
Rebellion in the Public and the Private Sphere:
Nādī al-sayyārāt by ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī*

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Over the past five years, socio-political changes in Egypt have stemmed from and – at the same time – contributed to the emergence of a new sensitivity, which has been expressed in various forms of art such as cinema, graffiti, music and literature. As far as fiction is concerned, various subgenres (diaries, blogs and popular literature) have contributed to a renewal of the genre. This essay looks at ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī’s Nādī al-sayyārāt (Automobile Club, 2013) as an example of the aforementioned new sensitivity or revolutionary perception in fiction. In this recent novel, the author depicts everyday life and inter-class relations at the Cairo Automobile Club during the 1940s, in order to create an allegory of contemporary Egyptian society. Overtly denouncing social injustice and the network of power is certainly not new in al-Aswānī’s oeuvre. However, in Nādī al-sayyārāt, the novelist examines the process of developing a revolutionary spirit and the personal choice of taking action, with all the difficulties that this implies. My analysis focuses on how representations of rebellion in the public and the private spheres are intertwined in the novel. This aspect will be seen especially through two male characters (father and son) and two female ones. The use of time and space as meaningful narrative strategies will also be taken into consideration. Finally, Nādī al-sayyārāt will be compared to al-Aswānī’s earlier production and related to his activity as social commentator, in an attempt to identify any innovations in content and form.

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A revolution is a process, not an event. And, as you know, our Egyptian revolution is ongoing. And its path has not been smooth. How could it have been when the interests we are seeking to break free of are so powerful and so pervasive?

Ahdaf Soueif¹

Over the past five years, socio-political changes in Egypt have stemmed from and – at the same time – contributed to the emergence of a new sensitivity, which has been expressed in various forms of art such as cinema, graffiti, music and literature, including poetry and theatre. The changing reality and the different way of perceiving it have been ongoing sources of inspiration and have contributed to an artistic regeneration.

Focusing on the Egyptian scene, it is possible to identify some common features of art produced during and after the January 25 revolution. In particular, art can be linked to the appropriation of space, starting from Maydān al-Tahrīr (Tahrir Square) and moving much further; to a different approach to digital media and resources²; to reducing the distance between artists and audiences, as well as blurring the boundaries of the traditional opposition between high-brow and low-brow art. Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman underline the connection between political change and a shift in artistic representation, since the early days of the uprisings:

And the first days of the revolution witnessed the circulation of amateurish low-budget art clips by e-mail or on YouTube, shot with mobile cameras, using the square for set and the demonstrators for pseudo-actors. What characterized these clips was that they went beyond the simple documentation of the political event unfolding to a documentation of the artistic expression surrounding it: graffiti, outdoor installation art, songs, performances, and so on. That this was simultaneously done as a political action of an unprecedented historical magnitude was taking place is a clear indication of how people naturally associated political change with artistic production and creativity³.

As far as fiction is concerned, critics and authors agree that it is too early for the production of a big narrative about these events. However, we can already find

¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, Bloomsbury, London 2012, p. xiv. In Arabic, the book's contents have appeared as columns on "al-Šurūq" under the title *al-Qāhirah. Madīnatī wa tawratunā*, <http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/ahdaf-soueiff>, accessed November 3, 2015. A book is forthcoming. In Italian: Ahdaf Soueif, *Il Cairo. La mia città. La nostra rivoluzione*, traduzione di N. Poo, Donzelli Editore, Roma 2013.

² Randa Aboubakr, *The Role of New Media in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Visuality as an Agent of Change*, in Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman (eds.), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 231-245.

³ Walid El Hamamsy, Mounira Soliman, *The Aesthetics of Revolution: Popular Creativity and the Egyptian Spring*, in ID. (eds.), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, cit., p. 250.

some literary representations of the revolution⁴. Analysts have noticed how some genres, traditionally considered on the margins of the canon or outside of it, were employed to describe the experience of the eighteen days of street demonstrations and the events of the following months, thus producing an image of what revolution means for the artist. Examples of this phenomenon are diaries and memoirs, such as Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* or Mona Prince's⁵ *Ismī tawrah* (Revolution is My Name, 2012)⁶. The genre of humorous and satirical writing has been revived in various ways: collections of jokes and puns published on the web; pieces by creative and independent journalists such as Bilāl Faḍl, Nawwārah Naḡm and Ġalāl 'Āmir; comic magazines, the most popular of which is "Tūk Tūk"⁷. Finally, some renowned and widely-read Egyptian authors have had their books published after the uprisings. Worth mentioning among these are 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr's *Bāb al-ḥurūġ risālat 'Alī al-muf'amah bi-bahġah ġayr mutawaqqa 'āh* (The Exit, Ali's Letter Full of an Unexpected Joy, 2012), 'Alā' al-Aswānī's *Nādī al-sayyārāt* and Aḡmad Murād's *1919* (2012)⁸. At first, it is interesting to note that these three novels are not set in present days, but either in the near future (in the case of the first novel) or back in the past (in the other two novels). This narrative strategy might be the object of further study.

Here I shall focus on the second of these novels as an example of post-2011 fiction, in an attempt to identify which aspects of the revolutionary sensitivity it portrays. Having identified rebellion as the main narrative motif in *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, i.e. the motif that makes the plot progress and shapes the characters' personalities, it is interesting to look at the different forms of rebellion displayed in the book: I

⁴ Nada Ramadan, *The Egyptian Contemporary Novel: A Survey of a Revolutionary Endeavour*, in "Al Jadid", vol. 17, No. 65, <http://www.aljadid.com/content/egyptian-contemporary-novel>, accessed December 30, 2014. A collection of literary excerpts related to the first year of the Egyptian uprisings is available in Italian: Mona Anis, Elisabetta Bartuli (a cura di), *Storie*, in "Internazionale", no. 1083, 24/12/2014-08/01/2015.

⁵ In the text of this article, the author's name in English transliteration is preferred to the Arabic one, because this is how she is known among her Arabic and international audiences.

⁶ Munā Barnas, *Ismī tawrah*, Amoun Printhouse, al-Qāhirah 2012. In English: Mona Prince, *Revolution is My Name. An Egyptian Woman's Diary from Eighteen Days in Tahrir*, Translated by S. Mehrez, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2014. For an analysis of the two books and a study of the diary in the representation of women's activism, see Dina Heshmat, *Egyptian Narratives of the 2011 Revolution: Diary as a Medium of Reconciliation with the Political*, in F. Pannewick, G. Khalil and Y. Albers (eds.), *Commitment and Beyond. Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 63-77; Sherine Fouad Mazloum, *To write/to revolt: Egyptian women novelists writing the revolution*, in "Journal for Cultural Research", 19.2, 2015, pp. 207-220; Hala Kamal, *Women's Memoirs of the Egyptian Revolution: Mona Prince's Ismi Thawra and Ahdaf Soueif's Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, in *Proceedings of the 11th International Symposium on Comparative Literature-Creativity and Revolution*, Cairo University, forthcoming.

⁷ See in this double issue Francesco De Angelis, *Graphic Novels and Comic Books in Post-Revolutionary Egypt: Some Remarks*, pp. 23-37.

⁸ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ, risālat 'Alī al-muf'amah bi-bahġah ġayr mutawaqqa 'āh*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012. This novel was originally published in instalments on the newspaper "al-Taḥrīr" (Liberation, 2011). 'Alā' al-Aswānī, *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2013, and Aḡmad Murād, *1919*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012.

will analyze the rebels’ language and weapons, as well as the space they occupy. In particular, I will examine rebellion in the public and private spheres in relation to the fictional construction of four characters, two male ones and two female ones.

1. ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī’s *Nādī al-sayyārāt* in Context

In *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, al-Aswānī depicts everyday life and inter-class relations at the Cairo Automobile Club in the 1940s to create an allegory of contemporary Egyptian society. Overtly denouncing social injustice and the network of power is certainly not new in al-Aswānī’s production, as *‘Imārat Ya’qūbiyān* (The Yacoubian Building, 2002) and *Šīkāǧū* (Chicago, 2007) prove⁹. However, in his latest book the author moves a step forward, as he examines the process of developing a revolutionary spirit and the personal choice of taking action, with all the difficulties it implies. After outlining the context of the novel, I will look at the different forms of rebellion displayed both in the private and the public sphere, focusing my analysis first on space and time, and then on the characters.

Nādī al-sayyārāt was written partly before 2011 and partly after: al-Aswānī started working on it in 2008; then he stopped writing for almost a year and a half, overwhelmed by the events of 2011-2012; finally, he got back to the book, which was published in April 2013¹⁰. In several interviews, the writer openly states that the real events that had taken place in Egypt had an influence on his fiction.

This span of time allows us to consider al-Aswānī’s intellectual stand before the uprisings. Labelled as a writer of popular literature, the author is often reckoned as one of the Egyptian novelists who expressed their dissent against Hosni Mubarak’s (Ḥusnī Mubārak) regime in their literary works. Dina Heshmat, for instance, includes *‘Imārat Ya’qūbiyān* among the «novels of anger and revolution»¹¹. The novel belongs to this category not only because of its representation of brutal police torture, but also for «the panorama of social ills it discusses, and which were at the heart of the revolution – from youth unemployment (represented by Buthayna Taha and his bride [*sic*] who works in a clothing store) to the dizzying corruption of businessmen linked to power (portrayed in the character Hagg Azzam)»¹². Christian Junge elaborates the

⁹ Both novels have been translated into various languages. In this footnote, references to the original, English and Italian translations will be provided. ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *‘Imārat Ya’qūbiyān*, Dār Mirīt, al-Qāhirah 2002; Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, Translated by H. Davies, Harper Perennial, New York 2006; ‘Ala al-Aswani, *Palazzo Yacoubian*, traduzione di B. Longhi, Feltrinelli, Milano 2007. ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *Šīkāǧū*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2007; Alaa Al Aswany, *Chicago*, Translated by Farouk Abdel Wahab, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2007; ‘Ala al-Aswani, *Chicago*, traduzione di B. Longhi, Feltrinelli, Milano 2008.

¹⁰ These circumstances of production are mentioned in many reviews and interviews, including Mary Mourad, *Egypt’s Al-Aswany launches ‘historical’ novel set under British colonialism*, in “Ahram online”, 13/04/2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/18/0/69134/Books/Egypt-AlAswany-launches-historical-novel-set-unde.aspx>, accessed November 11, 2014.

¹¹ Dina Heshmat, *Riwāyāt al-ǧadab wa ‘l-tawrah*, in “Ǧadaliyyah/Jadaliyya”, 08/12/2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3450/>, accessed December 28, 2014.

¹² Dina Heshmat, *From Literature to Revolution*, in “BabelMed”, 04/09/2011, <http://eng.babelmed.net/letteratura/240-egypt/6875-from-literature-to-revolution.html>, accessed December 28, 2014. This is the English version of the article mentioned in note 11.

category “*kifāyah* literature” to define some books written before 2011, including *‘Imārat Ya’qūbiyān*, in which social and political criticism is expressed through affects and emotions¹³. The term *kifāyah* (enough) evokes the Egyptian social movement of dissent created in 2004. al-Aswānī, along with other writers and publishers mentioned in Junge’s study, took part in the movement’s activities. However, in Junge’s analysis, *kifāyah*, is intended as a rhetorical tool that unifies the ideological and emotional aspects of dissent; it aims at scandalizing the reader.

Specifically, the political slogan *kifāya!* demands intellectually that a situation be changed or brought to an end, while the personal exclamation *kifāya!* expresses the feeling that one cannot bear this situation any longer. I argue that the four texts¹⁴ – along with other contemporary Egyptian and Arabic texts – rely on what I call ‘*kifāya* rhetoric’: They narrate and incite the feeling that ‘enough is enough’. Moreover, in the realm of fiction, they facilitate ‘acting out’ and ‘living through’ different forms of dissent and resistance¹⁵.

In these writings, «as a result of suffering from social or political injustice, the protagonists mostly direct their affects and emotions outwards, to another person or group; they no longer internalize but externalize aggression»¹⁶. Therefore, Junge focuses primarily on narratives of violence.

al-Aswānī has been very active on the Egyptian public scene since the eighteen days of Maydān al-Taḥrīr. The international press made him a favoured spokesman, because of his activity as a social commentator on independent Egyptian newspapers and his fame as a bestselling author. Although this paper does not concentrate on his columns, his role as a social commentator must be taken into account in terms of influences or discrepancies with his literary activity. ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī has been a regular contributor to the main Egyptian privately-owned newspapers: his columns appeared in “al-Dustūr” (The Constitution) and “al-Šurūq” (Sunrise), and later on “al-Miṣrī al-yawm” (The Egyptian Today, currently known as Egypt Independent)¹⁷, until he stopped his

¹³ Christian Junge, *On Affect and Emotion as Dissent. The Kifāya Rhetoric in Pre-Revolutionary Egyptian Literature*, in F. Pannewick, G. Khalil and Y. Albers (eds.), *Commitment and Beyond. Locating the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, cit., pp. 253-271. By the same author, see also *Genug. Schluss. Jetzt reicht’s!* *Der Kifaya-Gestus in der ägyptischen Literatur der 2000er Jahre*, in “Lisan. Zeitschrift für arabische Literatur”, 13/14, 2012, pp. 128-137.

¹⁴ The four texts analysed by Junge are: ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *‘Imārat Ya’qūbiyān*, cit.; Ḥālid al-Ḥamīsī, *Tāksī: Ḥawādīt al-mašāwīr* (Taxi. Cabbie Talk), Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2006; Maḡdī al-Šāfi’ī, *Mitrū* (Metro), Dār Malāmiḥ li ‘l-Našr, al-Qāhirah 2008; Aḥmad Ḥālid Tawfiq, *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia), Dār Mirīt, al-Qāhirah 2008.

¹⁵ Christian Junge, *On Affect and Emotion as Dissent. The Kifāya Rhetoric in Pre-Revolutionary Egyptian Literature*, cit., p. 254.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁷ On privately-owned newspapers since the 1990s, see: Baheyya, *The Death of Deference*, in “Baheyya: Egypt Analysis and Whimsy/Bahiyyah”, 16/09/2007, <http://baheyya.blogspot.co.uk/2009/07/other-egypt.html>, accessed September 4, 2015; Cecilia Valdesalici, *Stampa e Potere nell’Egitto contemporaneo. Il dibattito politico e sociale nell’attività giornalistica di Maḡdī al-Gallād, Ibrāhīm ‘Īsā e Muḥammad al-Sayyad Sa’īd (2004-2009)*, tesi di dottorato inedita, Dottorato in Lingue Culture e Società XXIII ciclo, Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, a.a. 2011-2012.

contributions in June 2014 alluding to limitations of freedom of expression¹⁸. A selection of his articles has been collected and published in Arabic and then translated into several languages¹⁹. In 2013, the author started a monthly column on “The New Yorker”. Concerning the second element, the writer’s previous novels are considered bestsellers, a feature that has been interpreted by critics from different perspectives: changes in the book market²⁰, the reintroduction of collective narratives in the novel tradition²¹ as well as a combination of external factors and inherent features of popular literature as it developed in the first decade of the 21st century²². In her article about *Štkāğū*, focused on the role of utopia and dystopia in shaping the narrative, Ghersetti includes an insightful paragraph on the novel’s reception and critical views²³. Finally, the Egyptian critic and writer Yūsuf Raḥā criticizes both the type of writing and the intellectual figure embodied by al-Aswānī; his considerations encompass literary style, journalism and activism²⁴. al-Aswānī’s popularity in Egypt and abroad, based on the aforementioned elements, is a factor that might influence the reception of *Nādī al-sayyārāt*: the author’s literary representation of rebellion at a time of popular uprisings is available to a vast public in the Arab countries and in the West in translation²⁵.

¹⁸ *Renowned novelist Aswany quits writing column, citing censorship*, in “Mada Masr”, 24/06/2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/news/renowned-novelist-aswany-quits-writing-column-citing-censorship>, accessed December 30, 2014.

¹⁹ In English: Alaa Al-Aswany, *On the State of Egypt. The Issues That Caused the Revolution*, Translated by J. Wright, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2011; ID., *Democracy is the Answer. Egypt’s Years of Revolution*, Edited by S. Cleave, Translated by R. Harris, A. Ayrne, and P. Naylor, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015. In Italian: ‘Ala al-Aswani, *La rivoluzione egiziana*, traduzione e cura di P. Caridi, Feltrinelli, Milano 2011.

²⁰ Richard Jacquemond, *The Yacoubian Building and Its Sisters: Reflections on Readership and Written Culture in Modern Egypt*, in Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman (eds.), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, cit., pp. 144-161.

²¹ Stephan Guth, *Between ‘Awdat al-rūḥ and ‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān. What Has Changed in Community Narratives?*, in S. Guth and G. Ramsay (eds.), *From New Values to New Aesthetics. Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature*, 2 vols., vol. 2: *Postmodernism and Thereafter*, Harrasowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2011, pp. 95-107.

²² Tetz Rooke, *The Emergence of the Arabic Bestseller: Arabic Fiction and World Literature*, in S. Guth and G. Ramsay (eds.), *From New Values to New Aesthetics. Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature*, 2 vols., vol. 2: *Postmodernism and Thereafter*, cit., pp. 201-213.

²³ Antonella Ghersetti, *Changing Perspectives: Utopia and Dystopia in ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī’s Chicago*, in “Middle Eastern Literatures”, November 2012, pp. 1-19.

²⁴ Youssef Rakha, *In Extremis: Literature and Revolution in Contemporary Cairo (An Oriental Essay in Seven Parts)*, in “The Kenyon Review”, 34.3, 2012, pp. 151-166.

²⁵ Alaa El Aswany, *Automobile Club d’Égypte*, roman traduit de l’arabe (Égypte) par G. Gauthier, Actes Sud, Arles 2014; ‘Ala al-Aswani, *Cairo Automobile Club*, traduzione di C. Dozio, E. Bartuli, Feltrinelli, Milano 2014; Alaa Al Aswany, *The Automobile Club of Egypt*, Translation by R. Harris, Knopf, New York 2015.

2. *The Social Life of the Place: the Terrain for Rebellion*

In *Nādī al-sayyārāt* space and time are two meaningful narrative axes, essential in creating a clear image of what the characters rebel against.

As in *'Imārat Ya'qūbiyān* and *Šīkāgū*, the story is set in one single place, the Royal Automobile Club of Egypt mentioned in the title, established in 1924. al-Aswānī knows this place very well, because his father used to work there as a lawyer and he used to visit it as a child. Thus, the real people working at the club and the anecdotes they told became a source of inspiration²⁶. The Automobile Club is located in Downtown (*Waṣṭ al-balad*), the once fashionable colonial centre of Cairo. In the same area, just a few streets away, stands the Yacoubian Building that inspired his first novel. It is not a surprise, then, that the Automobile Club was already mentioned in *'Imārat Ya'qūbiyān*. For example, Buṭaynah's father works there as an assistant cook; in the following passage Zakī al-Dasūqī describes the social function that the Automobile Club had in the past:

The kebab restaurant at the Sheraton has come to play the same role in Egyptian politics as that played by the Royal Automobile Club before the Revolution. How many policies, deals, and laws that have left their mark on the life of millions of Egyptians have been prepared and agreed to here, in the Sheraton's kebab restaurant, at the tables groaning beneath the weight of grilled meats! The difference between the Automobile Club and the Sheraton's kebab restaurant accurately embodies the change that the Egyptian ruling elites underwent between, before, and after the Revolution. Thus, the Automobile Club perfectly suited the aristocratic ministers of the bygone epoch with their pure Western education and manners, and there they would spend the evenings accompanied by their wives in revealing evening gowns, sipping whisky and playing poker and bridge. The great men of the present era, however, with their largely plebeian origins, their stern adherence to the outward forms of religion, and their voracious appetite for good food, find the Sheraton's kebab restaurant suits them, since they can eat the best kinds of kebab, kofta, and stuffed vegetables and then drink cups of tea and smoke molasses-soaked tobacco in the waterpipes that the restaurant's management has introduced in response to their requests. And during all the eating, drinking, and smoking, the talk of money and business never ceases²⁷.

In *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, al-Aswānī continues mapping the heart of Cairo and he sets the story in a period of time that partially coincides with Zakī al-Dasūqī's nostalgic memories.

Regarding space, in their respective studies of *'Imārat Ya'qūbiyān*, Mehrez and Naaman point out two spatial strategies that highlight socio-economic inequality: the first is the setting in one single place, as Mehrez puts it: «al-Aswany's building brings together the opposites and looks at the intersection of the fates of

²⁶ Cristiana Missori, *Al Aswani racconta la leggenda del Cairo Automobile Club*, in "ANSamed", 13/10/2014, http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/it/notizie/rubriche/cultura/2014/10/13/libri-cairo-automobile-club-il-circolo-whist-degitto_01678b01-b44f-42b8-9049-9e2c72f349b.html, accessed November 11, 2014.

²⁷ Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, cit., pp. 144-145.

his privileged and disadvantaged characters that cohabit the same space»²⁸; the second is vertical separation, «Aswany’s description of the Yacoubian Building is that of a vertically segregated space»²⁹. In *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, the opposites are the élite members of the club (Europeans, members of the Ottoman aristocracy and of the government) who enjoy the place as a site of entertainment, and the Nubian and Upper Egyptian servants. The unfillable social distance between the two groups is maintained through the strict rules that the servants have to respect in order to grant the members’ importance and status, and through a rigid vertical separation: for example, the servants’ changing rooms are placed on the rooftop, totally isolated from the places of entertainment inside the Club. Social injustice emerges as the first cause of rebellion.

With respect to time, the story is set in the Forties, i.e. during the British occupation of Egypt, to create an allegory of contemporary Egyptian society. The historical setting is not depicted with many details and the author includes some canonical references to the nationalist struggle. For example, he mentions Sa‘d Zaghlūl, leader of the 1919 revolution. Better said, this figure is translated according to the characters’ language and experience, as in the following passage that describes the family’s journey to Cairo from the mother’s perspective: «Her journey from Daraw to Cairo was a big event. People said that, except during the famous visit of the leader Sa‘ad Zaghlul in Upper Egypt, the train station had never seen so many people as the day she left for Cairo with her four kids»³⁰.

Upon this historical background, the analogy between colonialism and dictatorship is clear. Both of these phenomena rely on a set of similar strategies and discourses, such as breaking the people’s will, exploiting the country’s resources and using a paternalistic rhetoric. Thus, the second struggle is a political one, against despotic forms of power.

The connection between national history and the fictional history of the club defines three representatives of authority: Mister James Wright, the British director of the club; King Fārūq; and al-Kū. Mister Wright embodies the British presence in the country; he is a racist who despises Egyptians, but enjoys all of the privileges connected to his position. Fārūq, King of Egypt and the Sudan, is the country’s last monarch. He is described as a puppet and a corrupted man, devoted to the pleasures of life (eating, drinking, gambling, and spending the night with beautiful lovers) rather than guiding his country. He spends his nights at the Automobile Club, which becomes the place from where the country is governed. He officially resides at the Royal Palace of ‘Ābidīn, which was a hot spot during 2011’s events, too. However, the tyrannical authority that mostly affects the servants’ lives is that of al-Kū. In one definition, «the Ko has two faces: he is

²⁸ Samia Mehrez, *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*, Routledge, London-New York 2008, p. 161.

²⁹ Mara Naaman, *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature. Portraits of Cairo*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2011, p. 156.

³⁰ ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, cit., p. 38. The translation of this and the following passages are mine.

servant and master»³¹. This man of Nubian origins is the King's chamberlain and he enjoys a very tight relationship with the sovereign that makes him so powerful. Politicians and ministers fear him not out of respect, but because of the influence he has on the king and the ability he has to save or ruin their lives. He is a servant because he has to adapt himself to forms of power stronger than his: he relies upon his personal relation with the king and he is very humble with foreigners. At the same time, he is the master of the servants at the Royal Palace and at the Automobile Club; and in this role he very overtly resembles the figure of a dictator. He has been in charge for twenty years. He exercises absolute power, but also presides over every aspect of the servants' lives from housing to solving their family matters and providing medical assistance: «Beside Almighty God, he is the one and only who can dispose of their lives, their sustenance and their destiny»³². Because of this, he emerges as a caring father who knows better than his sons what is good for them, and guarantees stability.

The image of the caring father is very recurrent in the novel. I will just give two examples from the text: «“Sometimes the Ko is severe with us, but he is goodhearted, and he fears for us like a father”»; «“You are the master and father and we are your sons and servants”»³³. Through his characters al-Aswānī shows how pervasive propagandist discourse is. This coincides with the following remarks about the pervading presence of propaganda during Mubarak's regime:

The third factor which further aided the propagation of this ideology was the presidential discourse that presented the president himself analogically as a well-meaning leader/father who cannot provide for his citizens/family given the country's/family's limited resources and high population rate³⁴.

In another version, the «ailing/aging father [...] who would rather retire and pay more attention to his own person but cannot forfeit his responsibilities as the caretaker of the nation and of his 'children'»³⁵. In the final scene of the novel, al-Kū adopts the father-son rhetoric to try to save his life inside the Palace of 'Ābidīn: «The Ko started to beg: “I am an old man and you are like my sons”»³⁶. This scene cannot but remind us of Hosni Mubarak's latest speeches.

Going back to the features of this fictional character, he maintains his power upon the servants using spies, exerting a strict control on the respect of rules, arbitrary decisions, brutal and unjustified physical punishment carried out by his right-hand man Ḥamīd. When a worker does something wrong, some of his colleagues are forced to witness or collaborate to the punishment; and both options help to convey the message that personal safety is stronger than friendship and solidarity. «This is how the Ko has governed the servants for twenty years: watchful eye, iron fist and absolute control»³⁷. Moreover, al-Kū draws upon a

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 191 and p. 230.

³⁴ Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, *The Aesthetics of Revolution*, cit., p. 248.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ 'Alā' al-Aswānī, *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, cit., p. 643.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

system of corruption that involves the four characters in charge of the main activities at the Automobile Club, i.e. Rakābī the chef, Šākīr the headwaiter, Yūsuf Ṭarbūš the casino supervisor and Baḥr the barman. They can cheat customers and make their own profit, provided that they pay a monthly bribe to al-Kū. They also have a double nature: they scream and shout at their subordinates, but are not able to defend their “rights” in front of al-Kū. The servants, instead, cannot keep the tips they get; they have to put the money in a box and receive just a small amount of it at the end of the week, while al-Kū takes half of it for himself. The author describes a whole network of power that oppresses ordinary people, headed by an unquestionable authority. All together, these elements create a wall of fear. Rebellion seems almost impossible; yet, it happens.

3. *Rebellion in the Public Sphere: ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and Kāmil*

If we think of rebellion, we can identify two dimensions: a public one, as rebellion means opposition or armed resistance against an established government or leader; and a private one, since rebellion is an individual act of resistance to authority, control, or social conventions. I argue that these two concepts of rebellion are embodied respectively by two male and two female characters in *Nādī al-sayyārāt*.

The male characters move from individual demands to the participation in a public struggle. It is a process of awareness developing across multiple generations, since it involves ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Hamām and his son Kāmil. The two characters belong to the group of workers at the Cairo Automobile Club, even if their status and their tasks are different from those of the other workers, labeled as servants.

‘Abd al-‘Azīz is not a rebel that fights for a political cause or restlessly defies the system. His rebellion mainly stems from his awareness of the dignity that each worker, thus each person, has. His uniqueness is highlighted in various ways right from the start. First of all, he originally belongs to a higher social class than that of the other workers at the Automobile Club; he belongs to a rich and respected family of landowners from Upper Egypt, but he lost his money and had to emigrate to Cairo where he found a humble job. Secondly, he works in a different place inside the building, the enclosed space of the storehouse, where he is the assistant of monsieur Comanos, an Egyptian of Greek origins. This is how he describes his work place: «A huge place, dark, with a high ceiling. A kind of theatre backstage, a world set behind, crouched down in the shadow, forgotten behind the dazzling lights of the Automobile Club»³⁸. Moreover, he feels he does not belong to the Automobile Club, but considers his experience there as something limited in time. He compares himself to a train passenger who manages to bear the journey and the other passengers because he knows he will get off at the end of the trip³⁹. Finally, he is excluded from the tips system.

Throughout his life, he always tried to defend his dignity, also while facing some difficulties. When he asks for a second job and becomes the assistant of the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

old doorkeeper Sulaymān, he shares the servants' humiliating working conditions for the first time. He feels that he is losing his dignity and decides to react, to rebel. His rebellious actions are apparently very simple, but they represent a big change compared to the usual behaviour of the other servants: he is not submissive and imploring with customers; and he does not fear the tyrannical authority of al-Kū, because he is convinced that he isn't doing anything wrong on his job. His attitude cannot be accepted by the system. Interpreting the will of al-Kū, Ḥamīd gives an order to 'Abd al-'Azīz and verbally provokes him. The man should obey and keep silent, but he rebels and responds to the provocation: «I am a man, just like you»⁴⁰. For the first time, he openly says what he thinks, i.e. that all human beings are equal and have the same dignity. He is brutally beaten and dies.

I would like to examine here 'Abd al-'Azīz's weapons and the language of his rebellion. He is a rebel not because he makes an extraordinary act of heroism, but because he thinks differently. Actually he does not defend his cause in public speeches; we just read his thoughts and we observe his attitude. He does not speak out loud until the very end. One of his weapons is his death: his unexpected and brutal death makes him a martyr who died in the name of *karāmah* (dignity) because he could not bear repeated *ihānah* (humiliation). 'Abd al-'Azīz's death activates two paths of rebellion: the fight for social justice inside the Automobile Club and his son's political activism.

Kāmil is the rebel *par excellence*. This is why the author describes his evolution step by step: how he becomes an activist for the patriotic cause, how he decides to take action the first time in his life, and consequently how his life changes. In one word, all the experiences that make him a man. We can view this narration as a *Bildungsroman*.

As it happens to many activists, Kāmil's formation begins at university, where he studies law. There he meets Ḥasan Mu'min, the charismatic leader of the students' section of the *Wafd* party. After listening to his speech, Kāmil joins a demonstration that starts inside the university and continues out on the streets, where it is crashed by the police. It is the first time that he takes part in a political activity. Soon afterwards, he joins the *Wafd* students' committee and carries out some dangerous tasks risking to be arrested.

His father's death represents a turning point in his life, because he starts working at the Automobile Club, in the same place once occupied by his father, 'Abd al-'Azīz, and identifies with him. On his first day at work, Kāmil confesses that he has contrasting feelings, among them the feeling of extending his father's life, reproducing his voice and smell, in a word becoming him⁴¹. His first reaction is taking revenge. He thinks about it, twice with al-Kū and once after a verbal provocation by mister Wright. We can consider revenge a form of individual rebellion. However, he manages to suffocate this desire, thinking about its consequences upon his family and later following the advice he gets from Prince Šāmīl, the king's cousin:

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

“You should learn how to transform your personal rage into a public claim. Now you are angry because Wright humiliated you. [...] You can interpret what Wright did in two ways: either you simply take it personally or you consider the offense as the direct consequence of the occupation of Egypt”⁴².

Prince Šāmil becomes Kāmīl’s mentor, like a new father for him. This type of relationship is expressed by the Prince himself. For example, when he meets Kāmīl for the first time, he wants to tip him for his service; but when Kāmīl refuses the money, he tries to convince him to accept it by saying: «“Listen, if I had had a son, he would be in your age now. I will act for your dear departed father. Don’t be ashamed. Take it!”»⁴³. He is the leader of a secret group that unites different political forces in the fight against the British occupation: the *Wafd*, the Communist Party and the workers’ unions unite their forces for this cause, even if their political programmes for the country after independence differ. They act at a national scale and organize a secret plan inside the Automobile Club to discredit the King. Kāmīl joins the group and has an active role in the plan; his activism moves to a more complex and more dangerous stage. He is arrested and brutally beaten in prison; he is not tortured, but forced to listen and to watch scenes of torture.

Kāmīl’s trajectory from the private to the public sphere is also expressed in spatial terms: he moves from home to the university, then to the Automobile Club, the secret group’s hideout, and finally to prison. Even when he is active on the public scene, he constantly goes back home to find relief. It is not by chance that his family’s house is placed in Sayyidah Zaynab, a traditional district in the centre of Cairo, that stands for the character’s authenticity⁴⁴.

4. *Rebellion against Social Injustice at the Automobile Club*

As we have seen, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s death triggers other episodes of rebellion: Kāmīl’s participation in the patriotic sabotage plan and in a fight for social justice inside the Automobile Club. The two threads are constantly intertwined. In particular, when the sabotage plan is discovered, al-Kū punishes all the staff by not giving them the tips which are their only source income. Without covering the full series of events at the Automobile Club, I will only highlight some of the main features of the literary representation of rebellion as a collective experience.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁴⁴ Stephan Guth, *The Poetics of Urban Spaces: Structures of Literarising Egyptian Metropolis*, in “Arabica”, 46/3, 1999, pp. 454-481. See, in particular, pp. 459-461, in which Guth analyses *Qindīl Umm Hāšim* (The Lamp of Umm Hāšim, 1944) by Yaḥyà Ḥaqqī. In this story, Ḥaqqī places the popular quarter of Sayyidah Zaynab at the centre of his interest and the *maydān* (square) «fulfils the special function of being the seat of Egyptian collectivism, a sense of togetherness» (p. 460). Guth maintains that the main technique employed by the author in organizing the space is the gravitational pattern, with «a centre around which everything revolves and which exerts centripetal forces» (p. 476). This pattern partially applies to Kāmīl: Sayyidah Zaynab is one of the centres around which his life revolves; the district doesn’t exert a mystical or magical centripetal force, but the character repeatedly goes back to his district when he needs to find relief; finally, Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque is the district’s religious building where some relevant events of the novel take place.

First of all, al-Aswānī shows how difficult it is to rebel against injustice, despite its clear manifestation. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s death reveals the truth to his colleagues: that they are all equally exposed to the dangers of an arbitrary power. However, harsh confrontation between two positions takes place at a café, the traditional place to stage debate: a small minority of servants led by ‘Abdūn and Baḥr fight for dignity and rights; while the majority of the staff fears the consequences of a change and is concerned about economical stability, security and peace. The discourses of the two groups are constructed as a clear-cut dichotomy.

The difficulty of taking action and unite efforts is due to the thick wall of fear that the system has been building over years to prevent a rebellion from happening. This has undermined social relations («The Ko knew well that sympathy leads to solidarity, and that from solidarity to rebellion it is a short step»)⁴⁵, as well as the belief in social justice (al-Kū tells mister Wright: «“If a servant is too confident in himself or his abilities, if he believes in justice, if he feels he has some rights, then it is inevitable that he rebels. Rights ruin servants”»)⁴⁶.

The major change that the rebellious minority tries to achieve is not a political one, but a change in their colleagues’ attitude. Actually, when al-Kū accepts ‘Abdūn’s request to abolish physical punishment, the writer depicts a change in the human nature of the servants, that affects their appearance, look and voice:

To be honest, something essential had changed in the staff’s attitude. They were more active, zealous and obedient than ever. [...] But, at the same time, they weren’t submissive anymore. That obsequious and imploring smile had faded from their faces, replaced by a warm and respectful smile that expressed self-confidence, sense of responsibility and pride. Even when they received the tips, instead of whispering their usual humble and submissive “thank you”, they started to thank with clear voice and a resolute tone⁴⁷.

In terms of discourse about the uprisings, the moments of rebellion are presented as exceptional: «The new deal lasted only one month, that the servant would have remembered as a unique experience in their lives. It ended suddenly, as it had started. Was it too good to last?»⁴⁸. The faith in change is also expressed by some optimistic, but very idealistic statements by Kāmil («“Anybody has the force inside him”») and Prince Šāmīl («“The will of the people is invincible”»)⁴⁹. However, as soon as things go wrong, there is space for a counter-narration:

Day after day, work at Automobile Club went back to the old routine. The situation became stable. And the whole affair moved to the background, it became a story to be told from time to time, when there was the opportunity. ‘Abdun, a fanatic and silly boy that lived of illusions, had fomented some colleagues and, together, they had rebelled against His Highness the Ko and had got what they deserved. He who has ears to ear, let him ear⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, cit., p. 189. The words used for sympathy, solidarity and rebellion are respectively *ta’āṭuf*, *taḍāmun* and *tamarrud*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 490 and p. 248.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 634

5. *Rebellion in the Private Sphere: Mitzie (Mītsī) and Ṣāliḥah*

The political and social struggle is accompanied by episodes of private rebellion. The two female characters that better embody this are Ṣāliḥah, Kāmil’s sister, and Mitzie, mister Wright’s daughter and Kāmil’s future wife. Both of them do not conform to social conventions. Mitzie, who is British, rebels against class privileges and cultural division, is defined as «a kind of rebellious princess that has escaped the palace to live among the folks»⁵¹. Ṣāliḥah rebels against the idea that education is useless for girls because their destiny is to get married and that married girls cannot continue their studies.

We can find many similarities in the way the two characters are built. They share a common background for their rebellion, which includes the elements I will expose hereafter. First of all, at the basis of their rebellion there is their strong relationship with their fathers, negative in the case of the British girl and positive in the case of the Egyptian one. Mitzie despises Mister Wright because he is racist and hypocrite. There is a lack of communication between them, he does not understand her behaviour and they always fight. Even if Mitzie tries to provoke her father, at the end she feels humiliated by him. He is an enemy to fight. Ṣāliḥah’s relationship with her father, instead, is excellent: ‘Abd al-‘Azīz loves her and sees a bright future for her; she admires his perseverance and sees him as an example to follow. A second important element that unites the two girls is the relevance given to education. Ṣāliḥah is encouraged by her father to study and this leads her to fight against preconceptions before and after her marriage, as explained in the two following passages:

I had the feeling that, with her attitude, my sister-in-law was sending me a clear message. She was just one year older than me, but we were totally different. Her mother had raised her for getting married, while my father had encouraged me to study. I felt that she was jealous of my success and that she wanted to prove how happy she was as a married woman, that having a husband was much more important than education.

[...]

I had heard that the Ministry of Education didn’t allow married or divorced female students to be admitted at school. The only option I had was actually Kamel’s suggestion. I should have studied the whole program at home. I suddenly became enthusiastic⁵².

Mitzie gives up the privileges of getting a good formal education in England to pursue her ambition to study drama in Egypt. This educational choice is also a life choice, because she wants to be close to the Egyptian people. Thanks to her natural talent as an actress and to her determination to study Arabic, she tries to create a bridge between cultures. Nevertheless, she seems to be attracted by an idealized Middle East. Finally, private rebellion takes place in the intimate space of the house. Mitzie wants to leave her father’s house to break her financial dependence from him and Ṣāliḥah leaves her house to get married.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 368 and p. 509.

Before analyzing the scenes of rebellion, we can look at the girls' past to see if they have previously manifested a rebel nature in their life and, accordingly, how we can define their concept of rebellion. Ṣāliḩah usually respects rules, except when she disobeys her teacher to cover her family's financial problems. She is very sensitive to her father's humiliations; and rebellion for her is shaped by *karāmah* and *ihānah*, two concepts that she inherits from her father. Mitzie's rebellious past is clearer and it is narrated right before she performs her rebel action:

She had always had a disposition to rebel against anything fixed. [...] She had always wanted to break the rules and to go against the grain. [...] Her unruliness was not new: it had been part of her since she was a little girl. [...] The teachers' punishment didn't dissuade her. Her sudden outbursts accompanied her until adolescence when they acquired a deeper dimension. Mitzie was always defying fixed rules and looking for a hidden truth. There is always a hidden truth beneath every common principle, every fake smile, every staid gesture, every flowery word. And she enjoyed making this come out suddenly, making the mask fall and embarrassing everybody. Mitzie was looking for authenticity. And that's why she loved Egypt⁵³.

Bearing this in mind, we can look at their moments of rebellion against men. Mitzie is invited by the King to a party in a private space (a villa in the countryside near Faiyum), formally to become his friend, but clearly to be his lover. Her father accepts the invitation on her behalf. At the beginning, she opposes her father, stating: «I am free»⁵⁴. Then she accepts the invitation in order to show the truth to her father: he is putting her in the King's arm for his own interests. Finally, she redirects her rebellion against the King himself: using her dramatic abilities, she pretends to have a contagious disease and frees herself from the dangerous situation. When remembering this scene, she feels amused by her own ability of making fun of him. She describes her act as a stroke of genius (*ilhām rā'i'*)⁵⁵, a *coup de théâtre*. We can say that she preserves her dignity using her natural talent and her wit. Ṣāliḩah, instead, rebels against her husband's violence. After a long reflection, she decides to marry 'Abd al-Barr, who will be her brother Sa'īd's partner in a commercial project. She lives their intimate relation as an act of humiliation, because it is not based on love and because her husband is not able to penetrate her. Once he crosses the line: he blames her for taking the initiative, beats her under the effect of drugs and tries to deflower her. She doesn't surrender to the man's physical and psychological strength («He was hurting me, but psychological pain was even stronger»⁵⁶) and fights to preserve her virginity. After her act of rebellion, Ṣāliḩah has to fight more and more battles: with the help of her family she obtains the divorce and continues her studies. This character allows al-Aswānī to tackle two sensitive issues concerning women in Egypt and to reverse the stereotypical image that the Western reader might have about them, i.e. education and sexual

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

violence; the latter is a topic that has been frequently discussed in connection to the 2011 uprisings and transition period⁵⁷.

In these episodes, the body is a central element, both as a value to defend and as a weapon. Mitzie’s body is the object of desire in the eyes of the King and an item that her father is ready to exchange with some privileges. She turns it into a weapon, shifting from beauty to an apparent disease. As for Ṣāliḥah, her body is a burden at the beginning of her marriage, but it turns into something to fight for, because physical integrity means preserving her dignity. The strength that she unexpectedly discovers in her body becomes the weapon that allows her to subvert the conventional power relations between genders:

He jumped on me. He put his hand between my thighs, trying to push them apart. Despite the surprise and the fear, I tightened my muscles and I closed my legs tight. “Open!” [...]

I decided to resist, to focus all the energy of my body in the muscles of my thighs. ‘Abdelbarr was terribly strong. My muscles were going to tear because of the pain. Then my legs started to betray me. I was feeling exhausted and I realized that he was going to defeat me. Everything was becoming dark and I had the feeling that my body was leaving me. Then, suddenly, I had an idea, a kind of inspiration [*fikrah ka-annahā ilhām*]. I bit his arm. I still can’t believe what I did. I bit it so hard that I felt the flesh being torn by my teeth⁵⁸.

The two girls actually become friends, which marks the possible encounter between two distant worlds and the solidarity between rebels.

Do female characters rebel also on the public scene in *Nādī al-sayyārāt*? In the novel, there is a female rebel that takes part in the political struggle. She is Odette Fattal (Ūdīt Fattāl), a member of the Communist Party who joins the secret committee. Even if Odette acts in the public sphere, her figure is constructed in a similar way to those of Mitzie and Ṣāliḥah. Stress is put on the father-daughter relationship: Odette is the daughter of a millionaire, but she refuses his money and works as a teacher. Secondly, she resists social constraints and traditional classifications, because she does not consider nationality or religion relevant in shaping one’s identity. For example, she is a French citizen, but was born in Egypt in a family of Lebanese origins; she is of Jewish origins, but is an atheist. Finally, as Mitzie and Ṣāliḥah, she uses her body as a weapon in her struggle. In fact, she plays the role of Mr. Wright’s lover in order to influence him.

⁵⁷ Two Egyptian initiatives related to the issue of sexual harrasment are: “Ḥarīṭat al-taḥarruṣ/HarassMap”, established in 2010, <http://harassmap.org/ar/>, accessed November 3, 2015; “Buṣṣī”, <http://thebussyproject.weebly.com/>, accessed November 3, 2015.

⁵⁸ ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, cit., pp. 455-456. In this quotation, we find the word “inspiration” that was used by Mitzie, too (see note 54).

Conclusions

In several interviews, al-Aswānī stated that the Egyptian revolution is a process that will take a long time to be fully accomplished⁵⁹. In *Nādī al-sayyārāt* he represents this idea through the evolution of the characters, who experience a process of change. All of them have a rebellious nature, since they have undergone injustice and humiliation. However, they adopt different strategies and languages of rebellion. Through the analysis of two pairs of characters, I have identified some patterns used to fictionalize rebellion in *Nādī al-sayyārāt*. One line of the story is public rebellion which is transgenerational (‘Abd al-‘Azīz and Kāmīl, Kāmīl and Prince Šāmīl, ‘Abdūn and Baḥr) and staged at the Automobile Club. The second line is private rebellion, represented by Mitzie and Šāliḥah, and it involves the father-daughter relationship and the body as weapon.

In *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, the way public and private rebellion intertwine is shown through a specific narrative strategy: both Kāmīl and Šāliḥah tell their story in the first person, thus the male and female accounts partially balance. In the preamble, that we might call the inner frame, brother and sister come to life and ask the internal writer to add their versions of the events to the third-person narration: the fictional characters rebel against their author. This episode expresses al-Aswānī’s concern about the relation between fiction and reality, perception and representation (as in the preface of *Nīrān ṣadīqah*, *Friendly Fire*, 2004)⁶⁰. But it also rises another questions: who can speak in the name of youth? Who can speak on behalf of a rebel? Moreover, the writer is willing to explore the relationship between creativity and rebellion, since he depicts three rebels who are also artists: Prince Šāmīl is a photographer, Kāmīl is a poet and Mitzie is an actress. The main plot and the inner frame are enclosed in an outer frame that has the function of introducing the theme of rebellion: it tells the story of Karl Benz’s invention of the automobile, a symbol of modernity and a revolution in the field of transportation that radically changed people’s lives. To achieve this goal, Karl Benz has to challenge the common way of thinking and is helped by an act of rupture performed by his wife.

⁵⁹ For example, see: Robert Fisk, *Alaa al-Aswany: ‘Overthrowing Mubarak was too good to be true’*, in “Independent”, 12/12/2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/alaal-aswany-overthrowing-mubarak-was-too-good-to-be-true-6275801.html>, accessed November 3, 2015; Wendell Steavenson, *Writing the Revolution. Egypt’s leading novelist surveys the Arab spring*, in “The New Yorker”, 16/01/2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/16/writing-the-revolution>, accessed November 3, 2015; Ugo Tramballi, *Cronache da piazza Tahrir, parte seconda. ‘Ala al-Aswani*, in “Il Sole 24 Ore”, 27/11/2011, <http://ugotramballi.blog.ilsole24ore.com/2011/11/27/cronache-da-piazza-tahrir-parte-seconda-ala-al-aswani/>, accessed November 3, 2015.

⁶⁰ ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, *Nīrān ṣadīqah*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2004. English translation: Alaa Al Aswany, *Friendly Fire*, Translated by H. Davies, Fourth Estate, London 2009. Italian translation: ‘Ala al-Aswani, *Se non fossi egiziano*, traduzione di C. La Barbera, Feltrinelli, Milano 2009. *Nīrān ṣadīqah* is a collection of short stories that the author had written before *‘Imārāt Ya’qūbiyān*. In the book’s preface, al-Aswānī explains that the manuscript was rejected by the General Egyptian Book Organization (GEBO), because the officer attributed to the writer the opinions of one of the characters. Starting from this episode, al-Aswānī reflects on the readers’ confusion between imagination and reality, fiction and truth.

If we compare *Nādī al-sayyārāt* to al-Aswānī’s previous novels, we can find few formal innovations: in *Šikāğū* there are two narrators (a third-person and a first-person narrator, Nāğī), here one more first-person narrator is added; there is also a wider use of Egyptian colloquial Arabic in dialogues. It seems that the major change is in the content: the author still depicts social injustice and despotic power, but he also suggests the possibility of a common reaction. In this respect, *Nādī al-sayyārāt* reflects the sensitivity of the early stages of the 2011 revolution: al-Aswānī makes his characters talk about how hard it is to take action, to become activists; then he points out that the major success of the revolution is a change in human attitude; finally, he designs an optimistic ending in which a first political success is achieved and all the future scenarios are still open. On the other hand, in his articles, the author expresses his opinions on the evolving political situation. Thus, the universal values of the novel are put in the context of the real political scenario and might appear more nuanced.

In the case of *Nādī al-sayyārāt*, rebellion has transcended the limits of the written text: during the book launch of the French translation at the *Institut du Monde Arabe* (Paris, October 2013) a group of activists contested al-Aswānī because of his opinion about the Egyptian army’s intervention since July 2013⁶¹. An international literary event was used to question al-Aswānī’s opinions as a social commentator. This episode includes the key elements illustrated in my introduction: a writer that deals with political issues in his novels and newspaper columns, the international reception of a bestselling author, the overlapping of socio-political events and their representation in writing.

⁶¹ Marcia Lynx Qualey, *Showdown in Paris: Protesters vs. Novelist Alaa al-Aswany*, arablit.wordpress.com, 18/10/2014, <http://arablit.org/2013/10/18/showdown-in-paris-protesters-vs-novelist-alaa-al-aswany>, accessed December 1, 2014.