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The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent:  
*al-Ṭābūr* by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and *al-Tamāsīḥ* by Yūsuf Raḥā

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*This paper focuses on some peculiar ways in which Egyptian literature describes the aftermath of the Arab Spring. While a relevant trend has been documentary, other works searched for different perspectives. The two novels which I will discuss here, al-Ṭābūr (The Queue, 2013) by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and al-Tamāsīḥ (The Crocodiles, 2013) by Yūsuf Raḥā, divert their attention from the events forging the first turbulent post-Mubarak (Mubārak) years to something else. al-Ṭābūr sets Egypt in a dystopic present/near future, where citizens’ lives are controlled by a sinister centralizing authority named al-Bawwābah (the Gate). al-Tamāsīḥ traces the seeds of the Tahrir Revolution, by following – from 1997 to 2001 – the experiences of the members of a peculiar group of poets, Ḡamā‘at al-tamāsīḥ li ’l-šī‘r al-sirrī (The Crocodiles Group for the Secret Poetry), which was established on the same day a leading Egyptian activist committed suicide. Both novels offer a bitter evaluation of a doomed revolution by producing a counter-narrative that attempts to dismantle the revolutionary rhetoric through which the new rulers had been acclaimed. On another level of analysis, they seem not content with mere representation, but aim at unsettling generic boundaries while seeking both rupture and continuity with the narrative modes and strategies characterizing earlier and contemporary generations of writers. At the same time, they question the relationship between the text and the narrated reality, which appears instable and almost cryptic. While it may be too early to identify the features of a post-revolution Egyptian fiction, by analyzing these two novels this essay intends to contribute to developing a framework for reading Arabic and Egyptian literature in the present context.*

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### 1. Talking about the Revolutions Is not an Easy Task

Many scholars have searched for the seeds of what was about to deflagrate in works that were written before the revolutions which kicked off with the December 2010 upheavals in Tunisia. It certainly is a platitude that writers and intellectuals, especially Arab ones, consider it a prominent task to question troubled contexts and advocate for change, as it is not a novelty that the aftermath of revolutions is often characterized by a certain sense of bewilderment. As for contemporary Egyptian literature, a clear example may be found in the case of Nağīb Maḥfūz, who stopped writing for five years after the 1952 Free Officers' coup. While he tended to give critics accommodating answers<sup>1</sup>, the reasons for this stalemate have long been debated<sup>2</sup>. In opposition, the 60's generation had to face the revolution with a sense of loss and defeat, since many of them were arrested and persecuted because of their ideas. More importantly, they were conscious of how much their literature had to change in order to express new viewpoints on the changed reality<sup>3</sup>.

Five years have passed since the wave of uprisings, enthusiastically called the Arab Spring, swept the Arab world. Yet, to take stock of these experiences' outcome is quite a daunting task. Leaving aside the dramatic conflicts that are still tormenting the area, the demands raised by the 2010/2011 uprisings are still far from being satisfied, as widespread general unrest and political instability demonstrate.

Besides, writers now seem not to have as much time to look at things with detachment unlike the Nobel Laureate. Many felt compelled to express their point of view and their personal experience right after – or during – the uprisings, and admitted their difficulty of writing about such dramatic changes, and culturally emotively intense events<sup>4</sup>. While one reason for this may be found in the Western media and the public's interest in the uprisings and narrations about them, other factors like Arabic literature's changed dimensions of production and circulation and the emergence of new actors in the cultural landscape should be properly evaluated.

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<sup>1</sup> «He felt that the society he had been writing about had changed overnight and that many of the social ills which had moved him to write were remedied by the new regime». Cf. Rasheed El-Enany, *Nağuib Maḥfouz, The Pursuit of Meaning*, Routledge, London and New York 1993, p. 25. See also Ġamāl al-Ġīṭānī, *Nağīb Maḥfūz yataḍakkār*, Mu'assasat Aḥbār al-Yawm, al-Qāhirah 1987, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Among the many studies on this issue, see: Rasheed El-Enany, *The Novelist as Political Eye-Witness: A View of Najīb Maḥfūz's Evaluation of the Nasser and Sadat Eras*, in "Journal of Arabic Literature", Vol. 21, No. 1 (Mar. 1990), pp. 72-86; more recently, Jacquemond draws attention to Maḥfūz's cinematic collaboration during the years he stopped writing novels. Cf. Rīšār Ġākmūn, *Tawrat al-taḥyīl wa taḥyīl al-tawrah: qirā'ah ḡadīdah fī Awlād ḥāratinā*, in "Alif, Journal of Comparative Poetics", No. 23, 2003, *Literature and the Sacred*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>3</sup> An exemplary reference is the manifesto-like statement published on the back cover of the 1966 edition of Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's *Tilka al-rā'ihah* (That Smell). Cf. Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm, *Tilka al-rā'ihah wa qiṣaṣ uḥrā*, Maktab Yūliyū li 'l-Ṭab' wa 'l-Našr, al-Qāhirah 1966.

<sup>4</sup> This opinion was shared by Maṣūrah 'Izz al-Dīn, Samar Yazbik and Nāṣir 'Irāq in Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> EURAMAL Conference on "Literature and the Arab Spring – Analyses and Perspectives", Paris 9-12 May 2012 (forthcoming). As for the opinion of other Arab writers, see 'Abd al-Ḥāliq Kīṭān, *al-Kitābah taḥta zill al-tawrah*, in "Mağallat al-Dawḥah", No. 62, December 2012, [http://www.aldohamagazine.com/article.aspx?n=e27cabf8-7ef6-4671-93ed-c0e2f62f803e&d=20121201#.VRKnPO7F\\_IW](http://www.aldohamagazine.com/article.aspx?n=e27cabf8-7ef6-4671-93ed-c0e2f62f803e&d=20121201#.VRKnPO7F_IW).

This article focuses on some peculiar ways in which Egyptian literature confronts the aftermath of the 2011 events. The two novels which I will discuss here, *al-Ṭābūr* (The Queue, 2013) by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz<sup>5</sup> and *al-Tamāsīḥ* (The Crocodiles, 2013) by Yūsuf Raḥā<sup>6</sup>, divert their attention from the events that have been forging the turbulent post-Mubarak (Mubārak) years to something else. The former sets Egypt in a dystopian present/near future, where citizens’ lives are controlled by a sinister centralizing authority named *al-Bawwābah* (henceforth The Gate). The latter traces the seeds of the Tahrir Revolution back to 1997 by following the experiences of a peculiar group of poets, *Ġamā‘at al-tamāsīḥ li ‘l-šī‘r al-sirrī* (The Crocodiles Group for Secret Poetry), established the same day a leading Egyptian activist committed suicide. Both novels offer a bitter assessment of a doomed revolution by producing a counter-narrative that attempts to dismantle the revolutionary rhetoric with which the new rulers had been acclaimed.

## 2. Literature’s Role in a Changing Framework between Continuity and Rupture

A significant portion of scholarly work considers the political attitude of Arabic fiction as a means of participating in the literary field – that is of conquering symbolic hegemony –, or as a way of creating a historical counter-narrative. Samia Mehrez stresses the strong contiguity between historical and literary writing in Arabic literature, where

despite the limitations that have come to be placed on the connotations of the term *adab*, so that in modern times it leans more heavily towards designating literary texts, it has still preserved some of its elasticity and significantly continues to refer to the sum total of the valued works of society and not exclusively to the ‘creative’ works<sup>7</sup>.

In the context of the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings this contiguity becomes even more obvious. Once the first hours’ enthusiastic climate and rhetoric have made way for disillusion and bitterness, writers choose to oppose the newborn authoritarian regimes and counter their narrative. This meant taking on, in other words, the role of the “underground historian”<sup>8</sup>. In his application of Bourdieu’s theories on the literary field<sup>9</sup> to Egypt, Richard Jacquemond links the continuity of the understanding of contemporary literature as *adab* from the classical to the modern era to the conditions of production and circulation of the literary work<sup>10</sup>. From their retrospective point of view, the narratives on the 2011

<sup>5</sup> Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *al-Ṭābūr*, Dār al-Tanwīr, Bayrūt-al-Qāhirah-Tūnis 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Yūsuf Raḥā, *al-Tamāsīḥ*, Dār al-Sāqī, Bayrūt 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal al-Ghitani*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 1994, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> As George Steiner puts it: «Drastically, where totalitarian regimes are concerned, but more subtly in other forms of society also, the historian has been forced to relinquish his obligation of impartial remembrance [...] this condition makes of the writer an underground historian, a remembrancer against official dogma». Cf. George Steiner, *The Writer as Remembrance: a Note on Poetics*, ‘9, in “Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature”, No. 22 (1973), p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Seuil, Paris 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation. Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt*, Cairo University Press, Cairo 2008, pp. 9-10.

uprisings interrogate the *dawlah-kātib-kitāb* system<sup>11</sup> in a moment in which its foundations are shaken and its legitimacy is radically discussed.

A second analytical perspective entails the relationship that these novels entertain with a reality which appears instable and almost cryptic, and the peculiar strategies used to narrate it. These novels are, each in its own way, generically hybrid constructs which unsettle the boundaries between the sociological essay, chronicle and literary genres. From this point of view, they refer to the wider framework of what is defined “critical realism” and “new humanism”, and to the peculiar ways in which modernist and post-modernist literary experimentation develop in Arabic literature<sup>12</sup>. I argue that these novels offer a valid perspective within which it is possible to make further sense of literary innovation, especially in regards to the outcome of the 90’s generation and the last decade’s trends. These narrative works look for a way to express the present times’ uncertainty and to provide new answers without proposing a radical departure from many of the strategies that have been adopted in recent Arabic literature.

By building up on interrogatives on rupture and continuity, my essay engages with the possibility of periodization and categorization, thus questioning the possibility of talking of a “post-Spring” Arabic literature. I suggest that both *al-Ṭābūr* and *al-Tamāsīh* hack the frame of reference in which they have been written through different strategies and at different levels<sup>13</sup> by recurring to strategies such as the replication and reversion of languages and literary modes. By reading these two novels, this essay questions the extent to which the urge of representing/understanding the 2011 revolution can be seen as a major factor of change in literary modes of representation, narrative strategies and themes.

It may be too early to summarize the various threads and trends that Arabic and Egyptian literature have been following since the 2011 changes took place. However, as it appears, few fictional works have overtly dealt with the disillusion of an aborted revolution. In general, “iconic” authors have only partially dealt with the matter. While some of them have consecrated their impressions and memories to diaries and journalistic essays<sup>14</sup>, it seems easier for emerging writers to embark on this endeavor.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Stephan Guth, *The Changing Role of Pleasure, or: Towards a Fundamentalist Humanism. Some Thoughts on the Place of Pleasure and Desire in the System of a New Period*, in S. Boustani, I. Camera d’Afflitto, R. El-Enany, W. Granara (eds.), *Desire, Pleasure, and the Taboo: New Voices and Freedom of Expression in Contemporary Arabic Literature*, Supplemento alla “Rivista di Studi Orientali”, Fabrizio Serra Editore, Pisa-Roma 2014, pp. 115-142.

<sup>13</sup> I use the term “to hack” as Tarek El-Ariss does: «Hacking functions as a literary subversion that empowers a new generation of writers to critique an Arab project of aesthetic and political modernity through a new language and media». Cf. Tarek El-Ariss, *Hacking the Modern*, in “Comparative Literature Studies”, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2010, p. 533. However, the two cases I analyze here recur to new language and media in a limited manner.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Dina Heshmat, *Egyptian Narratives of the 2011 Revolution: Diary as a Medium of Reconciliation with the Political*, in R. Pannewick, G. Khalil, Y. Albers (eds.), *Commitment and Beyond. Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 63-75.

From this point of view, some brief considerations on the authors of the two examples I examine here are necessary. Their different backgrounds reflect the multiplicity and complexities of the literary field in Egypt. Both of them were born in the mid 70's, and are therefore slightly younger than the exponents of the *Ġīl al-tis 'ināt* (The Generation of the Nineties), whose works they surely read, whose circles they were contiguous to and whose literary fathers they were related to, without being truly part of the generation. Furthermore, Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz and Yūsuf Raḥā are neither newcomers nor established authors and, as I argue here, their position in the literary field reveals different patterns from those which have been in force until recently. While they mix marginality and recognition, it cannot be said that they look for literary and cultural legitimization in the field's canonical terms. Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz is indeed an interesting figure in the new breed of Egyptian leftist intelligentsia. Besides working as a psychiatrist and a human rights activist<sup>15</sup>, she is an artist and a writer<sup>16</sup>. Yūsuf Raḥā, despite his young age, is already a renowned writer of poetry and fiction, literary journalist and blogger<sup>17</sup>. A previous novel of his has recently been acclaimed and his works have been translated into English<sup>18</sup>. By comparing two authors who come from different backgrounds, my intention is to assess to which extent analogous attitudes towards the Tahrir Revolution's aftermath are shared and whether their differences reflect their peculiar position in the literary field.

*al-Ṭābūr* and *al-Tamāsīḥ* both deal with the difficulties of making sense of the disillusionment following the Arab uprisings, each following a peculiar direction and developing its own narrative strategies and themes; they also seem concerned with filling a void and addressing questions that the intellectual community finds it hard even to pose. This essay analyzes through which subjects, situations and characters and in which perspectives the discourses on revolution are reframed. On a deeper level, the narrative works here studied are considered as a vehicle of discourses on reality and truth. The conclusions will assess the stakes of this literary approach to the revolution and the further framework of research suggested by these writings.

<sup>15</sup> To date, she published two monographic essays on despotism, police violence and torture: *Iḡrā' al-sultāh al-muṭlaqah (masār al-'unf fī 'alāqat al-šurṭah ma'a al-muwāṭin 'abra al-ta'rīḥ)*, Saḡṣāfah li 'l-Našr, al-Qāhirah 2013; *Dākīrat al-qahr. Dirāsah ḥawla manzūmat al-ta'dīb*, Dār al-Tanwīr li 'l-Ṭibā'ah wa 'l-Našr, al-Qāhirah 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Before *al-Ṭābūr*, she wrote two collections of short stories, for which she won literary prizes: *'Ašān rabbinā yisahhil* (May God Make It Easy), Dār Mīrīt, al-Qāhirah 2007; and *al-Walad allaḡī iḡtafā* (The Boy Who Disappeared), al-Hay'ah al-'Āmmah li-Quṣūr al-Ṭaqāfah, al-Qāhirah 2009.

<sup>17</sup> He was selected among the "Beirut 39" young writers, <http://www.hayfestival.com/beirut39/>. Besides writing for different newspapers, he writes a blog in Arabic and English, *Ḥatīm al-Sulṭān, mudawwanat al-adab (al-'arabī) wa 'l-fūṭūḡrāfiyā*, yrakha.com, where he posts audiovisual as well as textual material.

<sup>18</sup> Yūsuf Raḥā, *Kitāb al-ṭuḡrā, 'arā'ib al-ta'rīḥ fī madīnat al-mīrrīḥ*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2011. English translation: Youssef Rakha, *Book of the Sultan's Seal: Strange Incidents from History in the City of Mars*, Translated by P. Starkey, Interlink, Northampton: MA 2014). *al-Tamāsīḥ* was translated into English by R. Moger: Youssef Rakha, *The Crocodiles: a Novel*, Seven Stories Press, New York 2014. In this article I refer exclusively to the Arabic version; all quotes from *al-Tamāsīḥ* are my translation.

### 3. *Discourses on Reality and Truth between Trauma and Memory*

Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s *al-Ṭābūr* projects discourses on authoritarianism, human rights and freedom onto a peculiar dystopic universe. After a period of political instability and uprisings, The Gate, an anonymous highly centralized and extremely bureaucratic authority, rises to power. It grows to monstrous proportions, to the point of controlling every aspect of the citizens’ lives and forcing them to stand in an almost interminable queue to access the Gate’s central building in order to have the authorization to perform normal activities of any kind. After violent clashes, called the “disgraceful events” (*al-aḥdāt al-muṣayyinah*), or the Night of the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, the Gate closes its offices for several weeks for security matters; as a consequence, the queue stretches for several kilometers. Staying in line and collaborating with neighbors in queue, for example to keep one’s place when he or she is off to attend to necessary activities, has become an everyday routine.

In the massive line we find the protagonist Yaḥyà, a quiet middle class young Egyptian. After being shot during the “disgraceful events” and having received emergency treatment in the State hospital, he is waiting for the bullet in his belly to be removed. To obtain the Gate’s authorization he must submit a copy of his x-rays, which disappeared after military doctors tampered with his medical records in an attempt to erase all evidence of police violence. The plot follows Yaḥyà, his girlfriend Amānī, his friend Ġād and a journalist, Īhāb, as they join forces in the quest to find the x-rays in order to have the surgery performed before it is too late.

Another protagonist, possibly the most significant character in the novel, is Ṭāriq, the young doctor in charge of Yaḥyà’s treatment. He represents the contradiction between obeying the authorities and being honest and righteous. He is portrayed as a scrupulous, honest and law-abiding citizen, who always worked hard and passionately<sup>19</sup>. His respect for the rules prevents him from performing the surgery without the Gate’s permission. When presented with the choice between violating his mission as a doctor and respecting his patient’s rights, he eventually turns against the system he has long been loyal to.

The novel vividly and straightforwardly stages the main mechanism and strategies through which state repression acts. While a surreal atmosphere permeates this dystopic reality, the striking resemblances with recent events in Egypt, especially the ones following Morsi’s (Mūrīsī) fall, suggest that everything that happens in its pages is not a metaphor, but something that could really happen or, even worse, is already happening. The cruelty and violence of the “disgraceful events” is pitted against the precarious normality that the citizens get used to<sup>20</sup>. With this, Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz seems to be saying that authoritarianism is even more dangerous when the people trust its discourses and practices and naturalize

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<sup>19</sup> Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *al-Ṭābūr*, cit., pp. 57-58.

<sup>20</sup> The queue, in fact, becomes a true social microcosm that reflects society as a whole. For example, some microbus lines run between the offices and the back of the line (the journey takes up to 20 minutes); a character opens an improvised but successful small coffee-shop to cater to the people standing in the queue; another starts giving religion classes.

its power and existence<sup>21</sup>. The populace described in the novel are subjected to tax rises, prohibitions and limitations to circulation while the city is transformed into a maze made up of security walls and fences, but all this happens without anyone protesting. The problem, in fact, is that they need the Gate<sup>22</sup>.

It is also possible to detect a clear critical attitude towards political actors and parties in Egypt with no exception. On the one hand, the political use of religious discourses is condemned. For instance, a salafi man in the queue is portrayed while receiving orders by an influential *šayḥ*, who tells him which rumors he must circulate in order to influence the queue's opinion and behavior<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, when new clashes rage between groups of protesters and police forces, the disruption of services and other difficulties, which last several days, affect those standing in line. The revolutionaries are trying to bring those people to their senses and the latter's cold reaction mirrors the distance between revolutionary and left parties and the Egyptian masses<sup>24</sup>. This clearly points to collaboration between citizens at grass-roots levels, far from the interest of political sectarianism, as the solution to the atomization and anesthetization of the collective conscience operated by a technologically and strategically up-to-date regime.

*al-Tamāsīḥ* by Yūsuf Raḥā is the first volume of a trilogy, where each novel is narrated by one of the three young founders of *Ġamā'at al-tamāsīḥ lī 'l-ši'r al-sirrī*. The narrator of this first volume<sup>25</sup>, Yūsuf, reconstructs the brief life of the group from the vantage point of the first anniversary of the Tahrir Revolution. It spans from the night in which it was founded in 1997, the same night Raḥwā 'Ādil, a leading leftist activist and symbol of the 70's generation, committed suicide, until 2001, when the friendship between the three poets ended and one of them died in a car accident at the exact moment in which the second airplane hit the WTC Towers in Manhattan. The non-linear series of events here recalled covers the three young poets' relationships with the Cairene literary circles, and focuses on their love affairs with three women, aspiring artists and poets, that end up in failure. The main theme of the novel is the difficulty of growing up in a hostile world among excesses, libertine sexual adventures and the use of drugs. At the same time, Raḥā tries to reconstruct the causes of Raḥwā 'Ādil's suicide and understand what brought the revolution to an apparent failure.

What drives *al-Tamāsīḥ*'s narrator, Yūsuf, nicknamed *Fattīs* (clutch) for his relatively big head, are the incidents and the episodes of political and cultural repression that mark the first twelve months following the fall of Mubarak's regime. As he states, the stimulus to remember becomes a way of balancing the Egyptian people's inclination to believe in lies<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> At the time of the narration its origins stretch so far back in the past that the citizens recall it always having been there. Cf. Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz, *al-Ṭābūr*, cit., p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44, 71.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-156 and pp. 205-207.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-163.

<sup>25</sup> The second novel is entitled *Bāwlū* (Paolo) after the nickname of its narrator, and is currently in print; the narrator of the third volume of the project, which is under preparation, is the third young poet, Nāyif.

<sup>26</sup> «I think that the problem – maybe – is that it [Egypt] is not burning as much as it should:

Notwithstanding this political leitmotif, there is in reality no will to intervene or restore a sort of public truth. There is no *iltizām* (commitment) in the canonical sense of the term; rather, the novel is pervaded by a feeling of having missed an opportunity, if one ever presented itself. In many passages Yūsuf makes this clear, especially when he emphasizes his distance from the events<sup>27</sup> while at the same time recalling them in a journalistic and rapid prose in different parts of the novel.

*al-Tamāsīh*'s narrator shows his disillusion by means of an anti-ideological position that clearly intends to counter the instrumental revolutionary rhetoric used by the ruling parties or in which the opposition groups entrenched themselves. The link between politics, commitment and writing is continuously underlined, but it remains in the background of the narration<sup>28</sup>.

Yet, there is distance from the non committed attitude of the 70's and 90's generations. The young founders of *Ġamā'at al-tamāsīh* showed and practiced a similar detachment while perceiving it as a strait-jacket. The point is that the three poets and protagonists of this novel wanted to start a revolution, just as the earlier generations did, but they simply tried their own way. Their choice of making their poetry secret – that is, unpublished, and thus unknown<sup>29</sup> – can be seen as a critique to the current mechanisms of cultural production and circulation. It severs them from the circles to which they belonged and separates them from the logic of generations contending the literary field's resources through recognition and opposition.

To sum up, these two novels reframe discourses on the 2011 and subsequent upheavals in two different narrative dimensions and with different intentions. The first recalls traumatic collective events in an effort to counter the legalized and legitimated narrations of the establishment and to allow the disempowered and the victims to regain control of them. The second retrospection operates mostly on an intellectual level, concerned as it is with questioning the effective revolutionary legacy of the last generations of literati. However, in spite of their diverging perspectives, both cases draw attention to a critical node on the relationship between narration, reality and truth.

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there are those who talk of the importance of enforcing the industrial production while young people are kidnapped and tortured; there are those who run as leader of the Congress since he "knows our Lord" while people of al-Azhar are shot dead; because the events are nevertheless small and because they have lost sense with the people's readiness to believe in lies». Cf. Yūsuf Raḥā, *al-Tamāsīh*, cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> The narrator often recurs to metafictional devices: for example by repeating some sentences, such as when he stresses what he observes from his hypothetical place in the future, «Min makānī al-iftirāḍī fi 'l-mustaqbal», or when he states that he thinks about events in the very moment in which he is writing.

<sup>28</sup> This is pointed out in the novel in many instances, such as in the numerous references to "the trunk of the future", that they "didn't want to carry", and "let go of". In other passages the narrator shows his disbelief in committed literature by repeatedly addressing Raḍwā 'Ādil with a chain of terms: *al-kātibah al-munāḍilah al-muṭaqqafah al-mašhūrah* (the famous writer activist-intellectual). While it denotes clear irony, it must be said that it is directed to the incapacity of Egyptian intellectuals and activists to see her as a human being and not just an important political and cultural figure.

<sup>29</sup> The narrator presents a sort of manifesto for the group, where three main conditions are established for their poetry: self-sufficiency, i.e. it is never proposed as poetry, but the reader has to recognize it; it has to be written only when the desire to write arises; it has to be written deliberately as poetry and not in any other form whatsoever. Cf. Yūsuf Raḥā, *al-Tamāsīh*, cit., pp. 144-145.

*al-Ṭābūr*'s dystopic setting complicates the realist mode that dominates the novel. Here, in fact, it must be noted that the resemblances to Egypt's recent events and predicament are evident. I argue that the main issue addressed in the novel is linked to the political and antiauthoritarian message it conveys, and it revolves around a sort of fragility of reality and the difficulties of representing it adequately. The novel is dominated by a disorienting effect created by the juxtaposition of futuristic elements<sup>30</sup>, as well as common scenes and situations of post-revolution Cairo are projected into the indefinite time setting of the novel<sup>31</sup>. In this way, fresh memories are cast as a possible immediate future so that the boundary between what really is and what could possibly be blurs<sup>32</sup>. In *al-Ṭābūr* reality is intended as a historical and legal narrative<sup>33</sup> and appears as something that is never fixed or easily recognizable. It is prey to the totalitarian regime that manipulates it by means of controlled media and creates narratives that dispossess the revolutionaries of their goals and messages. At the same time there is no unitary counter-narrative, since reality is composed by different, fluctuating and often contradictory perspectives, expressed by the novel's many voices, especially the ones of the people in the queue. From this point of view, the fragility of this multifaceted and unattainable reality resembles the fragility of collective memory. In this perspective the appropriate framework of reference is of a psychological nature, and regards questions on trauma and memory<sup>34</sup>.

The efforts of the protagonists to extract the bullet from Yaḥyà's body testify to the will to resist against the deceptive ways through which human rights are denied. However, the bullet also represents the evidence of state violence while the protagonists' fight can be related to the difficult road a community must take in order to retain memory of traumatic events. From this point of view, the perhaps naive simplicity and straightforwardness of the novel's representations shall be related to the need to convey its meaning with immediacy. This, I argue, suggests that the function of the novel is storytelling, and therefore a democratic practice and a means of collective healing at the same time.

<sup>30</sup> These are only mentioned and never described in detail, like, for example, the evidence of the use of new and unknown weapon technologies, as detected by wound analysis. In other instances, repression technologies, such as the use of mobile phones to bug conversations, are nothing out of the ordinary.

<sup>31</sup> Walls are erected to separate strategic areas of the capital city, the empty and dirty streets after the limitation of circulation are described, and everyday business is stagnating, Cf. Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz, *al-Ṭābūr*, cit., pp. 101-102.

<sup>32</sup> This point has two extremely relevant aspects. Firstly, it has been a common trend to look for anticipations and premonitions of the 2011 uprisings in Arabic literature; from this point of view *al-Ṭābūr* seems to predict many events characterizing al-Sisi's (al-Sīsī) rule. It must be noted that the writer's Cassandra-like abilities are grounded in her studies and academic background; similarly, other facts, such as the non-guilty verdict delivered in Mubarak's and his entourage's trial, were simply feared, if not expected. Secondly, *al-Ṭābūr*'s realistic references to real Cairene situations contrast with some characteristics of the dystopic Arabic novel, as identified by Ada Barbaro; cf. Ada Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, Carocci, Roma 2013, pp. 194-196.

<sup>33</sup> Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal al-Ghitani*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Sally Toma, *Requiems and dreams: The struggle for Egypt's memory*, in "Mada Masr", <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/requiems-and-dreams-struggle-egypts-memory>.

*al-Tamāsīh* narrativizes the difficulty of representing reality on a different level. Here, Egypt's poetic and literary field in the 90's – with its main figures, circles, stories and practices – while constituting the main subject and setting of the novel, lies outside of the focus of the story. By mixing fiction and autobiography, the novel reconstructs the trajectory of the formation of the author/narrator, making it possible to read it as an intellectual's *bildungsroman*; but the genre's form is here radically unsettled, in a way that stages the impossibility of making sense of these multiple, contradicting experiences.

This happens on many levels and through different strategies. In the first place, the two levels of reality and fiction collide and mix with one another. The three fictive poets (even the autobiographic relation between Yūsuf the writer and Yūsuf the narrator is not clearly determined) cross a world that reflects the 90's literary scene in Cairo in many aspects. They participated in their gatherings but never felt part of that world<sup>35</sup>; by doing so, the narrative creates the effect of observing that same world from the protagonists' marginal perspective. Furthermore, real people and events are easily identifiable behind the fictive names adopted by Raḡwā<sup>36</sup>. In this way, the universe of novelists, poets, artists, activists and their parties and talks appears distant, unattainable, to the point that it becomes impossible to finish the novel with a clear idea of its main features and historical meaning.

Secondly, an important link is drawn between their experience as Crocodiles and Raḡwā 'Ādil's death. Yūsuf makes a comparison between the declining trajectory followed by him and his fellow poets, and the fall that leads her to quit the movement, both a physical one from a 11<sup>th</sup> floor balcony and an emotional one, that is her disillusion and depression<sup>37</sup>.

Just like Raḡwā locked herself in a bedroom at one of her relatives' house and jumped, the Crocodiles locked themselves against the world in an effort to find truth and purity and allowed only the three aspiring artists with whom they had a relationship to enter their "room". Each one of these relationships failed, and broke them and their friendship too. A most significant element is the reference to Arwā Šāliḡ's famous *al-Mubtasarūn* (The Premature Ones) through its fictional counterpart, Raḡwā 'Ādil's *al-Mabsūrūn* (The Unripe Ones)<sup>38</sup>. In this text Šāliḡ portrays the 70's and later generations' defects and shortcomings, which are also the Crocodiles', who decided to face not failure, but the consequences of refusing any possibility of success<sup>39</sup>. This is, in a nihilistic stance, the revolutionary act. Yūsuf draws a parallelism, as if proclaiming that the emperor was naked, with

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<sup>35</sup> Yūsuf Raḡwā, *al-Tamāsīh*, cit., p. 155.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Layṭ al-Ḥayawān is Usāmah al-Danāšawrī, Šaqar al-Ġanaynī is Hayṭam al-Wardānī, Adham al-Yamanī is Aḡmad al-Yamanī, and Raḡwā 'Ādil corresponds to the famous member of the students movement Arwā Šāliḡ.

<sup>37</sup> Yūsuf Raḡwā, *al-Tamāsīh*, cit., p. 152.

<sup>38</sup> Arwā Šāliḡ, *al-Mubtasarūn, dafātir wāḡidah min ḡīl al-ḡarakah al-ṭullābiyyah* (The Premature Ones, Journal of a Woman from the Students' Movement Generation), Dār al-Nahr li 'l-Našr wa 'l-Tawzī', al-Qāhirah 1996. The novel's narrator refers to *al-Mabsūrūn, kašākīl mušārikah fī 'l-ḡarakah al-ṭullābiyyah* (The Unripe Ones, Album of a Student Movement Activist), published the winter before Raḡwā 'Ādil's suicide.

<sup>39</sup> Yūsuf Raḡwā, *al-Tamāsīh*, cit., p. 172.

another famous episode that occurred after the 2011 revolution, that is when the young student ‘Aliyyah al-Mahdī from the American University in Cairo posted a nude self-portrait of herself on the Internet. The narrator sees the young woman’s rebellion as revolutionary because of its immediacy and simplicity and because it did not stem from any ideological stance<sup>40</sup>.

The narrated events, facts and stories constitute the threads with which the fabric of the novel is interwoven. At the same time, though, they lose relevance and integrity, while the narrator directs attention to the missing pieces of the puzzle by cyclically returning to determined subjects or events, such as Raḍwā/Arwā’s suicide, or the Millennium night that represented a non-return point in the protagonists’ declining trajectory.

From this perspective, the three young poets’ rebellion and nonconformist acts may be assessed in a different light. They didn’t break any taboos to condemn what surrounded them unlike the other intellectuals of their time. It was nothing more than their way of looking for the meaning of things and themselves. That is why their numbness, the excesses they indulged in and the physical violence they mixed with desperately pure love relationships, gradually became even less than a mere background, as strongly effective and eye-catching as they may be.

Here we come to what I believe is the main distinguishing feature of this excellent work: *al-Tamāsīh* isn’t exactly a novel on events. It doesn’t answer the need to tell the truth or save it from oblivion, or to reveal the government’s lies or the people’s inclination to believe what is more reassuring for them. Instead, *al-Tamāsīh* chronicles a doubt-ridden reflection, the making sense of these multiple experiences in the light of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution and the events and mood that followed. In broader terms, the autobiographic dimension of this text, even if concealed, postulates and communicates a sense of accomplishment; this (apparently) inordinate collection of memories that are as short as blog posts, appears as a (b)log of doubts and questions, a re-construction and a new experience at the same time.

#### 4. *Hybridity as a Textual Strategy*

These novels show that reality has become uncanny and elusive, hard to analyze and even harder to narrate. In *al-Ṭābūr*, it consists in the battlefield and what is at stake at the same time. The novel underpins the vital function of literature as a historical counter-narrative. Rather than calling to action, it acts on the level of collective conscience and memory. From this point of view, the struggle to remove the bullet aims at something more than just saving a human life, it is necessary to oppose oblivion<sup>41</sup>. A strong symbol of this is the void into which Amānī is dramatically plunged after she is captured by the authorities without having been harmed physically. Non-consciousness, forgetfulness, “lā šay” (nothing), as described in the novel, are the traces of a mysterious, fearsome and technologically advanced torture technique<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> The extent to which oblivion is useful to despotic authorities is underlined, for example, when people confess that they don’t remember when the Gate was instituted, as if it had always existed. Cf. Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *al-Ṭābūr*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-178.

*al-Tamāsīh* develops this discourse on reality to a further point. It seems to proclaim that the gaze – the activity of pursuing aesthetic, philosophical and human knowledge – is all that counts. Reality, or, to be precise, the truth behind it, is created by afterthoughts, memories, by a past that is reconfigured in the light of present times' conscience, while the future lays in the past and its possibilities. A powerful symbol that encompasses all these concepts is the lion of Allen Ginsberg's poem *The Lion for Real* (1958). The three poets try to unravel the meaning of the poem, which Nāyif tries to translate into Arabic, drafting various versions without being satisfied with any of them. The difficulties of translating the foreign text derive from the instability of the symbolism contained, which reflects reality's unreliability. At different stages of the narration God, and the revolution, are identified in this egyptianized Ginsberg's lion, until it becomes a real vision tormenting Nāyif. Eventually, the lion's appearance in the passenger's seat while Nāyif is driving causes his death by car accident as reported by Yūsuf (to add to the ambiguity, nobody ever comes to know how he obtained this information since Nāyif was alone in the car).

The ultimate meaning of things coincides with the cultural, aesthetic and human identity of Egypt's people. The question, once again, is if the Spirit has come back (to phrase Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm's famous novel).

In order to convey the truth, to make it resonate throughout this unreliable reality, these texts have to become hybrid and unstable. The novel as the genre of modernity, even in its more experimental, fragmented, self-reflexive or playful versions, rethinks its paradigm as an instrument of cultural intervention. *al-Ṭābūr* must be read against Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz's work and essays on torture and despotism, to the point that it could be considered an essay on human rights in the form of fiction. Besides that, it displays striking references to a number of modernist works such as Orwell's *1984*, and it contains the Kafkesque atmosphere and elements of the detective stories and the thriller, that are found in Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's works, as well as in recent Arabic fiction. On a formal level, *al-Tamāsīh* appears to be a more experimental fictional work compared to *al-Ṭābūr*. Written as a memoir and a metafictional novel<sup>43</sup>, it is divided into 403 small paragraphs that recall blog writing strategies and form what has been also defined as a prose poem containing and intersecting with other fragmented texts, such as literary essays and poetic translations.

### *Conclusions: Is There a Post-Arab Spring Literature?*

Observing literature in such a fast paced changing context brings us to question which theoretical framework to use, and in particular the nexus between rupture and continuity on multiple levels. On the most visible level, some questions arise in relation to the main discourses regarding the post-Spring era. Besides locating themes revolving around human rights issues, martyrdom, ruins and Renaissance in different texts written after 2011, questions on whether they are new or developments of older ones should be asked<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> References by the narrator to the act of recalling, reconstructing and writing memories are frequent in the novel.

<sup>44</sup> Ken Seigneurie, *Discourses of the 2011 Arab Revolutions*, in "Journal of Arabic Literature", No. 43, 2012, pp. 484-509.

Discourses on a doomed revolution entail questions such as if it failed, or if it is ongoing and has not achieved its goals yet. This implies a second point: post-2011 cultural production engages with the matter of commitment and cultural production. In this perspective, I hypothesize that these literary works can be treated as metanarrations revolving around these issues. They explicate the role they play, along with other means of cultural and artistic expression, in the creation of collective imageries and the institutionalization of hegemonic versions of historical events. The text is committed to revealing these mechanisms and its being a part of them.

Firstly, the role of the intellectual is being scrutinized with renewed intensity. Tensions and differences in the literary field and fast paced changes have brought to the collision of different patterns and interpretations of intellectual activity. Institutionalized intellectuals are pitted against underground or rising actors of the cultural scene, who are, in turn, in search of recognition<sup>45</sup>. However, the validity of a conflict model between older consecrated generations, who intend to maintain their acquired capital, and younger ones, who are eager to replace the old ones, seems to be questioned. The solution suggested in these novels revolves around the radical questioning of the rules of constitution of the literary canon and the unsettling of the opposition between a “high” committed literature and supposedly less valuable forms of expression.

Another significant discourse concerns the relationship between the Internet, social communication networks, the revolution and literature. Of course, blogging and other new possibilities of publishing and circulating texts and creations are among the most relevant factors that have shaped the present cultural and literary landscape<sup>46</sup>. However, it could also be argued that elements pertaining to the construction and dissemination of texts are peculiar to Arabic/Egyptian literature regardless of the latest communication technologies, and in some instances ever since the late *nahḍah*<sup>47</sup>.

Furthermore, these novels critically interfere with questions of periodization. *al-Ṭābūr* does this by means of its apparent simplicity and straightforwardness. By mixing references to genres such as the dystopic novel and detective fiction, as well as the psychological essay, Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz aims at answering the demands of a literature which is capable of becoming an effective vehicle of change, rather than focusing on literary experimentation. *al-Tamāsīh* endeavors to present what the bullet metaphorically indicates in *al-Ṭābūr*, as raw, as it really is. Raḥā creates a short-circuit between the genres of poetry, the novel, and their “mission”: the novel, thanks to its poetic resonances, rids itself of its

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<sup>45</sup> The role of many established writers as the forerunners of the Tahrir revolutionaries has been jeopardized by the political positions they have assumed in the last months. An emblematic case is Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's support of the al-Sisi's government, which has been harshly criticized for ignoring the Egyptian regime's violation of human rights.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde. Intersection in Egypt*, Routledge, New York and London 2006. She concludes her analysis on the role of the Internet in recent years.

<sup>47</sup> An interesting framework of continuity is hypothesized by Tareq El-Ariss in his analysis of literary affects from the *nahḍah* to the XXI century. Cf. Tareq El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013.

metaphoricizing strait-jacket, and poetry, dissolved in the novel, resolves the contradiction between occasion/political reference and its quest for human and aesthetic truth. They undermine the validity of a sharp distinction between pre- and post-revolutionary eras, principally by crossing the boundaries of periods and generations of artists and intellectuals, as seen in the way they are structured and in the elements they bring together. In other words, Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and Yūsuf Raḥā seem, like their fellow authors in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, to refuse any sort of “anxiety over categorization”, unlike what happened, for example, with the 60’s generation<sup>48</sup>.

This brings us back to the question of whether it is possible to talk about a post-Arab Spring literature. In the first place, an interesting analysis perspective is offered by the comparison of *al-Ṭābūr* with other recent dystopic novels, for instance with two of the most recent and best known examples of the genre: Aḥmad Ḥālid Tawfīq’s *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia, 2008)<sup>49</sup> and *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* (Exit Door, 2012) by ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fīšīr.<sup>50</sup> While *Yūtūbiyā* obviously cannot refer to the revolutionary events and projects questions on violence and social justice onto a distant and unrecognizable future, it ultimately represents the *status quo* of the author’s contemporary Egypt<sup>51</sup>, *al-Ṭābūr* and *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* address the same main concerns<sup>52</sup>. In fact, both novels depict a post-revolutionary reality in which despotism and repression took over after riots and violent repression, and in both novels references to the post-Mubarak dramatic events are clear and depicted in detail. However, the time perspective utilized by Fīšīr, who sets his action in 2020 and looks retrospectively from 2013 onwards, is different from the indefinite one employed by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. Moreover, both writers borrow the novel’s focus from his and her respective profession – the former is a Political Sciences professor at AUC, the latter a psychologist interested in human rights and torture. From a broader perspective, a comparison between the two works studied here and the Egyptian and Arabic novelistic production of the last few years, brings to few more observations to the fore. While a peculiarity of *al-Ṭābūr* and *al-Tamāsīh* consists in the direct way in which they confront the Arab Spring and its grim aftermath, there are many analogies with other texts that were written after the 2010/2011 upheavals<sup>53</sup>. If we keep focusing on few writers who were active and well known before – most of them shortlisted or prize-winners in recent IPAF

<sup>48</sup> Yasmine Ramadan, *The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization*, in “Journal of Arabic Literature”, 43 (2012), pp. 409-430.

<sup>49</sup> Aḥmad Ḥālid Tawfīq, *Yūtūbiyā*, Dār Mīrīt, al-Qāhirah 2008. English translation: Ahmed Khaled Towfik, *Utopia*, Translated by C. Rossetti, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, Doha 2011.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fīšīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ, risālat ‘Alī al-muf‘amah bi-bahġah ġayr mutawaqqa‘āh* (Exit Door, Ali’s Letter Full of an Unexpected Joy), Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012.

<sup>51</sup> As Christian Junge argued in his paper *The Re-Emergence of Total Criticism and Radical Emotions in Khaled Tawfīq’s Utopia: a Case Study of Kifaya-Rhetoric*, presented at the already mentioned 10<sup>th</sup> international EURAMAL conference “Literature and the ‘Arab Spring’: analyses and perspectives”, cit.

<sup>52</sup> For more on this last novel, see Ada Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, cit., p. 259.

<sup>53</sup> To be exact, it must be noted that many works published since 2012 were started before the 2011 events.

editions –, unrest and uncertainty are the main characteristics of this literary production, a fact that clearly expresses their concerns with the criticalness of the new situations. As far as the themes are concerned, we can see that the chosen subjects revolve around dramatic political and social transition. An example of this is Yūsuf Zaydān's *Muḥāl* (Places/Impossible/Strong, 2012)<sup>54</sup>, which follows a young Egyptian, pious Muslim, whose peregrination brings him to war-torn Afghanistan as a war photographer, who ends up incarcerated in Guantanamo<sup>55</sup>. Similarly, *al-Ṭalyānī* (The Italian, 2014) by Šukrī al-Maḥbūt<sup>56</sup> portrays the years of transition from Bourguiba (Abū Ruqaybah) to Ben Ali (Bin 'Alī), focusing on social and political opportunism in the Tunisian society of the 80's; and al-Aswānī's *Nādī al-sayyārāt* (Automobile Club, 2012)<sup>57</sup> is set in the years before the Free Officers' revolution and looks back to the 1919 revolution. An interesting post-2011 novel is also *Mawlānā* (Our Master, 2012) by Ibrāhīm 'Īsā<sup>58</sup> that addresses the social and political malaises of Egypt by focusing on the relationship between religion, business and politics, as seen through the industry of religious talk-shows.

Another significant theme revolves around violence and injustice and has been treated in a wide variety of literary solutions. While Sa'ūd al-San'ūsī, in his *Sāq al-bāmbū* (The Bamboo Stalk, 2012)<sup>59</sup>, explores issues of exploitation and racism in the Arab Gulf, some others represent a universe of violence and conflict by using surreal and hallucinatory tones, introducing elements from the thriller and sci-fi genres as in Aḥmad al-Sa'dāwī's *Frānkīštāyn fī Baġdād* (Frankenstein in Baghdad, 2013)<sup>60</sup> which portrays a ferocious monster in Iraq during the US military invasion, and *al-Fīl al-azraq* (The Blue Elephant, 2012), by Aḥmad Murād<sup>61</sup>, that diverts from the usual plot based on white collar crime and sets his noir universe in the inner realms of the human psyche.

In conclusion, there is a strong continuity with the concerns and themes addressed by Arab writers before the wave of uprisings that swept the Arab world.

<sup>54</sup> Yūsuf Zaydān, *Muḥāl*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012 (the author intentionally left the title without vowels, so that it could have a threefold meaning).

<sup>55</sup> It is interesting to note that while Zaydān set his previous works in ancient history, the events of this novel occur in recent times (between the mid 90's and the first years of the second millennium).

<sup>56</sup> Šukrī al-Maḥbūt, *al-Ṭaliyānī*, Dār al-Tanwīr, al-Qāhirah 2014. The novel won the 2015 edition of the IPAF prize.

<sup>57</sup> 'Alā' al-Aswānī, *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012. English translation: Alaa Al Aswani, Translated by R. Harris, *The Automobile Club of Egypt*, Knopf, New York 2015. See also in this double issue Cristina Dozio, *Rebellion in the Public and the Private Sphere: Nādī al-sayyārāt by 'Alā' al-Aswānī*, pp. 54-71.

<sup>58</sup> Ibrāhīm 'Īsā, *Mawlānā*, Dār Blūmzburī-Mu'assasat Qaṭar li 'l-Našr/Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, al-Dawḥah 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Sa'ūd al-San'ūsī, *Sāq al-bāmbū*, al-Dār al-'Arabiyyah li 'l-'Ulūm Nāširūn, Bayrūt 2012. English translation: Saud Alsanousi, *The Bamboo Stalk*, Translated by J. Wright, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, Doha 2015. For more on this novel, see, i.e., Caterina Pinto, *Non è il paese delle meraviglie: Sāq al-bāmbū (Gambo di bambù, 2012) di Sa'ūd al-San'ūsī*, in "La rivista di Arablit", IV, 7-8, 2014, pp. 201-210, [http://www.arablit.it/rivista\\_arablit/Numero7\\_8\\_2014/20\\_Pinto.pdf](http://www.arablit.it/rivista_arablit/Numero7_8_2014/20_Pinto.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Aḥmad al-Sa'dāwī, *Frānkīštāyn fī Baġdād*, Manšūrāt al-Ġamal, Bayrūt-Baġdād 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Aḥmad Murād, *al-Fīl al-azraq*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012.

It could be argued that in general writers have resorted to ideas and themes with which they were already at ease, in order to elaborate and offer an understanding of such dramatic changes, in some cases by adapting works that had been written before to new scenarios. The main concerns of their works, those with universal resonance, have not changed over the time – violence, sectarianism, political abuse and social justice –, but the world in which writers and their readers live is radically different.

Within this broader framework, it is clear that *al-Ṭābūr* and *al-Tamāsīh* pose questions and treat themes that are analogous to those observed in the other novels written after the so called Arab Spring. Finally, we can detect a positive note behind these two works' radical disillusionment and the way in which they question the relationship between literature and any form of commitment. Although they paint a grim outlook and clearly appear to reject joy and playfulness, as a lot of Arabic literature did in this century's first decade<sup>62</sup>, they point to a central foundational element, which is "trust", as identified by Ihab Hassan as characteristic of the "beyond post-modernist" era<sup>63</sup>. In this perspective, questions on continuity and rupture can be addressed by recognizing that change in the Arabic literature is taking place at a deeper level. In fact, these examples suggest that this literature is not content of just simply mirroring historical events and anxieties and the hopes related to them, but it also questions the profound cultural, moral and philosophical roots of the latest Arab contemporary thought while offering a valid perspective from which to understand the present times in their universality.

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<sup>62</sup> Stephan Guth, *The Changing Role of Pleasure, or: towards a Fundamentalist Humanism. Some Thoughts on the Place of Pleasure and Desire in the System of a New Period*, cit., p. 141.

<sup>63</sup> «Truth, I have said, rests on trust, personal, social, cognitive trust. But what is trust? Roundly, I answer, more than consensus, trust depends on self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to *kenosis*. It requires dispassion, empathy, attention to others and to the created world, to something not in ourselves. But, ultimately, it demands self dispossession. That is why truth and trust remain spiritual qualities that are not simply psychological, not merely political but above all spiritual values». Cf. Ihab Hassan, *Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust*, in K. Stierstofer (ed.), *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments Literature, Theory, and Culture*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2003, p. 206.