between Berbers and Romans and other peoples until the Arabs came. The city resumed its history with them until the Turks arrived. It went on like that until the French landed. And here we are now beginning and ending once again. The earthquake which is going to be the demise of this whore of a city hasn't come yet. When it does, it will do so with a vengeance and will take revenge against its sordid past. [14]

The emphasis on Algeria's cyclical colonial occupations touches on the temporal manipulations of the eschatological framework.

Shaykh Boularwah's attempts at preventing the government from nationalizing his land shows how greedy he is, just like the political leaders willing to pursue their so-called agrarian reforms, reforms that do not benefit the intended target in any way. According to Shaykh Boularwah: "What I intend to do, at least on paper, is divide my property among my heirs, so that if they [the government] come to confiscate it, they won't find very much in my possession." (*The Earthquake,* 41) With such negative thoughts and show of avarice, Shaykh Boularwah still holds himself as a very pious and notable religious scholar whose place is God's promised Paradise. As a religious scholar who keeps on muttering and confessing to himself that "there is no power or strength save in God!" (*The Earthquake*, 35), the plight of the destitute and suffering masses should be his concern since he happens to be blessed with 'private property guaranteed to [him] in the holy Qur'an', God's Holy Scriptures. So vast is the amount of land owned by Shaykh Boularwah that if he cared about the plight of the suffering masses he would have at least given out part of it to them. He himself testifies to the vastness of his land. According to him, "the problem is somewhat more complicated. It's a question of how much property there is. I own more than seven thousand acres." (*The*

Earthquake, 41) In other words he could have given out some land and still have large tracts left. It is ironic that it is only when 'danger' is looming, in the words of Shaykh Boularwah, that he looks to "track down my relatives" (*The Earthquake*, 41) in order to bequeath his land to them. These are the same relatives he neglected to take care of when they came to him for help in their hour of need: Ammar, his brother-in-law, who came to him for financial help to set up a barber's shop was blatantly denied any help and rather shown the exit: "Listen, isn't it enough that I feed your sister? I never want to see you here again. Get away from me! You only bring bad luck!" (*The Earthquake*, 59) What has changed now to make such a relative the bringer of 'good luck' by Shaykh Boularwah hoping to bequeath part of his land to him? The question to ponder over therefore is whether Shaykh Boularwah will not go back for his land from his 'alive or dead' relative once he has managed to elude the government since he confesses himself that all that he is seeking to do is only a 'scheme' intended "to convince them [relatives] to help me." (*The Earthquake*, 41) After he gets the needed help from his relatives it is possible he may abandon them just as he had done in the past. Shaykh Boularwah is no different from the politicians seeking to take his property away from him because in the end they are the same people who will benefit from it and not the general Algerian populace who put them in power in the first place, and whose needs they are supposed to see to.

It is significant to note that the revolutionary ideals fought for by the founding fathers of Algeria for independence died immediately after independence was attained. Once Algeria won independence, attention had to be necessarily turned to the internal turmoil and reality of deep cracks of dissatisfaction within the society. The values and aspirations that united all Algerian bodies into one soul during the war for independence became meaningless and had to be replaced with new definitions of the self. Tahir Wattar belongs to the generation of Algerians who struggle for survival in the years immediately following independence. His

writing portrays a country characterized by chaos. In the author's preface to *The Earthquake*, Wattar states that:

> My work is the product of a cultural dynamic within a certain area of the Arab world which has been, to some degree or another, exposed to the winds of an era which at times carried the seeds of life and, at other times, took those seeds away and replaced them with the seeds of death. [15]

Though Wattar does not explain exactly what he means, it is likely that what he has in mind when he says 'the seeds of life' and 'the seeds of death' is the positive values and aspirations which Algerians fought for, and which were implemented for a short time immediately after independence, and the current state of suffering and dissatisfaction being experienced by majority of Algerians. While those at the helm of affairs have taken the position of the colonizer and are enjoying the resources of the country and enriching themselves as the colonizer did, the majority of the population have to battle with poor living conditions and suffer as second class citizens in their own country.

The choice of the city of Constantine as the setting for *The Earthquake* is quite successful. Constantine becomes a city unveiled, surrendering to readers' eyes by disclosing the inherent contradictions of a world 'turned upside down.' Constantine, overcrowded by half a million people who sit on "top of this great big rock" (*The Earthquake*, 28), shows all the signs of failed political leadership. The rural areas and villages have all been deserted for Constantine and yet Algeria's political leaders have not put social and other amenities in place to cater for the needs of the thousands of inhabitants flooding the city.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that *The Earthquake* chronicles Algeria's post-colonial reality. While Boularwah's criticisms of Algerian socialism are largely inspired by his material self-interest (just like the people implementing the so-called socialist policy), they also reveal the contradictory logic of the new state. *The Earthquake* highlights the incongruity of post-revolutionary socialist rhetoric and reforms with the reality of the

country's rampant capitalism, leading to excessive poverty on the part of the common masses.

Through its mapping of eschatology onto Algeria, *The Earthquake* creates an eerily fragmented temporality of Algerian national history. The apocalypse unfolds in its narrative, recounting the physical chaos of the city of Constantine, the moral corruption of its inhabitants, but most crucially in Shaykh Boularwah's own psyche. However, Wattar's novel is unique in that it does more than simply demonstrate a site of postcolonial disillusionment through the fractured consciousness of its narrator. Rather, it transforms the traditional form of allegory, whereby the personal narrative serves to explicate a larger national agenda. Wattar presents the national narrative—the postcolonial destruction of Algeria due to failed political and social leadership—as symptomatic of the personal narrative—Shaykh Boularwah's psychotic breakdown. Furthermore, the novel's constant shifts in time, speakers, and states of consciousness deliberately disrupt the concepts of linear narrative form, temporal and spatial continuity.

Finally, the reading of Wattar's *The Earthquake* in 21st century modern Africa offers insights into the 1970s Algeria not different from the Algeria of 2012. Four decades after its first publication, the novel seems to be a forewarning of what is actually taking place in Algeria today. It discusses the dilemma in the Arab world on two levels: private and public. On one level, we follow the protagonist, Shaykh Abdelmajid Boularwah's return to a changed Constantine, one that seems to have been struck by an earthquake. Shaykh Boularwah comes back to divide his property among his heirs, at least on paper, to avoid confiscation by the government. On another level, there is a change in the public sphere brought about by a new state establishment that preaches socialism and agricultural reform, while this newly constructed social order stinks with contradictions. Shaykh Boularwah's journey through

Constantine is symbolic of a spiritual journey. His movement throughout the transformed city ignites parallel shifts of consciousness at significant moments, evoking significant events that have had a lasting impact on Algerian history. The alternating movement between past and present previews a devastating future. The aftermath becomes fully clear with Boularwah's end bearing a multiple signification. Although the implied narrator of *The Earthquake* alludes to Shaykh Boularwah's fallen world, the narrative ironically forewarns of an imminent danger left by Boularwah and his disciples. The Earthquake launches a strong criticism against the Algerian nation, debunking the corrupt institutions that have contaminated its positive achievements.

In Algeria currently, disaster looms. The nation lives in the aftermath of a devastating series of demonstrations and protests whose causes erupted along the narrative flow of the novel, a novel that predicts a great downfall, extinguishing all forms of oppression and advocating democracy and justice. While Shaykh Boularwah is defeated by the earthquake of progressive change, the present generation of Algerians suffer the chaos of so-called socialist ideals.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 26

[2]The root word *Rahala*, from which the word *Rihla* is derived, was originally associated with camel husbandry. A *rahl* is a camel saddle. The word *Rihla* thus connoted the act of saddling one or more camels and, by extension, a journey or voyage.<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/rihla-SIM_6298?s.num=o&s.start=20. 9 January 2013>

[3]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 33

[4]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 66

[5]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 29

[6]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 26

[7]Harrold, D. "The Menace and Appeal of Algeria's Parallel Economy," in *Middle East Report*, No. 192, "Algeria: Islam, the State and the Politics of Eradication (Jan.-Feb. 1995)" 1995. pp 18-22

[8]http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010-2012_Algeria_protests#section_1. 15 June 2012

[9]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. Pp. 88-89

[10]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 28

[11]Information contained in this paragraph was culled from *Walls of Algiers: Narratives of the City Through Text and Images*. eds. Zeynap Celik, Julia Clancy-Smith & Francis Terpak. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2009.

[12]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 29

[13]James McDougall. "Myth and Counter-Myth: 'The Berber' as National Signifier in Algerian Historiographies" in *Radical History Review*. Issue 86 (Spring 2003)

[14]Tahir Wattar. *The Earthquake*. London: Saqi Books, 2000. p 81

[15] Author's Preface

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CONCLUSION

Literature is an important but often neglected resource for the study of the social and political life of Arabic, and generally, world literature. This non-conventional resource provides a counter view to official state history. Literature in modern North African states has always been affected by politics. The last forty years have taught literary critics not to make a distinction between literature and history. North African authors have developed literary strategies to produce a literature that is not directly confrontational, but that remains artistically aggressive in its commentary on the social and political life of its citizens. In recent decades rising living standards and literacy rates have resulted in an improved human development index in a number of North African and Middle Eastern countries. The tension between rising aspirations and a lack of government reform has attracted the attention of fiction writers of the various individual countries. Citizens of these countries have suffered so many atrocities under autocratic regimes. This has led to the outburst of a literature highly critical of the social and political chasms in most North African countries, beginning with the writings of Naguib Mahfouz in the early 1950's.

In this thesis, the main aim of the writer has been to prove first and foremost that North African literature does not exist in a vacuum, but can be put to mimetic effect. In other words, the writings of the authors under question, that is, Hisham Matar in *In the Country of Men*, Naguib Mahfouz in *Autumn Quail*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi in *Memory in the Flesh* and Tahir Wattar in *The Earthquake*, mirror the goings-on in their various societies; and more importantly, the issues discussed in these novels have a direct correlation to the issues underpinning and triggering the larger 'Arab Spring' currently being witnessed across North Africa and the Middle East. Again, the writer has shown that the current wave of protests across the Arabian Peninsula has been the culmination of deep-seated causes that have been

prevalent in the various countries affected by the 'Arab Spring' for decades; these deep-seated causes triggering the current protests have been extensively written on and discussed by Arab writers in times past. However, these works that have now turned prophetic have not been given the needed recognition possibly because they were regarded as mere fiction. It has now become clear that they are not mere fiction but classic works of art that have an important place in the development and advancement of the various societies they sought to portray.

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These works of art give a vivid picture of what is going on in various Arab countries whose citizens have been stifled and suppressed for decades; and if people, especially, the political elite and social commentators had taken time to ponder over the myriad of issues discussed in these literary works, we probably would not have gotten to this stage where the common masses of most North African and Middle Eastern countries have taken matters into their own hands by revolting and demanding a fair share of national resources. Furthermore the thesis has shown that the current path being plied by the citizens of the various countries affected by the 'Arab Spring' is a process that may take some time to bear fruits. Demands by disenchanted citizens for an end to dictatorship, human rights violations, government corruption and cronyism, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty, poor social housing and rising food prices would not happen overnight. It is a long struggle that would demand perseverance and a strong will in order to overhaul systems that have been in place for decades. This picture is clear in countries like Libya, where even though there has been a change in government, the people are still not satisfied with the governance style of the new government; there are still daily protests and a demand for sufficient transparency in the distribution of state resources, a minimization of government spending, better food security and a limitation of the sweeping powers of the military to prevent arbitrary harassment of citizens.

Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* is a striking novel. While set within the highly charged political landscape of Libya in the late 1970's (the setting of the author's own early childhood), the story's narrator is a young boy still preoccupied with games, just beginning to open his eyes to the possibility of love, and misinterpreting, what it means to be a man. By constructing the novel around an interplay of innocence and corruption, the author is able to start a discussion about duality, addressing both the light and dark elements of humanity and exploring a range of topics such as freedom and identity, justice and injustice, loyalty and betrayal, exile and identity, suppression, torture, addiction and the nature of truth, issues that are no different from those underpinning the current wave of protests across North Africa and the Middle East. Though Matar insists his work is not a purely political novel, politics plays a major role in the daily lives of the characters. Whether as a housewife taking care of the home or a political fugitive trying to clandestinely overthrow the ruling regime, the interplay of power has a lasting impact on the very existence of characters in *In the Country of Men*. Najwa's peculiar situation of being dominated by the men in her life actually mirrors the larger Libyan society where people like Faraj Bu Suleiman el-Dewani and Ustath Rashid are powerless in the face of a brutal and repressive political regime. While Najwa takes a sedative in the form of grappa to calm her nerves and be able to survive the absence of a husband she has been socialized to depend on with her own whole being, Faraj, Ustath Rashid and like-minded people who are not in agreement with the style of governance of the ruling government have to keep their activities veiled in secrecy, just like the opposition in Libyan politics was for a long time suppressed in a brutal erstwhile Gaddafi regime.

Naguib Mahfouz has contributed to modern Arabic fiction in a significant way unmatched by any other writer. *Autumn Quail* is a perfect example of a novel that chronicles an important phase in Egypt's history as a developing nation. Based on actual historical events and place names, the novel gives a chronological account of events leading to the 1952 Egyptian

Revolution, the revolution itself, and events immediately following the revolution. The opening of the novel, the famous 'Cairo Fires' following the trouble in the Suez canal, that is, the massacre of Egyptian police, is vividly portrayed. This vivid description lends credence to how Mahfouz is able to bridge the gap between history and literature in the novel. The real issues leading to the 1952 revolution are what are currently repeating themselves in the present revolts and protests in Egypt and other North African as well as Middle Eastern countries: government corruption, embezzlement of public funds, autocratic governments, a wide gap between the rich and the poor in society, inadequate social amenities, and more importantly governments that have been in place for decades and taken the welfare of the citizenry for granted. Isa's fate is a forewarning to all corrupt public officials in most Arab regimes. We see an instant of this forewarning when Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign on 11th February, 2011 after eighteen (18) days of massive protests, ending his thirty-year presidency.

Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* is the first novel written by an Algerian woman in Arabic. It is a novel that gives deep insights to Algeria's struggle to liberate itself from French colonial rule and the attempts at fashioning a native form of governance. Building a nation proves an uphill task after decades of entrenched French colonial rule. Mosteghanemi's novel details how the Algerian nation feels betrayed by their political leaders due to the substitution of post-revolutionary ideals and aspirations for selfish parochial interests on the part of these leaders. The subject of betrayal is one that underlies the current 'Arab Spring.' What a majority of Arab peoples were promised by their governments is not what they are currently being given with regard to how their lives are ordered. Ideals and aspirations changed overnight once indigenous leaders took the place of the white man. The masses then seem to be moving about in circles in terms of the conditions under which they live since even under indigenous rule they are treated as second class

citizens and suppressed in every way possible. Hence disappointed intellectuals like Khalid look beyond national borders to avoid a fate of poverty, suppression, torture, unemployment and unfulfilled aspirations that befalls most Algerian citizens. Gradually, the dream of Algeria becomes a nightmare. Against this background, personal passions cannot be dissociated from national dreams: Hayat personifies an Algeria that is driven away from her revolutionary glory to its mundane concerns; and yet Mosteghanemi shows that beneath the formal breakdown of the ideals and values of the Algerian people, the revolutionary spark is still alive, symbolized in the unfulfilled love relation between the two protagonists, Khalid and Hayat.

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What Tahir Wattar does in *The Earthquake* is to revisit Algeria's postcolonial history by using symbolism and allegory to show the efforts made to form a national identity following Algeria's independence from France in 1962. While Wattar appears to support the nationalization policy implemented by the new government, he subtly evokes the downside of it, portraying in some instances the disappointment that reality delivered as compared to the ideal. Wattar tells the story of a regular raving Shaykh whose mind churns mostly around a seething hatred of the poor in society. Shaykh Boularwah wants to stop the wheel of change from taking place. *The Earthquake* presents a conventional figure who is an opponent of modernity. The changes affecting the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity are connected to the changing relation between the typical and the general, the typical being the nucleus generating the general. Shaykh Boularwah, characterized by typicality, becomes a general phenomenon in the Arab region. Four decades after its publication, the novel seems to be a forewarning of what is actually taking place at present, the 'Arab Spring.' In other words, the novel features the dilemma on the part of the political and religious elite in the Arab world to accept change or not.

It is clear from the discussion of the novels of the four Arab writers under study, that is, Hisham Matar in *In the Country of Men*, Naguib Mahfouz in *Autumn Quail*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi in *Memory in the Flesh* and Tahir Wattar in *The Earthquake*, that they all speak with a common voice. Their works are very relevant now as they give deep insights to the major causes of the current wave of demonstrations across the Arabian Peninsula that has come to be known as the 'Arab Spring.' The novels in question discuss pressing issues affecting their various Arab societies that seem to be prevailing even now, decades after they were published. What it means is that the issues talked about in these literary works have not been taken seriously by the general Arab populace, and especially those who shape public policy and hold power on behalf of the people; hence the existence of this thesis. The fact that the 'Arab Spring' happened in the streets through insurrections and riots by the common brass of the society leads some to underestimate the role played by writers and artists in unravelling the causes of the current 'Arab Spring.' This underestimation of the power of the writer's pen might be related to the lack of emphasis placed on literature in Arab society. But those writers who chose to denounce autocratic regimes and dictatorship in their works have contributed in one way or another to drawing attention to the reasons underpinning today's 'Arab Spring.'

Samuel Johnson once said that little things grew by continual accumulation. This is exactly what we are currently witnessing in the events leading up to the 'Arab Spring.' The pressing issues that matter to the Arab peoples, and which have not been addressed by those entrusted with power, but have instead been met with suppression and torture have led to pent-up emotions that have erupted in magnitudes unimagined previously, in the form we are currently witnessing in the unfolding larger 'Arab Spring.' The novels of the writers under study could be considered as the bricks that have led to the build-up of the current wave of revolutions sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East through the formation of

'revolutionary consciousness.' Again, the subject matter talked about in these novels seek to show that history is repeating itself in that these matters discussed are no different from the issues of dissatisfaction leading to the current 'Arab Spring.' It should be noted that in the years preceding this current wave of unrest within North Africa and the Middle East, some writers disseminated their ideas and some of their writings through blogs and other tools of social media, which were effective media in relaying their work and messages to the youth. The 'Arab Spring' will challenge the engaged writer because the path is still long. Writing the revolution is not just depicting scenes of confrontations with the police or depicting torture in prisons; it is also a painstaking journey that necessitates deeper thought, and deeper discourse.

This thesis hopes to draw attention to the rich corpus of Arabic literature that has existed for decades, and which details the various developments and happenings in the Arabic society in relation to the people's social and political life. In particular, this thesis has tried to investigate the literary connection between the novels under scrutiny and the current causes of the 'Arab Spring.' This is because the 'Arab Spring' is a phenomenon that has far-reaching implications for the rest of the world. The 'Arab Spring' is a phenomenon not only limited to the Arab world. It could have happened anywhere; and indeed it has had implications stretching beyond the borders of North Africa and the Middle East. In the countries of the neighbouring South Caucasus, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as some countries in Europe, including Albania, Croatia and Spain, countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Burkina Faso, Djibouti and Uganda, and countries in other parts of Asia, including the Maldives and the People's Republic of China, demonstrators and opposition figures claiming inspiration from the examples of Tunisia and Egypt have staged their own popular protests. The bid for statehood by Palestine at the United Nations (UN) on 23rd September, 2011 is also regarded as drawing inspiration from the 'Arab Spring' after years of failed

peace negotiations with Israel. Again, the 15th October, 2011 global protests and the Occupy Wall Street movement, which started in the United States and has since spread to Asia and Europe, drew direct inspiration from the 'Arab Spring', with organizers asking U.S. citizens, "Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?" The protesters have committed to using the 'revolutionary Arab Spring tactic' to achieve their goals of curbing corporate power and control in Western governments. (*Wikipedia.org/arabspring*)

It has been almost two years now since Mohammed Bouazizi, a twenty-six (26) year old Tunisian street vendor, started what has become known as the 'Arab Spring.' It was the final act of a despondent young man whose efforts to eke out a living for his family were thwarted by government officials at every turn. No one could have predicted that this desperate act would spark a mass uprising in Tunisia that would quickly spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Indeed, not since the European revolutions of 1848 had the world witnessed such spontaneous uprisings in so many countries, and such at a rapid pace.

It is not yet clear if the leadership that will emerge out of the current turmoil will represent a radical departure from the past. From what is currently going on, many of the candidates who have thus far come to the fore have links with the previous authoritarian regimes. It remains to be seen, of course, if those same individuals will ultimately hold power and, if so, whether they can break away from the habits of old as advocated by Hisham Matar, Naguib Mahfouz, Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Tahir Wattar in their individual novels.

Most worrying, perhaps, is the stance that the military establishments are likely to adopt in a number of Arab countries in which the bickering among various factions and parties threatens stability and keeps matters in a constant state of flux. The temptation for the military to intervene in such a setting (as we have seen in Egypt for example) to prevent a slide into chaos or public disorder may be hard to resist. What is also uncertain is how quickly the new

regimes can establish the requisite institutions for any society that wishes to embrace democratic norms and that aspires to political stability and economic growth. Chief among those are the judicial institutions whose independence and integrity are vital to the safeguarding of rights. Democracy entails far more than elections and votes.

With this background in mind, one can appreciate the enormity of the tasks that will confront the regimes that eventually assume control of the turbulent Arab states. The challenges will be even more daunting considering the tribal makeup of a number of these states. And in countries awash with arms, such as Libya, a long held desire for vengeance by one group against another will be difficult to check. Intimidating as these problems are, they nevertheless can, with patience, prudence, goodwill and astute leadership, be overcome. They require a commitment on the part of those in the transitional authorities to be compromising and accommodating in their efforts to attain national goals.

If there is a lesson to be learnt from the 'Arab Spring', it is that the winds of change that are now blowing in North Africa and the Middle East will eventually reach every Arab state and beyond. Now is therefore an opportune time, particularly for the Arab monarchical regimes such as Saudi Arabia, which still enjoy a considerable measure of public goodwill and legitimacy, to begin adopting measures that will bring about greater participation of the citizenry in their countries' political life.

For the 'Arab Spring' to acquire the status of genuineness, writers, artists and literary critics should demonstrate, by commenting and reviewing the rich body of Arabic literature, that for the series of revolutions sweeping across the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere to yield effective democratic change, it must be built on a solid base that takes into account the encouragement of free creativity and culture. The role of writers and intellectuals is to show that the series of revolutions is not an occasion to gloat in the toppling of the dictator, but

instead, it is a long path and a painstaking process that demands hard work. In doing so, the 'Arab Spring' and its aftermath will be a source for the creation of novel artistic forms.

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