

Dictating the Narrative and Resisting Dictatorships in Saʿdī's Novel *al-Aʿzam*

Sami Alkyam^{[a],*}

^[a]Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization. Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This article examines Ibrāhīm Saʿdī's novel, *al-Aʿzam*, in the context of dictator novels. I argue that Saʿdī utilizes the forms and modes of narration to dictate, or tell, a story against dictatorship and resist oppressive domination. The novel, I suggest, marginalizes and parodies the voice of the dictator and centralizes the voice of marginalized characters in the overall narrative structure by utilizing a "dictatorial" form which permits who can and cannot speak. And by assuming the role of a dictator, the novel creates room for maneuver to not only resist closures but also to represent and critique the dissemination and repression of national history under autocratic and repressive powers. The article also shows how writers exploit the reader's ability to relive the past vicariously through the act of reading to suggest the implicit demythologization of dictators.

Key words: *al-Aʿzam*; Dictators; Dictator novel; Ibrāhīm Saʿdī; Narrative discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of authoritarianism has been and continues to be a topic which haunts Arab writers and their nations since independence into the present day. In the late sixties, this fixation gave birth to the emergence of new

writers and literary directions and aesthetics which is known as *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the 1960s generation of writers).¹ Many writers from this generation attempted in various ways to expose the new social and political realities that culminated in the appearance of dictatorial regimes in the decades that followed independence. Much of the literary outputs of writers from this *jīl* called into question the myth of authoritarianism and the establishment of the post-colonial nation-state; a nation-state whose success is also being increasingly called into question. Thus, one often finds contemporary Arabic novels to be politically charged.

The dictators of the new nations did not give Arab writers a "permission to narrate"; rather, they only allowed a narrative which fed into their dictatorial machine by exploiting the narrative process to authorize its legitimacy (Said, 1984, p.27). By employing various strategies such as the monopoly of the media, for instance, most Arab leaders were able to position themselves at the center of everything including the way of living, thinking, and even controlling the intellectual discourse. In describing this monopoly, Richard Jacquemond states that Arab leaders and regimes sat up a "system of institutions [...] which it intended to control and mobilize the intellectuals" (Jacquemond, 2008, p.15).

In a seminal study about the role of writers in such circumstances, where the state exercised power over narrative, Samia Mehrez (1994) writes that "the position of the writer as 'underground historian' is indeed what characterizes much of the literary input in contemporary Arab world" (p.7). This quotation is very relevant because it not only indicates that Arab dictators flexed their muscles over writers, but it also portrays a sense of the commitment that many Arab writers have taken upon

¹ Yasmin Ramadan addresses this issue in detail in her article, "The Emergence of Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization," which she published at the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 43(2012), 409-430.

their shoulders to expose authoritarians and their abuse of power. At the core of their writing, they started to call attention to the juxtaposition of both narrative and the rhetorical practices and structures that contributed to the empowerment of Arab leaders, who later became the dictators. By rhetorical practices, I mean the manipulated paradigms which privileged and put the dictators' will over the will of the people.

In recognition of their role as the conscience of the society, Arab writers then innovated their own strategies to question all the means dictators and dictatorial regimes used to manipulate the truth. Their depiction of the exilic, the rural and the urban space became a way, or a move away from realism, to understand their alienation in the new world and to re/evaluate the past through the prism of the present and the present through the eye of the past. Many courageous novelists such as Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Muḥammad Ḥāfīz Rajab, Bahaa Taher, Yaḥyā Ṭāhīr ʿAbdallah, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna, Raḍwā ʿĀshūr, Sunallah Ibrāhīm, Nawal El Saadawi, Assia Djebar, Alaa Al Aswany, Rashīd Jallūlī, Yūsuf al-Sāyigh, Tahar Djaout, among others, were able to expose part of the ramifications of this tyranny and oppression through the telling of fictional stories which in turn tell the stories of dictators.

To my surprise, and I think to the surprise of many critics in the field, Arab literary critics have not yet managed to produce a body of texts that can be grouped together under the banner of dictator(ship) novels to initiate an independent genre like its Latin American counterpart—both regions being the most fertile of soils for the thriving of such a canon by their exposure to several of the twentieth century's most ruthless regimes. In an essay entitled, "Imagining more Autumns for North Africa's Patriarchs: The Dictator Novel in Egypt," Ḥusām Abu al-ʿIlā (2011) writes about the history of the genre of dictator novels in Latin America and how it emerged at the hands of skillful writers such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez and Augusto Roa Bastos. What is interesting in this essay is not the historical fact that the genre of dictator novels emerged first in Latin American literature; rather, that Abu al-ʿIlā underscores the absence of this kind of writing in Arabic literature despite the many repressive regimes in the Arab world: "[a] discussion of the relationship between Arabic novel and the Arab dictator must inevitably begin," he then states (Abu al-ʿIlā, p.1). This statement suggests that the theme of the imaginary and, at times, real character of dictators has never been tackled or elaborated on in Arabic fiction. Taking this as the point of departure, I argue that there are many Arab writers, like but not limited to the ones in the list above, who have authored fictional narratives against dictatorships and dictatorial regimes in one way or another. I agree, however, with Abu al-ʿIlā that a discussion about Arabic dictator novels is one which

deserves attention and scholarship. In other words, it is the lack of critical exploration of Arabic dictator novel that has failed in capturing the distinctiveness of the work of Arab writers in this field.

Responding to a void that exists in Arabic literary criticism, not in the fictional terrains, I will briefly discuss the genre of the dictator novel before I examine Ibrāhīm Saʿdī's last novel, *al-Aʿzam*² to show how, through the form of his narrative, he challenges the dictatorial power to expose the constructed narrative of the authoritative regimes. I use the work of Gérard Genette's theory in narrative discourse to argue that not only the content of the novel is about dictatorship, but its form is also dictatorial in the sense that it dictates who can and cannot speak. The novel does so by resisting closure and creating a new readerly aesthetics which undermine the autocratic and repressive power of dictators stripping them of their role as the ones who dictate to that of the recipient of dictatorship by offering their own historical account of the nation. Simultaneously, and through this reversed dictatorship, the novel, I suggest exploits the reader's ability to relive the past vicariously through the act of reading to suggest the implicit demythologization of dictators.

1. THE GENRE OF DICTATOR NOVEL

The genre of the dictator novel is generally associated with Latin American critics who have long ago treated travel, existential, and cosmopolitan themes in literature as responses to dictatorship, unlike Arab critics who did not historicize the Arabic novel sufficiently³. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Latin America witnessed the emergence of this new literary genre that caused quite a commotion on the cultural scene. With the publication of *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* in 1845, the Argentinian writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento not only paved the road for many other Latin American writers to take apart their military leaders and their dictatorships, but he introduced a genre that later came to be known as Latin America's exclusive literary achievement, "*la novela del dictador*". In this genre, writers exhibited new literary aesthetics in their work, breaking with the realist tradition of their predecessors. Employing the historical figure of Juan Facundo Quiroga to address Argentina's contemporary situation, Sarmiento, for instance, was able to link both the past and the present of his nation to tell the story of how the dictator came to power. In his introduction to the English translated version by Mary

² Because there is the character in the novel named al-Aʿzam and the novel itself is called *al-Aʿzam*, when this word is italicized I intend it to refer to the novel otherwise it refers to the character in the novel.

³ The list of such critics is long, but it is hard for us to skip the contributions of Carlos Pacheco, Chambers Ross, Ilan Stavans, Leonard Tennenhouse, Robert Boyers, Roberto González Echevarría to this field.

Peabody Mann, Ilan Stavans writes that Sarmiento “sets out not only to debunk Rosas, but also, perhaps more urgently, to explain what had brought him to power—to illustrate the natural and social conditions in Argentina that allowed such a tyrant to emerge” (Mann, 1998, p.viii-ix).

A review of the scholarly literature on the topic of dictator novels, shows that the emergence of modern Latin American dictator novels, as we know them today, was reflected in a group of texts that echoed the political circumstances of certain Latin American countries while simultaneously laying the foundations of the ‘Dictator Novel’. In his book, *Narrativa de la Dictadura y Crítica Literaria*, Carlos Pacheco provides a clear definition of what a dictator novel is when he writes that it refers to “solo y todas aquellas obras de prosa narrativa cuyo tema principal sea la figura del dictador”. “Only those works of narrative prose whose principal theme is the figure of the dictator” (1987, p.38).

With the publication of novels such as, *El Señor Presidente* (Mister President, 1946) by Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Gran Burundún Burundá ha Muerto* (The Great Burundún Burundá Is Dead 1952) by Colombian writer Jorge Zalamea, *El Otoño del Patriarca* (Autumn of the Patriarch, 1975) by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, *Yo el Supremo* (I, the Supreme, 1974) by Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos, and *El Recurso del Método* (Reasons of State, 1974) by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, the emerging genre became more developed and distinct from even European novels in the sense that its main search is not for social or economic justice and identity but rather for a historical national identity that was lost at the hands of dictators. One of the main characteristics of the dictator novel during this period was that it became very critical of history and its formation. Although history is still at the center of their writings, the close ties between the Latin dictators and imperialist powers are highlighted. The dictator figure in this genre is not necessarily a reference to a specific individual; rather, as Robert Boyers (2005) writes in relation to the politics of writing dictatorships “the dictator in these novels is a composite portrait modeled in various originals, with the result that the character is larger than life, [...] he is less a person than he is a force of nature” (p.179). The literary criticism of Latin American writing is very relevant to the work of Arab writers regardless of the historical particularities of their experiences because they both wrote as a response to the wake of dictatorships.

The experience of Arab writers, one can argue, parallels that of their Latin American counterparts as they, too, are products of oppressive regimes. Many writers employed new literary aesthetics in their works to capture the issue of disillusionment. Just like their Latin American counterparts, Arabic literary texts, contemporary novels to be precise, call attention to the

parallels between narrative and the rhetorical processes and structures which, both, empowered and sustained the authoritarian rules.

Some of the Arabic texts, which can be categorized as dictator novels, exhibit various characteristics that distinguish them from other types of novels. First, in some Arabic dictator novels the character of the dictator occupies a conventional ruling position where an authoritarian figure may symbolically function as a dictator. One example of the latter type of novel is Naguib Mahfouz’s *Awlād Hāritnā* (*Children of the Alley*, 1995) in which Mahfouz uses the character of Gabalawi to draw an image of dictatorship and dictators. Another example is the character of the Imam in Nawal El Sadawi’s *Suqūtt al-Imām* (*The Fall of the Imam*, 1987). Although the Imam in Saadawi’s novel is not the ruler of the state, he is used and blamed for the corruption in his society.

Second, some novels use historical leaders, who were themselves dictators, to address contemporary dictators. Gamal al-Ghitani’s *al-Zayni Barakat* (1974) is a classic example of such novels. He takes the character of Barakāt ibn Mūsā, a historical ruler who governed Egypt in the 16th century to problematize the emergence of Nasser as a dictator in Egypt. The novel gives a vivid account of how hopes, when placed in a charismatic leader, are suffocated by a net of state surveillance and torture. This also seems clear in *Majnūn al-ḥukum* (*The Tyrant*, 1998) where the Moroccan writer, Bensālem Himmich, fictionalizes an iconic historical figure, the Fatimid Caliph Al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh who was the ruler of Egypt in the 11th century to mediate the role of Arab intellectuals in challenging power and authority. The novel mixes history and fiction about a tyrannical medieval ruler who is deployed as an allegory of modern repressive Arab dictators.

Third, some writers of Arabic dictator novels created fictitious rulers and nations to talk about Arab dictators and their repressive regimes. Here we can think of Abdelrahman Munif’s seminal novel, *Sharq al-Mutawassit* (*East of the Mediterranean*, 1974). The protagonist is physically ill because of the oppression imposed on him and thus he is sent to France to be cured from his disease. The protagonist’s political activities, however, are anchored in a desire to challenge the practice of dictatorship and the establishment of, although nameless, a state founded upon liberty. In this novel, both the dictator and the nation are fictitious. The use of fictitious characters has become a bench mark in the work of many Arab writers who write about dictators in their recent works such as *Al-Aʿzam* (*The Greatest!* 2010) by Ibrāhīm al-Saʿdī, *Al-Khawf* (*Fear*, 2009) by Rashīd Jallūlī, *Ṭāʾir al-Kharāb* (*The Bird of Destruction*, 2005) by ʿAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī. The Algerian writer Ibrāhīm Saʿdī, who is also the focus of this paper, is the most interesting and important voice that falls into the third category of Arab novelists who write about dictators. Saʿdī has authored eight novels: *al-Marfūdūn* (1981), *al-Nakhr* (1990),

Fatāwī Zaman al-Mawt (1999), *Bawḥ al-Rajul al-Qādim min al-Zalām* (2002), *Baḥthan ʿan āmāl al-Ghābrīn* (2004), *Šamt al-Farāgh* (2006), *Kitāb al-Asrār* (2007), and *al-Aʿzam* (2010). In all his novels, Saʿdī explores the issue of decaying regimes and suggests possible ways to address the scars left by authoritarianism.

2. THE STORY OF AL-AʿZAM

Al-Aʿzam tells the story of the life, illness, and death of a dictator whose name is Lazhar Klock. It shows us how he came to power as a freedom fighter against the French colonialization of the state of *al-Manārah* (*The Minaret*).⁴ The novel also tells the story of how this dictator managed to realize his dream of ruling for more than fifty years. Set in the fictional republic of *al-Manārah*, which is governed by its post-independence ruler “al-Aʿzam” (the greatest) who is sometimes also referred to as “al-ṭāghiyah” (the tyrant). The novel, in part, tells the story of the ruler and his regime which made of him the untouchable being, a godly figure, at times, who is capable to “end lives and resurrect people” who is also considered to be “the past, the present, and the future of al-Manārah” (Saʿdī, 2010, p.320, 323). The novel documents, in the aim of dissenting, the political intrigues of the dictator and his regime. Essential to Saʿdī's novel is the illumination of the life and times of contemporary Algeria, represented in the fictional state al-Manārah. The novel's concern with al-Manārah's postcolonial history, political corruption, the idea of justice and the transfer of power is reflected in the contaminated political and economic situation. Within this context, the novel presents a varying conception of the typical daily life of Algerians before and after the fall of the colonial regimes. Furthermore, it enriches our apprehension of the complex history of the country through the production of a cultural memory. The main concern of the production of cultural memory is the question of how the past and the present can interact with and be linked to each other. The remainder of this paper is a close reading of Saʿdī's novel, *al-Aʿzam*, to show how the writer utilizes the form of narrative to create a story which counters the authoritarian construction of the national history and challenges the dictator's hegemony.

3. THE FORM OF DICTATION AND THE DICTATION OF FORM IN AL-AʿZAM

Al-Aʿzam is a collection of lengthy semi-oral narrative tales about the title character, *al-Aʿzam*, who rules for fifty years before his son succeeds after his death. The novel is not limited to a single narrator; rather, there are multiple narrators making the story complex, like the topic it is

addressing. The narrators are Peter, the foreign historian who is interested in writing a history book about *al-Aʿzam*; Lazher Lamīn, an old friend of the dictator who fought with him during *al-Manārah*'s war for independence who is currently living in exile; Mamdūḥ, the previous advisor of the dictator; and Mamdūḥ's mother, Maymūnah who used to be a friend of the dictator's family before and after he came to power. The tales of all these narrators are woven together into a textile that flawlessly incorporates the lives of people who have known the dictator in three different eras: Maymūnah tells his story before he came to power, Lazhar Lamīn narrates his story when he was a fighter for the country's independence, and Mamdūḥ who is central in the life of the dictator and his regime from the moment he assumed the presidency of al-Manārah. Peter, who rarely speaks, however, is the implied historian whose job is not only to correct the history of the dictator but also to make us question the very process of history writing.

In his first meeting with the Peter, Lazhar Lamīn appears to be contemplating a picture that was taken of him and all the “leading members of the revolution” (Saʿdī, 2010, p.11),⁵ including Lazhar Klob, the current dictator. Later in the novel, we learn that some of these leaders passed away and some have been killed by the dictator himself. What is most important about this is that it stages the project that the novel is about to embark on: meeting the ones who are still alive to re-write the history of al-Manārah. This strategy of multiple protagonists in the novel gives voice to the oppressed people in general and make the project more collective. In other words, it gives voice to the oppressed one while muting the voice of the dictator and this is the main goal of this dictator novel.

As a fictional historian, Saʿdī acknowledges a basic problem of history—that truth disintegrates over time. And so, it becomes very hard for us to have a good grasp of the past. The perception of past events becomes something that is unrecoverable. The role of Peter as an implied historian in this novel then enters the realm of what Gerard Genette (1980) refers to as “the functions of the narrator” (p.255). Genette emphasizes the role narrators play in the narrative when he writes:

It can seem strange, at first sight, to attribute to any narrator a role other than the actual narrating, the act of telling the story, but in fact we know well that the narrator's discourse, novelistic or not, can take on other functions. (Ibid.)

The function of Peter and his orientation with his *narratee*, to use Genette's term, is to establish a dialogue whose main goal becomes more of interrogation of the past and historical accounts. Thus, while the details and the narrative voices may change, they are woven

⁴ This is the fictional name of the State in the novel.

⁵ The Novel is not yet translated to English. Any reference to the novel here will be my own translation.

into the same frame and tradition whose aim is to form an oppositional narrative that moves to the margins the dictator's central rhetorical system. These stories, therefore, reject the dictator's system of power by placing it in the periphery. This strategy of bringing the margin to the center and marginalizing the center unreservedly seeks to institute the voices of the once marginalized as alternative voices to the dictator's all-pervading oneness.

The stories of oppressed people are also emphasized by Sa'adi's decision to, not incidentally, have one of the voices be that of the historian in the story, Peter, whose main goal is to re/write the history of al-Manārah. This character of 'the implied historian' one can argue is the voice of the author of this novel himself who, knowing the consequences of writing a history book about a real and present dictator, chooses to fictionalize it by creating his own world where he becomes the master of narration who controls the course of the narrative. The protagonists of *al-A'zam*, Lazhar Lamīn, Mamdūh, Maymūnah and Peter, embody the figures of the people who struggle for freedom and desire to rise above their sufferings. Through the memories of these protagonists about the history of the ruler of al-Manārah and how he came to power, the history of al-Manārah emerges from the country chronicle to overcome his authoritarianism.

By having this form—privileging collective accounts over individualistic ones—the novel suggests that history does not lend itself to a singular account of historical events, like that put forward by authority. Rather, it foregrounds the artifice of literature and by analogy associates it with the history of dictatorship to produce its own readerly estrangement. One can then argue that, perhaps more than anything else, this novel illustrates what Linda Hutcheon (1988) refers to as "historiographic metafiction" (p.93). By foregrounding the questionable nature of the historical account once paved by the dictatorial apparatus and rejecting it as the "only history [which] has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses" the novel then becomes a source of authority which demythologizes and dictates the writing of history (Ibid.).

The opening words of the novel "al-A'zam māt, ajal, māta fi al-Akhīr" [The greatest died, indeed, he has finally died] (Sa'adi, 2010, p.1) challenge the authoritarian power by putting an end to it before the narrator begins the story of the dictator. Gérard Genette terms this kind of beginning as prolepsis which he writes "refer[s] in advance to an event that will be told in full in its place" (1980, p.73). In the case of this novel, the prolepsis does, in fact, allude to a future event that will be narrated—the myth of the dictator's rise to power, the myth of him being bigger than everything. This opening alludes to the main goal of this novel which is to challenge a totalitarian power. The

confirmation of the dictator's death is quite necessary here as it encourages the people who will participate in this project to speak with freedom. It is as if, Peter, the implied historian, who is concerned with rewriting the history of the nation, knows that the reason for the people's unending silence is fear and he wants them to overcome this fear. He wants to urge them to participate in a collective re/telling of the history of this dictator. To this end, the novel suggests that without freedom of expression and dissent apathy develops towards the social and political realities that then prevent them from speaking and resisting; people's voices can never be heard. As such, the contested point in the struggle for hegemony is the voice and who has the right to narrate. Thus, the novel, once and for all, mutes the dictator by announcing his death at the very beginning as to dictate the narrative hereafter. This beginning then functions as a confirmation of the feasibility of the project of this novel by using the canonical formula of prolepsis, a "we will see" in Genette's own words (1980, p.73). This beginning has many implications for the form of this novel because it challenges the rumor of the ruler's god-like being. The role this prolepsis plays, according to Genette, is "through the expectation that they create in the reader's mind" (p.74). This time, the narrator wants to relay to his readers, it is different. Thus, they should not be fearful of previous lies about this dictator. Peter's project and main concern is a re/consideration of any kind of standardized history by proposing other versions of the past that is intentionally or mistakenly absent from official historical records. To this end, the narrative in this novel allows new perspectives in looking at the past; which can be "defined in opposition to hegemonic views of the past and associated with groups who have been 'left out,' as it were, of mainstream history" (Rigney, 2005, p.13). The goal is twofold: to rebuild and recover the hidden and forgotten past as well as to show the impossibility of providing a complete account of a past that remains beyond representation and perception.

In the rest of the first paragraph in the novel, the novel relays this fear that people have adopted through the years from even the thought of imagining an end to the dictator. It then subverts it to offer a more complete picture of the reality on the ground and the trauma that ensued because of this fear. The beginning of the chapter sets the stage for a story that diverges from hegemonic history of the dictator and his regime. It is as if the narrator is saying that unlike all the previous efforts to overcome the power of the dictator, this time he is already dead, he is silent, he is muted. The voice of confirmation comes from the text itself which announces that:

Although he was in a deep coma for several months, afflicted by an illness that shows no mercy and old age, people continued to believe that he would be cured. He has always survived many illnesses throughout his life, each time thinking during the illness that his end was near. However, he was always

saved from the assassination attempts which he was exposed to throughout his long bloody life, to the point that people came to think that his end would never come. (Saʿdī, 2010, p.3)

This account reveals the obsession, and the necessity to be able to talk, which the implied historian, Peter, requires of the people for him to launch his project. The desire for freedom of expression, revealing the concealed, and who controls the gaze are all intertwined. In this proclamation of what was once a taboo, the ability to speak freely, the narrative gives birth to a text whose goal is to return the gaze to the dictator and to reveal his violence and wrongdoings. It also gives voice to the silenced ones and mutes the dictator at once by announcing that his claim to complete control is unfounded.

The “urgency to write and speak” against the dictator demanded by the implied historian, Peter, harks back to the novel’s title and is an example of the way in which words become important to unveil the larger socio-political “filth” created by al-Aʿzam’s regime. It can also be a recognition on Peter’s part of the failure of historians to have challenged this dictatorship. It is not only that the state has failed its people but that the intellectuals, and the people who have been always silent, have also failed to successfully challenge the repression of the state either by political action in the public sphere or by subverting power through literary production.

The need for an alternative political order and a different historical narrative is reflected in the hopelessness of the people who strive to end the dictatorial regime. This sentiment is clear in the following quote: “The people started to believe that his end is never going to come” (Ibid., p.3). Throughout the novel, the godly image of the dictator is repeatedly challenged. This image emerges through the descriptions of the dictator: “Al-ʿaʿzam is capable of everything, and that he is not a human being (Ibid., p.6). For Saʿdī, these images of the dictator mask the violent realities that lie at the heart of the project of re-appropriating history. They also illustrate the urgency of re/writing the historical narrative which was maimed by this dictator who created of himself an untouchable image. This project is undertaken by juxtaposing the historical account put forward by the dictator with the oral accounts of the narrators. Their oral accounts consequently subvert the hegemonic discourse of the dictator and his proclaimed history which are muted in this novel. The people’s memory of their past becomes a materialised medium used to produce information about a collective historical context or past events. Assmann (1995) talks about this when he states that among its many characteristics, cultural memory is unique in its ability to reconstruct the past, by relating it to actuality and offering new perspectives. He points out that

cultural memory exists in two modes: First in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and a second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the

objectivised meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance. (Assmann, 1995, p.130)

This understanding of memory offered by Assmann puts at question the fluidity attached to any re/presentation and re/reconstruction of the past. Which is also to say, that it puts to question the history of dictators themselves as well. As such, it exposes the falseness of the dictator’s narrative and the need to push it to the margin.

In so doing, and to use Echevarría González’ metaphor, *al-Aʿzam* symbolizes the rocket which was used by Paraguayans to “[blow] the dictator to bits” (1985, p.5)⁶ after his death. After it announces the death of the dictator, the novel begins its project of challenging the dictator’s historical narrative to dismantle it. Unlike what González considers to be “useless act” (1985, p.5), one can argue that such an action of destabilizing the history of dictators is inevitable in the process of dismantling the rhetoric of dictatorship for two reasons: First, it asserts the ability of literature to provoke readers’ actions and educate them of their own history; second, it offers a process of search and remembrance through the illumination of the life and tales of certain people and the memories of a number of places that are connected to the collective memory of al-Manārah with specific histories.

In the second numbered chapter in the novel, Peter insists on the need to document the history of the now-deceased dictator by asking the locals. He meets with “al-muʿāridh al-ʿajūz” [the old leader of opposition] who shares with him the disappointment he has experienced from and at the hand of the dictator, which consequentially linked to colonialism since the dictator simply replaced the colonizer with another repression. This is underscored by al-muʿāridh when he says, “the same disappointment and bitterness since the times our dreams of the old revolution have turned into ashes” (Saʿdī, 2010, p.11). This attempt to play the role of a historian who recognizes that his main job is to dig for the truth seems to also apply to writing. They both search for alternative accounts. The process of constructing an alternative historical narration is threatening to the dictator’s regime because it gives voice to an account that was once silenced while it simultaneously underlies the dictator’s brutality and acts of power. Because of his understanding of the fact that any concrete evidence for a historical account might deteriorate over time—as time passes it becomes thorny for us to recall the historical past—*al-Aʿzam* immediately launches into a project of excavation of the past and a re/construction of a hegemonic narrative which is filled with holes in the confirmable body of information to create an alternative one. For this reason, the old man, Lazhar

⁶ The reference here is to the assassination of General Anastasio Somoza in Paraguay. For more about this refer to Echevarría González. *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.

Lamīn, for example, is described as a contemplator who starts to “recall fifty years, and maybe more, of the history of his country” (Ibid., p.13).

Saʿdī’s approach to writing is innovative because he searches for artifacts that problematize the hegemonic narratives. These artifacts call into question the circulated narrative about the dictator because they suggest an alternative reading; a reading which seeks to depict the discrepancies in the history of the dictator through and within the content and, in fact, the form of this novel. This approach is clearly articulated by the implied historian, Peter, when he describes the nature and the approach of his writing by saying:

After I have extensively explained what I want from him [Lazhar Lamīn], he suggested that the project would not be in the form of question and answer and that I would let him talk freely about the al-Aʿzam without any guide from me. I accepted this proposal with no objection. And verily, this is how I imagined the project to be like from the beginning. (Ibid., p.13)

Being fully aware of dictators and their dictatorial ways, the novel seems to suggest that the only way to change things is to talk freely about the dictator without giving him even a voice to respond. The allegorical decentralization and the metaphorical silencing of the dictator, whose voice controlled every aspect of the people of al-Manārah’s life for “approximately fifty years” (Ibid., p.11), represents a certain act of both subversion and victory—even if it is only symbolic and fictional. This free-narration style calls attention to the rhetoric and artifice of fiction, and the creation of a narrative that is contingent on the collective memory. This approach of re/writing history, where the writer uses the memories of the oppressed to scrutinize the fundamental rhetorical intercepts drawn between history and fiction, calls into question the concepts of both authorship and dictatorship.

Therefore, in the previously quoted excerpt from the novel the implied historian, Peter, says: “I accepted this proposal with no objection” (Ibid., p.13) to have the old man be the master of narration; the one who narrates freely without being questioned or interrogated. Peter’s acceptance of this proposal is metaphoric, because it does imply something about the novel’s goal, and ultimate attainment. The focus now, in this text at least, is more on the voice of the oppressed who sees this project as a chance to silence the voice of the dictator and to have his voice, once and for all, rise above the dictator’s voice. As such, the narrative exposes the vulnerability of the dictator who is now uncertain about the system of his own personal rule simply because he lost his voice and power.

The novel, moreover, uses the memories of the people that represent physical and psychological oppression to offer another account of the history that the dictator once utilized to sustain his power. This process is also a means of empowerment for the people who participate

in sharing their memories. Peter, therefore, remains constantly cognizant of their right to be free to tell their own stories without any interruption and in effect redefine the space that they occupy. The multi-layered narrative here becomes one intertwined thread which masks the demarcations between literature and history in the created story that is being materialized along the way.

Only after this negotiation of the space of both the narrator and the implied historian, does the old man, Lamīn Sharīf, start his narration holding “al-Ṣūrah al-Qadīmah bimā yaqrub min khamsīna ʿāman” [the old picture which goes back to approximately fifty years] (Ibid., p.14). He tells the story of coming to power of Lazhar klock, the dictator, and how he was at the beginning of the formation of the nation state. His narration is an allegory of the failure of the al-Manārah state under the regime of Lazhar. Many of the activities that he narrates about the dictator involve corruption at all levels to enrich himself and attain more power. This seems clear in the juxtaposition of what the old man says about the dictator and the incident of the killing of the leader of the liberation movement, ʿAbd al-Bāqī Bāqūr, and what the history books have written about this incident. At some point Lazhar tells Peter that: “Some of the newspapers and the history books have mentioned that ʿAbd al-Bāqī Bāqūr was a victim of some of his companions, in fact, there was a direct reference to the major Lazhar by name, who was in undercover contact with the enemy” (Saʿdī, 2010, pp.19-20).

This reference to the policies of the dictator to suppress any opposition captures what dictatorship inflicts on the Arab people psyche and history. The melancholy experienced by the characters reflects the struggle that Arabs had to endure, which forces a negotiation of history “bi’atharin rajʿī” [retrospectively] (Ibid., p.19). The dictator’s historical account resides in an ambivalent space between presentation and acceptance. In other words, the novel not only problematizes the manipulation of historical events by dictators to sustain their legitimacy, but it also problematizes the acceptance of such manipulation by the people through the skepticism of us as readers and through the memories that are being collected about the dictator. The dictator and his machine of self-empowerment produced a history that is authorized by those who are in power to tell their story. A good example from the text that illustrates the immediacy of this project is when the father of al-Aʿzam begins to tell people to resist the subjugation by his son:

The father of al-Aʿzam used to stand in the popular markets to talk to people inviting them to fight when he calls corruption and unfairness, saying to them: Oh believers! Keep your head up, do not be afraid of those who blame you, rescue yourself from the shame and subjugation, is this the independence that your martyrs have died for. (Ibid., p.44)

This quote relates the repressive nature of the dictator’s rule and the citizens’ disappointment with this reality after

fighting for independence from colonizers. In this reality, the dictator's focus is on the consolidation of his power and not representing the will of the people. The regime's narrative presumes that the dictator is legitimate because he is in power. For this reason, coercion, in various forms, is utilized to force citizens to accept the rule of dictator and his policies. The authorized history of the regime is dynamic; it continues to develop, and it always depends on the centrality of the dictator. It is this centrality that matters to the holders of power. For this reason, the moment the dictator felt that his narrative was being challenged by even his father, his response was brutal. The dictator sends this message to his father through al-Mustashār Mamdūh:

Listen, you shaykh, you are free to choose not to see my face, and by the way, I do not care about this, what I really want from you is only one thing, not more, which is to keep your mouth shut as the rest of the people do. And as far as you keep talking about equality, it is not fair to prevent the people from talking in certain topics out of their respect for the law while you talk freely about them day and night. (Ibid., pp.55-56)

The message the dictator sent to his father portrays the way in which oppositional narratives destabilize the authorized history. Al-Aʿzam's father reminds him that if the silenced people voices were heard they would reject the authorized history of his regime. Thus, his father represents the alternative narrative that has been marginalized. This action of shifting away—placing and displacing—placing a new narrative in the center and moving with the aim of deliberately displacing an authorized history or narrative toward the rhetorical periphery, even if it is symbolic and metaphorical is threatening for authority. The history which *al-Aʿzam* is narrating and claiming, thus, is positioned in direct rivalry with the authorized history.

The act of empowering and disempowering which *al-Aʿzam* is engaging in and the space it is creating reflects what Ross Chambers (1991) refers to as “Room for Maneuver”: A space which enables the writer “to elude both repression and recuperation, or more accurately, to ‘maneuver’ within the ‘room’ that opens up *between* the two. These are the characteristics of address that imply reading as a mode of reception inscribed *without closure* in time, and hence, history” (p.3).⁷ The key word in this quote is “closure” which is, not only, being rejected but also challenged from the very beginning in *al-Aʿzam* when it announces the death of the dictator to transfer his voice to the people whom he silenced during his life. In addition, this novel is heroic in the sense that it gives its people enormous power, a power emanating from its aim to reclaim the right to speak. Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria (1980) eloquently addresses this point when he writes:

⁷ The emphasis in this quote is from the original text by Ross Chambers.

There may no longer be, as in the epic, heroic protagonists who are at the center of harmonious totalities, but there is the implicit, powerful author, who probes the inner workings of an entire society to lay them bare in his novels, and who within the confines of the text is a partially veiled god. He has the vision afforded by a reflexive and reflective consciousness, less grandiose. (pp.207-208)

The form of this novel and the way it does things by fluctuating through a multiperson narrative in a subtle manner has made of the ruler of al-Manārah, al-Aʿzam, a fearful, restless and weak person. The sources of his fear are the people themselves. The people, among whom is his father, who according to al-Aʿzam “threatens the public safety and causes harm to the dignity of the country and its reputation” (Saʿdī, 2010, p.58). The metaphorical space created by *al-Aʿzam* gestures to the regimes of al-Manārah and amplifies the critique of the authoritarian power of the figure of the dictator because it brings into doubt the claim that the dictator has absolute power by offering a space for the voices of the marginalized by the dictator, i.e. the citizens, to be heard. It casts doubts on the one who is described in the novel as “al-hay al-qayyūm [...] [al] qahhār [al] jabbār” (Ibid., p.20) [The Living, The Everlasting, The Subduer, The Omnipotent]. These descriptions are particularly noteworthy because they are among the 99 names of God in the Islamic tradition. Thus, by describing the dictator with these names the narrative underscores the divine-like qualities that the dictator employs to instill fear in his citizens. However, the traits of God are not limited to names that reflect a relationship of fear, unlike the dictator. He knows that he has proclaimed power and the people are forcefully accepting it.

Fear in this novel is not only experienced by the citizens; the dictator himself fears losing his position. This sentiment is best described in the work of Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg (1982), *Personal Rule in Black Africa*, who argue that fear haunts the dictator and follows him where ever he goes. Fear, they write, “is with him every day in the sense that he rules not by institutional right but by personal domination, intelligence, energy, and fortune [...] [He] may rule for many years, but there is always a possibility that legitimacy will be lost, that ability and loyalty will decline, and that misfortune will overtake his power” (p.27). The fear of losing legitimacy, power, and acquired authority is the motivation for the brutal and tyrannical practices of dictatorship. Therefore, when al-Aʿzam's father continues to preach against the tyranny and the wrong deeds of his son, the latter shows no mercy. In fact, al-Aʿzam spreads a rumor that there was a reconciliation between his father and himself to cover the truth which the narrator unveils for us by saying:

I was really surprised by the news that was spreading in the east about a reconciliation, at the end, between the father and his son. But the truth [...] was not like that, it was that the supporter of al-Aʿzam spread this rumor among the people. They fabricated

this news not more than that. The truth, Peter, is that the father was kidnapped. (Saʿdī, 2010, pp.62-63)

By mixing the literary with the nonliterary, i.e. the fictional history and the history of the narrator's nation, as means of opposition, the novel seeks to expose the brutality of the regime. It deconstructs the narrative of the dictator by immediately juxtaposing it with a counter narrative that unveils the truth of what happened to the father and systematically breaking down the boundaries between the "truth" and the "lie", by blurring the distinction between them. In so doing, the novel expands itself beyond what is fictional to create a space for the narrator to produce a narrative which, not only deconstructs the dictator's own narrative but also unveils its lies and mends its historical rupture.

Peter, the historian who gathers information to re/write the history of al-Manārah, is probably the character that represents Saʿdī the author. Peter as the foreigner, the European who comes from Europe, is the only one who can write something that challenges the account of the dictator as opposed to a citizen. He is beyond the control of the dictator and his observations about al-Manārah results from concern about human rights violations. This choice reflects the challenges Arab intellectuals face with dictators and the price that they might pay for resisting the rule of the dictator. Peter, therefore, can construct the counter narrative by collecting the memories of the people who know al-Aʿzam. Through the character of Peter, Saʿdī, the author, employs the same rhetorical process to produce a counter narrative which allows him to call attention to the process by which dictatorial regimes construct historical accounts. At the aesthetic level, this becomes a literary intervention in the Arabic novel.

In this sense, then, we can understand *al-Aʿzam* as Saʿdī's desire to re/write his own story and the story of his people. Through this intervention, the novel suggests that breaking free from the dictatorial account and control empowers its readers by providing them with a "room to maneuver" where they can reject the structures of dictatorial power. The relationship between the narrator and readers, "is no longer the dyadic relationship of seducer/seducee," Leonard Tennenhouse (1993) argues. Rather, it is incorporated "within a triangulated relationship which enacts the cultural system as an inevitably mediated one" (p.440). Here, Tennenhouse does not negate the position of the reader as the object of the narrator's seduction, but he attributes to him/her also the role of a participant in making the text. While *al-Aʿzam* suggests a sense of oppositionality and breaking free from the dominant narrative of the dictator, *al-Aʿzam*, it reiterates that this goal is still a readerly function which transcends the textual sphere and transpires beyond the limits of the written words. The role of the text then ends after creating the fictional

space only to await its success and/or failure which is assumed to be judged by the reader. Oppositional reading, Tennenhouse argues, requires embodying the reader: "Achieving oppositionality simply entails situating oneself in the reading position" (p.439).

The created space, allotted to the writer, becomes a means to assert the silenced voice and overcome the narrative censorship imposed on al-Manārah during the dictatorship of "al-Ṭāghiyah" (the dictator) as he is described in the novel. The idea of opposing oppression and dismantling dictatorship is echoed repeatedly throughout the novel. And in his role as the re/writer of history, Saʿdī gains his creative liberties which were once profoundly constrained through the attention he pays to words and textual disruption in the novel. Through the interplay of narrative convention, readers' expectations and the inherent discrepancies he creates between the maimed history and the told history of al-Manārah which he has chosen to unsettle, Saʿdī is able to produce a novel that overcomes all these obstacles.

In this novel, the contested point in the struggle for hegemony is space in its fictional as well as real manifestations. Therefore, the dictator, Lazhar, is concerned with dominating this space to stop any attempt that might lead to the inevitable—the loss of control. One of the ways to gain legitimacy and maintain the sustainability of control over space is religion. At a moment of defenselessness and panic the dictator sends a letter to Nūr al-dīn Ṣuṭūrā, the minister of religious affairs, asking him "to change the format of the Jumʿah speech, in which they start mentioning the name of the dictator and pray for him in all the mosques of al-Manārah" (Saʿdī, 2010, p.90).⁸ The reference here is to a phenomenon that came to be applicable to, almost, all the ruling powers in the Arab world in which the obedience of the ruler is associated with that of God himself. In other words, the supplication that people make for God to protect dictators have played a role in the making of dictators under the name of religion. This misuse of religion to promote one's own interests is well studied by Cunningham (1991) who argues that the aim of theology is not to get finally to God but rather "to bring the audience along to the end of new forms of thought and actions" (p.312). Although his writing was not in the context of dictators and the dictatorships, it is still relevant as it critiques the religious rhetoric and how sometimes it is used as a conduit which helps manipulators to reach their goal of convincing the oppressed to accept their ideology.

The novel seems to suggest that religious rhetoric plays a crucial role in the formation of a god-like dictators. In the war of independence, Arab resistance movements used Islam as a source of inspiration and guidance in their

⁸ Friday's *khuṭbah* (sermon) is a speech that takes place before the congregational midday prayer that Muslims hold every Friday.

struggle against European colonization. Arab nationalists at that time formulated their discourses and ideologies around the idea of establishing an Islamic State ruled by Islamic laws. After independence, however, and to legitimize their perpetual powers, dictators used religion and its discourse to control the way people view them. The dictator of al-Manārah, therefore, tries to achieve this in several ways. He asks the religious leaders to bring him into the religious discourse where his obedience is juxtaposed with the obedience of God himself “[wa-tudaʿu maʿa] ism Allah wa-Rasūl” [to put side by side by the name of Allah and the prophet] (Saʿdī, 2010, p.91). The aim of such manipulation is to gain a sense of legitimacy that allows dictators to stay in power through the support of religious leaders. They must place obedience to him, like God, in the center, partly as a defensive measure against challenges to his authority. He becomes a centripetal force, so to speak. He not only seeks to manipulate the use of religion to his ends, but he also casts a broader net to ensnare the people’s sense of religiosity. This is why when Nūr al-dīn Suṭūrā rejects the order of the dictator—to associate his obedience with the obedience of God—he faces serious consequences. He had to resign from the dictator’s cabinet and his life becomes difficult. The dictator then puts him in silent mode and brings someone else to replace him. Someone who is willing to conclude his khutbah, this time, by mentioning al-Aʿzam, asking “Allah to keep and protect him as the leader of the nation and to grant him victory over his enemies” (Ibid., p.94). What deserves careful attention in this quote is the all-encompassing use of religious terminology which alludes to the greatness and the blessings of God, remind people to be patient and united and praise the rulers’ right policies and decisions.

In stark contrast to the orders of the dictator, Suṭūrā’s decision, to reject, embodies the very essence of liberty in his eyes. He is dazzled by the consequences of this decision as he looks at the men who came to arrest him on the night of his wedding. While telling Peter the story of what happened to Suṭūrā, Lamīn remembers the terrible day when detectives came to arrest Suṭūrā and he says:

One of the two officers had presented to him a document that shows that he is under arrest and they asked him to accompany them to a black car parked near the sidewalk [...] Then, Nūr al-Dīn said but this is my wedding night my dear sons. (Ibid., p.97)

The sense of defeat experienced by Suṭūrā in front of the orders of the dictator to arrest him reflects the inability of the whole nation to overcome the constraints and control of dictatorship. The image portrays Saʿdī’s critique, not only of the brutality of the regime but also of the people’s lack of resistance. For although they were gathering to celebrate Suṭūrā’s wedding, they were not able to stop the detectives from arresting him by saying:

“Naḥnu āsifān... al-Shaykh... al-Awāmir awāmir” [we are sorry.... Sheikh... orders are orders] (Ibid., p.97). In this scene, the novel critiques the dictator and his regime by portraying their lack of any human traits and mercy. He is willing to do whatever it takes to solidify his power over the people. It depicts the dictator as the one who undermines the people and reduces them to slaves who live, move, and dream according to his orders. As such, the novel alludes here to the means of empowerment used by the dictator to maintain his power. Although the novel reasserts the very structures used by the dictator, it does not, however, contribute to the empowerment of his dictatorship. Rather, it artistically uses narrative to emulate, denounce and displace the power of the dictator “to undermine the myth of [dictatorship] and create a game of mirrors that corrodes the relation that [he] had established between myth and history” (Echevarría, 1985, p.83). In other words, by exposing his lies, the novel preemptively colors our sense of the dictator false power which has already collapsed by his inaugurated death at the beginning of the novel and his silence throughout.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the impact of *al-Aʿzam* lies not only in its sharp critique of the dictator and the ruler of al-Manārah, but also in the way Saʿdī uses the structure of the novel and form to privilege, in a clear contrast to the dictator, the collectivity and the multiplicity of perspectives. By giving the people of al-Manārah the freedom to narrate their stories of the dictator who is now dead, literally and metaphorically, the novel goes beyond only searching for a “room to maneuver” to silence the dictator by preventing him from the very strategy he used to maintain his power over—limiting the people freedom and exercising his authority over the state narrative. In other words, being a critique of the apparatuses used by the machine of the dictator, the novel suggests that writing can possibly help to know one’s own history and to orient the truth. In so doing, and to use Echevarría’s own words, the “novel demonstrates in its very structure that in reality dictators are not powerful telluric forces, but ideological diversions, shadows cast by the true powers” (Echevarría, 1985, p.83). By using its form and establishing credibility with its readers, the novel enshrouds the legitimacy of the dictator and his history with a sense of uncertainty. It does so, I argue, by enacting the very democratic society where the voice of the people is heard, which is what all dictators try to prevent. The society that is described in the novel at the end is not a society of enslaved or “drugged” citizens, to use Miriam Cooke’s term, who live within a lie that the regime is constructing of itself any more (p.138). I also showed how the novel provides a reader-directed alternative to the history imposed on

people about their dictators where the created fictional space in this novel becomes the mask which the author, the narrator and the characters take role in wearing to distort the lies of dictators. As such, the novel represents a significant formal development in the work of Saʿdī and in the genre of the dictator novel in general as it shows how the inventive use of an implied historian narrator allows for a critique of the dictator to develop at the diegetic, extradiegetic and the metadiegetic level (Genette, 1980, pp.228-233).

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