Between

The human body in two Egyptian dystopias: *al-Ṭabūr* (2013, The Queue) and *Hunā badan* (2017, Here Is a Body) by Basma ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz

Maria Elena Paniconi

Abstract

Against the backdrop of the recent resurfacing of the dystopian genre in the Arabic literary field, the Egyptian psychiatrist, essayist, and novelist Basma ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz stands out for her political dystopias, which can be read as lucid projections of the 'real malfunctioning' of the Egyptian political system.

In this essay, building on a close-reading analysis and on two interviews given to me by the author between 2018 and 2023, I dissect the novel *al-Ṭabūr* (2012, The Queue 2016) and its prequel *Hunā badan* (2017, Here Is a Body 2021). In particular, I will focus on the trope of the human body as a 'transformative space' in which the oppressive authority can exert its control, its persuasion, and its strength to the point of creating bodies that lack minds.

Keywords

Contemporary Arab novel, Egyptian Contemporary dystopia, Basma Abdel Aziz, *al-Ṭabūr*, *Hunā badan*.

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Maria Elena Paniconi

1. The contemporary resurfacing of dystopias in Egyptian literature

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which started on 25 January, was triggered by the occupation of public space by workers, students, and protesters from all walks of life. For three weeks, despite the interruption of communication networks and internet, the protesters organised a permanent sit-in in Taḥrīr Square, holding out against violent attacks by plain-clothes policemen and paramilitary forces and, in the end, forcing President Ḥusnī Mubārak to resign after a rule spanning about thirty years. This revolution made such an impact that all over the world, other squares occupied by protesters openly referenced the square in Cairo as a model to be imitated (Seigel, Frazier and Sartorius 2012). In particular, Maydān al-Taḥrīr, the heart of the Egyptian Revolution, long remained an iconic image of a 'transformative' space – so much so that outside observers and activists have spoken of the square as a 'heterotopic' site[1], referencing Foucault's definition of 'heterotopia' as «a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted» (Foucault 1967). During the occupation period, the bodies of the protesters became icons in and of themselves: photos of protesters with slogans painted on their faces or torsos, raising flags, or wearing makeshift armour cobbled together with kitchen utensils spread rapidly all over the world. Through these performances in disguise, along with other

[1] Telmissany 2014: 36.

types of performance (theatrical, musical…), the Egyptians joined together in protest and took advantage of their cultural power, of their «ability to project powerful symbols and real-time performance, plot compelling protagonists and despicable antagonists; to stimulate and circulate powerful emotions; to organize exemplary solidarity; to create suspense; and finally to minister ignominious defeat to dark and polluted adversaries» (Alexander 2011: x). In the performativity of the square, the protesters' political bodies took on the sense of the revolution.

However, the widespread anger due to social inequality, political corruption and excessive power granted to the security apparatus that caused the revolution had already been expressed in another 'symbolic space' in Egypt. The country's literary space had been witnessing a brisk revival of the dystopian novel since 2008[2]. In Egypt like in other Arabic-speaking countries, the revival of the dystopian genre does not appear to be oriented towards chasing science fiction models but, rather, towards regaining a certain realism in protest literature, after the withdrawal into self and the often playful and disillusioned autobiographical tendency of the Nineties (Paniconi 2006). Indeed, contemporary Arabic dystopias – which predicted the revolutions and, after the ensuing failures and disillusionment, continue to be a popular genre in Arabic fiction – appear to hide an «augmented realism»[3] These works manage to capture the deep-rooted dynamics of certain parties' seizing and maintaining of power, the real tendencies of

[2] Between 2008 and 2015, various dystopias appeared in Egypt (Bakker 2021), from the post-apocalyptic *Utūbyā* (Utopia) by Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq, to '*Uṭārid* (Mercury) by Muḥammad Rabī', to fantasy-folklore novels such as *Ḍarīḥ Abī* (My father's Tomb) by Ṭāriq Imām. Generally speaking, the first category of these novels draws on the language of international dystopia, plotting the existence of totalitarian regimes and the clash between these regimes and factions of civil society (Bakker 2021: 85-88). In the second category, which I have elsewhere referred to as fantasy-folklore (Paniconi 2016), traditional forms of narrative are revived to convey non-real or surreal worlds, dominated by arcane presences, folkloric settings, and unrealistic narrative language. We speak here of a "revival" of dystopia and not of the "appearance" in the first instance of the dystopian genre because it is a literary form not foreign to Arab audiences, which since the 1950s have been reading dystopias signed by canonical authors such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Ṣabrī Musā, and at the same time experimenters in Science Fiction (Barbaro 2013: 99-140).

[3] The definition of «augmented realism» was coined by Italian writer Fabio Deotto and taken up by writer Bruno Arpaia. See Arpaia 2018.

political absolutism that redefine the concepts of 'individual' and 'society', the propaganda and manipulation practices of the media.

What are the common features of this recent literary production? First and foremost, a blurred, subtle, and often unrecognisable setting, starting from specific urban details. Realistically depicted cities – a key element of social realism – had dictated the canon of the 20th-century novel, in Egypt (Naaman 2011) as well as in other Arabic-speaking literary fields. The elimination of the traditional city setting is the first element to cause a defamiliarization effect in readers (Bakker 2021: 84).

Another element contributing to an alienating effect is the authors' language choice. In contemporary Egyptian dystopias, language often imitates the arid 'officialise' spoken by the authorities or the technical terms of specialised languages without, however, distinguishing the characters from a linguistic point of view. The many-voiced nature typical of the realist novel thus gives way to monolingualism, with an alienating and inhibiting effect on readers, especially as far as the process of identification with the characters goes. Despite this complicated identification, the dynamics set in motion and experienced by the main characters are still recognisable – perhaps made 'visible' to our eyes by virtue of the dystopian setting. In his essay "The Origins of Dystopia", Gregory Claeys (2010: 107-131) analyses a few authors viewed as founders of the dystopian genre (like Wells, Huxley or Orwell) and describes dystopia as a projection of specific malfunctioning of contemporary political-economic systems in 'another' space-time. Against the backdrop of the recent revival of the dystopian genre in the Arabic and Egyptian literary sector, the Egyptian psychiatrist, essayist and novelist Basma 'Abd al-'Azīz (henceforth Abdel Aziz)[4] is the author who

[4] Basma Abdel Aziz is an Egyptian psychiatrist and activist, among the founders of the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture. A columnist for al-Shurūq, she won in 2008 the Egyptian Sawiris Cultural Literary Award. Three years earlier, the author won the Bahaa-Eddin Award for *Temptation of Absolute Power*, an essay in which she offers a description from a sociological perspective of the relationship between citizenship and police apparatchiks in Egypt. Her debut novel, *al-Ṭabūr* (The Queue) was initially published by Dār al-Tanwīr in 2013. Melville House published the English translation by Elisabeth Jaquette in 2016, which was followed by translations in many other languages. *Hunā badan* (Here is a body), on the other hand, came out as a prequel to *al-Ṭabūr* in 2018, and was translated into English by Jonathan Wright for Hoopoe Editions (American University in Cairo Press) (Abdeal Aziz 2018, 500). The second novel, expected in Egypt and abroad, was recently withdrawn from most outlets in Egypt due to its

stands out most for her lucid projection of the 'real malfunctioning' of the Egyptian political system, as well as for her ability to foretell the events recalling the functions of classic political dystopia. Her works have been translated into several languages.

With reference to the above-mentioned narrative devices (setting and the characterisation of the characters), the two novels at the heart of this paper, *al-Ṭabūr* (The Queue) and *Hunā badan* (Here Is a Body), are also emblematic from the formal perspective. The city setting is unrecognisable in *al-Ṭabūr*, while in *Hunā badan* it is replaced by other places and environments that rule themselves and function almost 'separately' from the city. The dialogues between characters are generally mechanical and, barring a few exceptions, indirect rather than direct speech is used. In an interview, the author explained this choice by referring to her wish to

> entrust the narration to a voice that knows more than all the characters do. I wanted to intensify the readers' feeling of being watched, giving them the impression we have when we are closely monitored. This external voice also influences the readers who, as they carry on reading, become more and more involved in the events happening to the people waiting in the queue[5].

In addition to this external and all-pervading voice, in both novels, we find the story interpolated by several non-narrative passages (or passages emulating non-fiction). In *al-Ṭabūr* (The Queue), there are medical reports, propaganda, statements, and notices issued by the mysterious plenipotentiary body around which the novel revolves. In *Hunā badan* (Here Is a Body), there are lessons taught to the children in the Training Camp and reproduced in full in the novel.

2. The body's central position in Abdel Aziz's fiction

Several dystopia theorists have spoken of the post-human dimension of bodies; bodies that are further and further from the political notion of 'person'[6], intended as – and ever closer to – technology (Marks de Marques

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content being too violent and too readable as a political metaphor for the current Egyptian regime (interview given to me by the author on April 8, 2023).

[5] Interview given to me by the Author on December 23, 2018.

[6] According to Joseph Slaughter, the 'person' is a cultural and discursive concept, is «the vehicle, from a legal standpoint, of human dignity», and forms of

2013: 37). In most modern dystopias, the human body is manipulated, disjointed, and replicated in clones and androids fit to represent the residual dimension of the human component at a moment in time when capitalism and the crisis of liberal democracies are eating away at the person's basic rights. 'Abd al-'Azīz's language, which portrays exclusively human bodies (though they are objectified and 'depersonalised' – that is, detached from the juridical dimension of person) does not feature the hybridised and synthetic aspect dominates the science-fiction dystopia, where the human body merges with mechanical or electric parts.

These themes of the body, however, still preserve the body's potential force of rebellion against an annihilating power. Referencing Foucault's concept of 'political body', we could say that the author constructs her own meanings on the tension between an authority that acts on bodies and the resistance offered by the bodies themselves (or some of them) against this process.

It is undeniable that her work caring for victims of torture and minors mediated Basma 'Abd al-'Azīz's writing, and informed her understanding of human body as a «transformative space», in which the oppressive authority can exert control, persuasion, and strength to the point of creating bodies that lack minds (*Hunā badan*) or without individuality because they are trapped in a queue – in *al-Ṭabūr* (The Queue) – that grows out of all proportion until it becomes the only present 'reality'.

3. Summary of *al-Ṭabūr* and *Hunā badan*

As previously mentioned, neither novel has an urban space in which the protagonists move around freely; instead, there are absolute space/

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narrative such as the Bildungsroman have been functional, in certain contexts, to the dissemination of the pivotal concepts contained in the Declaration of Human Rights. As a result, the disarticulated, dismembered, mechanized bodies of these novels convey the meaning of the disintegration of the 'person', in terms of capabilities, civil rights, and political and social dignity. The parallelism between literary and legal discourse followed by Slaughter can be of great help to those who wish to read texts of post-colonial and early-independence modernity written in the Arab world: these are in fact often structured, not surprisingly, around themes such as that of the growth, physical and moral but also political, of a young person within his or her own society. Pre- and post-revolutionary dystopias of the twenty-first century cannot be unhinged from this archaeology of meanings and the discursive horizon they seek to subvert (see Slaughter 2007: 18).

time configurations: the Queue, the Space and the System are structures, or chronotopes to put it in Bakhtinian terms, governing the protagonists' movements. *The Queue* is a uchronia, as the story told is set in an unspecified near future. The story is conditioned by and consequent to certain previous events, which the protagonists laconically mention, calling them «Disgraceful Events» (*aḥdāth al-mashīna*). From the words of some of the characters, readers learn that the expression refers to a great popular uprising against the absolute power of a government body called «The Gate», violently suppressed by the government itself. The time reference to those mysterious events is characterised throughout the story as an absolute element, something that is outside the timeframe of the story. This way of managing the chronological aspect will have an alienating effect of *déja vu* that accompanies the narration, playing a part in drawing an aura of ineluctability around the main characters.

After these events, The Gate has centralised all power on itself, re-establishing order. The Gate continues to be a plenipotentiary body from which citizens must request authorisations and certificates to do anything: to work, travel or even undergo surgery. However, at a certain point the gates of this institution close, never to reopen. This causes a long queue of people waiting outside of the octagonal building which serves as headquarters for this agency. People are generally resigned to waiting, and some of them even arrange to work or carry out their daily activities without having to lose their place in the queue.

The central event is that of Yaḥyā (Yehya in the English translation), a thirty-eight year old man who took part in the Disgraceful Events and was hit by a bullet that remained lodged in his pelvis. Comforted only by his fiancée Amānī, Yaḥyā stands in line, in pain, waiting to be able to address The Gate to obtain the authorisation needed to remove the bullet. Certain documents, including some X-rays, are falsified and taken from the offices: Yaḥyā's case becomes complicated, so Amānī goes on an expedition to a secret area of the hospital to try and retrieve them. However, in the end The Gate will not issue Yaḥyā any authorisations, so he is fated to die while waiting in the queue. In Amānī's case, on the other hand, The Gate does open, but only to torture her.

The story in *Here Is a Body* follows two subplots that run parallel up to the tenth chapter.

Two distinct spaces, in which the protagonists move around, conditioned and under close surveillance, correspond to these subplots. The first is a paramilitary training camp («the Camp») and the second is a space of protest, simply called «the Space».

In the odd chapters, from the first to the ninth, the reader follows the story of Rabīʿ (Rabie in the English translation). Rabīʿ is a fourteen-year-old street urchin who is taken by force from the dump he lives in with many of his peers, street urchins like him. They are brutally and for no reason thrown into a sort of training camp, where they are detained and undergo harsh military training and radical brainwashing. In the even chapters, from the second to the tenth, readers instead follow the experiences of Āʻida, of her husband Murād and of their nine-year-old son Adam. The family pays a social call to some friends involved in a political protest carried out in reaction to the sudden and mysterious disappearance (perhaps an abduction?) of a legitimately elected political leader. The protest is held in a place (a large square?) that the protesters – mainly under the aegis of a movement of Islamist imprint called «The Raised Banner», renamed «The Space» (al-barāḥ; this term is used in Arabic to mean a large and empty space). Āʻida (Aida in the English translation) and Murād decide to follow the protests all the way to the permanent occupation, offering the protesters their help. The Space appears as a self-organised space where, however, episodes of intolerance and, sporadically, violence begin to emerge. Rabīʿ, meanwhile, narrates his life in the training camp in the first person, describing both the inhumane treatment received from the heads, informally called «Titans» by some of the children, and the changes produced in him and his life and training in the Camp. The children become stronger and some of them aspire to become «Heads» themselves. Chapter after chapter, they become more and more skilled at training, and some of them dream of emulating the Titans and of one day becoming like them. They are assigned their first missions to suppress demonstrations promoted in the city by the masses protesting in the Space; indeed, the Camp's purpose is to block and prevent protests against the current regime.

Rabīʿ and Āʻida's paths meet in the twelfth chapter, when the Space is awakened to the sound of tear gas bombs and hand grenades and when the bodies used as batterers and snipers to strike the protest burst into the Space. The violence of the suppression, which will lead to Murād's death and to the beginning of a series of psychological problems in Adam, also affects Rabīʿ in some way. He begins to distance himself from life in the Camp. At the end of the novel, readers are faced with the semi-alienation undergone by Rabīʿ, who is ridiculed and treated as different by his comrades in the Camp. In the final lines we read of the erection of two towers connected to each other by a wall, in the middle of which a gate (*bawwāba*) opens, namely the architecture in which *The Queue* will be set.

4. The Queue and The Gate / the System and the Space: polarisations and eccentric trajectories

The people queuing up in *al-Ṭabūr*, deprived simultaneously of their time, of their freedom of movement and of their individuality (Barbaro 2019-2020: 19) symbolise both the constant control by the central power and the corrosion of the urban space, gradually replaced by the Queue itself. The cross-reference to contemporary Egyptian society, where bodies are closely monitored – through control of people's basic needs and through a distressing economic situation (which greatly conditions the life of the middle and lower classes), as well as through a dense network of police – is immediately clear.

In the second novel, divided into two subplots, we find a polarisation between two systems which can be read as metaphors of the Nation-space: the Camp in the first sub-plot and the Space in the second. In particular, the Space clearly appears to be inspired by Maidan al-Taḥrīr's real experience, by the 'transformative heterotopia' that had managed to provide itself with its own rules of operation.

Initially, the Space is represented, or represents itself, as a clean and safe utopian space. Some protesters, presenting the space to the newcomer Āʻida, compare it to the rest of the city, which has become unsafe and inundated with garbage:[7]

> What she admired most was the cleanliness, and she hoped it would continue. In the Space she didn't run into piles of garbage that were a feature of the capital. No place in the city, rich or poor, was free from them. Even the fancy areas she knew were drowning in their own rubbish, attracting beggars and scavengers who went through tons of refuse. (Abdel Aziz 2021: 65)

A protester explains how they managed cleanliness in the Space:

> «We almost never sleep, at dawn the Brothers take turns cleaning the ground and sprinkling water to keep the dust down. The young guys compete to collect the litter into bags, and then the garbage truck comes regularly to pick it up».

[7] This passage reminds to the topos that Prakash refers to as the «dark city»: by this term is meant the emergence to the surface of a previously hidden urban underworld (See Prakash 2010: 1-14).

> Murad praised their efforts and seconded what Aida had said. It was obvious that they never relaxed, or things would have fallen apart. (*Ibid.*)

If the Space appears at first as an orderly area, able to organise itself and to differ in a positive way from the city, The Camp is instead characterised straight away as an iconically dystopian, alienating and dehumanising space. The paramilitaries with covered faces call themselves «heads», and in turn call the young people «bodies», cancelling their individuality in speech even before in action. Readers are immediately unsettled by the opening lines of the novel with their explicit violence:

> They threw us to the ground one after another. We curled up next to each other and didn't move. This time it was a tiled surface, hard and firm. I could hear the sound of each new body landing as they threw them on the floor. It was reassuring to know I was not alone and that there were plenty of us. Someone came around taking the blindfolds off our eyes and I saw that the Titans had herded us into a large room that contained only a large table […]. Now we could see. (5)

The routine of the Camp, with the shaving of heads, the measuring of height and of the length of the limbs of the «bodies» (Abdel Aziz 2017: 22) recall traditional forms of dehumanisation. These disciplining and coercive practices on the «bodies» foretell the training camp's mission: to give the youths removed from the street an alternative identity. A collective identity. These street urchins are thus convinced that they have been saved from certain death and rehabilitated, through a programme sponsored by one of the organisers of this recruitment process, identified only as General Ismail (Ismāʻīl) (Abdel Aziz 2021: 19). General Ismail calls them «children of the System», and later on, identifying with the System, he calls them his children, affirming his acquired paternity over these commandeered street urchins[8]. And thus legitimising their change of status from 'outcasts' to 'legitimate children' of the system.

This change of status is accomplished through the transformation of the children's bodies, which from 'outcasts', i.e. reject-bodies, are transformed

[8] This use of the patriarchal metaphor is no doubt an ironic reference to the use of the same metaphor among Egyptian political leaders. From Anwār al-Sadāt to ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, Egyptian presidents have often used paternalistic tones toward their people. See Giladi 2021, 94-114.

through training into weapon-bodies in the hands of those in charge of the System. The children are disciplined not only through violence, depersonalisation and punishment in case of rebellion, but they are also regularly exposed to different lessons, which become an integral part of the novel. In the lesson on obedience (Abdel Aziz 2021: 29), in the one on *fitna*[9] (*Ibid.*: 211), and in others, concepts and discourses of radical Islam are taken up and manipulated. This is to instill morals in the children of the Camp, thus also cementing their sense of belonging to the System.

In the coercive spaces described above, the characters that stand out are those whose trajectories (both in the sense of physical movement of the character in space and in the case of telos, or path pursued by the character in the story) differ from the disciplining action. Eccentric characters are those who, by moving against the crowd, reveal the existence of the crowd and of a general trend. This is the case for the character of Amānī, Yaḥyā's fiancée in *al-Ṭabūr*, and Yūsuf (Youssef in the English translation) in *Hunā badan*.

In *al-Ṭabūr*, in fact, the story told coincides with the amount of time the main character Yaḥyā waits for the most part queuing for The Gate to open and issue the document needed for his operation. His fiancée, Amāni, tries to stand by him. We see her, in one of the early scenes of the novel, organise a small private party to celebrate his thirty-ninth birthday:

> No matter what happened, Amani never changed. Yehya knew she was guided by her emotions and never considered things rationally. He knew she waited for her dreams to magically come true, and never took obstacles into account […]. He dealt with her optimism by trying to make reality match it as best he could, but this time was different.
>
> She'd been drawn into the incident herself. He pulled her close to him, putting an end to her inspection and wishful thinking. He kissed the top of her head and her lips, but he couldn't hold her as he wanted to – the pain shot through his left side mercilessly, and he sat down […] He reflected with wry humor on the fact that it was the first birthday he'd celebrated with a bullet in his guts. […]
>
> Yehya fell asleep and Amani wandered through her memories, pausing in front of the Northern Building where Yehya stood impatiently

[9] The term *fitna* refers to unjust rebellion, corruption, and discord, both in religious and historical contexts. The Qur'an uses it to indicate the corruption and hubris the offspring of Adam would fill the earth with, while historically it denotes the traumatic civil wars that tore the early Muslim community apart.

> every day, waiting to enter. She'd seen the northern building often, but only ever from a distance: a strange crimson octagonal structure, slightly higher than the concrete walls that extended from it on either side. The main entrance to the Building was the Gate itself, built into one of its eight sides. It had no visible windows or balconies. Only barren walls of cast iron. If it weren't for people who'd once entered it and told of all the rooms and offices inside, anyone gazing up at it would have imagined it to be a massive block, solid and impenetrable. (Abdel Aziz 2021: 35)

In the scene above we already find a preview of the wait in which Yaḥyā's slow agony unfolds: from the apartment to the queue, Yaḥyā never has access to a hospital or infirmary. His wound is the subject of conversations, exchanges and, at times, verbal confrontations between the couple and the various doctors or bureaucrats handling the case, but throughout the novel he is never treated.

The entire story hinges on the friction between the effect of reliability – given by the extreme precision recreated by the author by means of the technical language used by the medical staff – and the paradox created by the loss of functionality of places and professional figures. Doctor Ṭāriq is an example of this process since, although he is a doctor and initially took Yaḥyā's case to heart, he does not feel called upon to operate on the wounded person's body by himself.

As Yaḥyā is helpless before the whims of the Gate, Amānī decides to go into the Zephyr Hospital (violating the law of the Gate) to retrieve the necessary documents. Caught in the restricted area on the fifth floor of the Zephyr Hospital, Amānī is questioned by a man behind the desk. When the man and a hospital official claim they do not have any file under the name of Yaḥyā, Amānī raises her voice, so much so that the man repeats his truth in a loud voice:

> «No one was injured by any bullet that day or the day after or any other day, do you understand?»
>
> She took a step back, but she'd lost her temper. Her self-control crumbled. And she shouted back at him.
>
> «Lies!» He is wounded, and the bullet is still in his body, and as soon as they do the operation and he has the bullet in his hand he'll tell everyone who shot him, and then you'll have your proof. (*Ibid.*: 151)

In the next scene, Amānī is enveloped by darkness:

> Nothingness. She wasn't blindfolded, but all she could see was black. She moved her palms away from her face…Nothing. She heard no voices. Her hands felt no walls, no columns, no bars. She saw and felt nothing, only the solid earth underneath her, where she stood or sat or slept. Perhaps she was only earth, too. She walked in every direction but met nothing but a void. She tried to scream, to be silent and listen out for other voices, to swear and curse every person who deserved to be punished for wronging her. […] But everything remained as it was: nothingness. […] Gradually, she began to forget faces: her mother's, Yehya's, her boss's. the familiar details of their faces became blurry until they were featureless. Was it possible that her own memory was being stolen from her? (151-152)

The woman disappears from her friends' sight and nothing will be known about her for an unspecified period of time. In the same way, readers will never know in detail what happened during her imprisonment. Clearly however, after this experience, Amānī shows no signs of torture, but her personality and behavior have changed – despite what Yaḥyā had always thought about her. Finally, Amānī's body is paired in some way with Yaḥyā's: it is helpless and violated, as her mind is violated. This attempt on Amānī's part having failed, Yaḥyā's fate will be to bleed to death while waiting in the queue. Amānī's fate will be that of no longer being herself.

In *Hunā badan*, the only attempt at resistance to the disciplining action implemented by the «heads» in the paramilitary camp is, initially, Rabī''s. Together with a small group of comrades, he promises to keep secret track of each of their names. This element of the plot is also the narrative ploy by means of which the author allows readers to follow the personalities of the secondary characters, in their various reactions to the «rehabilitation programme»: from 'Imād's (Emad's) mimetic reaction to the eccentric trajectory taken by Yūsuf, who keeps his critical sense alive, also noticing the changes that have taken place in Rabī':

> «You have changed, Rabie» he said. «You used to stand up to the Titans, and now you are screwing over poor people who have no one to help them. It's only by chance that you recently ceased to be one of them and they have to suffer without you. You used to enjoy defying the government and harassing the rich and powerful. And now you are picking on people who live in slums? What's wrong with you, Rabie?». (188)

The eccentricity of Yūsuf, who shines at the Camp due to his excellent aim, is finally visible during the battle against the protesters of the Space.

He will be punished with death for having missed the target on purpose:

> everything about Youssef refused to take part in the killing: his eyes didn't want to see people, his arm didn't want to hold the gun steady and even his finger didn't want to pull the trigger and shooting at the right moment. But he could hit inanimate objects. […]
>
> The titan squinted and looked into the distance, then lifted up his gun, held it steady and fired straight at Youssef's head. (273)

Parallel to the space of the training camp, the Space (where the protest takes place) is outlined, chapter after chapter. It is an orderly space, including an area for accommodating first aid care, a shopping centre, a mosque, lavatories and an area called «The Podium», where speakers and experts are invited to speak. At times portrayed as almost idyllic and compared to the city 'outside' in several places, this space stands out for its cleanliness and the competence of its occupants in disposing of its garbage efficiently[10].

Nevertheless, the Space gradually shows itself to be less and less inclusive and more intolerant. A child with a cross tattooed on his wrist (a symbol that distinguishes the Copts in Egypt) is ostracised, while women joined in a protest march spur men to revenge, more specifically to jihād (Abdel Aziz 2021: 175). A few episodes of violence show how the Space is not immune to extremism and inflexibility (166) and how it can quickly change from a space of protest, of expression of freedom, to a space of constraints on individual freedom.

In this system also, certain individuals manage to escape the 'system' in which they should be subsumed, thus escaping the fates of their counterparts. This is the case of Ḥalīm, the Coptic child with the cross tattooed on his wrist. Informed by a barber of the imminent roundup of street urchins by the Titans, he manages to escape and take refuge in the Space, amongst the protesters. The sole exception among those who follow an eccentric trajectory with respect to the systems of power in force, Ḥalīm will be protected by other human beings: some protesters, including Āʻida, will look after him and remove him from the encroaching violence of the Space.

[10] As Lovato argues in a study focusing on Ṣunʻallāh Ibrāhīm's novel *Dhāt* (1992), much contemporary Egyptian fiction uses the theme of the presence of garbage on the street as an objective correlative of the process of decay and alteration of a given urban environment (Lovato forthcoming).

5. The scandal-body in *al-Ṭabūr*; the weapon-body in *Hunā badan*

As previously mentioned, the doctor Ṭāriq in *al-Ṭabūr* embodies the bureaucrat who has silenced his own conscience. In spite of an initial interest in the case, Ṭāriq sticks to the public statement issued by The Gate concerning «Authorization for the Removal of the Bullets». This prohibits extraction of a «bullet or any type of firearm projectile, whether in a clinic or a private or government hospital. From a body of a person killed or injured», except when performed under the official authorization issued by the Gate of the Northern Buildings (Abdel Aziz 2013: 44). Yaḥyā finds out from watching TV that the article will be amended later on.

> [The announcer] devoted special attention to the revision of Article 4 (A), saying that it had been amended in accordance with a new spirit in government emphasizing sound moral principles and surveillance of citizens' consciences. He also added that it had been altered as a direct response to developments in the country and was in effect immediately.
>
> «*Permits authorizing the removal of bullets shall not be granted, except to those who prove beyond doubt, and with irrefutable evidence, their full commitment to sound morals and comportment, and to those who are issued an official certificate confirming that they are a righteous citizen* (*muwāṭin ṣāliḥ*). (Abdel Aziz 2013: 113-114)

Yaḥyā's body is thus at the mercy of the Gate which, after having shut its doors in his face, confronts him with the need to produce the 'authentic citizen' certificate, where the Arabic adjective *ṣāliḥ* encompasses the characteristics of devotion and obedience. In other words, Yaḥyā finds himself facing an authority that invalidates – until proven otherwise – his status of citizen, preparing instead to recognise only one type of citizenship as valid: that of the citizen obedient to authority.

But there is another reason why Yaḥyā's body will in fact be treated by the authorities as a 'scandal' to be expelled. Indeed, the regime propaganda claims that The Gate and its security departments did not open fire during the Disgraceful Events. Yaḥyā's body, however, with its bullet in the lower abdomen, tells a different story. Yaḥyā's body carries within the truth about those events, and therefore constitutes a scandal per se, even if not accompanied by a particular attitude of revolt or of opposition to the regime.

In *Hunā badan*, as previously mention mentioned, the transformation of the 'reject-body' into 'weapon-body' is at the centre of the first of the

two sub-plots comprising the novel. The two subplots merge the eleventh and twelfth chapters, and the bodies leave the Camp to attack the demonstration organised by the occupants of the Space, on the orders of/by order of the System. The bodies burst in with gas, bullets and hand grenades, wiping out the Space, and breaching the mosque itself (Abdel Aziz 2021: 277). After the battle, Rabīʿ appears to be in shock due to the execution in cold blood of his comrade Yūsuf, understanding at the same time that he has changed. He feels like he no longer belongs to the Camp, nor, however, to the street:

> Rabie resumed life in the camp. He went back to training, had three meals a day and listened to the lectures, which were rather less frequent. But he didn't join the other boys when they sat in the dining hall, and he didn't watch television […] he felt a heaviness in his chest that spread to his whole body and even his mind. (Abdel Aziz 2021: 314)

The massacre of the protesters, in which Rabīʿ took an active part, leaves him with ambiguous feelings. On the one hand, he appears resigned in the face of the possible new identity that the rehabilitation program might reserve him; on the other hand, he is disillusioned and in shock.

> With the passage of time, I've lost what was left of my soul. My only wish is to graduate from this rehabilitation program with an identity card. I don't even want the salary they have promised us. Recently I have become obsessed with the idea of leaving the camp, even if it means I go to hell. Hell is my certain fate, but I know I won't see Youssef there. I'll be on my own there, too. […] Maybe they're giving us a rest after what we did for them in the Space, or maybe they are using bodies from other camps. I haven't been interested to know the reason, though I feel comfortable with the situation. (Abdel Aziz 2021: 330)

Conclusions

Perhaps we can find one of the reasons underlying the all-pervading nature and permanence of the dystopia genre in Egyptian literature in its ability to recall (in its languages and abstract settings) the 'heterotopia' of Revolutionary Square – capturing it, however, in its negative reversal in the wake of the exacerbation of tendencies and conditions latent in a space that is potentially at once utopian and dystopian.

'Abd al-'Azīz's novels can be viewed as a glaring example of this antiphrastic mechanism: indeed, both tend to depict settings in contrast with the Square: the Queue (disciplined, single-direction, hierarchical) represents the antiphrasis of the heterotopic Square (a free, multidirectional and multifunctional space), just like the Space in *Hunā badan* represents an antithesis to the inclusive and peaceful Square (Mehrez 2012: 25-37). Within this framework of 'reversal of the potential utopia into dystopia', Abdel Aziz draws an accurate picture of the mechanisms underlying the politics of the regime, appealing to her portrayals of the human body within these overturned systems. To quote the Author's words, her aim was

> to highlight how the oppressive authority may have different faces, how much it could all be similar to each other, how can each authority transform people and play games, using its own tools the tools might be the religion, or the disciplinary national propaganda or any other available and effective tool. Both the Camp and the Space consider each other as an enemy, meanwhile, the reader can notice how similar are they at the end of the day.[11]

The body is an essential unit of meaning in the structure of both novels. In view of the fact that *Hunā badan* is none other than a prequel to *al-Ṭabūr*, we can read the trajectory of the bodies making up the plots of the two novels in continuity, linking Rabī''s and Yaḥyā's stories. It is thus easy to perceive how the 'weapon-body' created by the System in the training camp in *Hunā badan* is, in fact, responsible for the bullet in Yaḥyā's pelvis. Yaḥyā's scandal-body is, therefore, a repository not only of the violence committed by the Gate during the uprisings but also of the violence committed on the reject-bodies transformed into weapon-bodies. The author thus ends the 'cycle' of the subjugated body, once an 'outcast' and now a 'weapon' capable of wounding other bodies in turn fated to become 'scandalous' as they witness the violence of the System. The eccentric figures – that is, the characters who escape this cycle – are the only ones to be fully aware of it. The only ones aware of its ambiguities and paradoxes, the only ones to recognise the transformations inflicted on the bodies, which remain 'political bodies' no matter the stage of the cycle in which they find themselves.

[11] Interview given to me by the Author on April 8, 2023

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