

THE QUEUE AS A DYSTOPIAN TAḤRĪR:
BASMA ‘ABDAL‘AZĪZ’S AṬ-ṬĀBŪR¹
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This article deals with the dystopian novel called *aṭ-Ṭābūr* (The Queue) written by the contemporary Egyptian writer and psychiatrist Basma ‘Abdal‘azīz. The article briefly discusses the emergence of dystopian fiction in Egypt, especially from the point of view of its assumed connection to the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. It focuses on the examination of ‘Abdal‘azīz’s depiction of a dystopian reality in the novel, with special emphasis on moments of rupture that are often mentioned but never shown. The article argues that the portrayal of the Queue in the novel can be interpreted as a reversal of the positive literary image of Taḥrīr Square that appeared in many revolutionary diaries and memoirs. Both sites are analysed not only as places but also as time-spaces or chronotopes. The aim of the article is to explore the ways in which these sites are contrasted, juxtaposed and presented in a dialectical relationship with each other to point to the reversal of the utopian reality to dystopian nightmare. It also seeks to show that in spite of its dystopian character, the novel actually articulates a certain degree of optimism.

Keywords: dystopia, Basma ‘Abdal‘azīz, queue, Taḥrīr Square, chronotope, Arabic literature

Despite the fact that dystopian fiction emerged in Arabic literature only at the beginning of the new millennium, the roots of the utopian imagination in the Arab world can be traced back to philosophical treatises like al-Farābī’s (872 –

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950/951) *Mabādi' ārā' ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* (Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City), with elements of early utopian fiction also present in fantastic stories about adventure voyages to remote corners of the (imaginary) world, like the tales from the *Thousand and One Nights* and especially those of Sindbād the Sailor. These narratives depict imaginary societies and cultures that are presented either in a positive or a negative light and sometimes the difference between a utopia and a dystopia is only a matter of perspective or depth of understanding of a given society:² what might look like a dream world at first sight can turn into a nightmare when observed more closely. Nevertheless, either a positive or a negative portrayal of foreign societies often depended on the religious beliefs of their inhabitants. As I. Campbell, R. Irwin and others observed, unlike Western utopias, which have been largely secular in character, utopian thinking in Arabic literature has often been linked to religious belief and has reflected the idea of a perfect society rooted in Islam.³ After all, the principles of an ideal Muslim society have already been established in the Holy Qur'ān. That is most probably one of the reasons why, as Irwin believes, there were considerably fewer examples of utopian fiction in Arabic literature than in the Euro-American environment. The dawn of Arab modernity witnessed the renewal of utopian imagination, especially in connection with the so-called *tamaddun* (civilization) debates. As Wen-Chin Ouyang observed, during the modernization period, utopian thinking became closely related to the notion of a nation-state and especially in the form of its imagined literary representation.⁴ In the period that witnessed the formation of the concept of a nation, especially in terms of Benedict Anderson's imagined community,⁵ the notion of utopia acquired a more secular character, even though it often remained rooted in religious values.

The Turn to Dystopia in Modern Arabic Literature

Humankind seems to have always been fascinated by visions of ruin, horror and death, with images of apocalypse and hell proliferating not only in theology and philosophy but in literature and art too. While dystopia has its roots in satire and the apocalyptic imagination, according to G. Claeys it is mostly “a modern

² Such as for example the Fourth Voyage of Sindbād the Sailor.

³ See IRWIN, R. *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, p. 207; CAMPBELL, I. *Arabic Science Fiction*, pp. 66–67.

⁴ OUYANG, W.-Ch. *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition*, p. 46.

⁵ See ANDERSON, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1991.

phenomenon, wedded to secular pessimism”.⁶ Often considered a dark twin of utopia which depicts an ideal society, the term dystopia⁷ (Arab. *dīstūbiyā*; *adab al-madīna al-fāsida*; *‘ālam al-wāqī‘ al-marīr*; *naqīd al-yūtūbiyā*) refers to a non-existent society that “the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived”.⁸

The turn from utopian thinking to anti-utopianism and dystopian fiction in Euro-American writing was largely a result of horrors of the 20th century, that were accompanied by the loss of belief that our world can be a better place.⁹ After the utopian imagination was discredited by totalitarian regimes, utopias came to represent a stagnant, rigid and undesirable state of affairs in a society.¹⁰ Once a genre that promoted social transformation, as R. Levitas has put it, it has lost much of its changing capacity and become only a form of escapism or instrument of social critique.¹¹ Moreover, utopianism has come to be deemed as dangerous and writers and thinkers have become wary of its possible authoritarian tendency. If a single version of a utopia is imposed on all the people in a given society, especially when combined with ideology, it can easily become a tool of oppression and tyranny, turning the vision of an ideal society into a nightmarish dystopia instead.

In the Arab world, the inclination towards dystopian fiction in literature can be seen as the result of several interconnected factors. First and foremost, the long-lasting existence of authoritarian regimes, an atmosphere of repression, the constant violation of human rights, deteriorating living conditions, proliferating corruption, increasing income inequality and the dead-end situation especially of the younger generation of educated but unemployed individuals condemned to a protracted “waithood”¹² in all spheres of their lives, all these factors have contributed to an ever-deepening frustration among the population towards the political authorities, economic situation and the overall status quo.

⁶ CLAEYS, G. *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 4.

⁷ The term dystopia was coined in the 18th century. See CLAEYS, G. *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 273.

⁸ SARGENT, L. T. Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited. In *Utopian Studies*, 1994, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 9.

⁹ MOYLAN, T. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, p. xi.

¹⁰ BOOKER, K. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, pp. 16–17.

¹¹ LEVITAS, R., SARGISSON, L. Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia. In MOYLAN, T., BACCOLINI, R. (eds.). *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, p. 14.

¹² SINGERMAN, D. The Negotiation of Waithood: The Political Economy of Delayed Marriage in Egypt. In KHALAF, S., KHALAF, R. S. (eds.). *Arab Youth/ Social Mobilisation in Times of Risk*, pp. 67–78.

One of the inherent traits of dystopian fiction is its ability to reflect upon contemporary issues in a society, to identify potential threats, harmful tendencies and possibly also to uncover the hidden source of social evils.¹³ Arabic literature has a long history of addressing socio-political issues through creative writing, which was the result of decades of state surveillance and strict censorship, especially during the eras of Jamāl ‘Abdannāṣir and Anwar as-Sādāt. This kind of criticism usually took the form of allegory, fables, folk stories and historical fiction, but not dystopias.

In an article the Egyptian writer Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962 – 2018) poses the question of why the genres of science fiction and dystopia¹⁴ are so underrepresented in Arabic literature and comes to the conclusion that it could be the result of the relatively late emergence of the genre of the novel in the Arab environment.¹⁵ Referencing several professionals from the field of Arab cultural production, Tawfīq explains that genres like sci-fi have often been viewed as “inferior” or “low” literature (*adab dūnī*).¹⁶ The reason for this was most probably that in other parts of the world as well, both dystopia and sci-fi have for a long time not been considered a part of serious literary production with artistic value, as Campbell and others have pointed out.¹⁷

The rise of dystopian fiction in Egyptian literature came about thanks to a change of approach to creative writing. With the dawn of postmodern literature, the reverence of authors for grand narratives and serious literary genres dissipated. At the same time, most of them rejected the idea of committed writing and literature with a message that ruled the Egyptian literary scene for decades. Instead literature acquired a post-political character, as the Egyptian writer, journalist and literary critic Y. Rakhā put it. Writers no longer turn away from political issues, as was the case of literature of the 90s, but they “never endorse a

¹³ MOYLAN, T. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, p. xii; see also BOOKER, K. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*.

¹⁴ Tawfīq considers dystopia a subcategory of science fiction (*khayāl ‘ilmī*). See TAWFĪQ, A. K. *Khayāl ‘ilmī ‘Arabī... hal huwa khayāl ‘ilmī? [Arabic Science Fiction... is it a Science Fiction?]* In *Antologia.com*, published on the website by Jīrān ash-Shaddānī. 23 March 2016. [online] [cit. 18 April 2022]. Available from <https://alantologia.com/page/4370/>.

¹⁵ TAWFĪQ, A. K. *Khayāl ‘ilmī ‘Arabī... hal huwa khayāl ‘ilmī? [Arabic Science Fiction... is it a Science Fiction?]* In *Antologia.com*, published on the website by Jīrān ash-Shaddānī. 23 March 2016. [online] [cit. 18 April 2022]. Available from <https://alantologia.com/page/4370/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See for example CAMPBELL, I. *Arabic Science Fiction*, pp. 7–10.

political argument”.¹⁸ The younger generation’s protest against the cultural values of the previous decades is manifest in their choice of language, style, use of irony and satire and mixing-up of different literary genres. Dystopian fiction enables writers of this “post-political” period to address critically specific problematic political, social, religious, cultural, gender, economic, class or environmental issues in a creative way without resorting to ideological writing. While the first pioneering works to contain elements of dystopian fiction¹⁹ appeared in Egypt in the second half of the 20th century,²⁰ the rise of dystopian fiction in Arabic literature in general and in Egypt in particular came only much later, in the first decade of the new millennium, with works like Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq’s *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia, 2008), ‘Izzaddīn Shukrī Fushayr’s *Bāb al-khurūj* (Exit Door, 2012), Aḥmad Nājī’s *Istikhdām al-ḥayāt* (Using Life, 2014),²¹ Muḥammad Rabī’s *Uṭārid* (Otared, 2015) and, last but not least, Basma ‘Abdal‘azīz’s *aṭ-Ṭābūr* (The Queue, 2013).

“The Queue”

Basma ‘Abdal‘azīz (1976) is an Egyptian writer, psychiatrist, human rights activist and artist.²² She started writing her first novel *aṭ-Ṭābūr* (The Queue,

¹⁸ RAKHA, Y. In *Extremis: Literature and Revolution in Contemporary Cairo: An Oriental Essay in Seven Parts*. In *The Kenyon Review New Series*, 2012, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 161.

¹⁹ For more information see HILL, P. *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda*.

²⁰ Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm’s *Riḥla ilā al-ḡad* (Voyage to Tomorrow, 1957) combines elements of dystopia and sci-fi, Najīb Maḥfūz’s *Riḥlat Ibn Faṭṭūma* (The Journey of Ibn Faṭṭūma, 1983) oscillates between a utopia and dystopia and Ṣabrī Mūsā’s (1932 – 2018) *as-Sayyid min ḥaql as-sabānikh*, (The Man from the Spinach Field, 1987) is often read as an early example of an Arabic dystopia.

²¹ In collaboration with the Egyptian illustrator Ayman az-Zurqānī.

²² ‘Abdal‘azīz studied neuropsychiatry and sociology and works at the Nadīm Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture (*an-Nadīm li-munāḥaḍat al-‘anf wa at-ta-ḍīb*) and General Secretariat for Mental Health (*al-Amāna al-‘amma li-aṣ-ṣiḥḥa an-naḥsiya*), both located in Cairo, Egypt. She has published several scholarly books on the topics of torture, power and subjugation and two collections of short stories – *Ashān Rabbunā yusahhil* (May God Make it Easy, 2008) and *al-Walad alladī ikhtafā* (A Boy who Disappeared, 2008). In 2013, she published her debut novel *aṭ-Ṭābūr* (The Queue). Her second novel *Hunā badan* (Here is a Body) was published in 2018 and her most recent novel *A‘wām at-tūta* (Years of the Mulberry Tree) was published in 2022. For more information see for example NADER, S. (Pseudonym). Basma Abdelaziz – A Portrait. In *Middle East – Topics & Arguments*, November 2018, pp. 146–152.

published in 2013) in 2012, shortly after the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muḥammad Mursī (1951 – 2019, in office 2012 – 2013) in the presidential election. Despite the disenchantment that many felt over the results of the election and what they saw as a threat to the secular values of the society and a regression to Islamic conservatism, ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel is not aimed at any kind of religious government but at the dehumanized, oppressive, totalitarian system. The writer admitted to drawing inspiration from the writings of George Orwell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett and also the Egyptian avant-garde writer Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm.²³

Her novel *aṭ-Ṭābūr* is set in an unnamed Middle Eastern city resembling the Egyptian capital and its events take place in an unspecified future which, however, in many aspects alludes to a present-day reality. In this dystopian realm, all aspects of life are monitored and strictly controlled by the state apparatus called the Gate (*al-Bawwāba*) which uses various strategies to subjugate the citizens. The novel tells the story of a 38-year-old sales representative Yaḥyā Jād ar-Rabb Sa‘īd who was shot during the anti-government protests against the Gate labelled by the regime as the Disgraceful Events (*al-Aḥdāṭ al-mushayyina*). The bullet lodged near his kidney and he needs to undergo surgery to have it removed, but since the official narrative has it that no shooting occurred during the events, such a procedure requires special permission (*taṣrīḥ*) from the Gate. Even though the Gate has remained closed to the public ever since the Disgraceful Events took place, Yaḥyā has no other option than to join the long queue that has started to form in front of the eponymous building, in the hope that it will re-open before his health condition severely deteriorates.

Yaḥyā is assisted by his girlfriend Amānī and his friend Nājī who on the one hand try to help him obtain the documents that are required for the removal of the bullet and on the other hand attempt to persuade the on-duty physician who examined Yaḥyā on the night he was shot and took the X-ray picture of his pelvis, Dr. Ṭāriq Fahmī, to perform the surgery without the permit. Whilst Ṭāriq takes his medical duties seriously and genuinely cares about the wellbeing of his patients, he is reluctant to break the law out of fear of the possible consequences for his career and even his own life.

The novel offers insight into the psychology and motivations of a wide range of other characters from different socio-economic strata, like the poor but resourceful Umm Mabruk, the idealistic school teacher Inās, the liberated and outspoken Woman with Short Hair, the religious zealot Man in Jallābiya, the inquisitive journalist Iḥāb or the local villager Shalabī, seeking justice for his cousin who died carrying out the orders of the Gate. The characters in the novel oscillate between submission and resistance, often attempting to defy the

²³ ‘ABDAL‘AZĪZ, B. Personal communication, 27 November 2018.

oppressive system only to be overpowered by the Gate’s manifold subjugating mechanisms which include but are not limited to psychological manipulation, propaganda, overcomplicated and incomprehensible rhetoric, gaslighting, selective provision of health care and basic goods, intimidation, victim-blaming and excessive (though ineffective) bureaucracy and administrative overload. As a result, people become confused, anxious and mentally exhausted, drained of all energy until they completely lose their will to resist. And in case this “strategy of latent terror,” as S. Milich called it,²⁴ does not suffice to maintain control over the citizens, the Gate resorts to more tangible forms of oppression like violence and torture.²⁵

One of the examples that illustrate how these oppressive mechanisms operate to control the people is the case of the destitute but resourceful Umm Mabruk, who tries to acquire a permit for her sick daughter to undergo surgery but finds the paperwork procedures so complicated and overwhelming that she asks an official for help. However, his speech is so perplexing and opaque that after he basically instructs her to give up her endeavour to save her daughter’s life, she is thankful all the same and even tips him generously.

Another storyline follows Inās, an open-minded and emancipated school teacher who gradually turns into a frightened and timid person under the influence of continuous psychological manipulation and abuse on the part of a self-proclaimed preacher, the so-called Man in Jallābiya (*ar-Rajul dū al-jilbāb*). Driven by feelings of uncertainty, guilt and the fear of being ostracized by both her family and society for her bold opinions, she alters her behaviour and the way she dresses, and even agrees to marry the Man in Jallābiya, whom she once found repulsive.

Arguably the most disturbing episode describes the transformation of Yahyā’s girlfriend Amānī after she sneaks into the hospital to steal his X-ray picture which he needs to get his authorization from the Gate. Once there, she is captured and subjected to an extreme form of psychological torture that leaves her with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. She is overcome with paranoia, secludes herself from other people and in the end finds refuge in a complete denial of reality.

²⁴ MILICH, S. The Politics of Terror and Traumatization: State Violence and Dehumanization in Basma ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s al-Ṭābūr. In GUTH, S., PEPE, T. (eds.). *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World*, p. 146.

²⁵ These are actually real-life strategies often employed by authoritarian regimes. For more information, see ‘ABDAL‘AZĪZ, B. *Āliyāt at-talā‘ub wa al-iqnā‘ fī khiṭāb al-i‘lām wa al-sulṭa* [Techniques of Manipulation and Persuasion in the Discourse of Media and Power]. In *Madā Miṣr*. 26 January 2017. [online] [cit. 4 December 2019]. Available from <https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2017/01/26/opinion/u/الآليات-التلاعب-والإقناع-في-خطاب-الإعلام>.

Under the oppressive system, people become mere shadows of their former selves, “not venturing beyond the lines their oppressor has drawn for them,”²⁶ as the author of the novel commented on the profound changes in personality that her characters go through. They become extremely passive and always expecting that the situation will somehow improve itself. The society in which individuals suffer from extreme forms of psychological and social alienation to the point that they isolate themselves from others becomes atomized and unable to conduct any kind of collective action to rise up against their oppressors.²⁷

The novel can be characterized as a critical dystopia because it lacks narrative closure and contains elements of textual hybridity.²⁸ According to R. Baccolini, in dystopias, especially the ones that belong to the genre of a critical dystopia, re-appropriation of language together with recovery of memory can become agents of change since they have the capacity to undermine the power of the authorities and promote hope.²⁹ Therefore, to change the status quo, the characters in ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel need to regain control over memory (of history) and language which have been both usurped by the tyrannical authorities and use them as weapons against those in power. As A. Buontempo has noted, the bullet lodged in Yaḥyā’s body is a reminder of the Gate’s shooting during the protests, which makes the character’s survival a matter of preserving memory of both the revolutionary event and the regime’s violent response.³⁰

²⁶ ABDEL AZIZ, B. Basma Abdel Aziz on Writing The Queue. In *For Books’ Sake*. Transl. JAQUETTE, E. 9 June 2016. [online] [cit. 14 January 2020]. Available from <http://forbookssake.net/2016/06/09/basma-abdel-aziz-writing-queue/>.

²⁷ Matthies-Boon and Head identified traumatization of citizens as one of the strategies of the (post)revolutionary Egyptian government to create an atomized, depoliticized society and prevent any possible future uprisings. MATTHIES-BOON, V., HEAD, N. Trauma as Counter-Revolutionary Colonisation: Narratives from (Post)Revolutionary Egypt. In *Journal of International Political Theory*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 258–279.

²⁸ The narrative also includes various announcements and decrees of the Gate. Moreover, each chapter of the novel (*faṣl*) begins with one page from Yaḥyā’s medical file that provides the reader not only with all kinds of information about the protagonist, but also shows the extent of the regime’s surveillance system. It has to be noted that the file always updates itself in a mysterious way, as if everything was written down by the invisible hand of the regime.

²⁹ BACCOLINI, R. “A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past”: Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Telling*. In BACCOLINI, R., MOYLAN, T. (eds.). *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, pp. 124–130.

³⁰ BUONTEMPO, A. The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent: al-Ṭābūr by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and al-Tamāsīḥ by Yūsuf Raḥā. In *La rivista di Arablit*, 2015, Vol. 5, Nos. 9–10, p. 48.

Dystopia and Revolution

The emergence of dystopian fiction in the Arab world has often been interpreted as a reaction to the largely disappointing outcome of the revolutionary events often called the Arab Spring, with literary images of violence, terror, chaos and death recalling writers’ own experiences during this tumultuous period. However, the correlation between the historical event and the rise of dystopian genre is actually not that straightforward. While dystopian novels share a bleak, even apocalyptic vision of the future and a menacing atmosphere, most of them differ in style, narrative structure, the portrayal of reality and overall tone, and many of these works had substantial parts written well before the outbreak of the revolutionary events,³¹ which would make them reflections of a wider socio-political and cultural reality in the region rather than a reaction to a particular historical event. T. Pepe and S. Guth have construed the tendency to construct frightening and nightmarish futures in Arabic literature as a turn to posthumanism, which can be perceived as a subversion of the grand humanist narratives of the Nahḍa period.³² Z. Halabi too considers dystopian fiction in the Arab world a reflection of the disillusionment with the failed ideals of the enlightenment project during the Arab renaissance.³³ Last but not least, as crossovers between utopian and dystopian writing exist, not all dystopias necessarily need to be interpreted in terms of writers’ pessimism.³⁴ Nevertheless, to say that the revolution had no impact on contemporary Egyptian fiction would be far from the truth.³⁵ B. Bakker assumes that there seems to exist a certain kind

³¹ AṬ-ṬŪKHĪ, N. How to Write about a Revolution without Making Any Statement about It? In *Beyond Text: Anthropological Approaches to Literature in Europe and the Middle East* [conference]. Prague, 18 October 2019; NĀJĪ, A. Personal e-mail communication, January 2020.

³² GUTH, S., PEPE, T. Foreword/Introduction. In GUTH, S., PEPE, T. (eds.). *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World*, pp. ix-xviii.

³³ MOUNZER, L. Apocalypse now: Why Arab Authors Are Really Writing about the End of the World. In *Middle East Eye*. 1 April 2019. [online] [cit. 20 December 2019]. Available from <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/apocalypse-now-dystopia-why-arab-authors-are-reallywriting-about-end-world-egypt>.

³⁴ One such genre is the critical dystopia, which manages to maintain hope for a better future through resistance to closure. See BACCOLINI, R., MOYLAN, T. Introduction: Dystopia and Histories. In BACCOLINI, R., MOYLAN, T. (eds.). *Dark horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, p. 7.

³⁵ While many literary works were more or less directly influenced by the event, many contemporary writers seem to struggle with the portrayal of the revolutionary events in their fiction out of concern that “the big event” might overshadow other aspects of their writing. See WĀIL’, A. Muzannaq al-kitāba ‘an ḥadaṭ kabīr: at-ṭawra maṭalan [The

of affinity between the dystopian genre in the Arab world and the wave of popular uprisings that swept through the region in 2010/2011.³⁶ While this relationship cannot be explained simply in terms of cause and effect, it has to be noted that some Egyptian dystopias did indeed draw inspiration from the revolutionary events of 2011 and their aftermath. One such novel is Basma 'Abdal'azīz's *aṭ-Ṭābūr* (The Queue, 2013) whose portrayal of the long, ever-growing queue represents the atmosphere of stagnation and passivity and it stands in sharp contrast with the elated spirit that prevailed in Tahrīr Square (*Maydān/ eg. Mīdān Tahrīr*) during the 18 days often described as the January (2011) Revolution (*Ṭawrat Yanāyir*).

Despite the fact that the dystopian reality in *aṭ-Ṭābūr* is not portrayed in such a way as to be interpreted as directly connected with the 2011 uprising, the author alludes to the historical event to explain the rise of the fictional yet very lifelike dehumanized power apparatus known as the Gate. Even though the plot of the novel is set outside any actual place and time and the references to the actual events are given in a rather vague fashion without any factual historical details, the reactions of people to these events, the narratives that surrounded them, the fragmentation of the protest movement into different groups, the violent response of the authorities to these expressions of dissatisfaction, as well as their strategies to re-gain control and remain in power all reflect elements of the country's real-life experience with the (post-)revolutionary period. In the novel, two moments of rupture are mentioned: a popular uprising called the First Storm which gave rise to the Gate and the protests against the status quo labelled as the Disgraceful Events, which happened much later. As for the Disgraceful Events, they are reported to have happened more recently, as a response to economic and administrative terrorization of the citizens by the Gate, which kept issuing numerous bans and orders, and generated excessive paperwork and also levied excessive taxes and fees for practically everything, including window-shopping. The Gate came to control every single aspect of people's lives, making businesses and organizations go bankrupt and ordinary people desperate. Some of them protested, but were quickly dispersed by the Gate's security units. While the reaction of the authorities to the First Storm was their retreat into anonymity and the creation of the dehumanized power apparatus to tighten control over the population, their response to the Disgraceful Events was to put the affairs (and

Bottleneck of Writing on a Big Event: For Example the Revolution]. In *Madā Miṣr*. 11 February 2019. [online] [cit. 20 October 2019]. Available from <https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2019/02/11/feature/الثورة-مثلا-عن-حدث-كبير-الثورة-مثلا-ثقافة/مزنق-الكتابة-عن-حدث-كبير-الثورة-مثلا>.

³⁶ BAKKER, B. Egyptian Dystopias of the 21st Century: A New Literary Trend? In *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 2021, Vol. 21, p. 84.

lives) of the whole society on hold, pushing the citizens into an endless state of waiting and inactivity.

The characters in the novel are not depicted as revolutionaries. Their attitudes towards the moments of rupture range from indifference to ambivalence. Ṭāriq, for example, is concerned only with his medical duties and has only a vague understanding of what happened. He did not participate in either of them; his memory of the First Storm (*al-Habba al-ūlā*) is limited to what he read about it a long time ago and his knowledge of the Disgraceful Events is based on what he heard from his colleagues and the media. He believes that the changes the protesters demanded would make the regime “less authoritarian and harsh” (*aqall tasalluṭan wa tashaddudan*), “more flexible and open-minded” (*akṭar murūnatan wa rubbamā arḥab ufuqan*) but also “less disciplined and less stable” (*aqall inḍibāṭan wa istiqrārān*).³⁷ As for Yahyā, he was reluctant to participate in the protest as he doubted its efficacy. However, he was also curious to see what would happen and therefore decided to be present as an observer. When the Second Disgraceful Events are rumoured to take place, again neither of the two characters are involved; they are preoccupied with their own lives and problems.

While the idea of protest as well as allusions to revolution are an integral part of the characters’ reality, they are always kept in the background, overshadowed by the Gate’s omniscient presence that traps them in the ever-growing Queue, unable to escape the bureaucracy and banalities of everyday life. As A. Buontempo has noted, the novel focuses first and foremost on the aftermath of the January Revolution,³⁸ not on the revolutionary period itself, which might be one of the reasons why the revolution is kept in the background. That being said, I also believe that ‘Abdal‘azīz’s masterful portrayal of the relationship between the people and the reigning powers, her depiction of the psychology of the citizens and their path from passivity to action, as well as the strategies of subjugation, including propaganda and manipulation, cover a larger period of Egypt’s experience with authoritarianism, despotism and repression, including that of the Mubārak era. Moreover, with her expertise in both psychiatry and sociology, the author has managed to touch on some of the more universal topics concerning the human mind and behaviour, especially in times of uncertainty and fear. As Buontempo observed, ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel could almost be read “as an essay on human rights in the form of fiction.”³⁹

³⁷ ‘ABDAL ‘AZĪZ, B. *Aṭ-Ṭābūr* [The Queue], p. 14.

³⁸ BUONTEMPO, A. The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent: *al-Ṭābūr* by Basma ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and *al-Tamāsīḥ* by Yūsuf Raḥā. In *La rivista di Arablit*, 2015, Vol. 5, Nos. 9–10, pp. 48–51.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The Square and the Queue as Chronotopes

The main focus of the novel is undoubtedly the infamous Queue spreading in front of the headquarters of the Gate. While its meaning can be understood in symbolic terms since, according to A. Barbaro, it can be interpreted as an “iconic representation of relations with power,”⁴⁰ it is also a site, which, despite being located spatially, keeps expanding and changing its size and shape. In the novel, the Queue gets longer each day until it reaches monstrous dimensions; whilst on page 38 it is thought to be about two or three kilometres long, on page 76 it took Yahyā a three-hour ride in a minibus to move from his position to the very end of the line. The Queue is also a social unit and a place of everyday social interaction, in which relationships, alliances and mutual animosities are formed and developed. Barbaro considers a queue to be an “anthropological space” since identities and relations as well as history are shaped there.⁴¹ In this regard the Queue in ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel is not much different from the depiction of life in Ṭahrīr Square during the 18 days in January 2011 that can be found in Egyptian fiction, newspaper articles and memoirs.

I would argue that in the novel both sites are contrasted, juxtaposed and presented in a dialectical relationship with each other to point out the reversal of a utopian reality into a dystopian nightmare and possibly also to suggest the way out. Despite the fact that ‘Abdal‘azīz avoids direct description of revolutionary events in her novel, I believe she has relied on the contextual knowledge of the event engraved in the collective memory as well as on numerous literary accounts of the revolution which were published mostly during 2011 and 2012.⁴²

Both the Queue and Ṭahrīr Square can be defined not only as places, but as time-spaces, or chronotopes in Bakhtinian terms, since the passage of time in both of them is inseparably bound up with their respective geographical locations. Bakhtin borrowed the term from Einstein’s theory of relativity and applied it to

⁴⁰ BARBARO, A. In *The Realm of Queueutopia: How to Give Physical Shape to Relations with Power in al-Tābūr(s) by Yūsuf Idrīs and Basma ‘Abd al-‘Azīz*. In *Al-Karmil: Studies in Arabic Language and Literature*, 2019 – 2020, Vols. 40–41, p. 19.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴² For example, Wael Ghonim (Wā’il Ġunaym) – *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power*, (2012), Abdarraḥmān Yūsuf – *Yawmīyāt ṭawrat aṣ-ṣabbār* (Diary of a Cactus Revolution, 2011), Munā Brins – *Ismī Ṭawra* (My Name is Revolution, 2012), Ibrāhīm ‘Abdalmajīd – *Ayyām fī at-Ṭahrīr* (Days in Ṭahrīr, 2011), Aḥmad Zaġlūl ash- Shīṭī - *Mī’at khaṭwa min at-ṭawra: Yawmīyāt min Maydān at-Ṭahrīr* (One Hundred Steps from Revolution: A Diary from Ṭahrīr Square, 2011), Ibrāhīm Aṣlān – *Inṭibā’āt saġīra ḥawla ḥādīṭ kabīr*, (Small Reflections on a Big Event; published 2015), Raḍwā ‘Āshūr – *Aṭqal min Raḍwā* (Heavier than Raḍwā, 2013), Ahdaf Soueif (Ahdāf Suwayf) – *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012) and many others.

literary theory to define “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”.⁴³ In her novel *Sījāra sābi'a* (Cigarette Number Seven, 2012), the Egyptian writer Dunyā Kamāl (1982) has likened Taḥrīr Square to one of Bakhtin's chronotopes. She regards it a particular segment of reality with a characteristic atmosphere and specific rules bound to a delimited geographical location:

The square was powered by an innate honesty that filtered out lies from facts. Leaving the square exposed you to frustration and despair. I sometimes felt that it fell beyond the realms of geography and history, even as it was closely bound to both. It was like a fictional chronotope in Bakhtin's sense: a standalone whole that, while influencing external events, is hardly affected by them. [...] ⁴⁴ The Square was a monumental, tangible living entity. It had influence, spirit, and power. It provided us with support and healed our wounds. It had a face, shape and tongue. It motivated us to persevere and finish what we started, not allowing us for a second to give in or succumb to despair. If you want the proof, just look at what happened to the people as soon as they stepped out of the Square: their spirits broke down and they were overcome with feelings of hopelessness and pessimism. Only rarely did they keep that elevated mood outside the Square.⁴⁵

In fact, according to Bakhtin's theory, a public square can be considered a specific category of the so-called “adjacent chronotope”.⁴⁶ In the times of Ancient Greece, the public square (*agora*) was the centre of public life. It was a place where free citizens gathered and all important public institutions were located. The square was not only a space of social interaction but a locus of political as well as religious, scientific and artistic life.⁴⁷ In Bakhtin's view, the square is closely related to the autobiographical self-consciousness of an individual, which “was first laid bare and shaped in the public square”.⁴⁸ Considering the interconnectedness between the public square and autobiography, it is not surprising, that after Taḥrīr Square was both physically and symbolically (though also temporarily) claimed by the protesters in early 2011, numerous diaries of the

⁴³ BAKHTIN, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination by M. M. Bakhtin: Four Essays*, p. 84.

⁴⁴ KAMĀL, D. *Sījāra sābi'a* [Cigarette No. 7], p. 149, N. Youssef's translation, p. 143.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 164, my translation.

⁴⁶ VLASOV, E. The World According to Bakhtin: On the Description of Space and Spatial Forms in Mikhail Bakhtin's Works. In *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 1995, Vol. 37, Nos. 1–2, pp. 44–45; BAKHTIN, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination by M. M. Bakhtin: Four Essays*, p. 131.

⁴⁷ BAKHTIN, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination by M. M. Bakhtin: Four Essays*, p. 131.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

revolution, memoirs and other writings of an autobiographical character were published. D. Heshmat explains that the number of autobiographical publications that appeared on the Egyptian book market after the revolution reflect the change in Egyptian society and the attempt to reintegrate an alienated, disillusioned and depoliticized citizen into public life and political action.⁴⁹

The Queue can also be considered a chronotope since its existence depends on the fulfilment of specific spatial and temporal conditions.⁵⁰ As S. Fraser and K. Valentine have put it succinctly, though in a different context, “the queue is in itself an inherently spatio-temporal phenomenon in that it is the product of the intra-action of specific temporal conditions with specific spatial arrangements”.⁵¹ But whereas the dominant characteristics of the literary image of Tahrīr Square could be specified as self-expression, freedom, solidarity and tolerance, the main attributes of the Queue can be defined as submission, secrecy, paranoia, distrust and fear. While the Square became an incentive for the people to express their feelings and ideas, as it promoted both verbal and textual communication and encouraged creativity, the effect of the Queue was quite the opposite. Even though the restriction of the use of language is one of the fundamental attributes of dystopian fiction in general, in ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel it becomes even more pronounced in the direct location of the Queue. Most of the characters standing in the line are reluctant to share private information about themselves, keeping the real reason why they were forced to join the Queue a secret, with their verbal interaction limited to small talk. After they realize that their conversations are being recorded, they are alarmed and become even more cautious about the content of their talk and some of them even become paranoid. Last but not least, discussions about the recent development of the situation in the Queue as well as asking questions are both considered as “planting seeds of evil among the people” and “undesirable activities” (*umūr ġayr muḥabbaba*).⁵²

If we consider Bakhtin’s theory, according to which a chronotope is understood not only as a time-space but as “a structural pivot of the narrative,

⁴⁹ HESHMAT, D. Egyptian Narratives of the 2011 Revolution: Diary as a Medium of Reconciliation with the Political. In PANNEWICK, F., KHALIL, G., ALBERS, Y. (eds.). *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, pp. 67–69.

⁵⁰ FRASER, S., VALENTINE, K. *Substance and Substitution: Methadone Subjects in Liberal Societies*, p. 107.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² ‘ABDAL ‘AZĪZ, B. *Aṭ-Ṭābūr* [The Queue], p. 193.

which integrates and determines other aspects of the text,”⁵³ as U. Terentowicz-Fotyga has suggested, we might come to the conclusion that the chronotope of the queue can be viewed as a variation on another of the adjacent chronotopes – “the chronotope of the threshold”⁵⁴ which can be defined as a place of transition between the two different spaces, like entrances, doorways and corridors.⁵⁵ No matter how far the Queue keeps expanding, it is always positioned precisely in front of the entrance to the Gate – i.e. on a threshold. Spatially, it comprises an area that separates the ruling authority from the rest of the country while temporally it can be considered an interlude. As soon as the characters join the queue, their lives are interrupted and left in limbo, “on the borderline between existence and nonexistence, reality and phantasmagoria, always on the verge of disappearing like the fog and vanishing,”⁵⁶ to quote the words Bakhtin used to describe the chronotope in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, but which are perfectly applicable in this context. As long as Yaḥyā stays in the Queue, the matter of his survival remains uncertain, his very existence suspended between life and death. However, the state of transience and “inbetweenness” that is characteristic of the chronotope of the threshold does not concern only the fates of individual characters, which are left on hold, but since transition from one point to another suggests a possibility of change, it raises questions about the future of the whole dystopian system, including the very existence of the Gate.

The Queue as a Dystopian Taḥrīr

The literary image of Taḥrīr Square in both Egyptian fiction and autobiography has often been depicted in utopian terms. Various accounts of the revolutionary events from Taḥrīr Square report that it was a place in which people from different socio-economic strata and religious backgrounds coexisted peacefully, sharing food, medicine, and various acts of kindness. Participants freely expressed their opinions and treated one another with tolerance and respect.

⁵³ TERENTOWICZ-FOTYGA, U. Defining the Dystopian Chronotope: Space, Time and Genre in George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. In *Beyond Philology*, 2018, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 9.

⁵⁴ VLASOV, E. The World According to Bakhtin: On the Description of Space and Spatial Forms in Mikhail Bakhtin’s Works. In *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 1995, Vol. 37, Nos. 1–2, p. 45.

⁵⁵ BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 149; VLASOV, E. The World According to Bakhtin: On the Description of Space and Spatial Forms in Mikhail Bakhtin’s Works. In *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 1995, Vol. 37, Nos. 1–2, p. 47.

⁵⁶ BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 167.

Young people collected waste, keeping the public space clean, participants with medical training tended the injured in improvised first-aid stations, others brought blankets and mattresses for those who spent the night in the square. Those who gathered in the square in protest against the corrupt regime managed to build a community united by feelings of unparalleled mutual solidarity.⁵⁷ Notwithstanding the violence that the protesters experienced on site, the pain they suffered from injuries, and the grief over those who lost their lives, many authors have created a utopian image of the square, at times attributing to it mythical, even supernatural, qualities. For instance, Nādiya, the narrator and protagonist in Dunyā Kamāl's novel *Sījāra sābi'a* (Cigarette Number Seven, 2012), believes that the square provided the protesters with support and healed their wounds.⁵⁸ The Egyptian writer Yūsuf Rakhā's (1976) expressed the extraordinary atmosphere on Taḥrīr Square through the words of the protagonist of his novel *at-Tamāsīḥ* (The Crocodiles, 2012) who felt as if God appeared for real.⁵⁹ The prominent Egyptian blogger and political activist 'Alā' 'Abdalfattāḥ has defined Taḥrīr Square as "a myth that creates a reality in which... [the people] long believed".⁶⁰ Even the novelist May Telmissany described the group of protesters who gathered on Taḥrīr Square in the early days of protests as "a utopian community"⁶¹ as "the square strove to build a secular utopian space where class-based, gender-based as well as religious-based relationships were briefly discarded in favour of the call for national unity".⁶²

Indeed, many parallels can be observed between the literary portrayal of Taḥrīr Square and 'Abdal'azīz's Queue. However, the two sites are also in sharp contrast with each other. In the novel, the characters remain in the queue for days, even weeks, regardless of their age, education, religious views or their social standing, as was the case in Taḥrīr Square.

⁵⁷ See for example the memoirs of the Egyptian novelist and political and cultural commentator SOUEIF, A. *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* [mobi e-book], locations 1746–1775.

⁵⁸ KAMĀL, D. *Sījāra sābi'a* [Cigarette Number Seven], p. 164.

⁵⁹ RAKHĀ, Y. *At-Tamāsīḥ* [The Crocodiles], p. 174, paragraph no. 158. The writer himself expressed a similar sentiment in a personal interview with the author of this article. RAKHĀ, Y. Personal communication, 12 June 2019.

⁶⁰ SOUEIF, A. *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* [mobi e-book], Epilogue: Alaa, 24 June 2011, Location 2099.

⁶¹ TELMISSANY, M. The Utopian and Dystopian Functions of Tahrir Square. In *Postcolonial Studies*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 37.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 39–41.

[Yahyā] passed most of the day there [in the queue] and sometimes even spent the night, as many others did. Nagy [Nājī] had offered to bring him a tent to sleep in, but he’d turned it down. He would rather be like everyone else, chatting until the early hours of the morning and then nodding off for an hour or two in his place. People around him stood there so resolutely, he hadn’t seen many sleeping or even sitting down in recent days. Everyone expected the queue to move at any minute, and they wanted to be ready. He found himself doing the same, even though he didn’t believe what they told him about the Gate – that it might open at dawn, or even deep in the middle of the night.⁶³

However, the atmosphere in the Queue is diametrically opposed to the one pertaining to the square. That elevated spirit, feelings of freedom, optimism, solidarity and the sense of belonging to a community which were prevalent in Tahrīr are replaced by passivity, lethargy, scepticism, mistrust and even hostility. One of the main reasons for that is undoubtedly the fact that people did not join the Queue out of their own will; they were forced to do so through denial of access to their basic needs, medical care as well as requirements of all kinds of permits and certificates. Whilst most of the time, people are polite to one another, they are immersed in their own problems and almost never ask anyone for help or share anything for free. Umm Mabruk sets up her own small business of selling tea and other refreshments and lets others use her mobile phone to make calls but it is always for a small fee.⁶⁴

As a result of the various oppressive mechanisms and subjugating strategies of the Gate, the society in ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel is atomized, distrustful and extremely passive, which is in sharp contrast with the collective spirit of Tahrīr Square. Individual citizens suffer from trauma, psychological and social alienation, anxiety, PTSD, depression and mental paralysis. The totalitarian system in *aṭ-Ṭābūr* is buttressed by both economic elites and religious authorities. However, religion is not portrayed as a means to find solace but to exert the latter’s power over the people and bring them to submission. For example, the High Sheikh (*ash-Shaykh al-a‘lā*) suggests that the people who were killed during the events actually deserved their lot because they were not religious enough and “piety protects people from misfortune and evil”.⁶⁵ The discourse of the religious authorities induces and strengthens a fatalist approach to life, leading people to

⁶³ ‘ABDAL‘AZĪZ, B. *Aṭ-Ṭābūr* [The Queue], pp. 25–26. E. Jaquette’s translation, pp. 17–18.

⁶⁴ In fact, she has won unlimited phone credit in a competition, which is why she can make calls for free. However, she keeps this piece of information secret and gains profit from the small fees that people pay her for using her phone to make calls.

⁶⁵ ‘ABDAL‘AZĪZ, B. *Aṭ-Ṭābūr* [The Queue], p. 206. E. Jaquette’s translation, p. 181.

view difficulties in life as God's will that needs to be accepted. This kind of fatalism, however, not only leads to excessive passivity among the populace but, as recent scholarship in critical psychology has shown, also induces "internalization of an oppressive social structure," as it can be viewed "neither as an individual attitude nor an internal cognitive process but rather a product of power relations".⁶⁶ Yahyā's friend Nājī is aware of the change in people's mentality and their turn to an extreme form of passivity, but admits that he himself has been afflicted and is therefore unable to intervene:

He wondered what made people so attached to their new lives spinning in orbit around the queue, unable to venture beyond it. People hadn't been idiots before they came to the Gate with their paperwork. There were women and men, young and old people, professionals and the working class. No section of society was missing, even the poorest of the poor were there, not separated from the rich by any means. Everyone was on equal ground. But they all had the same look about them, the same lethargy. Now they were even all starting to think the same way. He had expected there to be exceptions, that someone among them would come out in support of the Rifraff, or even sympathize with their call to resist the absurd and ceaseless situation – but no one did. The queue was like a magnet. It drew people toward it, then held them captive as individuals and in their little groups, and it stripped them of everything, even the sense that their previous lives had been stolen from them. He, too, had been affected – he knew it in his heart. Otherwise, he would have told everyone in the queue to advance, promising them that if everyone took just a single step, that single step alone could destroy the Gate's walls and shake off this stagnation. But the queue's magnet held him captive. Maybe he'd convinced himself that he was helping Yehya [Yahyā] by staying in the queue, but the truth was he couldn't leave it; his body came and went, but his will was trapped there.⁶⁷

Besides various forms of physical and psychological violence utilized by the reigning powers, A. Barbaro also recognizes the "symbolic violence" that is epitomized by the very shape and structure of the queue.⁶⁸ Symbolic violence, as defined by Bourdieu, "represents the way in which individuals can contribute

⁶⁶ LACREDA Jr., F. Fatalism, Overview. In TEO, T. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, pp. 690–691.

⁶⁷ 'ABDAL 'AZĪZ, B. *Aṭ-Ṭābūr* [The Queue], pp. 105–106. E. Jaquette's translation, pp. 90–91.

⁶⁸ BARBARO, A. In The Realm of Queueutopia: How to Give Physical Shape to Relations with Power in al-Ṭābūr(s) by Yūsuf Idrīs and Basma 'Abd al-'Azīz. In *Al-Karmil: Studies in Arabic Language and Literature*, 2019 – 2020, Vols. 40–41, pp. 25–26.

toward their own subordination by gradually accepting and internalizing those very ideas and structures that tend to subordinate them”.⁶⁹ Unlike the mass of people gathered in the square as a group of equals, with each individual able to move freely all over the site, the shape of the queue is the one of perpetual subordination – an individual is always in a subordinate position to the person(s) standing in front of them and, at the same time, all of them are subordinated to the Gate. Referencing W. Burroughs and L. Reed, Suzanne Fraser and Kylie Valentine have characterized the time that people spend waiting in a queue, uncertain of the results of their endeavour, as “junk time”.⁷⁰ Taking into consideration that for those who joined the Queue, the site has become the locus of their everyday lives, with all other parts of their former lives, including work and personal relationships, pushed aside, then the Gate has reduced them to unproductive citizens, unable to contribute to society in any meaningful way.

In her article, May Telmissany identifies Tahrīr square as a place of dichotomy and discusses tensions between its utopian and dystopian functions in the (post)revolutionary period. It has to be said that apart from her particular focus on the threat of religious authoritarianism, all other dystopian functions she assigns to Tahrīr Square can be traced in *aṭ-Ṭābūr* as well. She believes that unlike the revolutionary period, which she views as “utopian” during the post-revolutionary period, the square became associated with dystopian features whose aim was “to assert the domination of one particular group, seeking to achieve total control over the society”.⁷¹ According to Telmissany’s article, the square’s reversal from utopia⁷² to dystopia was accompanied by the formation of negative attitudes towards the revolution. The authorities attempted to change people’s view of the revolutionary events through restrictive measures that denied them access to the public space as well as anti-propaganda, mostly aimed at smearing the reputation of the protesters. The last dystopian function of the square given by Telmissany is erasure of memory and an “un-learning revolt”,

⁶⁹ CONNOLLY, P., HEALY, J. Symbolic Violence and the Neighbourhood: the Educational Aspirations of 7–8 Year Old Working-Class Girls. In *The British Journal of Sociology*, 2004, Vol. 55, No. 4, p. 513.

⁷⁰ FRASER, S., VALENTINE, K. *Substance and Substitution: Methadone Subjects in Liberal Societies*, p. 111.

⁷¹ TELMISSANY, M. The Utopian and Dystopian Functions of Tahrir Square. In *Postcolonial Studies*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 42.

⁷² According to Telmissany, the utopian functions of the square can be summed up in the following way: 1. Tahrīr was a site of both resistance against the authoritarian regime and of a struggle for democracy; 2. it was a place of communal living; 3. it was a space where people received a moral and political education; 4. it was the site of a secular (revolutionary) utopian project. See TELMISSANY, M. The Utopian and Dystopian Functions of Tahrir Square. In *Postcolonial Studies*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 49–51.

both of which are realized through propaganda and through elimination of the physical traces of the moment of rupture to prevent the sites from becoming *lieux de mémoire*⁷³ or sites of memory as Pierre Nora has defined places, objects but also intangible entities that have become “symbolic element[s] of the memorial heritage of any community”.⁷⁴

Telmissany’s analysis has shown that since Tahrīr Square had been a site of not only positive but also negative socio-political circumstances, it has acquired both utopian and dystopian connotations. While the utopian face of the square has been captured in many autobiographies and diaries of the revolution, its darker side has been depicted in some of the examples of post-revolutionary fiction. Even though the square is not physically present in ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel, the connection, or rather the polarity, between the two sites has been expressed through a subtler, less obvious approach. The author has managed to portray a site, in which the very essence of the utopian spirit of the square, including the change in interpersonal relations and mental mindset of the people, has been reversed. Moreover, ‘Abdal‘azīz had good reason to exclude the actual site of the square from the dystopian narrative. As A. Barbaro pointed out, the public space of the square that the people re-appropriated in 2011 had been taken away from them again, which is why the square is not visible and “spaces in general and their contours have become increasingly blurred and indistinguishable”.⁷⁵ In dystopian reality, the city no longer belongs to the citizens and as long as they remain in the Queue, both physically and mentally, waiting for the authorities to solve their problems, those places will remain beyond their reach.

Conclusion

In her novel, Basma ‘Abdal‘azīz has painted a dystopian picture of post-revolutionary Egyptian society, with the main focus on the image of the long-stretching Queue, which can be viewed as the site antithetical to that of the literary representation of Tahrīr Square during the early days of the 2011 revolution. In many aspects, she has managed to create a dystopian version of the square, in

⁷³ TELMISSANY, M. The Utopian and Dystopian Functions of Tahrir Square. In *Postcolonial Studies*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 41–44.

⁷⁴ NORA, P. Preface to the English Language Edition. In KRITZMAN, L. D. (ed.). *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. Transl. GOLDHAMMER, A., p. xvii.

⁷⁵ BARBARO, A. In The Realm of Queueutopia: How to Give Physical Shape to Relations with Power in al-Tābūr(s) by Yūsuf Idrīs and Basma ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. In *Al-Karmil: Studies in Arabic Language and Literature*, 2019 – 2020, Vols. 40–41, pp. 19–22.

which the utopian qualities of the revolutionary site are reversed. Nevertheless, no matter how bleak the situation in the novel may seem, the author does not succumb to pessimism. Despite the lack of any large-scale collective action against the tyrannical system, the capacity for change is indicated on an individual level through Dr. Ṭāriq's shift from passivity to activity.

When at the end of the novel and after a long hesitation Ṭāriq finally decides to operate on Yaḥyā to save his life but is unable to reach him, he opens his medical file, in which he finds an enigmatic sentence suggesting, but not confirming that something (bad) has happened to Yaḥyā: "[Yaḥyā Jād ar-Rabb Sa'īd] spent one hundred and fourteen nights of his life in the queue".⁷⁶ In reaction to what he has just read, for the very first time in the novel, Ṭāriq is actually propelled into activity and dares to write something in the file himself. What might seem like a small, even insignificant, act of personal resistance can have far reaching consequences. In fact, through the act of writing Ṭāriq takes control over the means of communication which up until that moment have been monopolized by the regime, which is a first step on the path to the citizens' reappropriation of language. In dystopian fiction, both language and memory have transformative potential and serve as powerful weapons that can be used to overthrow the oppressive regime. The revolutionary character of Ṭāriq's simple act of writing is emphasised in the choice of words in the last sentence: "He closed the file, left it on his desk, and rose [*qāma*]". The statement can be interpreted not only in terms of Ṭāriq's physical movement, but presumably it should also be viewed as his act of rebellion against the dehumanizing system.⁷⁷

As a critical dystopia, *aṭ-Ṭābūr* manages to preserve utopian hope through resistance to closure. While B. Bakker interprets the lack of happy endings in Arabic dystopias in mostly negative terms, as a manifestation of characters' inability to be agents of change,⁷⁸ according to R. Baccolini an open ending in critical dystopias is actually more hopeful than a conformist happy ending, which provides readers with a false feeling of security and relieves them of their anxiety, because it has the potential to mobilize the readers and encourages them not only to create their own ending but to take the necessary steps in real life to avoid the

⁷⁶ 'ABDAL'AZĪZ, B. *Aṭ-Ṭābūr* [The Queue], p. 244; Jaquette's translation, 217. However, there appears to be a mistake in Jaquette's translation, in which the number 140 is used instead of 114.

⁷⁷ Arabic word *qāma* which the author uses in the last sentence of the novel has several meanings. It means to stand up, but also rise from the dead and to rebel.

⁷⁸ BAKKER, B. Dystopic Trends in Modern Arabic Literature. In *Al Jadid*, 2018, Vol. 22, No. 75. [online] [cit. 21 December 2019]. Available from <https://www.aljadid.com/node/2131>.

bleak dystopian future.⁷⁹ As A. Buontempo has observed, “rather than calling to action, [the novel] acts on the level of collective conscience and memory,”⁸⁰ creating a counter-narrative to the official history, which helps dystopian citizens to see through and confront the half-truths and propaganda spread by the reigning powers. Despite the apparent impression that characters in ‘Abdal‘azīz’s novel gradually adapt to the dystopian conditions, as Bakker has suggested,⁸¹ the novel in fact depicts their slow but steady path to resistance.

Whereas the row of emotionally paralysed citizens, forever waiting in the queue evokes an almost (post)apocalyptic image of zombies, the stagnation that the society has fallen into is not permanent. From a chronotopic point of view, the Queue signifies a state of transition and as such, it also possesses a subversive potential to destabilize the whole system and lead to its overthrow. A mass of people gathered together, never mind how passive and docile they may appear, always poses a latent threat to the hegemonic order. The right impulse is all it takes to ignite the revolutionary spark and turn the site of waiting into that of an uprising. While the Square might have been temporarily reversed to the Queue in *aṭ-Ṭābūr*, the open ending keeps alive the hope that winds of change have already begun to blow.

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⁷⁹ BACCOLINI, R. ‘Hope isn’t stupid’: The Appropriation of Dystopia. In *mediAzioni*, 2020, Vol. 27, pp. D39–D49. [online]. Available from <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>.

⁸⁰ BUONTEMPO, A. The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent: al-Ṭābūr by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and al-Tamāsīḥ by Yūsuf Raḥā. In *La rivista di Arablit*, 2015, Vol. 5, Nos. 9–10, p. 48.

⁸¹ BAKKER, B. Dystopic Trends in Modern Arabic Literature. In *Al Jadid*, 2018, Vol. 22, No. 75. [online] [cit. 21 December 2019]. Available from <https://www.aljadid.com/node/2131>.

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