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by

Radwa Mohamed El Barouni

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**Refashioning Language: Arabic Literature in the New Millennium**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Kristen Brustad

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Tarek El-Ariss

**Refashioning Language: Arabic Literature in the New Millennium**

**by**

**Radwa Mohamed El Barouni, B.A**

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## **Dedication**

To my Father who taught me the love of books, and my mother who taught me the most powerful thing of all and that is simply “to be”.

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I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Brustad for all of her guidance, support, and insights both on the academic and personal level. Your presence and what you have done for the field is inspiring.

## **Abstract**

### **Refashioning Language: Arabic Literature in the New Millennium**

Radwa Mohamed El Barouni, MA  
The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Kristen Brustad

In this paper I explore two contemporary Egyptian literary works, *Nisā' il-Karantīna* and the graphic novel *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq*, showing that the language varieties and registers that exist within them make the dualistic category of *Fuṣḥā* and *‘Ammiyyah* no longer sufficient. Using affective stance theory, I analyse the language and to what affect it is used in the novels, showing that the new millennium writers are refashioning a new poetics for the language that aims to unsettle previously held notions of power in all its guises, including the linguistic.

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## Introduction

For the language that the educated Arab speaks and the language that he writes are both his, and he does not divest himself of any essential of his personality when he uses the one or the other; but the one has peculiar associations with the familiar and the immediate and the everyday, and the other carries in its very inflections a reminder of the crowning achievements and conscious aspirations of his society. It is easier to be flippant in the one, to be articulately lofty in the other; it is possible to be human, wise, sincere, and elegant in either.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, “the language that the educated Arab speaks and the language that he writes are both his” and hers, as well as that of the not-so educated Arab and the non-native Arabic speaking and writing individual. This is applicable not only to the variety that is spoken and the variety which is written, but the whole spectrum, varieties and nuances that exist in between and which any living language entails and includes with varying degrees. Cachia, however, then goes on to discuss how particular domains are often associated more with one variety than the other, while not categorically ruling out the possibility of using any variety for any domain or style of expression. He does this by using the adjective “easier“ rather than committing to a modal verb that shows possibility or obligation. Is it “easier to be flippant in one, to be articulately lofty in the other?” is a question that begs to be asked, or is it equally possible to be either in any one variety with

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<sup>1</sup> Cachia, Pierre. *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature*. Islamic Surveys. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990. 60.



a difference only in what stylistic choices you make to achieve the desired affect? This paper argues the latter through an analysis of the literary language used in the novel *Nisā' il-Karantīna* and the graphic novel *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq*.

Many studies have discussed the diglossic nature of the Arabic language specifically its use in literature across different genres. The overall picture that we see in these studies is that the situation in prose specifically has always been far more complicated than assumed at a first glance, with a wide range of variations. In the case of the studies conducted by Somekh and Cachia, they offer a diachronic overview of the changes that Arabic literature has witnessed in its use of different language varieties. Their overview commences with medieval “canonical” literature and the “non-canonical folkloric” literature<sup>2</sup>. It then goes on to the *Nahḍa* with ‘Abdallah an-Nadīm’s experimentation and his use of everyday speech in *al-’Uāstdh*, and ends up with the literature produced during the 1950’s and 60’s by writers like Yūsif ’Idrīss and Najīb Maḥfūz. Through their analysis, they show some of the factors that affected the writers’ choices. These factors were the ideological stances that the authors have taken towards language variety, time, geographical location, as well as genre. By looking at specific examples from literary works, Somekh termed the language used as “colloquialized *Fuṣḥā*” or “Hidden ‘*Ammiyya*”<sup>3</sup>, while in other works Somekh noticed the writers used

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<sup>2</sup> Madiha Doss and Humphrey Davies in an anthology titled *al-’Ammiyyah al-Masriyyah al-maktūbah*, include literary works and prose that used ‘*Ammiyyah* starting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century right up to the present day.

either one “distinct” variety or another based on the characters’ education in the novel. One of the patterns that Somekh discerned was that writers distinguished between dialogue and narration as distinct modes of writing within prose, using *‘Ammiyyah* for the former and *Fuṣḥā* for the latter. Rosenbaum’s analysis of the use of “free indirect discourse” in his study titled “Mixing Colloquial And Literary Arabic In Modern Egyptian Prose Through The Use of Free Indirect Style and Interior Monologue” contradicts the existence of such a distinction between descriptive and narrative prose. Rosenbaum illustrates that a mix of narration, descriptions and stream of consciousness styled “interior monologue”’s can often be found all in one paragraph. Despite Somekh’s distinction between narrative and descriptive passages, he like Rosenbaum supports the linguistic complexity of narrative passages in his study as well. His analysis concludes with “[m]odern fiction has developed a variety of narrative modes that often compel the novelist to employ unconventional linguistic and stylistic devices.”<sup>4</sup>

More recent studies like those conducted by Mejdall and Bassiouney cover works produced in the 80’s and 90’s. Mejdall in her article titled “The Use of Colloquial in Modern Egyptian Literature- a Survey” discusses Salwā Bakr’s works, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān’s *Mālik al-Ḥazīn* and Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s *Dhāt* among other novelists’ use of language varieties. Bassiouney on the other hand in her paper titled “Redefining Identity Through Code Choice in al-Ḥubb Fī’l-Manfā by Bahā’ Ṭāhir” chooses to focus on Ṭāhir’s novel.

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<sup>3</sup> Somekh, Sasson. *Genre And Language in Modern Arabic Literature*. Vol. Volume One. Studies in Arabic Language and Literature. Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991. Print. (26-27)

<sup>4</sup> Somekh, 30.

Using Woolard's concept of indexicality, she applies it to code switching that takes place between the different varieties of Arabic and not just between languages which is how Woolard conceived and applied it. She examines Ṭāhir's use of *Fuṣḥā* in the novel as a way of indexing formality and detachment, and his use of *'Ammiyyah* to index informality, emotional attachment and intimacy. Bassiouney explores the implications of indexicality to signify various identities and modes of remapping reality.

However, little has been published on the subject of use of language varieties in Egyptian fiction produced in the new millennium<sup>5</sup>. The generation of writers producing fiction in the last several years show a shift in attitudes towards language and culture that differ from that of the previous generations. Writers like Yūsif Rakhā, Nā'il aṭ-Ṭūkhī, the poet 'Īmān Mirsāl and Mohamed Rabī' are often referred to loosely as the 90's generation. The socio-political and literary landscape which shaped their consciousness has witnessed great upheavals in the past several years. Mubarak's years in power and his economic policies that led to changes in Egyptian class dynamics were significant, in addition to the "Arab Spring". Moreover, one cannot deny the importance as well of the effects and affect of global policies and the remapping of power structures both within Egyptian society and worldwide. When it comes to the literary domain, there have been many factors that have all played an important role in reconfiguring the literary scene and market, its aesthetics, and reconstructing the dynamics of the reading public. Some of these factors have been the growth of social media and the eruption of the blogosphere. In

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to Tarek El-Ariss' works like his articles "Fiction of Scandal" and "Hacking the Modern: Arabic Writing in the Virtual Age", Teresa Pepe discusses language use in contemporary Arabic writing in her dissertation "Fictionalized Identities in the Egyptian Blogosphere." (2014)

addition, there has been a greater ease when it comes to the publishing and circulation of literature due to an increase in the presence of non-governmental publishing houses like Dar Al-Shorouk, and smaller independent publishers like Merit. The appearance of chain bookstores like al-Diwan and the emergence of literary prizes dedicated to Arabic literature such as the Arabic Booker Prize and the Sawīris Prize have also all allowed for greater visibility for Arabic Literature worldwide via translation.

In turn the language used and produced by these writers and others in recent works illustrates a departure from that of the previous generations of writers. That is not to say that their stance towards their choice(s) of language variety is not ideological, for are not all language choices ideological? Nor I am generalizing that all contemporary Egyptian writers who are producing literary prose works share the exact same ideological stance or are using language varieties in the exact same way. We have such variations that span Aḥmed al-'Aydī's *'An Takūn 'Abbās al-'Abd*<sup>6</sup> to Ibrāhīm al-Farghalī's *'Abnā' al-Jabalāwī*<sup>7</sup> to Mansūrah 'Ezz ad-Dīn's *Mā Warā' al-Fardaws*<sup>8</sup>. In a post by Yūsif Rakhā on his blog *The Sultan's Seal*, titled "E-Cards for Mohammad Rabie" and which is also quoted by Tarek El-Ariss in his article "Fiction of Scandal", Rakhā describes his generation of writers as possibly the following:

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<sup>6</sup> *'An Takūn 'Abbās al-'Abd* is a novel that resembles Chuck palahniuk's *Fight Club*. In it the main protagonist is a bitter angry young man who has an alter ego, and who is totally disillusioned and frustrated with the status quo. Different varieties of *'Ammiyyah* are used extensively in the novel, as are English words.

<sup>7</sup> *'Abnā' al-Jabalāwī* is predicated on the idea that all of Maḥfūz's works have disappeared all of a sudden. There is a great deal of intertextuality in the novel, using quotes from Maḥfūz's works and alluding to characters in his works among other things. The result is a palimpsest of sorts.

<sup>8</sup> *Mā Warā' al-Fardaws* stylistically includes a great deal of flashbacks, and thus linear chronology is disrupted. The remembering that takes place involves stream of consciousness and interior monologues and entails the use of different language varieties.

the Two thousanders but not only because they started publishing after 2000. People like Nael El-Toukhy, Ahmad Nagui and (to a lesser extent) Mohammad Kheir and Mohammad Abdelnaby also share something more profound. They are all internet-savvy, down-to-earth agents of subversion as interested in things as they are in people and as closely connected to pop culture, communications technology and the global media as they are to literary history. Kundera is their Balzac, Mahfouz their Greek tragedy. They are cynics and jokers and glorifiers of what they refer to (admittedly often with ignorance) as kitsch. By and large they eschew poetry; and until the Egyptian quasi-literary blogging craze fizzled out, many of them professed to eschew print publication....their position is truly postmodern in the sense that they own and disown many histories at once; they don't have a problem revolving around the commodity as a mode of being; they don't have a problem with commodification. In short, they live mentally in our times—and they try to do it unselfconsciously.<sup>9</sup>

Assuredly, their connection to “pop-culture, communications technology,” the fact that many of them started out as bloggers, and their stance towards histories affects their view of language, how it can be used and what it is capable of. Rakhā himself in a feature about him written by Hilary Plum, titled *A Conversation with Youssef Rakha* and published in *Music & Literature*, talks about what he tried to do with language in his first novel *Kitāb at-Ṭuḡhrā: Gharā'ib at-Tārīkh fī Madīnat al-Mirrīkh*:

I tried to bring out this layered quality of the language to reflect the layers of experience I was dealing with, and sometimes I had to do some etymological research just to confirm or understand what I was doing in a given sentence.... So whatever idiom I was using—Sixties-Generation-like standard Arabic, whether lyrical or journalistic-descriptive; unmitigated 2000s Egyptian slang ...; the “middle Arabic” in which I tried to create a contemporary version of Jabarti’s conversational, dialect-inflected classical Arabic so different from either “modern standard” or Quranic Arabic—I emphasized the links, the joints. I made no attempt to conceal the seams or smooth out the bumps. The intention, even if I hadn’t articulated it to myself in so many words, was to produce a sort of

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<sup>9</sup> Rakha, Youssef. “E-Cards for Mohammad Rabie.” *The Sycamore’s Seed*, January 9, 2012. [yrakha.com/2012/01/10/e-cards-for-mohammad-rabie/](http://yrakha.com/2012/01/10/e-cards-for-mohammad-rabie/). Accessed 3 March, 2016.

commonwealth of Egyptian Arabic, a kind of linguistic caliphate, multifarious but functional.<sup>10</sup>

Later on in the interview, Rakhā also mentions that he wanted to “invent a polyphonic, novelistic Arabic.”<sup>11</sup> In the previous quote, we see that Rakhā makes use of the whole Arabic linguistic spectrum available not just diachronically but also synchronically, and he does this with a playfulness and intentness that displays none of the same ideological commitments to *Fuṣḥā* and restraints that earlier generations of writers, editors and publishers might have displayed. At the same time there is a focus on the social and cultural meanings that language carries. Mansūrah ‘Ezz ad-Dīn, who is of the same generation as Rakhā, discusses in a post titled “al-‘Ammiyyah al-Maṣriyya...badīl lil-Fuṣḥa am ghetto lughawī” (The Egyptian Colloquial Dialect...An Alternative to Modern Standard Arabic or a Language Ghetto) her approach and feelings towards the diglossic nature of Arabic and its use by saying:

حلي الوحيد، في هذه الحالة، أن أتناسى قداستها المفترضة، أن أمارس حريتي في التجول بين مستوياتها وعصورها المختلفة، أن أقرأ ((فقه اللغة)) للثعالبي كنص فني، وأن أغوص بالساعات في ((لسان العرب)) بلا غرض سوى المتعة، وأن أصالح بين المستويات المختلفة للعربية فصحي أو عامية بحثاً عن معجمي الخاص المتوائم مع إيقاعي الداخلي.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Plum, Hilary. “A Conversation with Youssef Rakha.” *Music & Literature*. 6 March, 2015. [www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/6/a-conversation-with-youssef-rakha](http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/6/a-conversation-with-youssef-rakha). Accessed 20 February, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Plum, Hilary. “A Conversation with Youssef Rakha.” *Music & Literature*. 6 March, 2015. [www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/6/a-conversation-with-youssef-rakha](http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/6/a-conversation-with-youssef-rakha). Accessed 20 February, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> □Ezz Eldin, Mansoura. “al-‘Ammiyya al-Maṣriyyah badīl lil-Fuṣḥa am ghetto lughawī” *mansouraezeldin*. 17 April, 2016. [mansouraezeldin.blogspot.com](http://mansouraezeldin.blogspot.com). Accessed 27 April, 2016.

Here ‘Ezz ad-Dīn, like Rakhā, emphasize the different levels and varieties of the Arabic language, and the freedom to make use of its multifarious legacies, picking and choosing what she finds suitable for her literary and novelistic discourse. Both ‘Ezz ad-Dīn and Rakhā’s words resound with Bakhtin’s discussion of the “prerequisites” of the novel as “a diversity of social languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.”<sup>13</sup>

In this paper, I will explore the different varieties and registers of the Arabic language that two contemporary Egyptian writers employ in their respective works with the goal of showing how the categories of *Fuṣḥā* and *‘Ammiyyah* are no longer sufficient when stylistically describing literary works. I will show that a more detailed analysis that bears in mind the wider array of varieties and registers used is essential when looking at contemporary works due to their linguistic complexity. I will focus on two contemporary Egyptian novels: *Nisā’ il-Karantīna* (Women of Karanita) by Nā’il aṭ-Tūkhī, published by Dār Merit in 2013 and the graphic novel *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq* (In the Bab-al-Luq Apartment), written by Duniyā Māhir, illustrated by Ganzīr and Aḥmed Nādī, and also published by Dār Merit in 2013. I will be using stance theory to argue why these writers make these choices specifically, and what consequent styles of writing emerge due to these choices. I define style as the way of using a mix of language varieties and linguistic tools such as structures and lexicon.

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<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. (Mikhail Mikhaïlovich). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981

Dubois' 2007 definition of stance is that it is "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field."<sup>14</sup> What we understand from this definition is that stance allows us to think about ways in which the "social actor" during communication positions himself in relation to others (intersubjectivity), and in relation to himself via both his speech acts and paralinguistic elements as well. This affects choice of language variety and register and helps him/her decide which variety and register best suits the content of his communication.

Researchers have defined three major kinds of stance: "*epistemic stance* (e.g. how certain an interlocutor is about her opinions), *affective stance* (e.g. how the speaker represents her feelings and moods), and *interpersonal stance* (e.g. how an interlocutor represents her relationship to other participants)."<sup>15</sup> It is the second of these, "affective stance," that will be my focus in analyzing excerpts from two novels at hand. When discussing the "speaker's" representation of feelings, moods and attitudes, I will expand the definition of speaker in the literary text to mean the writer or the narrator, who may or may not be one of the characters, depending on the focalization in the excerpt; I will specifically identify the either the writer, narrator or character each time to specify which

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<sup>14</sup> Du Bois, John W. "The Stance Triangle." In *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, edited by Englebretson, Robert. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007. 163.

<sup>15</sup> Blyth, Carl. "Cross-Cultural Stances in Online Discussions: Pragmatic Variations in French and American Ways of Expressing Opinions." In *Pragmatic Variation in First and Second Language Contexts: Methodological Issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012. Print. 52.



voice I am discussing rather than use the more ambivalent term “speaker,” which is better suited to refer to actual conversations that take place between interlocutors.

### ***Nisā’ il-Karantīna***

*Nisā’ il-Karantīna* is a novel of epic proportions, spanning nearly sixty years and three generations. It is not a Homeric epic, but quite the postmodern one: it commences in the future in Alexandria 2064 with a scene of two dogs in a wasteland, an eerie phantasmagoria of a deserted city with gun shots heard in the background, pools of blood, piss, debris, corpses, bullet shells, Molotov cocktails and empty pits where one of the dogs is thrown after being shot. We are then catapulted into the more familiar past of Cairo 2004 where the tale of Injī and ‘Alī unfolds, as well as that of their parents and of their children and a lot of other characters associated with them. However, the familiar past turns out to be not so familiar, since aṭ-Tūkhī is not interested in presenting an official historical narrative; instead, he mixes public history with private and popular history, official history with pop culture, and facts with fiction. In short, he is interested in presenting histories, and thus in many ways subverting our sense of what constitutes history and in so doing challenging forms of authority like that of the historian, official narratives and who gets to say what. A case in point is his narrating the events of the famous Egyptian television series *ar-Rāya al-Baydā’* that aired in 1988 as if they were real events that took place in autumn 2004. Another example of his “tampering” with facts, temporality and chronology is moving the Alexandria governor’s ban on smoking *shīsha* (hookah) inside cafes that took place in 2010 and setting it in July 2005, and

having the Alexandrian people rebel against the ban by shattering all the lamp posts along the cornice and thus plunging the cityscape into darkness. The ban did in fact take place, but the counter rebellious act did not. aṭ-Ṭūkhī ends the description with the moral statement:

السكندري الحر يعرف أن لا قيمة للحق بدون قوة تحميه.16

“A free Alexandrian knows that what is right and true is worthless without the power to protect that right”<sup>17</sup>

This moral statement nevertheless is not without irony, especially in light of the events of the novel. Within the novel, we see the rise of Injī and ‘Alī as the overlords of a criminal network, and their committing multiple assassinations, pimping and drug dealing, among many other crimes. They establish a mafia-like presence in Alexandria and rule parts of the city while at the same time managing to garner popular appeal among its citizens. Thus “*al-ḥaqq*” (right/truth) in the above quote is problematized for what constitutes “*al-ḥaqq?*” And what kind of “*quwwah*” (power) is needed and meant here? In the novel, aṭ-Ṭūkhī not only subverts notions of history, authority, justice and gender, but also commonly held clichés about Alexandria as a city that held the iconic status of being cosmopolitan in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as playing with clichés of Alexandria’s exceptionalism.

It only makes sense, then, that when it comes to the use of language varieties and registers, aṭ-Ṭūkhī displays an equal sense of playfulness. He uses not only *Fuṣḥā* and

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<sup>16</sup> aṭ-Ṭūkhī, Nā’ il. *Nisā’ il-Karantīna*. 2013. Cairo: Dar Merit, 2014. Print. 42

<sup>17</sup> All translation is mine.

'*Ammiyyah* varieties, he also uses colloquialized *Fuṣḥā*, inserts transliterated words from English, uses specifically at times the Alexandrian '*Ammiyyah* variety, as well as the specific lexicon of the *shabāb* (young people) in certain narrative instances. He also uses dialogue, narrative, and reported dialogue, as well as free indirect discourse, which has been defined by Rosenbaum as:

Free indirect style or free indirect discourse, a manner of presenting the thoughts or utterances of a fictional character as if from that character's point of view by combining grammatical and other features of the character's 'direct speech' with the features of the narrator's 'indirect report'.<sup>18</sup>

Such a narrative device allows for the flow and switch between the different varieties of language.

As mentioned before, the novel opens with a futuristic narrative scene about two dogs. The novel starts as follows:

الكلب الذي تعود على النبش في الزبالة لم يجد الزبالة التي تعود على النبش فيها.

حدث هذا في الثامن والعشرين من شهر مارس - آذار للعام ٢٠٦٤. لأسباب كثيرة يلي سردها هنا، كان هذا اليوم هو الأقسى في تاريخ الإسكندرية. الجميع عانوا من مرارته، ولكن أكثر من تعرّض لقسوته هو الكلب الذي لم يجد الزبالة. بحث الكلب بجوار سور المترو، حيث كان يُفترض أن تتواجد الكومة الكبيرة والتي تحلق فوقها أسراب الذباب الهانمة، ولكنه لم يجدها، ولم يجد سور المترو نفسه. المنطقة كانت مكشوفة للشمس بشكل غريب، كانت كالصحراء.

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<sup>18</sup> Rosenbaum, Gabriel M. "Mixing Colloquial and Literary Arabic in Modern Egyptian Prose Through the Use of Free Indirect Style and Interior Monologue". In: Jérôme Lentin and Jacques Grand'Henry (eds.). *Moyen arabe et variétés moyennes de l'arabe à travers l'histoire* (Proceedings of the 1st AIMA Conference). Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium): Université catholique de Louvain, Institut orientaliste de Louvain, Print. 2008. 392.

## 19 الكلب كان جانعاً....

In this passage, we notice the repeated use of placing the subject before the verb like in the first sentence “*al-kalb alladhī*“, in “*al-jamī’ ānū*“, “*al-minṭiqa kānit*” and in “*al-kalb kān*”. Although this does exist structurally in *Fuṣḥā*, it is used more in ‘*Ammiyyah* and allows for the cadences of ‘*Ammiyyah* to come through the text. The use of lexicon that is common to both *Fuṣḥā* and colloquial like “*nabash*”(rummage through) and “*sūr*” (wall), the use of the prepositions that can be used in both like “*nabash fihā*” instead of “*nabash bihā*” and the use of the construction “*bishakl gharīb*” without its inflections all help to make the language variety used a “colloquialized *Fuṣḥā*” or “Hidden ‘*Ammiyyah*”<sup>20</sup>. In fact the sentence “*al-manṭiqah kānit makshūfah lil-shams bishakl gharīb*” (The sun flooded the area in the weirdest of ways) can be read completely as a sentence in ‘*Ammiyyah*. However, aṭ-Tūkhī still uses several *Fuṣḥā* features when it comes to both the syntax and the lexicon. His use of “*lam*” for negation, the use of the literary expression “*wa allatī tuḥaliqu fawqihā asrāb adh-dhubābī al-hā’imah*” (swarms of flies buzzed over it), the use of the letter “*ka*” to create a simile in “*ka-ṣṣaḥarā*” (like a desert), connectors like “*ḥaythu*” and finally the use of the inflected ‘*ism fā’il* (active participle) “*jā’i’an*” (hungry) instead of its colloquial form of “*ga’ān*” all point towards *Fuṣḥā* features.

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<sup>19</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Somekh, 26-27.

The narration is what has been termed as “involved” rather than “neutral” or what Somekh quotes Ḥaqqī as defining as the “static style”<sup>21</sup>, which is a style of narrative language that evokes emotions through the length and arrangement of sentences and the lexicon. This leads us to the question of what kind of affect does aṭ-Tūkhī’s use of this style and language varieties evoke in this passage? To put this in context, at the very end of the novel we are shown the lead up to this scene. It is a cataclysmic one in which the three main female characters of that generation, ’Amīra, Lārā and Yārā, are defending their territory, *il-Karantīna*, against an army of policemen and security personnel. Tear gas bombs, hand grenades, Molotov cocktails, live ammunition and huge explosions are all part of the scene. They manage to defend their territory but they all die, not at the hands of the police but due to the fact that one of them or all of them blow each other up intentionally as a final act of revenge due to previous acts of betrayal and fighting over a “man”--and thus ends the reign of *Nisā’ il-Karantīna*. The ambiguity about who killed whom is deliberate. In that context, the irony in starting the novel with a passage about a dog seems more evident, and the sentence that

هذا اليوم هو الأقسى في تاريخ الإسكندرية. الجميع عانوا من مرارته، ولكن أكثر من تعرّض  
لقسوته هو الكلب الذي لم يجد الزبالة.<sup>22</sup>

“That day was the cruelest in the history of Alexandria. Everybody suffered its bitterness, but it was the dog that suffered its cruelty most since he couldn’t find any garbage to rummage through for food”

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<sup>21</sup> Somekh, 30.

<sup>22</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 9.

may carry the most blatant irony, as the narrator pinpoints the dog as the one who has suffered most that day, not the countless human lives that are lost or the destruction of the city or anything else. Is the narrator being ironic or is he making an implicit comment about the value of animals over humans, especially as the novel unfolds showing us repeated acts of betrayal, killing, and hypocrisy. However, to think that the narrator is making some kind of moral judgment would be I argue, a gross misreading of the novel. If anything, being one of the nineties generation, aṭ-Ṭūkhī rejects the ideology of *'adab al-'iltizām*<sup>23</sup> with its idea that literature is a form of moral instruction that aims to improve society and help in the shaping of individuals and their worldview. In the previously-cited interview between Hilary Plum in *Music & Literature* in 2015, Rakhā, who is of the same generation, responds to Plum's question about what writers can do if anything amidst "the world's daily tumult and horror" with the following:

I think as individuals with questions, with voids to circle around, there are books through which we can better know and so in some sense be wholer versions of ourselves. Yes. But not as consumers or receptacles of the kind of discursive trash and commercial brainwashing that so often pass for informed public opinion, humanitarian concern, or moral-political commitment, and certainly not as public figures or players of collective roles.<sup>24</sup>

Like Rakha, aṭ-Ṭūkhī eschews the role of presenting any overt "moral-political commitment." His subversive use of language and rejection of official narratives about history, and his amoral stance towards his characters' actions can be viewed as a different

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<sup>23</sup> Committed writing.

<sup>24</sup> Plum, Hilary. "A Conversation with Youssef Rakha." *Music & Literature*. 6 March, 2015. [www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/6/a-conversation-with-youssef-rakha](http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2015/3/6/a-conversation-with-youssef-rakha). Accessed 20 February, 2016.

form of commitment, a literary and aesthetic one that does not aim to morally intervene in any direct way or champion a cause, but which does aim to explore human subjects and their interactions and “make a more lasting contribution to human self awareness and the possibility of empathy, sympathy, and—to use a horribly hackneyed word—“dialogue”. I can truthfully find out about the world in a way that does not presume to pronounce on how the world should be....”<sup>25</sup>

On the following page, the narrator sets out to define the scope and main purpose of the novel:

القصة بدأت منذ وقت طويل، امتدت لأكثر من جيل، وحلقت فوق أكثر من مكان، من جنوب مصر لشماليها، واحتوت على الكثير من المواعظ والدروس الأخلاقية، و الكثير من الفلسفة العميقة بخصوص الإنسان و رغباته وصفاته. القصة هي واحدة من تلك القصص النادرة في تاريخ الإنسانية، التي تربط المتعة بالتشويق بالمعلومة المفيدة والنصائح الغالية إذا كان لنا أن نصف أحداث القصة بصفة فهي التوفيق الإلهي. التوفيق الإلهي الذي وضع كلاً من الأشخاص في مكانة الصحيح، وأهمه بالتفكير الصحيح في الوقت الصحيح. وإذا جاز لنا أن تستخرج الدروس المناسبة فهي أن لاشيء مستحيلًا، وأنه متى توفرت النية السليمة، فإن الإنسان، بفضل من ربه عز وجل في البداية والنهاية، قادر على كل شيء. 26

What are we to make of the previous two paragraphs and their description of the “*qiṣṣah*” (story) at hand as one of epic, mythical, national and intergenerational proportions? One that

واحتوت على الكثير من المواعظ والدروس الأخلاقية، و الكثير من الفلسفة العميقة بخصوص الإنسان ورغباته وصفاته. 27

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

“is full of important sermons, sage advice, moral lessons and a great deal of profound philosophy when it comes to man, his desires and attributes”

and which is

من تلك القصص النادرة في تاريخ الإنسانية<sup>28</sup>

“one of the unique stories throughout mankind’s history”. What is more on the following page, we are told that “*al-qiṣṣah hunā hīyā qiṣṣat waṭan yatashakkal*” (the story here is the story of the forming of a homeland).<sup>29</sup> In these paragraphs and quotations, we see the narrator professing the presence of overarching grand narratives in the novel such as the factors that go into the formation of a homeland, moral lessons to be deduced, philosophical musings, commentary about style and reception and how it combines “*al-mut‘ah bi-al-tashwīq*” (enjoyment combined with suspense). All this is driven by “*al-tawfīq al-‘ilāhī*” (divine accommodation). Taken at face value, these paragraphs could very well be taken from many a 19<sup>th</sup> century European novel, as well as many an early twentieth century Arabic novel. Yet, these narratorial statements cannot be taken at face value when time and time again in the novel, these very same sentiments are actively ridiculed, prodded, subverted and so much more and thus is another display of the inherent irony in the novel and its discursive strategies. In fact, many sentences and phrases in the paragraphs emerge as instances of intertextuality used for the purpose of parody. The word “*al-Mawā‘iz*” (sage advice/sermon) and its surrounding lexicon reminds us of part of the Quranic verse 125 in *Surat an-Nahl*:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> at-Tūkhī, 11.



ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction”<sup>30</sup>

“*al-maw‘izah al-ḥasanah*” (good instruction) is more or less what the narrator purports the novel to offer, among many other things. The paragraphs are also strongly reminiscent of the lexicon and registers used in the voice-overs or texts that often accompanied footage of the 1973 Arab-Israeli October war or narratives of that war. Phrases like “*al-tawfiq al-‘ilāhī*” (divine providence), “*min tilka al-qisṣaṣ al-nādirah*” (one of those unique stories) would often be followed by “*fī malḥmit at-tarīkh al-maṣrī*” (In Egypt’s epic historical narrative), or “*lā shay‘ mustaḥīl*” (nothing is impossible). All these phrases would be used to glorify how the Egyptian army performed the impossible act of crossing the Bar-Lev fortifications and “*kasar uṣturit al-jaysh al-Isrā‘īlī al-ladhī lā yuqhar*” (Defied the legend of the invincible Israeli Army). Predominantly in the novel, we see within the same paragraph a mixing of varieties and registers like that of *Fuṣḥā* and ‘Ammiyyah and even within ‘Ammiyyah varying varieties and registers and many other linguistic variations. However, in these two paragraphs the variety used is *Fuṣḥā*, despite there being several nominal sentences and some of the lexicon that can serve both *Fuṣḥā* and ‘Ammiyyah varieties, yet use of parallelisms, use of *idhā* instead of *law*, *aladhī* instead of the ‘Ammiyyah relative pronoun *‘illī*, and *kulan* among other items all point to the *Fuṣḥā* variety. His use of the *Fuṣḥā* variety here is precisely because it helps

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<sup>30</sup> The Qur‘ān : Ṣaḥīḥ International. Jeddah; Al-Muntada Al-Islami, 2004. Print. 261.

to accentuate the irony via its parodic potential. It does this by the conjuring of so many intertextual cultural associations.

In Linda Hutcheon's seminal work, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she explains how parody brings out society's contradictions and refuses to smooth out these contradictions or resolve them by offering any totalizing narrative; parody "is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies."<sup>31</sup> The legitimization takes place through the use of the very same language and ideas of the text, while subverting it by placing it in a context with which it obviously jars. As such, parody allows for a constant unsettling and undermining of the very ideas and language it is using and thus like postmodernism it "de-naturalize (s) some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" are in fact "cultural"; made by us"<sup>32</sup>. When exploring *Nisā' il-Karantīna*, we find the narrator doing just that, denaturalizing and unsettling commonly held notions when it comes to ideology and language; society's contradictions are pointed at with no attempt at resolving them. Thus, we get the constant impression of the impossibility of knowing history and the events as they really were or have so far claimed to be.

In the following chapter, we leave the futuristic and dystopic scene of Alexandria in the year 2064 with its dogs, blown up buildings, sounds of gun shots, debris, and buzzing flies. We also leave behind the narrator's statements about life, history, mankind, and

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<sup>31</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print. 101.

<sup>32</sup> Hutcheon, 2.

homelands and instead are thrown back in time to the year 2004, which witnesses the beginning of the relationship between ‘Alī (32 years old) and Injī (21 years old), who, along with their family, friends, and later on son and grandchildren, will be the pivotal characters in the novel. The choice of the names of the two main characters by aṭ-Tūkhī is not haphazard, as it immediately brings to mind the main characters in the iconic Egyptian 1957 film *Ruda Qalbī* (The Return of my Heart) which was an adaptation of the Yusuf Sibā‘ī novel of the same title that was published in 1955. The film is considered highly influential: it ranked number thirteen among the best one hundred Egyptian films in the last century. The film, like the novel, tracks the love story between Injī, the daughter of a feudal Pasha who is a member of the royal family in Egypt, and ‘Alī, who is the son of the gardener who works for Injī’s family. This is prior to 1952, and when Injī’s brother finds out he tries to kill ‘Alī, as well as having his father fired from his job. Fast forward, ‘Alī is now a police officer and he is one of the officers responsible for overlooking the redistribution of lands post-1952. In the end, ‘Alī and Injī are romantically reunited, and the political propaganda message is that post-1952, love knows no classism, and gone are the days when your family background will limit your education, possibilities or define your choice of partner. This was an era of a new social contract. For many younger generations who did not live during the heyday of Nasserism, the film has come to represent romanticism par excellence, especially with soft-spoken, innocent-looking, Mariam Fakhr Eddine playing the role of Injī, who was nick-named *ḥasnaa’ as-shāshah* “The beauty of the silver screen” and the handsome heart-throb Shoukry Sarhan playing ‘Alī. In choosing these names for his two main characters, aṭ-

Tūkhī evokes along with them what they conjure in the Egyptian collective consciousness, but only to subvert what they represent in many ways. Yes, ‘Alī comes from a less privileged social class than Injī, who at the beginning of the novel is depicted as a young romantic doe-eyed girl, and they do fall in love, but that is as far as the resemblance goes. As the novel progresses, we see them turn into murderers, fugitives, pimps, overlords of the underworld and at one point even consider killing each other. Images of the upright, patriotic ‘Alī and the ever faithful Injī are overturned, despite the characters at times using the same vocabulary and lexicon of “*al-waṭaniyyah*” (patriotism) and “*al-ḥubb*” (love), “*al-īkhilāṣ*” (loyalty) and so on. This way, aṭ-Tūkhī unsettles these terms and asks the reader to rethink and examine what these terms mean, and whether they ever meant what we thought they meant and represented.

In the first instance when ‘Alī and Injī meet--they are second cousins--we see how it is Injī that first talks to him and how he is uncomfortably aware of the difference between them when it comes to social class and education:

اللقاء الأول بين علي وإنجي لم يكن مهماً، مرت بنت بنظارة من أمام المحل فقال بصوت عالٍ إيه يا دكتور. وقفت لتتفرج على البضاعة فنظر إلى أصحابه وقال يكفيني شرفاً إنها وقفت عندي. اشتريت بنطلونا فعلاً. وهي بالداخل قالت له إزيك يا علي. أخبرته أن اسمها إنجي. هو تذكر بنت عمه البعيدة المقيمة في أبوظبي. سألها إن كانت بنت عم سليمان العلايلي. ابتسمت وقالت له أيوة. ارتبك. بعد ثوانٍ سألها عن صحتها وصحة أبيها والجو في الإمارات عامل إيه. ومضت ونساها. لم تكن ابنة عمه المباشرة، أبوها هو ابن عم أبيه. عادت مرة أخرى، ومرة ثالثة. هي التي لم تتسه. وشيناً فشيناً بدأ يلتفت لها، ويسألها عن أشياء خارج الهدوم لم يكن خجولاً. كل ما في الأمر إنه كان لا يصدق، بنت ناس أوي يا أخي، وإنجليزي وبتاع، هكذا قال لمصطفى أخيه. شجع وأخذ رقم تليفونها. ابتسمت عندما طلب منها هذا. سألته ليه عاوزه وهي تستعد لإملائه عليه بالفعل. ارتبك ولكنه تماكك نفسه، عدل إطار النظارة السمكية، علشان أبقى أسأل على صحة الوالد حضرتك. 33

<sup>33</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 13-14.

In this paragraph we see constant mixing between *Fuṣḥā* and *‘Ammiyyah* varieties, often in the very same phrase and sentence, thus breaking the traditional boundaries. We also have a blurring of the distinction between narrative and dialogue in which instances of reported speech and free indirect discourse allow for shifts in perspective from the third person to the first person. The instances of reported speech that we do see vary between responses that ‘Alī gives to Injī or questions he asks her like, “*wa-al-gaww fī al-’Imarāt ‘āmil eeh?*” [What is the weather like in the Emirates?] to remarks he makes to his brother about Injī like “*bint nās awī ya akhī, wa-Inglīzī wa-bitā*” [She is really well-bred and knows English and stuff]. The question he asks Injī about the weather is in a different register to the comment he makes to his brother, although both are in *‘Ammiyyah*. The one he makes to his brother shows a greater degree of familiarity. It also helps us see that social class is one of the factors that ‘Alī is highly aware of and the discrepancy between his and her education. This allows us from an affective stance point of view to see ‘Alī’s thoughts and feelings in his own words, rather than through the third person narrative. In an instance of free indirect discourse which facilitates the erasure of register boundaries, we see ‘Alī--without any verbs to indicate reported speech--almost as if we are being plunged into the scene, saying the following to Injī in response to her asking him why he wants her phone number “*alashān ab’ā as’al ‘an ṣiḥit al-wālid ḥadritik*” [So that I can ask about your father’s health]. His use of “*al-wālid*” and “*ḥadritik*” is to signal a degree of formality and respect towards Injī and her father which will soon be dissipated and will contrast with an excessive familiarity that Injī gets upset about in the following pages. This mixing allows the situation to be conveyed to the reader in cadences that

remind him/her of situations and conversations that s/he might have been party to. Incorporation of allusions to popular culture is again seen in the following paragraph which allows for a polyphonic textuality, because of the presence of so many varieties and registers of Arabic within popular culture like in series', songs, T.V programmes and so on:

حكى لها علي كيف مات أبوه. استرجع ذكريات بعيدة ومؤلمة. حكى لها عن الصعيد وعن النار، وعن الضوء الشارد وذئاب الجبل، حكى عن أبيه الذي وجدوه مقتولاً على باب محله، وعن الصوت المتحشرج الذي يخرج من حنجرته، عن الدم الذي أغرق جميع الملابس، عن المحل الذي أغلق عامين كاملين، ماكانش فيه زيون واحد يرضى يقرب مننا، والله العظيم والله العظيم والله العظيم أنا كنت أمشي ف الشارع أنا وأخويا واحس الناس بتهرب مننا، أنا كنت أما أتعب أوي أروح الجامع أصلي، هتصدقيني لو قلتلك إن ما كانش فيه حد يرضى يصلي معايا. كل ما فعلته إنجي هو إنها أغلقت عينيها تعاطفاً معه. ثم طببت على كتفه. احتضن كفها بين كفيه وبدأ في السهوكة. ألصق ساقه اليسرى بساقها اليمنى. مد يده على ظهرها وبدأ يلعب فيه من تحت التي شيرت. هي ارتبكت جداً. هتفت علي! إنت اتجننت؟! بتعمل إيه؟ وعلي لم يكن يعرف على وجه التدقيق هو بيعمل إيه. ولذا ارتبك هو الآخر، وقال لها يا فندم ما تفهمينيش غلط. حضرتك في منزلة أختي والله. هي نظرت له باحتقار شديد، وغادرت المكان. بعدها بيومين أرسلت له إس أم إس. قالت له أنا حاسة بحاجة ناحيتك يا علي. بس أنا عاوزة أبعد شوية علشان أتأكد منها. ما تزعلش مني. 34

The second line of this passage contains an allusion to two very popular Egyptian television series, *ad-Daw' ash-Shārid* (1998) and *Dhi'āb al-Jabal* (1992), both of which were partially set in upper Egypt and discussed the traditions that existed there. These allusions bring to the readers' minds a set of cultural associations and registers including concentrated forms of patriarchy, restrictions in choosing spouses, blood revenge *at-tār*, distinct social hierarchies, and a regional dialect, without having to refer directly to all of these aspects.

<sup>34</sup> at-Tūkhī, 16.

Aṭ-Ṭūkhī incorporates direct references to popular television series', films and genres of writing throughout the novel. Each time he does that he draws upon all the linguistic and cultural associations, a reader would make with that reference without having to go into all the details. But he adds another layer to these associations by making fun of this association and what it might have represented to the reader. For example we see a fighting scene that ends with the violent death of a man being thrown by 'Alī onto the train rails just before a train pulls in to crush and totally disfigure and mangle his body. The language used in this scene is strongly reminiscent of the language used by Nabīl Farūq in a series of pocket-sized popular action novels *ar-Ragul al-Mustaḥīl* (The Man of the Impossible) that was published nearly on a monthly basis between 1984-2008. This action series was extremely popular amongst adolescents and young adults with its central character 'Adham Ṣabrī, who was a highly military trained professional working in espionage for the Egyptian Intelligence services; a James Bond of sorts. In every volume, you would find the usual mix of espionage situations, fighting, romance, and a heavy dose of patriotism with the main character fighting international conspiracies and enemies. The language variety used was *Fuṣḥā* even in the dialogues and was highly formulaic, especially in the fighting scenes with the same expressions being used time and time again which explains aṭ-Ṭūkhī's ease at using some of those stock expressions, but at the same time incorporating some '*Ammiyyah* lexicon which unsettles the readers' expectations.

This mixing of what is often called high-brow and low-brow forms of culture is a feature of both postmodernist and metamodernist<sup>35</sup> writings which often allows for irony. We need only to fast-forward a few lines to realize that ‘Alī tells Injī his family’s own tragic story of blood revenge and their ensuing ostracization in very melodramatic terms only to garner her sympathy and make a sexual move on her

ألصق ساقه اليسرى بساقها اليمنى. مد يده على ظهرها وبدأ يلعب فيه من تحت التي شيرت. 36

[He intentionally brushed his left leg up against her right one, put his hand up her t-shirt and started to caress her back.]

The effect is almost comic when after Injī chides him in ‘*Ammiyyah* with “*inta itgannint? bita ‘mil eh?*” [Have you gone crazy? What on earth are you doing?] he soberly responds in a more formal tone with a stock response in Egyptian culture

يا فندم ما تفهمينيش غلط. حضرتك في منزلة أختي والله. 37

[Please don’t get me wrong miss, I swear to god I consider you to be like my sister], as if making a non-consensual sexual advance on a woman constitutes everyday practice that lies within a normative brother-sister relationship framework.

In contrast the *Fuṣḥā* variety is used in parallel sentence structures when first recounting his father’s murder which help create an escalating tragic effect of all the woes that befell them. Interestingly the language variety used, changes to ‘*Ammiyyah*

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of metamodernism see: Vermeulen, Timotheus, and Robin Van Den Akker. “Notes on Metamodernism.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2.0 Web. 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 16.



via free indirect discourse to give the reader the affective impression that ‘Alī’s emotions have overwhelmed him and is pouring his heart out, and that we now are privy to his most intimate and tragic life events. In the outbreak ‘Alī uses negation like in “*mā-kansh fī zabūn wāḥid*” [There wasn’t a single client that...] emphatic repetitions like in “*wallahī il-‘azīm wallahī il-‘azīm wallahī il-‘azīm*” [I swear to God, I swear to God, I swear to God...] and rhetorical questions like “*ha-tiṣada ’inī law utilik*” [Would you believe me if I told you that...] to persuade Injī of his victimhood and thus gain her sympathy. His swearing by God so profusely and claiming that the only thing that calmed him was going to the mosque to pray serves as a contradiction to his sexual advances, a contradiction that aṭ-Ṭūkhī points out time and again in his novel to reveal and almost celebrate the hypocrisy embedded in society. The use of loan words that have become part and parcel of the daily language of many Egyptians like *SMS* and *T-shirt* adds another linguistic layer to the text that will be repeated throughout the novel.

Aṭ-Ṭūkhī further complicates the language of the novel by incorporating the Alexandrian dialect within his text, using registers that are specific to the youth, and by indicating in writing how certain words and phonemes would be pronounced by particular social classes, thereby producing a novelistic discourse that embodies Bakhtinian heteroglossia:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single

national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases)--this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre.<sup>38</sup>

In this line the narrator points out that 'Alī pronounces Injī's name as *Inshī*.

بصي يا إنشي (هكذا كان ينطق اسمها)<sup>39</sup>

بس وحق السوجارة دي ما حد منهم هيفلت سليم.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, in the second line quoted above the word cigarette is written as how it would be pronounced by many in 'Alī's socio-economic class. This shows how the narrator--and in turn the author--takes care to portray the heteroglossia that exists within Egypt, both in the last decade, and, hypothetically, in the future. Later, when 'Alī and Injī flee to Alexandria and settle down there after killing a man, we are introduced to the Alexandrian dialect of a certain socio-economic class, geographically concentrated in the eastern districts of Alexandria. These areas are usually not populated with internal migrants from others parts of Egypt. In this passage, we see both 'Ādil and Abū Amīrah who are both Alexandrians, having invited 'Alī over to drink beer and smoke weed, insist he stay the night:

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<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, 262-263.

<sup>39</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

مرة وراء الأخرى تجرأ على دعوة علي إلى بيته، عشة صغيرة فوق السطح، هناك قدمه إلى أخويه، عادل وأبو أميرة، أخيهما الأكبر وصاحب البيت، بوصفه البشمةهندس علي اللي عاوزين نعملو معاه الواجب. عادل لم يقصر. بيرة وحشيش للصبح. على الساعة عشرة استأذن علي في الانصراف. أمسك أبو أميرة ذراعة بقوة وقال له علي الطلاق يا خويا ما يحصل، أنت بايت معنا النهاردة. بأدب قال علي إن المدام قد تقلق عليه وهي في أول شهر حمل. أبو أميرة أغلظ القسم ثم حل المشكلة: يبقى انت تكلمها دلوقتي، واني نبعث المدام تبنيت عندها، واحنا الرجالة نقعدو براحتنا. اتصل علي بإنجي وأخيرها وخرج أبو أميرة ليتفاوض مع زوجته التي غادرت الشقة بعدها بربع ساعة. واستمرت سهرة الرجالة للصبح.

لم يهفلط علي بالكلام.... 41

We see the use of the first-person imperfective verbs conjugated with *n-* or *n-.. -ū* in the above passage “*na ‘milū*” [do], “*nib ‘at*” [send], and “*nu ‘u ‘dū*” [stay/sit] as examples of the local dialect mentioned above. Another feature is the use of “*‘ānī*” [me] instead of the more common “*‘anā*”. The passage is interlaced with class and gender referents, with expressions linked to patriarchy and which show their authoritative attitudes. Some of the expressions are more general, but would be more likely heard from men rather than from women in Egyptian society, due to issues of access and societal restrictions like “*bīrah wa ḥashīsh lil-ṣubḥ*” [We are going to drink beer and smoke weed to till the early hours of morning]. Others display a language that is only used by men posturing about their control of their wives “*wa ‘aleyya aṭ-ṭalāq yā khūyah ma-yehṣal*” [This isn’t going to happen, otherwise I will divorce my wife] and “*w ‘ānī nib ‘at al-madām*” [I will send my wife...]

Yet another “voice” is that of the street slang of youth, the types of expressions that would be found in Urban Dictionary if an Arabic version existed. Yet these expressions can be combined with formal structures in ways that unsettle our concepts of what

<sup>41</sup> aṭ-Tūkhī, 29.

constitutes each variety. “*lam yehaflaṭ* ‘*Alī bil-kalām*” [Ali didn’t spill the beans/babble/run off at the mouth] combines the slang verb “*yehaflaṭ*” with the *Fuṣḥā* negative particle “*lam*”, rather than the expected ‘*Ammiyya* negation *ma...š*. The juxtaposition of “*lam*” with this verb makes it seem that the verb is *Fuṣḥā* Arabic.

Throughout the passage, ‘Alī’s language is of a more *Fuṣḥā* variety and more formal register whether in the form of reported speech or narration with the use of “*qad*” and “*inna*”, which is not the case in previous passages as we have seen. The choice made here is to set ‘Alī apart from Abū Amīrah and his siblings, conveying that for all his talk before, he does belong to a different social class than these seedier characters. Another reading of the use of the *Fuṣḥā* variety here is to show how ‘Alī himself is using the formal variety to intentionally set himself apart in an affected manner.

These few brief passages demonstrate the range of varieties and registers that the author uses in his novel, and as the novel progresses, we see idiolects developing for certain characters, and registers used by female characters evolving into a matriarchy later on. We find the same characters adopting different varieties and registers depending on the context, and the addressee. In addition, we have seen the use of allusions, intertextuality, deictic shifts, shifts between narration, description and forms of speech whether reported or free indirect discourse. The result is a panoramic evocation of contemporary (sub)culture(s) and an exploration of the possibilities of what the Arabic language does and can do in literature through the language’s wide array of varieties.

## ***Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq***

In his seminal work *Understanding Comics (The Invisible Art)*, Scott McCloud reproduces in detail an ancient Egyptian mural that depicts the story of a group of farmers who refuse to pay taxes for their harvest, and are thus beaten by a group of tax collectors to illustrate his argument that these paintings with their “sequential pictorial narratives” were precursors of modern day comics<sup>42</sup>. Whether one agrees with this genealogy or not--since sequential pictorial narratives are not exclusive to the ancient Egyptian civilization but can be seen in many ancient civilizations--comics and graphic novels are not a novelty in the Arab world. In their book *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas trace the emergence of comics in the Arab world back to the 1970’s at least, if not earlier. Some have even considered the 1950’s as the start of comic strips in the Arab world, coinciding with the free officer’s movement in 1952.

Recently however, there has been a surge of comics and graphic novels all over the Arab world, especially since 2010. Notable examples of serialized comic strips that have emerged include *Tuk Tuk* and *El 3oşba* in Egypt, *Samandal* in Lebanon, *Skefkef* in Morocco, and *Makhbar 619* in Tunisia. When it comes to graphic novels, both Lebanon’s publishing houses for example Dar Onboz and Egypt’s publishing houses like Dar Merit have published several graphic novels. Examples are *Madīna Mujāwira l-il Ard* (A City

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<sup>42</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Reprint edition. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1994. Print. 14-15.

Close to Earth) by Jorj Abu Mhayya, *Metro* by Magdy El-Shafee, and *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (The Use of Life)* by Ahmed Naji.

In addition, the past two years have seen a series of events and initiatives that promote comics and graphic novels. In September-October 2015, *Cairocomix*--a series of events, panels and discussions about the state of comics and graphic novels in the Arab world--was held at the old AUC downtown campus. Moreover, in 2014 the *Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative* was established at the AUB, which defines itself on its website as “an academic body for the study of Arabic Comics ... It aims to elevate and facilitate the interdisciplinary research of Arabic comics, promote the production, scholarship and teaching of comics, and develop and maintain a repository of Arabic comics literature.”<sup>43</sup> These developments constitute an unprecedented amount of serious attention being given to the medium in the Arab world, as well as in other places of cultural and literary production worldwide.

In this section, I will analyze language variation in the graphic novel *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq* (In the Bab-al-Luq Apartment) by Dunya Mahir, illustrated by Ganzeer and Ahmed Nadi, and published by Dar Merit in 2013. Before delving into its use of language, some preliminary remarks about the novel and the visual elements in it will be in order to clarify the context. A great deal of literature has been written about how the backdrop of all graphic novels and comics are urban cityscapes, megalopolises and that setting's relation to modernity. So as a genre, the urban cityscape is the graphic novel's

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<sup>43</sup> *The American University of Beirut*. The Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative. [www.aub.edu.lb/provost/Academic-initiatives/saci/Pages/index.aspx](http://www.aub.edu.lb/provost/Academic-initiatives/saci/Pages/index.aspx). Accessed 20 October, 2016

major domain. The scene of *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq* (In the Bab-al-Luq Apartment) is the urban landscape of downtown Cairo. Most of the novel takes place within the apartment of *Bāb al-Lūq* and its immediate surroundings.

The sequential narrative that emerges in the apartment is not a clearly linear one. It is basically constituted by what the inhabitant of the apartment sees, hears and feels, creating a proliferation of affect. The novel is thus full of sights, sounds, smells and objects. Animals and insects abound in the novel as well. The colours of the visual element are black, white and a greenish-bluish hue. Ganzeer and Nadi eschew the panel set up of other comics and graphic novels except in the last few pages of the novel, in which the main inhabitant of the apartment dies or is murdered, and the panels conjure up a film noir-like atmosphere. Except for this, the novel maintains great diversity in how the visual and the textual elements intersperse and even mesh. Drawings vary from zoomed-in-comic-style shots to Roy-Lichtenstein-inspired pop art photos to blank pages, and lines. The narratorial perspective also shifts among first person narration, second person narration, and speech bubbles, with a refrain that is employed quite constantly: *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq* (In the Bab-al-Luq Apartment). Intertextuality abounds as well in the form of newspaper clippings, Nancy Ajram and state-sponsored songs, and menus of well-known Egyptian fast food chains like Cook-Door strewn on the floor. Through the employment of these various techniques, and through proliferations, reiterations and mediations of affects, connections between the elements of the story are created only to be constantly ruptured, and we are left with a sense of fragmentation and implosion.

The main character exudes a sense of alienation, and the city is a hostile alienating space full of people who affront you, and who watch you in different ways; it is a city full of paranoid people. The main character, who remains anonymous, is walled in, in multifarious ways. He is held hostage in his place by the domestic helper *Umm Rā'ī*, who moves in with her two children and two cats, by security forces, by demonstrations, and by the effortless of obtaining anything one needs via home delivery services. We are left with the main character's acute realization of this lack of agency and an attempt to reassert it, which takes on the form of a certain nonchalance, a refusal to align oneself with the official discourse, a defamiliarization of surroundings, or joining demonstrations. Whether he succeeds or not in doing these things in the novel is seemingly irrelevant, it is the endeavor and the exertion that matters.

Scott McCloud defines comics--and by implication graphic novels--as “[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”<sup>44</sup>. Because in graphic novels we have this additional visual pictorial element that plays an essential role both in helping the reader/viewer perceive what is being told him/her as well as provoking “an aesthetic response,” we need to ask what is the role of language in graphic novels, and how is that role different from that in text-based novels? Furthermore, how might the function of language in graphic novels affect the choice of language being used?

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<sup>44</sup> McCloud, 9.



Language undoubtedly plays a significant role within graphic novels, but due to the strong visual element that is at least as integral to the “text” as is the language, language complements the visual or vice-versa. One cannot read the text without taking in the visual at the same time. The written is always comprehended through/with the visual. While the relative attention paid to the visual and the verbal may vary widely in graphic novels, in *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq*, both the written and the visual element are equally significant. The majority of the written text is in *Fuṣḥā*, and surprisingly with full diacritic markings, a rare sight in contemporary literature. The diacritics are written in a greenish-bluish hue, while the text itself is in black (except on one page where the text is in white because the page itself is black). The greenish-bluish hue is also used visually in the drawings throughout the novel, and thus in turn the diacritics can be seen as another visual element added for an aesthetic purpose, one that helps the written text mesh with or complement the visual. It is hard to imagine that the reader is expected to sound out all the diacritics unless for a performative purpose or to create a particular dramatic effect that contrasts with the mundanely quotidian nature of what is being described. *‘Ammiyyah* is used in speech bubbles in the last few pages to represent either a direct dialogue or people’s comments about the deceased. Apart from that, *‘Ammiyyah* is rarely used except for lines from songs, the odd word that is placed between inverted commas, a partial text in a newspaper and two odd lines of dialogue and a speech bubble.

However, the determination that the majority of the text is written in *Fuṣḥā* does not tell us much for there is such a wide variety of registers available in *Fuṣḥā*. Is it the

*Fuṣḥā* used in newspaper articles, charged with political terminology and clichéd collocations, is it the lyrically poetic *Fuṣḥā* used in the novels of Radwa ‘Ashour, or is it the bare, formulaic *Fuṣḥā* used in legal documents? The novel opens<sup>45</sup> as follows, framed in a bathroom mirror, interrupted by a drawing of a cockroach; beneath the mirror is bathroom tap:

في شقة باب اللوق تتناثر أغراضِي، وتتراكمُ حولي بلا أثاثٍ يذكُرُ. يتجمَعُ الماءُ، وتلتصقُ  
رغَاوي الصَّابونِ بجوانبِ حوضِ حَمَامِي نصفِ المسدودِ، بينما تتكدَّسُ حاوياتٌ من كلِّ شكلٍ،  
تحتوي على كلِّ ما اخترَعُ من مستحضراتِ، كريماتِ، سيرمِ، سبراي، رول أون، مُعطر "أو"  
للبيشرة الحساسة، إلى جانبِ زجاجاتِ الزيوتِ والأعشابِ وآخرِ كتبِ الطبِّ البديلِ وأساليبِ  
التهدئةِ الأسيويةِ. أستهللكُ أطناناً من المطهراتِ والمبيداتِ، وتستمرُّ الحشراتُ بالمجيءِ لإلقاءِ  
التحيةِ. أفرُّ فجأةً من مكاني لأنظفَ شيئاً ما، فأجدُه قدراً بعدَ دقائقِ.

عند انتقالك لشقة باب اللوق ستشعرُ وكأنك قد هاجرتَ لبلدٍ آخرِ. تقابلُ فيه ناساً كثيرين، لكن  
تظلُّ لا تعرفُ فيه أحداً. ستتابعُ تخزينَ المستحضراتِ والأدويةِ والأقلامِ، وستستمرُّ في الانتظارِ  
ومراقبةِ تفاصيلِ الميدانِ الذي تتكاثرُ به الكراكيبُ.<sup>46</sup>

The structure here is a bare, simple *Fuṣḥā*. We find short verbal phrases arranged in parallelism like in “*wa-tatarākamu ḥawlī/ yatajamma ‘u al-mā’u/ wa-taltaṣaqu raghāwā aṣ-ṣābūni*” etc [My things pile up around me/the water accumulates/and the soap bubbles stick ...].The paragraph is highly descriptive in nature, but the description is not one that depends on an ornate embellished language, but one that is almost clinical in its affective nature. This comes as no surprise when the subject of description is a bathroom sink with its surrounding paraphernalia, insects and dirt. The passage ends with a description of

<sup>45</sup> The graphic novel intentionally has no page numbers.

<sup>46</sup> Mahir, Donia, writer. *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq*. Artistic production by Ganzeer. Comics Ahmed Nadi. Cairo: Dar Merit, 2013. Print.

what is missing in the drawing. The tap is there in the picture, but the actual sink with the accumulating water, soap bubbles, and what you would find on the sink top or in the medicine cabinet like roll-on deodorants, hair spray, air fresheners, oils, insecticides and so on are what are described. The narrator uses the loan words “*krīmāt, Sīrum, Sbrāy, Rūwl Aun*” [creams, serum, spray, roll-on] as they would be used in everyday conversations in Egypt. In another instance, we see the listing of what someone is ordering at a food stall, listing of what the main character orders as “home delivery” from restaurants and pharmacies, listing of the shops that surround the apartment in *Bāb al-Lūq*, of sounds and so on. It is almost as if the language has been stripped down to its bare minimum. The affective function of this minimally descriptive use of language is to foster the feelings of alienation, paranoia, commodification, fear and fragmentation that we see throughout the novel and in the pictures and drawings. The following paragraph, which occurs later on in the novel also supports this argument:

على السطح المجاور لشباك غرفتك تكتشف عائلة نوبية ينام أحد أفرادها بالخارج - في خيمة من أغطية مُستهلكة - صيفاً وشتاءً، بينما يتجمع الباقي من بنات - لن تجزم أبداً بعددهن - في حجرتين مبنيتين بالطوب الأحمر و "الكراكيب". ستسمع صراخهم كثيراً في شجارات أجازات يوم الجمعة والأعياد. حينها سوف تحصى على الأقل اثني عشر شخصاً في ذلك الجزء الصغير من السطح. جيرانهم المحاصرين على السطح يحرصون اقتناء الزرع، ويملك أحدهم تمثالاً فرعونياً مقلداً كبير الحجم. ستتمكن من رؤية أنفه إذا ملت قليلاً إلى اليسار، سترى عبر شباك إحدى الغرفتين طاولة تتبدل عليها أغراض مختلفة: كراسات رسم مقسمة لمربعات (إحدى الفتيات في التعليم الفني بالتأكد)، حقائب بلاستيك، تملك أنت منها المزيد مفيدة لتخزين الأشياء، غلبة ألوان صيني جربت رداؤها بنفسك، كاسيت صغير بلا وجه وبعض الشرائط، أغلبها لمطربين لا تحبهم. في شقة باب اللوق ستجيد فنون التلصص<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Here the main character acts like a voyeur who enjoys “*funūn at-talaşşuşi*” [The art of voyeurism]. He is looking through his bedroom window onto the adjacent rooftop where a Nubian family of twelve members live in two basic rooms with a dingy make-shift tent outside to house one of the members of the large family. Most probably, as is the custom in Cairo, the family are the caretakers *bawwābīn* of the apartment building. He can hear their screams and arguments on Fridays and holidays. He describes their neighbours as besieged “*muḥāşirīn*” by them. The list of what he can see on the rooftop and inside the rooms rolls on: plants, a phony big Pharoanic statue, plastic bags, bad quality paint boxes for colouring made in China, a broken cassette recorder, some cassette tapes and some squared notebooks--scattered, cheap commodities, and the single lonely voyeur/subject looking out with feelings of being trapped.

This feeling is further augmented by not only the kind of language used, but also how it is placed in the novel. We see the language sometimes as text paragraphs with a drawing or photo as backdrop, other times as speech bubbles, but we also see it resembling figure poetry when the paragraph takes on the form of one of two cats it is describing. In another instance, we see the sentences slanted across the page like rain drops in the wind, or placed within the gaping mouth of a child or entering what seems to be an uncanny single magnified ear, or emanating from a large bell megaphone on top of a car. We also see the language scribbled on walls, as shop signs, as a text message on a cell-phone screen, as text in a newspaper, on license plates, and on strewn menus. The

multiplicity of forms that the language takes is evidence of the multiplicity of the functions that language serves in everyday contexts.

The minimal affective use of language is seen throughout the novel as well via the proliferation of sounds. We see a parrot that imitates the sounds he hears in the street, cat sounds, a *ha ha ha* coming from a man in the street that almost seems like a disembodied sound, the sounds of street vendors calling out their products, of howling dogs, of music, and the sound of a creaking groaning elevator that is described as *ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt ṭaqṭaqāt*. The sounds are onomatopoeic and their repetition causes an affective performance while we read it and see it on the page. The permeation of sounds and the minimal use of language brings to mind some of the characteristics that Deleuze and Guattari associate with “a minor literature” and that is the deterritorialization of language, which in turn leads to the deterritorialization of the articulation of sound and thus of the subject who enunciates. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the kind of language used that leads to its deterritorialization is one that is characterized by “sobriety” and “dryness”<sup>48</sup> which we see in this novel. The language is moved to “its extremities or its limits,”<sup>49</sup> In addition, the sounds that are mentioned above and that we see coming out of gaping mouths or falling on listening ears causes the organs to separate from the subject in many ways, for “in giving themselves over to the articulation of sounds, the mouth, teeth and tongue deterritorialize.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. 1 edition. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1986. 19.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, 19

I mentioned previously that in the last nine pages of the graphic novel, we find more traditional comic sequential panels set up with gutters, speech and thought bubbles, and sound effects/visual sound clues. Apart from two captions on two separate pages, the language variety used is 'Ammiyyah and carries two registers, one of the authoritative policeman on the one hand, and the submissive, fawning *bawwāb* on the other hand. The main character has not been seen for eleven days, and the rent was due three days ago. The *bawwāb* has called the police, since it's unlike the *bāshā* to be late in paying the rent. He also adds--spelled out so as to convey an upper Egyptian dialect-- "*lūwlaksh ir-rīḥah illī fāyḥah min ash-shagah kunt gult 'inuh bi-yitharrab min dafa' al-īygār*" [If it were not for the stench coming from the apartment, I would have said that he was trying to avoid paying rent.] The policeman insults the *bawwāb* and they break down the apartment's door, only to find the main character dead, with a gaping mouth as if screaming with fear, reminiscent of the iconic painting *The Scream* by Edvard Munch. The *bawwāb* and one of the tenants who just happens to be around are taken as suspects, and the novel ends with neighbours voicing comments about the deceased.

"All comics are political"<sup>51</sup> note Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas. Even though *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq* is directly political in a literal sense, since it unfolds in downtown Cairo where protests take place in post-2011 Egypt, where policemen authoritatively arrest and accuse people haphazardly, and where the main character in the novel is found dead, assumed murdered, the term political can be understood in its

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<sup>51</sup> Douglas, Allen, and Fedwa Malti-Douglas. *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ Pr, 1994. Print. 1.

broader meaning in the case of comics and graphic novels. For even the simple act of reading itself in graphic novels can be seen as political, as it is radicalized by the nature of the heterogeneous space and the dismantling of forms and concepts of spatio-temporality. One can argue that homogenous spaces no longer exist anywhere, but with the meshing of the visual with the textual and the presence of multiple linguistic and visual levels, the heterogeneity of space in graphic novels is multiplied and open, allowing for new modes of conceptualization, and the breaking down of the prioritizing of content over form or even form over content. In many ways, graphic novels are all form and all content. The implication of this on the linguistic level is that the literary language of graphic novels takes on a different dimension and function other than the literary languages we see in more traditional novels. It is true that in many postmodern novels, the insertion of diagrams does take place, but that is the exception rather than the norm. In graphic novels, the visual element is constitutive of the very act and process of reading and meaning making, as we have seen in *Fī Shiqqat Bāb al-Lūq* with an aestheticization of even the use of diacritics. A potential subverting of diacritical marking--traditionally associated with the Quran and classical texts--occurs, transforming it into a purely visual element.

## **Conclusion**

The playfulness in the use of language that we have witnessed is just one of the common characteristics that we have seen in the two novels and that can be seen in many other contemporary Arabic novels as well. Intertextuality and parody proliferate the texts.

The authors making use of the rich array of varieties and registers that the Arabic language has to offer, thinking often of the function that using a particular variety may serve, can be observed time and again. The use of the varieties available in the Arabic language, and the intertextuality that allows for movement between different genres and registers of Arabic with no ideology of privileging one variety over another or delegitimization of the spoken forms is reminiscent of pre-modern texts like that of al-Jāhiz. It is only towards the end of the Nahḍah--for at its beginning we see works like Aḥmed Fāris ash-Shidyāq's *aṣ-Ṣāq 'Alā aṣ-Ṣāq Fī Mā Huwā al-Firyāq*-- that we see a foreclosing of the free use of all these varieties and registers, with a strict policing of the suitability and preference of one variety *Fuṣḥā*, over the other *'Ammiyyah* and all that lies in between. It is with the advent of what can be loosely called as the “two thousanders” --those writing in the new millennium-- that we see a return and a reclaiming of all that the Arabic language with its multiple traditions has to offer. Access to public spaces, independent publishing houses, online medium and in turn the emergence of a new reading public all figured in this reclaiming of the Arabic language with its varieties. The fact that all of the examined novels are political in one way or another is significant, and by political I mean ready to unsettle notions like history, authority, what a text can do and ultimately the possibilities that language can offer. Their subversiveness and politicization is different from that of the 1960's generation, who often used their texts to reveal oppression and torture, and thus were speaking “truth to power.” The “two thousanders” often do not speak “truth to power,” for they would rather unsettle and disturb the very notion of power in all its guises even its linguistic ones, and what it



means, not least via their use of language. In order to keep up with their writing with all its inclusiveness, we too need to recognize and describe a new poetics when it comes to the literary languages of Arabic.

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