

A BLEAK PORTRAIT OF THE REVOLUTION: ‘ALĀ’ AL-ASWĀNĪ’S *JUMHŪRĪYA KA’AN*¹

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This article deals with the latest novel of the contemporary Egyptian writer ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī which is called *Jumhūrīya Ka’an* (2018) (The So-Called Republic.). The novel depicts how the lives of various characters from different socioeconomic and religious backgrounds were shaped by the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution of 2011, with special emphasis on the darker side of the Egyptian struggle for democracy. In his novel, the author speculates about the reasons for the failure of the revolution and tries to identify the main culprits. The article aims to provide a thorough analysis of al-Aswānī’s novel with the main focus on how his portrayal of the revolutionary events and the fates of individual characters reflect his own disillusionment with the outcome of the revolution and his shift from sceptical optimism to pessimism.

Key Words: ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *Jumhūrīya Ka’an*, contemporary Egyptian literature, January 25 Revolution, revolutionary youth, The Yacoubian Building, disillusion.

Introduction

After the Egyptian revolution of 2011², the Egyptian publishing world was flooded with literary works, mostly of an autobiographical character, which

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² Opinions on the terminology concerning the events of 25 January 2011 differ according to criteria applied and point of view. Some call it an uprising, others opt for the terms revolt, failed revolution, aborted revolution etc. For a variety of reasons, in this study the event is considered and called a revolution, mainly because it reflects the attitude and choice of word of the Egyptians themselves, even though the Arabic word “*ṭawra*” and “revolution” do not have completely identical meanings. For more information on different meanings of the word, see for example ŠABASEVIČIŮTĚ, G.

were trying to capture the historic moment when the Egyptian people united and rose against the hated autocratic ruler, Ḥusnī Mubārak and made him finally step down. Memoires and diaries of the revolution described the wondrous effect these events had on the collective psyche of the Egyptian people, describing the general atmosphere on the main site of the protests, Taḥrīr Square, in terms of feelings of solidarity and tolerance among the protesters, their strengthened sense of community and shared euphoria over the final turn of events. Those narratives published in the post-revolutionary period reflected a prevailing wave of optimism and people's hopes for a better future. However, the victory in parliamentary elections of the Freedom and Justice Party (*Ḥizb al-Ḥurrīya wa al-ʿAdāla*) affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood and the appointment of its leader, Muḥammad Mursī, as president after his triumph in the presidential elections in 2012 cast a cloud over the democratic aspirations of the revolutionary youth. Soon enough a military coup supported by popular protests in July 2013 brought the country back to its previous state of affairs and the Nahḍa and Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīya massacres of the Muslim Brotherhood supporters cast a dark shadow over the period of democratic struggle.³ While this return to authoritarian rule and the heightened repressive measures of the as-Sīsī regime left indelible marks on local literary production, somewhat contrary to expectations, not many works of fiction dealt particularly with the revolutionary events of 2011 and their aftermath. The reason behind this can be found in the rapid changes which were taking place in the Egyptian political, social and cultural arenas, changing regimes and the resulting need for writers to accommodate to these changing realities and reflect them truthfully in their literary works. Authors were trying to find ways to talk about the big historic event without resorting to political writing. This tendency of avoiding the so-called big issues (*al-qaḍāyā al-kubrā*) in literature started back in the 1990s, when a generation of young, politically and personally disempowered and often marginalized writers started publishing works which reflected their disenchantment with grand narratives and the books of their predecessors.⁴ However, with the outbreak of the revolution it proved almost impossible for

Re-creating the Past: The Manipulation of the Notion of Rupture in Egyptian Revolutions. In *La Révolution française: Rupture(s) en Révolution*, 2011, Vol. 5, pp. 1–12.

³ The account of the revolution is left out in this publication for reasons of space. However, there are a large number of academic and journalistic publications available on the January 25 Revolution and its aftermath. For a concise and comprehensible analysis of the event see e.g. GELVIN, J. L. *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

⁴ MEHREZ, S. Where have All the Families Gone: Egyptian Literary Texts of the Nineties. In *The Arab Studies Journal*, 2001–2002, Vols. 9–10, Nos. 2–1.

authors to completely steer away from politics in their writing while remaining in touch with the current socio-political reality all around.

The So-Called Republic

Seven years after the revolution, the prominent Egyptian writer and political activist ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī (born 1957) published his extensive, 500 page long novel *Jumhūrīya Ka’an* (2018, *The So-Called Republic*),⁵ in which he depicts how the lives of the characters from different socioeconomic and religious backgrounds were shaped by the outbreak of the January 25 Revolution (*Tawrat Yanāyir*). Al-Aswānī, who works as a dentist, is one of the founder members of the oppositional coalition Egyptian Movement for Change (*al-Ḥaraka al-Miṣrīya min ajl at-Taḡyīr*) also known as *Kifāya* (Enough) and a regular contributor of political and cultural commentaries to numerous Arabic and foreign newspapers. He belongs to the category of committed writer-intellectuals who believe in the transformative potential of literature and use it as a tool to comment on pressing social, political and cultural issues. In 2002 al-Aswānī published his first novel *‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān* (*The Yacoubian Building*), depicting various social ills of Egyptian society such as corruption, sexual harassment, abuse of power and religious extremism, which gained international acclaim. His last novel *Jumhūrīya Ka’an* is not only much more critical of contemporary Egyptian society than its famous counterpart, but it gives a rather gloomy account of the revolution and the accompanying events, accusing not just the army and opportunistic religious authorities of being the cause of its failure, but also compliant business elites, celebrities and even ordinary Egyptian people willing to trade their moral values in exchange for their personal benefit, mostly money and power. It brings into the spotlight many controversial issues such as torture, state violence, cronyism, religious duplicity, various kinds of business fraud including looting of factories, exploitation of workers, anti-revolutionary propaganda, miscarriages of court and a dysfunctional education system. The novel also reflects the author’s dismay with the outcome of the so-called Arab Spring and his disappointment with the course the struggle for modernization and enlightenment in Egyptian society has taken in recent years. Because of its provocative content, open criticism of the army and Islamic clergy and sexually explicit scenes, the book had to be published in Lebanon where the publishing world enjoys more freedom and the censorship rules are more lax. Yet, it stirred much controversy in Egypt and

⁵ To be published in English in 2021 as *The Republic of False Truths* (advertised as such on Amazon.com).

given the stifling atmosphere of clamping down on dissent which has even worsened under the new regime, al-Aswānī has been charged with insulting the army and the judiciary and currently faces a military trial.⁶ There are three main content areas that are subject to unofficial literary censorship, namely politics, religion and sex and al-Aswānī's novel ticks all three boxes. According to the prominent Lebanese writer and critic, Ilyās Khūrī (1948), who lauded al-Aswānī for his bravery to write openly about sufferings of the Egyptian people, the novel is "the only comprehensive literary record of the revolution and of the tragic fate which befell the young people who were killed, imprisoned and tortured".⁷ The novel is divided into 73 chapters of various lengths and depicts the lives of numerous characters from different socioeconomic, religious and political backgrounds. Each of them is more or less directly connected to the events of the January Revolution. The novel begins shortly before the eruption of the nation-wide wave of protests in January 2011 and ends before the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power. The main focus of the novel is not the revolution itself but the events that were happening in the background, on the margins, or after Mubārak stepped down and how it changed the lives of the various characters. The novel can be characterized as *roman à clef*: most of the historical incidents described in the novel are based on real events, such as factory strikes, the Maspero massacre, humiliating virginity tests for female protesters performed by army officers or a vicious anti-revolutionary media campaign and the author supports the authenticity of the narrative by adding various kinds of materials such as the testimonies of eye witnesses and victims, editing of TV clips and videos, letters and email correspondence. Moreover, some of the characters are reminiscent of real-life people whether they be activists, TV personalities, preachers or members of the political and cultural elite.

Dāniya and Khālid: Shattered Dreams of the Youth

The beginning of the novel introduces to the reader the °Alwānīs - without doubt one of the most influential families in Egypt. Major General (*liwā'*) °Alwānī is an awe-inspiring and powerful member of the military and the

⁶ AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. Na°am.. anā muttahaḡ bi-qaḡīya °askarīya [Yes.. I am Charged Before the Military Court]. In *Deutsche Welle* [online]. 19 March 2019 [cit. 30 November 2019]. Available from <<https://p.dw.com/p/3FESo>>.

⁷ KHŪRĪ, I. Taḡīya li-ḡākirat al-alam al-miṣrī wa li-al-kātib ash-shujā° °Alā' al-Aswānī [Salute to the Memory of Egyptian Pain and to the Brave Writer °Alā' al-Aswānī]. In *Qanṡara.de* [online]. 9 August 2018 [cit. 19 December 2019]. Available from <<https://ar.qanṡara.de/node/31918>>.

éminence grise behind much of what is happening in Egypt who does not refrain from torturing detained activists, plotting a nationwide conspiracy and if necessary, also killing his enemies. His youngest daughter Dāniya is nothing like her father. She is a bright, good-hearted and meek if rather naïve student of medicine, who seems to be almost oblivious to both her class privileges and the true nature of her father's work. Because of her overprotective father who considers her "the genuine source of joy in his life"⁸ and her high social status, most of her life she has been kept in a gilded cage by her wealthy parents who also intentionally isolated her from her peers, "sons of the scum" so that they do not corrupt her morals and way of thinking. At the same time, Dāniya's understanding of the outside world seems to be quite superficial and she only begins to develop a critical capacity and to reconsider many of her beliefs after she starts spending more time with her poor but brilliant classmate, Khālid Madanī, with whom she eventually falls in love. What begins as a classic love story across social classes, ends as a tragic tale of the shattered dreams of Egyptian youth. There is no chance to even properly consider how to win the consent of Dāniya's parents (as if there were any chance to succeed) because the revolution breaks out and Khālid, who is an ardent activist, shares a similar fate to that of his real-life namesake Khālid Sa'īd: he is killed by a police officer at one of the revolutionary protests, which they both attended as medical students to care for the injured. The life of the a young student, his hopes and aspirations come to an abrupt end. Dāniya, who saw him dying right before her eyes, is devastated. She is ready to defy her family and bear witness before the court. However, in the end she succumbs to threats and emotional blackmail from her family and decides against getting involved in the whole case. Ironically enough, none of the testimonies of other witnesses is given enough weight before the corrupt court and Khālid's killer walks free without punishment.

Khālid's story is similar to that of countless Egyptian youths. It is also a very good example of their lack of options whatever their talent, intelligence, morals or diligence. What really matters are connections and money. Khālid's father works hard every day as a driver, living an almost ascetic life and saving every pound he earns for his children. The only thing he cares about is his family. Therefore, he does not understand the desire of young people to get involved in politics and to revolt, which could only lead to one of two outcomes: prison or death. He is not able to fathom the depth of frustration of the young generation, their dead-end situation since in his eyes their lives are, or at least should be, much better than those of their parents. The rules of logic dictate that better education should go hand in hand with better job opportunities, higher salary,

⁸ AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. *Jumhūrīya Ka'an* [The So-Called Republic], p. 21.

social mobility and therefore a more prosperous life. At least that is what the generation of Khālīd's father believe, since it gave up their political rights and remained loyal to the regime in exchange for certain social and economic benefits, such as free healthcare, free education, available housing, and the guarantee of getting a job after graduation.⁹ However, these promises were no longer valid nor being fulfilled during the Mubārak era and with rising prices and a higher cost of living, the situation was getting worse every day. According to official statistics, in 2010 the rate of unemployment among young people reached almost 25% and the following year it had risen to as much as 30%¹⁰ and these statistics often take into account only people registered at the offices of Ministry of Manpower and overlook other forms of unemployment or underemployment.¹¹ If unemployed, young people are not able to move on with their lives and they get stuck in a situation which Diane Singerman has called "waithood" – waiting to find a job, waiting to move out from their parents' house, waiting to get married and start a family.¹² On the other hand, the volume of accumulated wealth among the members of the political and business elite and cases of corruption which came to light but were often swept under the carpet filled the hearts of the people with a burning sense of injustice and despair. An authoritarian regime and the ongoing state of emergency took away their political and civil rights, their freedom, their sense of dignity and justice, while a crony capitalist system deprived them of a prosperous future and shattered their hopes for a better life.¹³ As Singerman aptly puts it, "when young people experience social, economic, sexual and political exclusion at the same time, they cannot be satisfied or productive members of society".¹⁴

⁹ GELVIN, J. *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, pp. 8–9, 1–18.

¹⁰ PLECHER, H. Egypt: Youth unemployment rate from 1998 to 2018. In *Statista* [online]. [cit. 20 October 2019]. Available from <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/811968/youth-unemployment-rate-in-egypt/>>.

¹¹ CHARBEL, J. Workers Question Official Statistics on Unemployment Figures. In *Mada Masr* [online]. 16 November 2015 [cit. 20 October 2019]. Available from <<https://madamasr.com/en/2015/11/16/feature/economy/workers-question-official-statistics-on-unemployment-figures/>>.

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.

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of the revolutionary youth and their part in the revolution see COLE, J. *The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East*.

¹⁴ 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*, p. 77.

Khālīd is very bright, hardworking and an excellent student. Be that as it may, he knows he will not receive the highest grades (*taqdīr imtiyāz*) because they are reserved for the children from prominent and influential families in order to raise their chances to get recruited at some of the best clinics. When his father learns about this injustice (*ẓulm*), he is vexed. Feeling powerless, he turns to his boss, ʿIṣām Shaʿlān, who assures him not to worry and promises to help him acquire a contract for Khālīd in Saudi Arabia, where after a few years of practising medicine he will earn enough money to open his own clinic in Cairo. The message of this short episode is clear: without high social status, money or connections, there is no future for all “Khālīds” of the young generation in Egypt. The same holds true for his relationship with Dāniya. Even though they apparently love each other, for him, she is unattainable like a dream. She represents all prospects that are out of Khālīd’s reach: wealth, social mobility, a suitable job and, last but not least, freedom to choose a life partner according to criteria based on their mutual love, respect and compatibility. She is the embodiment of the ideals of revolution: bread, dignity, freedom and social justice (*ʿaysh, karāma, ḥurrīya insānīya, ʿadāla ijtimāʿīya*), which he and his peers were willing to die for. Therefore, Khālīd’s decision to participate in the revolution is not surprising at all, since he has nothing to lose. This attitude which springs from the dead-end position of the young people is nicely illustrated in a short speech by one of the protesters on Taḥrīr Square:

My name is Ḥasan. I’m from Ismāʿīliya. I studied science and I’ve been unemployed for ten years. I no longer hope for anything... marriage, work, travel. I have come today because for me, there’s just two options: to get rid of Ḥusnī Mubārak or to die. And I’m not afraid of dying. I’m already dead.¹⁵

Ironically enough, Dāniya continues to represent the unachievable dreams and shattered hopes of millions of Egyptians even after Khālīd’s death. By retracting her decision to bear witness before the court, she denies him and his family any hope of achieving justice by lawful means. Only when the desperate father stops relying on the state and the elite and takes matters into his own hands, can the death of his beloved son be avenged – even though it means compromising his moral integrity and values. Paradoxically, Dāniya, even though she is honest and has a good heart, is in fact helping to sustain the oppressive system by being too weak and not revolutionary enough.

¹⁵ AL-ASWĀNĪ, ʿA. *Jumhūrīya Ka’an* [Te So-Called Republic], p. 168.

Asmā': The Country Subdued

One of the main storylines of the novel involves e-mail correspondence between a young and liberated teacher Asmā' and her co-activist and later also her love interest Māzin, who are without doubt the real heroes of the novel. They both represent the young generation of educated, urban middle-class Egyptians, who strive to break free from the conservative, patriarchal and seemingly religious but at the same time hypocritical and corrupt elements in the society. They are determined to fight for freedom, democracy and a better future not only on their personal levels but concerning all their compatriots as well. Asmā' faces discrimination at school for not wearing a hijab and is also subjected to bullying by her boss and colleagues because she refuses to disfavour poor students who can't afford to pay for private lessons or extra classes – apparently a widespread practice to compel students to pay in order to pass their exams and by doing so to compensate for teachers' low wages. Even though she encounters many difficulties, she is not willing to give up. At home, she fights gender stereotypes which dictate that she marries well and has children instead of being independent and getting involved in politics, which she prefers. She rejects the concept of marriage as that of a market transaction and a woman's presumable duty to satisfy all her husband's needs in exchange for material comfort. Asmā' regularly participates in demonstrations and she is also part of the youth branch of the Kifāya movement. She is present among other protesters on Taḥrīr Square when Mubārak finally steps down. Her activism continues even beyond this victorious moment because the aim of the revolution was not to remove one dictator and replace it with another – they long for true democracy with a new constitution and want to get rid of all remnants of the old regime (*al-fulūl*). Her outspoken opinions and bold actions are a source of endless conflict between her and her parents. They consider her participation in protests to be shameful and dangerous. Her father, who works in Saudi Arabia, would rather see her veiled, married and preferably also living with him outside Egypt, which she refuses categorically. During one of the demonstrations, she is detained, tortured, sexually molested and humiliated while the Egyptian media spread false news to foment hatred against the revolutionary youth, presenting the whole revolution as a foreign conspiracy against Egypt that is financed from abroad. In the end, the regime manages to break her and she loses all faith in the cause of her activism. She no longer believes that people, including her own family, who were so easily won over by the state propaganda and who consider her a traitor, deserve her sacrifice. She deems all her efforts as vain, convinced that they “have carried out the revolution no one needed nor wanted”.¹⁶ In fact,

¹⁶ AL-ASWĀNĪ, 'A. *Jumhūrīya Ka'an* [The So-Called Republic], p. 509.

she is certain that the Egyptian people oppose the idea of revolution and any possible progress because the current conditions suit them. She, on the other hand, decides to emigrate because: “I would rather be a human being outside my homeland than to be considered ‘nothing’ [*wa-lá hága*] in my own country”.¹⁷

In al-Aswānī’s literary representation, Asmā’ is the epitome of a young, idealistic Egyptian woman, one who is modern, liberated and brave with a strong moral compass and who believes in God but espouses secular beliefs. On the symbolic level, her character can also be interpreted as a personification of contemporary Egypt, struggling for her own emancipation, fighting to break the chains of repression and tyranny and to re-gain her freedom and dignity. This widespread practice of depicting one’s country in literature and arts as a woman is not peculiar to Egypt, but actually it dates back to antiquity. According to Beth Baron, this phenomenon can be explained in terms of the notion of the fertility of a land, especially among peasant societies, but other factors such as local myths and deities played a role too.¹⁸ During the era of colonization and the subsequent nationalist movement, the gendering of national imagery was a reflection of the power relationship between the colonizing countries and the colonies as well as western biases characteristic of Orientalist stereotypes (West = superior, strong, rational, male; East = inferior, weak, emotional, female). Nationalist movements appropriated this imagery and utilized it to support their political agenda and women and their bodies became symbols of the nation. They played on the notions of a woman as a bearer of family and the nation’s honour who has been usurped and denigrated by the colonizers and needs to be saved by a patriotic hero, as well as that of a mother of the nation whose role was to raise these true patriots.¹⁹ The Syrian literary critic Jūrj Ṭarābīshī has pointed out the changing characteristics of female heroines in Arabic literature who more often than not have represented the nation on the symbolic level.²⁰ Another prominent Arab critic Sabry Hafez explains how socio-political changes that happened in the Arab world influenced the representation of female protagonists in Arabic literature. In the colonial period, the symbol of a nation is often portrayed through the character of an idealized, beautiful and

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 511.

¹⁸ BARON, B. *Egypt as a Woman*, p. 7.

¹⁹ INNES, C. L. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English*, pp. 140–141; BARON, B. *Egypt as a Woman*, p. 7.

²⁰ ṬARĀBĪSHĪ, J. Ramzīyat al-mar’a fī ar-riwāya al-^cArabīya wa dirāsāt ukhrā [Symbolism of a Woman in Arabic Novel and Other Studies]. In *Jūrj Ṭarābīshī: al-A^cmāl an-naqdiyya al-kāmila (j. 2)* [Jūrj Ṭarābīshī: Complete Critical Works (Vol. 2)], pp. 290–360.

kind-hearted peasant girl or a young woman from a poor area, while in the post-colonial era she has become more urban and often coming from the middle class.²¹ Still, the gendered notion of homeland has become embedded in the imagery of writers from many countries around the world, especially the postcolonial ones. According to Abir Hamdar, ill or disabled female bodies in literature signify “the sick, wounded or fractured nation”.²² One might add that the same holds true for violated, damaged and mutilated female bodies. Therefore, the picture of Asmā' beaten, tortured, stripped naked, sexually abused and humiliated to the core reflects the pitiful state of the country in the hands of the military regime. While the revolution gave her a glimpse of hope for a brighter tomorrow full of love, respect and freedom, the regime has trampled over her honour again, torn her apart, devastated her self-esteem and robbed her of any prospects for a better future. Her injured body and broken spirit can therefore be interpreted as a reflection of a wounded, fractured and dispirited nation.

Māzin: A Revolutionary Hero Incarcerated

The struggle that the young engineer Māzin as-Saqqā wages in the Bellilini cement factory is of a different order. Having been brought up by his now deceased father, a lawyer and communist activist, he had been shaped by ideas of social justice and developed deep feelings of social empathy and also solidarity with poor workers in the factory where he works. As a member of a labour union committee (*lajna niqābīya*), he vigorously defends their rights, first before the director of the factory, 'Iṣām Sha'ālān, but also before the owners. During his quest for fair working conditions, appropriate wages and the payment of promised benefits, numerous exploitative practices towards the workers are uncovered and other dubious unlawful business activities are implied. The decision to include a narrative about labour protests in the factory is particularly important because workers' strikes and sit-ins played crucial role in the revolution even though they are often overlooked. Most accounts of the revolutionary events come from the Egyptian middle and upper classes and so the narrative is centered on happenings on Taḥrīr Square and foregrounds Internet activism and social networks. As Rabab El Mahdi pointed out, not only did labour protests set the stage for the uprising, but they “played a decisive role

²¹ HAFEZ, S. The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response. In *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 1994, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 94–95.

²² HAMDAR, A. *The Female Suffering Body*, p. 35.

in leading to the ousting of Mubarak”.²³ Moreover, the April 6 Youth Movement, which was one of the main driving forces behind the outbreak of the popular uprising, was founded in 2008 to support a workers’ strike in an Egyptian spinning and weaving factory (*Sharikat Miṣr li-al-Ġazl wa an-Nasīj*) situated in the industrial city of al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā. During the January revolution in 2011 a large wave of labour strikes swept across the country on 9th and 10th February, creating a serious threat of destabilization which, as El Mahdi points out, urged Mubārak to step down.²⁴ Therefore, al-Aswānī’s depiction of labour activism as a part of larger struggle for democracy can be seen as a break with dominant revolutionary narratives and an attempt to widen the scope of society involved in and influenced by the uprisings.

After the short-lived victory of the revolution that mirrors the temporary success of labour strikes, the problem with disappearing lorries owned by the factory leads to its close-down and the now unemployed workers would do anything to regain their jobs and income so that they can take care of their desperate families. The honest and innocent man is betrayed by the very people he defended and he is beaten, mocked, tortured and ends up in prison. However, Māzin, true to character as a revolutionary hero, refuses to give up and leave the country even though it is suggested that even if released, it won’t be his last incarceration because the regime considers him a threat and wants to get rid of him. As he writes in his last letter to Asmā’, despite all the suffering and disappointment, he has not given up on the people because they are not the ones responsible – they are all just victims of the same corrupt system.²⁵

If we consider Asmā’’s character a personification of Egypt, then Māzin can be viewed as a hero who should save her or at least take his revenge on her behalf. His character can be understood as a descendant of what Hoda Elsadda calls a “naḥḍa hero”, a middle-class intellectual, who is no longer vainly searching for a suitable life partner as was the case of his ancestors, but he is still a bearer of enlightenment ideals, and a fighter for the freedom of his country. However, the image of Māzin, locked up in his cell, powerless though still not broken, does not bode well for the future of the country that needs to be rescued. The story of the two young revolutionaries ends on a pessimistic note, not just on their individual levels but also concerning their budding relationship. She is disillusioned and has emigrated, while he will most probably spend much of his life as a political prisoner. Nevertheless, one can see a faint ray of light in Māzin’s determination to teach his illiterate fellow prisoners how to read and

²³ EL MAHDI, R. Against Marginalization: workers, youth and class in the 25 January revolution. In BUSH, R., AYEB, H. (eds.). *Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt*, p. 134.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

²⁵ AL-ASWĀNĪ, ‘A. *Jumhūrīya Ka’an* [The So-Called Republic], p. 496.

write. This ending is highly symbolic, for it reveals that the author believes that the only way out of this dismal, gloomy and depressing point in history is by means of education, even if it would certainly be a long-run solution.

The characters of Asmā', Māzin and Khālid together represent the whole generation of Egyptian revolutionary youth, each of them epitomizing different motives and circumstances for their revolutionary activism as well as various outcomes of their struggle. Unfortunately, the trajectories of their fates as depicted in the novel are truthful reflections of what the as-Sīsī regime has done to brave young people who despite impossible conditions and bleak prospects managed to set the country on the path to democracy, in order to suppress any traces of dissent and the possible recurrence of similar protests in the future. According to Joshua Stacher, who identified the Egyptian ruling system as "neoliberal authoritarianism"²⁶ its centralized coalition of executive elites is able to adapt its structure to changing circumstances whenever necessary in order to stay in power. According to his analysis, this was actually what happened in Egypt after Mubārak stepped down – the structure of the regime changed in favour of the army but the character of the regime stayed the same.²⁷ These alterations within the regime became visible through the changing strategy of the army that refused to attack the protesters during the revolution, but turned against them once Mubārak was gone. Many examples of animosity towards the activists on the part of the army may be found in the novel, starting with the Maspero incident,²⁸ through intimidation, threats, detentions and various forms of violence including the infamous virginity tests on female protesters and vicious anti-revolutionary propaganda in the media that presented the revolutionary youth as agents collaborating with foreign intelligence services. As Vivienne Matthies-Boon has shown in her research, state violence against Egyptian activists during the revolution and in the post-revolutionary period shattered their assumptive world and was a source of deep trauma which often led to their depoliticization,²⁹ as was the case for Asmā' in al-Aswānī's novel. Not only has the regime crushed the dreams of the young activists and

²⁶ STACHER, J. *Adaptable Autocrats*, p. 156.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–160.

²⁸ One of the most glaring examples is the Maspero incident in October 2011 during which a peaceful march in protest at the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt turned violent due to the intervention of the army, during which dozens died and a few hundred were injured.

²⁹ MATTHIES-BOON, V. Shattered worlds: political trauma amongst young activists in post-revolutionary Egypt. In *The Journal of North African Studies* [Online]. 28 February 2017 [cit. 10 January 2019]. Available from <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1295855>>.

tried to break their bodies and spirits, but most of them finally ended up abroad, in jail or even dead. It would have been insightful and more balanced, however, if the activists were not represented only by the middle-class characters, but also included activists from different socioeconomic and religious background, for example members of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whom actually shared a lot of revolutionary ideals and enthusiasm with their liberal peers and were not at all as villainous and treacherous as their depiction in the novel suggests. This negative, stereotypical portrayal as well as their total exclusion from the revolutionary narrative in the novel most probably springs from the author's personal beliefs and religious-liberal dichotomy long present in Egyptian cultural sphere, and has much to do with the elements of society he blames for the failure of post-revolutionary progress.

Inhabitants of the So-Called Republic: Enemies of the Revolution

Major General Aḥmad ʿAlwānī, one of the most influential and powerful members of the Egyptian military, has to deal with the mass protests which have turned into a revolution that nobody expected: “Rebellions and demonstrations are foreign to the nature of the Egyptians. All our lives we are obedient people who respect our leaders even if we are angry with them. Those who went to Taḥrīr Square must have something deviant in their mentality”.³⁰ To save his post, and that of his comrades, ʿAlwānī orchestrates a conspiracy with the Muslim Brotherhood and members of the Egyptian “elite”, consisting of wealthy businessmen and prominent members of the worlds of culture and sport, including singers, actors, TV presenters and football players. Their role is to launch a media campaign against the revolution, slander the reputation of protesters and activists and hamper the process of drafting a new constitution. Besides political machinations and the occasional torture of detained activists, he is a pious Muslim and devoted father of three with a soft spot for his daughter Dāniya. He uses his power and connections to secure great careers for his children and to help his wife boost her contracting company business. ʿAlwānī's wife, Tahānī, is also one of the secondary characters whose portrayal represents corruption on an everyday scale – she owns a company that is officially registered in her brother's name but she is the one pulling the strings and in order to acquire any piece of land she does not hesitate to use her husband's influence. Mājida, the wife of an elderly actor, a Coptic Christian named Ashraf Wīṣā, who helps the revolutionaries, only cares about money and social esteem. She works as an accountant in a big company where she

³⁰ Al-ASWĀNĪ, ʿA. *Jumhūrīya Ka'an* [The So-Called Republic], p. 176.

manipulates the budget so that they can evade taxes. Her brother Amīn is a jeweller who benefits from stolen gold that he reworks and sells again and pays bribes to avoid prison.

One of the most ambivalent characters in the novel is 'Iṣām Sha'elān, a director of the cement factory and a good friend of Māzin's late father. A former communist, he was imprisoned several times for his political beliefs and activism in his youth. During his time in prison, he was tortured, raped and humiliated to the core. Now he is a disillusioned, embittered and cynical old man who has been compelled to collaborate with the regime he detests and fears and so he takes refuge in drinking whisky. He is no villain but certainly not a hero either; he is actually one of the most complex characters in the story. As a director, he can be harsh and deceitful, always loyal to his employers. However, he is truly fond of Māzin and helps him whenever he can. He reminds him of his younger self and so he tries to prevent him from meeting the same fate. He is an example of what the as-Sādāt regime did to the older generation of activists, how it subjugated them, traumatized them and convinced them of the futility of any kind of collective action in Egyptian society. What is more, their co-optation by the regime serves as a constant reminder of their failure and their permanent loss of dignity. His character also foreshadows what might become of the young generation of the revolutionaries if the regime survives.

Nūrhān: The Veil of Hypocrisy

'Iṣām gets married to the beautiful, ambitious and manipulative TV presenter Nūrhān, who later plays a key role in an anti-revolutionary media campaign. Despite her outstanding beauty, Nūrhān appears very pious and modest, and always makes great efforts to ensure that no aspect of her life contradicts Islamic norms or the teachings of the religious authorities. Al-Aswānī depicts Nūrhān's character as that of the ultimate hypocrite. However, because the author never allows readers access to her inner thoughts and feelings, one can never be sure of the true motives of her actions. Is she a naïve victim of religious misconceptions and hypocrisy and is thus being used by the regime to spread dirty propaganda, or is it she who is actually using both her religion and the regime to fulfil her ambitions and achieve her goals? Has she learnt to play the game of hypocrisy in the Egyptian society so well that she has taken the art of gold digging to the next level? When it no longer suits her ambitious plans, she compels 'Iṣām to divorce her so that she can marry an older business tycoon and the owner of the TV channel where she works, Ḥājj Shanwānī, a shining example of the crony capitalist elite who is rumoured to be connected to organized crime and the illegal drug trade. Step by step, Nūrhān climbs the

social ladder and finally she becomes the director of the TV channel. She is in fact the exact opposite of Asmā'. While Asmā' refuses to get married for material comfort, Nūrhān does so three times, each time reaching a higher level of social status. While Asmā' supports the revolution and participates in demonstrations and protests because she sincerely believes in democracy and freedom, Nūrhān actively spreads the regime's conspiracy fabrications and does not hesitate to slander the reputation of the revolutionary youth by any means and spread lies through her TV programme *Ma'ca Nūrhān* (With Nūrhān) from which she benefits greatly. Where Asmā' despises the idea of her body being used by a potential husband to satisfy his desires, Nūrhān actively learns to do so through various manuals and pornographic movies, to assert greater power over her husbands and to secure their loyalty to her. And last but not least, while Asmā' refuses to cover her head with a hijab because in her eyes it is an obsolete tradition which has nothing to do with religion, Nūrhān appears to long for it.³¹ Nevertheless, in the society depicted by al-Aswānī, Nūrhān is considered a paragon of the respectable woman and pious Muslim, in addition to becoming successful and wealthy, while Asmā' is perceived as a rebel and later also a traitor and is traumatized and sexually assaulted.

The hijab is actually one of the most striking symbols al-Aswānī uses to communicate with readers on different levels. On the one hand it reflects the fact that more and more women in Egypt opted for wearing a headscarf for religious or cultural reasons, which is connected with the rise of conservative religious currents from the 1970s and the so-called "Saudization" (*taṣaḥḥur*, desertification) or the growing influence of Saudi Arabia over the Egyptian economy and in other areas of life and the spread of its ultraconservative interpretation of Islam.³² On the other hand, the frequent reference to a veil recalls the early 20th century during which the Egyptian cultural sphere witnessed vigorous debates on veiling and its cultural and social ramifications. During the colonial era, Great Britain used the case of Egyptian women as a

³¹ During the Mubarak era, presenters were not allowed to wear the hijab on state TV programmes. The ban was lifted under the Mursī regime and the first TV personality who read the news on state TV with her head covered was Fāṭima Nabīl. The ban on wearing the hijab at work is apparently a source of great distress for Nūrhān; she even sheds a few tears for the cause. When she is finally allowed to wear a hijab on TV after the revolution, her popularity among the viewers rises even more. It is not completely clear whether her desire to wear the hijab, like her other conduct connected to her faith, could be just an act and a well calculated move on her side.

³² EARLY, E. Tele-Preachers and Talk Shows: Egyptian Religious Discourse. In BOWEN, D. L., EARLY, E. A., SCHULTHIES, B. (eds.). *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, pp. 338–339.

proof of the whole country's backwardness. At that time, a woman's place was still restricted to the private, domestic space, while the public sphere was reserved for men. The social seclusion of women and their lack of education became the main focus of colonial criticism and the manifestation of both became the veil. Quite paradoxically, Egyptian liberal and secular intellectuals internalized the view of the colonizer and believed in the necessity to educate Egyptian women in order for the whole nation to progress. Thus, for them the veil became a symbol of the country's backwardness, a hindrance on its path to modernity.³³ However, it is necessary to say that at that time, what was called a hijab included not only a headscarf but also a face veil (*burqu'*).³⁴ Almost a century after Mahmūd Mukhtār created his iconic sculpture named *Nahḍat Miṣr* (The Awakening of Egypt, 1920 a small model, 1928 large-scale monument) that presents a peasant girl removing her veil³⁵ and after Hudā Sha°rāwī, one of the leading Egyptian feminists of that time publicly took off her face veil (1923), in *Jumhūrīya Ka'an* al-Aswānī reopens the topic of the veil. However, its meaning has shifted. It no longer stands for backwardness or ignorance as was the case during the Nahḍa intellectual debates. In °Alā' al-Aswānī's novel, the veil is a symbol of ultimate hypocrisy, a token of the "Inhabitants of the So-called republic". The moment when Nūrhān appears for the first time in a hijab on TV is a sign of a triumph. However, in the novel it is not the triumph of modesty or morality or religious principles but that of false news, state propaganda and the spread of lies that started to affect the opinion of general public. It is the first step on the path to counter-revolution.

In the novel, the defective and corrupt form of religion is represented by Shaykh Shāmil, a Salafi preacher and a TV celebrity, a close acquaintance of the °Alwānī family whom he fully supports. No one knows that he has no religious education – he studied Spanish and worked for a while as a tourist guide in one of the Egyptian holiday resorts, until he relocated to Saudi Arabia where he "heard God's call" and became a preacher. The farcical scene in which he is giving his sermon by the pool in Major General °Alwānī's opulent villa, dressed in his finest clothes, while the Indonesian maids serve the guests hot and cold drinks, reveals the true nature of his profession. As Khālid Madanī puts it: "He is no man of God, he is a businessman."³⁶ He is truly a caricature of a preacher – duplicitous, decadent, indulging in luxury and carnal pleasures. In exchange for his rise to fame and a comfortable life, his role is to back the

³³ BARON, B. *Egypt as a Woman*, pp. 35–36.

³⁴ BARON, B. Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations. In *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1989, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 370–376.

³⁵ BARON, B. *Egypt as a Woman*, pp. 67–68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

regime with religious authority. In Hassina Mechaï's words, al-Aswānī depicts "a country where a military dictatorship uses religion as a social corset".³⁷ The author is known for his secular opinions and his contempt for both, reducing religion to a set of external observances and using it as a tool to gain political power (like the Muslim Brotherhood). Similarly, the talk about Islam in the novel is devoid of any deeper meaning and is confined to the importance of wearing a hijab, supported by figures of speech and ridiculous metaphors. Al-Aswānī has criticized this turn to flawed, superficial religiosity that favours formal rituals over internal spirituality in many of his articles:

Unfortunately, in Egypt we have become more preoccupied with external manifestations of religion and not with real religiosity. However, before the spread of Wahhabi ideas, we were less concerned about the externals of religion and more religious in the true sense – more just, more honest and more tolerant.³⁸

His views on the subject can be summarized by the words Khālid Madanī writes in his essay and later says to Dāniya: "Morals without religion are better than religion without morals".³⁹

Al-Aswānī has been criticized for oversexualizing the content of his novels. While it is true that the novel contains many sexually explicit scenes with a lot of detail that can shock and offend the mainly conservative cultural scene in Egypt, it has to be noted that the depiction of sex in contemporary Arabic literary production is nothing unusual or unheard of. One could find many examples even among the Arabic literary classics and popular literature such as the stories from the *Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Layla wa Layla*) and popular epics (*sīra*, pl. *siyar*). The heightened sexuality in the novel *Jumhūrīya Ka'an* actually serves to sharpen the contrast between the alleged outward religiosity and moral preaching and the radically different conduct of the characters in their real lives. Thus, Major General °Alwānī has a habit of watching porn because his obese wife, Ḥājja Tahānī, is not attractive enough to arouse him before their intercourse, meanwhile the veiled Nūrhān who appears a paragon of modesty

³⁷ MECHAÏ, H. Alaa al-Aswany: 'I write because I don't agree.' In *Middle East Monitor* [online]. 10 November 2018 [cit. 20 October 2019]. Available from <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181110-alaal-aswany-i-write-because-i-dont-agree/>>.

³⁸ AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. Niqāb kāmīl.. wa tadyīn nāqīṣ..!! [Full Niqab.. and Flawed Religiosity..!!]. In *Ash-Shurūq* [online]. 21 July 2009 [cit. 24 June 2020]. Available from <<https://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=27072009&id=4bf0c505-43da-4607-98a2-d8247a2b2f06>>.

³⁹ AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. *Jumhūrīya Ka'an* [The So-Called Republic], p. 97.

and chastity pretends to quickly climax when spending the night with her old but wealthy husband Hājj Shanwānī because of his problems of erectile dysfunction. The Salafī preacher Shaykh Shāmīl who often gives sermons about the importance of keeping a woman veiled so that she retains her purity and does not get rotten like a fruit exposed to outside conditions, has a habit of marrying a virgin, enjoying her body and then divorcing her as soon as he has satisfied his carnal desires. The sex that these characters enjoy is devoid of any romantic or erotic feelings and individual sexual encounters and escapades are depicted to the point of caricature. The purpose of these scenes is to reveal the utter hypocrisy and duplicity of those characters and their lack of any moral principles.

All three main antagonists together serve as an answer to the question as to whom the author blames for the failed revolution and the deteriorating state of the affairs in Egypt. It is military power (°Alwānī), religion (Shaykh Shāmīl, the Muslim Brotherhood) and the unscrupulous, opportunistic people who did not shy away from media propaganda (Nūrhān), with hypocrisy being their common denominator. According to al-Aswānī, the widespread duplicity among the Egyptian people is a result of what he calls “the dictatorship syndrome”:

In a dictatorship, society lives in an acute and comprehensive state of duality. [...] In a dictatorship there is always a contradiction between what is announced and the truth, between the hypothetical and the practical, between words and deeds. [...] Hypocrisy in the political domain gradually turns into hypocrisy across all domains and corruption goes beyond concept and into practice. Hypocrisy becomes propriety, cheating in exams becomes ‘help’, cowardice becomes wisdom and bribes become acts of cleverness. The worst thing that a dictatorship does is to destroy all rules of fairness in society, so that actions do not necessarily lead to logical consequences.⁴⁰

Many of the ideas present in al-Aswānī's novels the author also elaborates in the form of articles and op-eds. In one such article published in Deutsche Welle Arabic, he identifies five obstacles that hinder Arab progress; al-Aswānī names as first the “relationship between religion and politics” while “religion in place of morality” is in fourth place.⁴¹ In another one, the author describes five categories of people who may be considered “haters” or enemies of the

⁴⁰ AL-ASWANY, A. *The Dictatorship Syndrome*. Translated by HARRIS, R., pp. 23–24.

⁴¹ AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. *Khamsa awā'iq tamna° nahdat al-°Arab* [Five Obstacles that Prevent the Arab Awakening]. In *Deutsche Welle* [online]. 2 January 2018 [cit. 22 June 2020]. Available from <<https://p.dw.com/p/2qD6c>>.

revolution: number one are high-ranking citizens who consider themselves above any law, who in the novel are represented by Major General °Alwānī. The second place on the list goes to rich citizens who profit from the status quo and so they fear any change which might jeopardize their positions, such as a member of the business elite, Ḥājj Shanwānī. Then, there are corrupt citizens who are either involved in illegal activities and don't want to risk their exposure and arrest or those who use their money or influence to improve their lives (Ḥājja Tahānī). Another category contains depoliticized citizens who stopped believing in any possibility of change a long time ago and what they concentrate on is personal issues instead, such as Madanī or Asmā's parents. And finally, there is the frightened citizen who fears that the country will fall into chaos, into the hands of Islamic radicals or civil war and so he or she prefers the "devil he knows."⁴² Paradoxically, al-Aswānī, a secular liberal who is known as an ardent advocate of democracy and human rights, classified himself indirectly in the last category when he quite surprisingly supported the military coup in 2013 which deposed the democratically elected president, Muḥammad Mursī. As Dalia Fahmy and Daanish Faruqi have shown in their analysis, his contradictory opinions are most probably influenced by his antagonism towards Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood, which stem from the origins of Egyptian liberalism as well as from the complicated relationship between the Egyptian regime, Egyptian liberal intelligentsia and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴³

From The Yacoubian Building to Taḥrīr Square: Ashraf and Ikrām

Ashraf Wīṣā is a background actor in his fifties who feels alienated and lonely because his life with his wife Mājida has become insufferable, empty and devoid of any feeling and mutual respect. But since he is a Coptic Christian and not a Muslim, he cannot ask for a divorce. He is disillusioned about everything in Egypt, including his marriage and the film industry in Egypt where people become famous not because of their talent but through connections and in other corrupt ways. He spends his days mostly at home, alone, smoking hashish and feeling miserable. Because of his proximity to Taḥrīr Square, his life soon

⁴² AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. Jamī'at kārihī Ṭawrat Yanāyir [Group of Those Who Hate the January Revolution]. In *Deutsche Welle* [online]. 21 January 2020 [cit. 22 June 2020]. Available from <<https://p.dw.com/p/3WXOv>>.

⁴³ For an in-depth analysis of the complexities behind this deeply rooted liberal vs. religious dualism and mutual mistrust between the Egyptian liberals and the Muslim Brotherhood see FAHMY, D. F., FARUQI, D. (eds.). *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy*.

becomes entangled with the revolution. A random encounter with the young activist Asmā' makes him reconsider his attitude towards the revolution and after witnessing the shocking death of a young protester, he decides to join the activists and even offers to put part of the building he owns at their disposal. His wife Mājida disapproves of his conduct and decides to move in with her parents far away from all the turmoil and danger. Ashraf gets involved in a love affair with his poor housemaid Ikrām who is simple but kind, sensual and caring and possesses a certain kind of natural intelligence. Despite their differences in age, class, education and faith, they fall in love with each other and their relationship compensates Ashraf for years of loveless marriage and Ikrām for her harsh life circumstances. Ashraf openly asserts his preference for women from humble origins over their artificial, calculating and cold upper-class counterparts whose only aim is to hook a husband, secure their material well-being and consolidate their social status. He considers a simple woman from a poor area (*mar'a sha'abiya*) the quintessence of femininity while high-class females are in his eyes just a pompous fraud. Ashraf and Ikrām's love story is also reminiscent of another one from al-Aswānī's pen – that of Zakī ad-Dasūqī and Buṭayna as-Sayyid in his famous novel *'Imārat Ya'qūbiyān*. Both, Zakī and Ashraf are much older than their female counterparts and their relationships start as sheer sexual affairs but then evolve into mutual love and respect. They both fight with their closest female relatives – Ashraf with his wife Mājida and Zakī with his sister Dawlat – and they both live in the same neighbourhood, even on the same street. Ashraf's house is described as being situated on Ṭal'at Harb Street in Downtown, which is also the location of the renowned building of Hagop (Hāgūb) Ya'qūbiyān in al-Aswānī's eponymous novel. The setting of Ashraf and Ikrām's story is particularly important not only from the strategic point of view – the very heart of the revolution - but it can also serve as a point of departure from which it is possible to trace the author's changing vision of Egyptian society. Whereas in *'Imārat Ya'qūbiyān*, al-Aswānī depicts a corrupt society with many social issues, the novel does not end on such a pessimistic note as *Jumhūrīya Ka'an*. While for the rich womanizer Zakī Bey and the poor and disillusioned Buṭayna the story ends with wedding ululations, the prospects for Ashraf and Ikrām are not that optimistic. Ashraf is a Copt which means he cannot divorce his wife. In a conservative Egyptian society, he will never be able to live with Ikrām in peace, especially since not only his wife, her family and their children are against their relationship, but also their family priest and neighbours. As in Asmā' and Māzin's storyline, a revolution that turned society upside down and filled the hearts of the Egyptian people with hope, enabled the characters to live brief moments of happiness before things go back to their normal (or even worse) state. The description of the main site of the protests, Tahrīr Square, as “a small independent republic, the first Egyptian land

liberated from the rule of the dictator”, mirrors the glimpse readers get into how Egyptian society and the lives of individual characters could improve if freed from authoritarian rule. However, with the end of the revolution and rising anti-revolutionary feelings, hopes for a better life turn into a daydream. There is no future for Ashraf and Ikrām’s relationship in Egypt. Therefore, the shift from the satisfying conclusion of Zakī and Buṭayna’s love story to a cul-de-sac situation of Ashraf and Ikrām’s relationship reflects the author’s turn from a critical but rather optimistic standpoint to a much more pessimist vision of the present and future state of affairs in Egypt.

As Stephan Guth has shown, *‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān* represents the continuation of a pre-1967 trend of so-called community narratives which has almost disappeared as a result of people’s disillusionment with Jamāl ‘Abdannāṣir’s nationalistic project, especially after the Six-Day War defeat in 1967. However, according to Guth, by showing characters from different social classes who rarely interact with each other and do not share a sense of belonging or loyalty to a group, al-Aswānī, unlike his predecessors, actually deconstructs the idea of national unity and depicts a fragmented and disintegrating society.⁴⁴ By the term “community narrative”, Guth refers to “texts in which a number of individuals who are meant to represent certain groups of society, or representatives of certain tendencies in it, are brought together by the author in a certain *place* (textual space), that in its turn, has the *function of, metaphorically, or metonymically, representing* the idea that these persons resp. groups *belong to a greater whole*, i.e., the nation or ‘our’ society”.⁴⁵ Since besides houses, trains, alleys and villages Guth also includes in his definition larger places such as towns, it is certainly possible to consider al-Aswānī’s recent novel a community narrative, too. There is also a unifying event – the revolution with its main space – Taḥrīr Square which loosely connects all the characters, some of them even occasionally interacting. Nevertheless, the city is a much bigger “container” for the characters than a house and the gaps between their lives are even greater than they were in *‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān*. What is more, one of the main storylines, that of Asmā’ and Māzin, is written in the form of an e-mail correspondence and the reader almost never sees them interact in person. Therefore, one can conclude that the community al-Aswānī depicts is even more fractured and disintegrated than in his previous novel. The collusion between the regime, Islamic clergy and media pushes this fragmentation further and further and it is exploited to maintain power and personal gain. This

⁴⁴ GUTH, S. Between ‘Awdat al-Rūḥ and ‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān: What has changed in community narratives? In GUTH, S., RAMSEY, G. (eds.). *From New Values to New Aesthetics: Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature, Vol II*, pp. 99–106.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

crumbling of unity within the already disjointed society consisting of alienated individuals foreshadows the forthcoming period of chaos, violence and the advent of the counter-revolution.

Conclusion

ʿAlāʾ al-Aswānī is a writer whose literary output can be seen as an extension of his political activism and journalistic articles on topics like democracy, liberty, human dignity and various sociopolitical and cultural issues. His style of writing is simple; he is an heir to the literary realism of writers like Najīb Maḥfūz and Yūsuf Idrīs in the earlier stages of their writing, and yet the size of his latest novel proves how difficult it was even for him to capture the moment in all its contradictions and complexities. In this novel which can be read as a political and cultural commentary he uncovers the dark side of the Egyptian struggle for democracy. The society he portrays is fragmented and disintegrating, yet for the eighteen days it was able to unite and stand together against its oppressor. It turns out that when Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wrote his famous novel *ʿAwdat ar-rūḥ* (Return of the Spirit. 1933), he was wrong. After all, the Egyptian people did not need a strong leader to awaken their spirit, to unify them and lead them on the path to freedom; they were well capable of doing it all on their own. But then the Egyptian regime deliberately exploited cracks and fissures existing in the society and managed to decompose the remnants of the unifying spirit that bound them together, which had a negative impact on the future unfolding of events. The focus on topics like democracy, human rights, education, justice and dignity reflects the renewal and intensification of enlightenment (*tanwīr*) debates among Egyptian intellectuals since the turn of the 21st century.⁴⁶ Therefore, not only do the ending and the dismal fates of the individual characters indicate the extent of the author's disappointment over the outcome of the revolution but they also betray his frustration with the failure of the enlightenment ideals of democracy, liberty and reason as well as the defeat of liberal and secular values in Egypt. The novel presents a rather pessimist outlook for the future, especially if compared with his earlier novel *ʿImārat Yaʿqūbiyān*. Particularly poignant is Asmā's final letter which she sends to Māzin, her imprisoned boyfriend and a former co-activist, after emigrating:

⁴⁶ For more information on the topic see KASSAB, S. R. *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates*.

Don't deceive yourself again. Egyptians believed the media because they wanted to believe. Most Egyptians are actually satisfied with tyranny and go along with the corruption, even participate in it. These people hated the revolution right from the start because it made them feel ashamed of themselves. First they hated the revolution and then the media provided them with the reason for their hatred. Egyptians live in a so-called republic. Their lives are full of lies which are masked as truths. They practise religious observances and so they look religious, but they are in fact corrupt to the core. Everything in Egypt which appears to be true is a sheer lie.⁴⁷

Ilyās Khūrī, considers the importance and bravery of the novel to reside in the fact that it has broken the silence and so it “deserves to be read as a record of our times and a testament of shattered dreams”.⁴⁸ Al-Aswānī himself, like many of the dissident personalities of the Egyptian political, cultural and literary scenes, came to share Asmā's fate and is now living in the U.S.A. While his regular contributions to various periodicals suggest that his belief in literature as an agent of social and political change has never wavered, his shift from sceptical optimism to pessimism reveals that he, like many writers before him, has become “committed to disillusion”.⁴⁹

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⁴⁷ AL-ASWĀNĪ, °A. *Jumhūrīya Ka°an* [The So-Called Republic], p. 510.

⁴⁸ KHŪRĪ, I. Ṭaḥīya li-dākīrat al-alam al-Miṣrī wa li-al-kātib ash-shujā° °Alā° al-Aswānī [Salute to the Memory of Egyptian Pain and to the Brave Writer °Alā° al-Aswānī]. In *Qanṭara.de* [online]. 9 August 2018 [cit. 19 December 2019]. Available from <<https://ar.qantara.de/node/31918>>.

⁴⁹ The phrase refers to David DiMeo's book of the same name in which he analyses the literary works of committed writers such as Najīb Maḥfūz, Yūsuf Idrīs and Sun°allāh Ibrāhīm and shows that their commitment (*iltizām*) to political and social change has in fact never disappeared; only their way of writing turned from committed literature to its inverted version, in order to reflect their disillusionment. See DIMEO, D. *Committed to Disillusion: Activist Writers in Egypt from the 1950s to the 1980s*.

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