The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

THE MARGIN AND THE CENTER

A STUDY IN SELECTED WORKS FROM CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN
NOVELS

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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(under the supervision of Dr. Assyed Fadl)
July/2010

Introduction

The rapid pace of change sweeping through the Arab world over the last few decades has profoundly affected the nature of its literature. Since the end of World War II, several significant social changes in Egypt have reshaped the Egyptian novel; the collective consciousness, for example, "was replaced by a more individualistic one, and cohesion tended to be confined to small groups rather than vested in the community at large."[1] In some parts of the Arab world, especially in the old centers, like Cairo, this change has reinforced the sense of difference and of conflict.

The in-pouring of people from rural communities and small towns into a single metropolis or megalopolis has produced social complexity and social problems. "The rates of urbanization are so high and the accompanying problems are so great that the quality of city life may actually be deteriorating despite the efforts of the Egyptian government to combat these problems."[2] These problems include unemployment, poverty, congestion, and shortages of electricity, water, and schools.

All of the above factors in addition to rampant corruption and the government's use of rigid and repressive controls over the social, economic and political life of the population has gradually squeezed simple Egyptians out of the city's central power. The ring steadily tightened until the time of the Infitaah (Sadat's open door policy). This policy led to a significant rise in the wealth of the few and to the complete marginalization of simple Egyptians in Cairo.

In the world of Arabic literature, this kind of alienation and isolation of common people has fueled "one of the most recurrent and haunting themes in its history; the author's passionate cry for freedom under authoritarian rules."[3] Because writing has always been one of the most viable forms of resistance in Egypt, and because simple Egyptians were systematically marginalized and alienated by the powerful, modern

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[1] Sabry Hafez, "The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1994): 94.
[2] Helen Anne Rivlin and Katherine Helmer, *The changing Middle Eastern city* (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1980), V.
[3] M. M. Badawi, "Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20 (1993): 6.

Egyptian writers' resistance began to focus on new arenas. The change in the class composition of Egyptian writers themselves also played a paramount role in changing the way reality is represented and recreated in the modern Egyptian novel. While early Egyptian writers came from the upper strata of society, the new generation "confirmed the prevalence of the middle-class on the literary scene."[4]

In the late nineteen-eighties and nineties, Egyptian writers began to abandon the bourgeois frame that had surrounded the picture of contemporary Egyptians in their novels. They instead penetrated deeply into hidden and dark sides of the society, rediscovering new parts of the city that housed the lives of simple Egyptians. The new Egyptian novel deliberately shunned educated people, politicians, lovers, and "ibn ilbalad" (good old boys)—and embraced waitresses in roadside cafés, addicts, homosexuals, and the aimless: those who live on the margins of power. Some modern critics call these people "The Marginalized".

Unlike philosophers, novelists do not usually express their ideas in reasoned arguments, but instead, rely on artistic form and characterization for the presentation of their thought. In this thesis, I will follow the homology between some changes in the socio-political and cultural reality of the marginalized, and some concurrent changes in aesthetic and literary techniques used in the modern Egyptian novel. It is anticipated here that there is an interaction between the novel and its socio-cultural context, and that this interaction affects writers' perceptions. Authors' literary orientations and the relationship between their narrative texts and reality inevitably betray their reasoning about social reality. Although the metaphoric relationship between the literary text and reality is interactive, the two entities remain distinct and independent from each other.

In order to demonstrate how the marginalized are manifested in the contemporary Egyptian novel and how Arabic novelists assimilate the socio-cultural reality of the marginalized into the fabric of their narrative, we must always ask what center the margin is derived from. The claim is that these people are marginalized from the center. But where are these centers? In order to follow the transformation of the margin and the center and their various levels of interaction, I will analyze three particular themes in three contemporary Egyptian novels: Hamdi Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement*,

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[4] Hafez, 98.

published in 2002, Alaa Al-Aswani's *The Yacoubian Building*, published in 2002 , and Mohammed El-Fakharani's *Fasil Lil Dahsha* (*The Shocking Line*)[5], published in 2007. I will also, in some chapters, and for historical comparison, use some additional works, such as *Zeenat Marches in The President's Funeral* by Salwa Bakr, published in 1986, *The Siren* by Yusuf Idris, published in 1969, and Najib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* published in 1947.

"The Marginalized," by conceptual necessity, is defined by two cultures and two societies at the same time; the margin and the center. I will, in this thesis, trace and explore how contemporary Egyptian writers locate and represent these two forces, and how this duality creates relationships that keep these two opposing entities connected to each other. Modern Egyptian writers represent the margin by reorienting the relationship between the center and the margin according to their points of view; they represent these two forces as both interdependent and as governed by a unipolar magnetic field. But the margin is sometimes so far from the magnetic force that the far pole, the center, can be ignored.

The margin itself is in continuous movement, which creates various levels of dualities for introducing the place itself. These levels are unified, in the novels under consideration, by the concept of place of attraction verses place of impulsion. Dualities can carry a cultural dimension like the relationship between the old city and the modern city as in the relationship between the alley and the new Cairo in Midaq Alley, or a socio-political one like the metaphoric relationship between the top and the bottom of the building in Al-Aswani's work, or even a more direct duality like that of city/village.

In chapter one, I adopt the writer's geographical starting point to determine how he reshapes place and which part of the duality is the dominant force in his work. Margin/center is not only a physical container, but also a context of interaction, and the relationship between the marginalized and the perpetually transforming margin on one hand, and between the marginalized and the center on the other hand is of fundamental importance in the literary works here under review. The marginalized are not a new concept in the contemporary Egyptian novel, but rather have gradually emerged in different forms through its evolution. I will, in order to trace the historical transformation

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[5] *The Shocking Line* is the title to be used in the thesis and it is my own translation.

of the margin and the center, consider novels from Yusuf Idris, and Najib Mahfouz and then move on to the three twenty first century works under consideration. I will argue, in chapter one, that the relationships between the margin and the center are shaped in three different geometric dimensions: the horizontal, the vertical and the fragmented.

The relationship between the marginalized and the center is not only based on location, but more importantly on where power is located and exercised. Class conflict, the lack of intellectual content in Egyptian political life, People's frustration with status quo, and their alienation are all represented in contemporary Egyptian novels. In chapter two, I will trace the writers' answers to several questions: How do writers map the main forces that shape central powers? How do central powers see and use the marginalized and how do the marginalized themselves picture these centers? and what geometric dimensions do those struggles take in the three novels under consideration?

To the powerful, the marginalized are not only an ineffective sector of the society, but they also are an important obedient force which the powerful can take advantage of and use to satisfy their greed or expand their wealth. On the other hand, the bitter feeling of alienation experienced by the Marginalized generates different reactions and expressions in various individual and collective ways; violence against the other or oneself, immorality, or simply escaping reality through living in a world of fantasies.

As a result of oppression and alienation, a culture of fear has not only spread all over Egyptian society, but also over the whole Arab world. This fear has put the marginalized in constant need and search for security. The importance of security and the mechanisms that the marginalized employ to attain security, will be discussed in chapter three on two levels: the search for identity and the metamorphosis of the hero or the savior.

"The theme of the failure of the individual, who is crushed by overwhelming hostile social forces, is familiar in the work of many Arab authors."[6] And the search for identity is found in much of modern Arabic literary works. Since dynamic literature never stands still, new substance is continuously introduced. In this sense, the more the city can not sustain the marginalized and spits the weakest inhabitants to its edges, the more these

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[6] Badawi, "Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature." 9.

people retreat to their own communities and fortify themselves by searching for their ethnic/regional identity as a direct response to the exigencies of survival in a hostile society.

I will, in chapter three, also argue that the concept of the hero that follows conventional social values is discarded in contemporary Egyptian novels. Novelists now select many of their heroes from amongst the marginalized and the downtrodden, because when government fails, society is saved from anarchy by the strong man. While *The Shocking Line* focuses on the idea of the strong man, *The Yacoubian Building* and Thieves *in Retirement* express the social death of the hero by replacing the concept itself with an elaborate network of relationships in which all the characters attain equal importance. In order to trace the transformation of the hero, I will, for historical reference and context, use *Zeenat Marches in the President's Funeral* by Salwa Bakr.

"In the modern Egyptian novel the diverse starting points and the myriad visions and interpretations opened the narrative text to multiple possibilities and thus to several often contradictory interpretations."[7] Believing in that statement, the connection between modern literary works and reality is looked at in this thesis as a literary convention rather than as a faithful representation of reality; the creation of a new world that structurally resembles the social context under which the literary work is written. The viewpoint developed in this thesis is a response to the texts and is one of many possible interpretations. It is important to mention that when the concept of 'reflection' is used, it does not represent a mirror that reflects reality. Rather, the world is seen in an imperfect mirror where writers catch glimpses of different human situations. Sometimes the images they see are larger than life, diminutive, or strangely-proportioned. Writers are here understood as gathering individual pieces (some distorted, some just shrunken or magnified), to cobble together their own mosaic of reality.

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[7] Hafez, 103.

The Geometry of Margin and Center

One can compare the space that surrounds people to an onion— the more a person does in terms of actions and deeds, the more the layers around him expand. Everyone is surrounded by a number of layers, and people are caught between the desire to spread out and move from one layer to another, and the desire to retreat to the onion's center. The further out the person moves from the center, he moves from an individual space into a collective one. This collective space is ruled by a group of social, economic, and emotional human relationships. Each group of people puts itself in a frame of interior (family, friends...) and exterior (others, strangers …) and when a group of people wants to punish one of its members it usually excludes him out of its space. They move him out of the space of us (the center) to the space of others (the margin).

So, place is not only a physical container where people act, but a context of an interactive influence between place itself and people. Each place holds its own standards and imposes its own way of living on the people who occupy it. This kind of interaction divides place into a place of attraction; where you can root yourself and reinforce your identity, or a place of repulsion; where you can never break through. This division takes us back to the duality of interior and exterior, here and there, or margin and center.

Considering the above, place takes supreme importance in the literary imagination-- Not only because it is a literary tool, or because it is where things happen and people move, but because, in some works, it is the space itself that defines characters and their relationships. It provides them with an environment in which they act and express themselves. In his work entitled *Atlas of The European Novel 1800-1900*, where Moretti illuminates the geographical assumptions of nineteenth-century novels and the geographical reach of particular authors and genres across the continent, he suggests that "geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history happens, but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth"[8]. In novels, for example, it often establishes the framework, holds the hero's voice, and represents the author's view. Place is never the canvas for a painting, it is the space that the painting itself creates.

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[8] Franco Moretti, *Atlas of European Map 1800-1900* (London, Verso, 1998), 2.

Cairo, the city, has always played a paramount role in the Egyptian literary imagination. "Cairo, whether it is the historic city or the modern metropolis, should be the central metaphor for much of the literary production during the twentieth century,"[9] but since the attempt of defining one's self usually occurs within a relation to the other, writers search for different entities either outside of the city or in the various layers of Cairo itself, and as they come to represent Cairo in literature, their literary works, in turn, reconstruct and re-map this city, which constantly changes the picture of Here/There or Center/Margin. This mobility of the center and the margin that writers create makes it difficult to pin them down. Harper in his work *Framing the Margin* states "When we try to pin them down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that the phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social frame work of our culture, and over the ways we think about it."[10]

There is a close relationship between changes in the Arab world and changes in the Arabic novel.[11] And Cairo, the vividly changing city, with what it embodies of social, economic and political changes, has always been present in the Egyptian novel.

- **Continuous Movement**

The overall ideological developments which were taking place in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century were accompanied by the gradual transfer of power from the court circles who had governed Egypt during the nineteenth century to the new groups of professionals, many of whom were graduates of recently established secular educational institutions, and completed their education in France or England. These new professionals were essentially products of New Cairo.

Haikal's work, *Zaynab* (published in 1913), was one of the very first Arabic novels, and is one example of a literary work from the pioneer generation of Egyptian writers. The novel itself can be understood as an example of the major changes that were taking place within political and intellectual circles about the idea of nation and cultural nationality. "Zaynab indicates that Haykal and his generation were not so much writing in

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[9] Samia Mehrez, Egypt's *Culture Wars* (London: Routledge, 2008), 144.

[10]Phillip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13.

[11] See Hafez, 93.

a new way as experiencing in a new way."[12] They wanted to put a new political and social picture together. For that reason they sought authenticity in the countryside, and in this period of the Egyptian literature, Cairo, the city, was marked by its absence; an absence of significance. Urban values and urban characters were present in these novels but rarely from the center of the stage. As Kilpatrick states in her work *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, where she uses social analysis to follow the development of the modern Egyptian novel, "almost always has the writer approached his material as an outsider, even if the way of life itself is not alien to him."[13]

The pioneer generation did not reveal a specific consciousness of urban conditions. However, in the following generations, attitudes changed and a different phase started. What happened can partly be explained by "historical facts; from the end of the twenties, cities witnessed an influx of unemployed peasants attracted by possibility of earning higher wages, and as a result living conditions deteriorated, while an urban mob made its appearance, composed of people cut off from their village, their class and society."[14] Unplanned migration enlarged the marginal sector of the population in the urban area. Social problems became a subject of concern and new policies were needed to face Egypt's overwhelming problems. The sixties-generation of writers corresponded with a new form of novel and with a complete shift in focus from the country to the city. They, in their own way, moved the spot light on to the city as the center they focused on. This shift was not a sudden one. It gradually emerged and its first signs were apparent by the forties. Social problems, such as drug addiction, unemployment and violence became a subject of concern. Hand in hand with these changes was the growing interest of intellectuals in socialism, and essentially an urban ideology. The novelists of the forties focused their attention on the city, and they began to abandon the countryside. Ostle, in his work *The City in Arabic Literature*, states that "the publication of Yawmiyyat Naib Fl-Aryaf in 1937 had suggested that the motif of the rural idyll was no longer appropriate

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[12] R. C. Ostle, "The City in Modern Arabic Literature." *Bulletin of the school of Oriental and African Studies* 49 (1986): 197.

[13] Hilary Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel: A Study in Social Criticism* (London: Ithaca Press for the Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College, 1974), 150.

[14] Ibid, 165.

to literature or to life, and the writers … reversed their social criticism for the environment they knew best."[15]

This shift in representing the center was also the literary expression of the clash between traditional society and the western world. The Cairene novels of Naguib Mahfouz which began to appear in the forties were the greatest evidence of that shift. This shift in focus from country to city revealed the failure of the individual who is crushed by overwhelming social forces, which by turn created another duality in the Egyptian novel; Old City and New City.

Ostlle states that "usually the city in modern Egyptian literature is an environment with strong associations of malevolence and immorality, and the exceptions to this tend to be associated with the traditional medina rather than the New City."[16] The tension between town and country and between old and new city is "parallel to, and often connected with, that between East and West or Arab and Europeans, for the town is a modern town that has seen a measure of westernization both topographically and socially."[17]

In Mahfouz's work *Midaq Alley*, published in 1947, the alley as a distinct entity appears in opposition to the New City and in the very first paragraph of his novel; Mahfouz roots the history of the alley in the reader's mind by focusing on the rich history of Cairo:

> Many things combine to show that Midaq Alley is one of the gems of times gone by and that it once shone forth like a flashing star in the history of Cairo. Which Cairo do I mean? That of the Fatimids, the Mamlukes or the Sultans? Only God and the archeologists know the answer to that, but in any case, the alley is certainly an ancient relic and a precious one.[18]

As Cairo expands and transforms, most of the characters aim to migrate to the new Cairo, and Mahfouz reveals a traditional Cairo as it transforms to a centrifugal spot of the new generation. Most of Mahfouz's characters live and work in the very alley, but the new generation wants to go out to the westernized side. With the exception of

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[15] Ostle, 199.

[16] Ibid, 200.

[17] Badawi, "Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature." 6.

[18] Najīb Mahfouz, *Zuqāq Al-Midaq*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick, *Midaq Alley* (London : Heinemann Educational, 1975), 1.

Hamida, the only two characters who leave the alley are Abbas and Hussain, and they both leave to work with "the occupier," the British army. This is what the new city does, it deforms standards and foundations. Just as Mahfouz states in his novel "everything has changed … the poet has gone and the radio has come."[19]

Midaq Alley also suggests that it is rare to find characters who adjust positively to their new environment or assimilate into the landscape of the modern city. Hamida, one of the main characters, strives to transform her destiny by moving out of the alley, but like most of Mahfouz's protagonists, she ends in a situation that is worse than the point of the departure.

Midaq Alley, the alley that has only one exit to the out side, is the center in Mahfouz's novel, and it is being gradually overtaken by the Margin. This margin, the new city, is not only the light that attracts butterflies and then burns them to death; it is also cancer that spreads around killing what's left. The radio which entered the alley and replaced the traditional story teller is a metaphor of how the new city reached the alley, and as it is described by the café owner in his argument with the story teller, "we know all the stories you tell by heart and we don't need to run through them again. People don't want a poet. They keep asking for a radio and there's one over there being installed now."[20]

The city, in Yusuf Idris's work *The Siren* (published in 1969) is another clear example of the new center that, as the title itself suggests, is a place of attraction and impulsion at the same time. Just like a siren, the city keeps calling you, and as you are trapped, it leads you to your death. Idris highlights this death at the very opening of his work, "When Hamid pushed open the door and was suddenly confronted by the dreadful scene, everything in him stopped, He died. He felt himself immobilized, every thought, every tremor of emotion in him silenced, and he could no longer see or hear or feel."[21]

In *The Siren*, Hamid the doorman is a villager who has come from the country to try his luck at the capital. His wife Fathiyya is a simple village girl who always wanted to live in "the vast shining place, 'the mother of the world' they called it, that with its

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[19] Ibid, 6.
[20] Ibid, 5.
[21] Yusuf Idris, *Al-Naddahah*, trans. Catherine Cobham, "The Siren" In *Rings of Burnished Brass* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 98.

splendor and luxury peeled away the deposits left by squalor and abuse and transformed those who lived there into men and women of class."[22] She spends her time watching Cairo, or watching the little slice of Cairo that she can see through the door of the building in which she works and lives, until she is raped by an Afandi (a city man) – whose name Idris never specifies, since he represents the rapacious city and its declining values. The country here is within the city and it is represented through Fathiyya and her husband.

The story depicts the encroachment and brutality of the new center; embodied in the Affandi, and everything it stands for on the traditional way of life; embodied by Fathiyya and Hamid, and when Hamid ran after the Affandi in a spontaneous move, and when he reached the street "the man had become ten or twenty men, all of them with in jackets, and all of them with behinds which were covered by trousers."[23] Fathiyya in *The Siren* is just like Hamida in *Midaq Alley*. She is attracted to the other that is very appealing but as soon as she gets there, this place turns into a crushing machine and kills her innocence.

Mahfouz, in *Midaq Alley*, presents Old Cairo as the center; leaving new Cairo as the ambiguous dangerous margin which no one is able to penetrate and if someone does he/she will not come back safe, Idris, on the other hand, in *The Siren*, presents Cairo as the center and the point of departure of his literary work.

While the early novels presented modern/traditional duality through country/city and old city/modern city, the new generation of Egyptian writers in the late eighties and nineties moved to a different environment. With widespread cultural change and globalization, the feeling of alienation increased in everyone who had no connection with the regime. This generation of writers explored the random and ignored parts of characters, and the dark side of the city. "They have realized the difficulty of fitting life into a single frame. They have abandoned closed plots with structured elements to capture the dispersed, the elusive and the contingent that constitute the every day."[24] They arrived at a state of crisis and uncertainty during the last years of the twentieth

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[22] Ibid, 104.

[23] Ibid. 98.

[24] Marie Thérèse Abdel-Messih, "Debunking the Heroic Self," Banipal, *Magazin of Modern Arab Literature* 25, 2006: 22.

century as "Egyptian writers began casting aside the presumptions of the post-independence period, of writers and artists being prophets of the nation as epiphany." Many of these writers chose poor areas, slums and Ashwaiyyat[25] (informal communities), as the center for their novels.

Thieves in Retirement by Abu Golayyel (published in 2002), as an example of the new Egyptian novel and its new directions, presents the unique experience of an isolated world. It takes us to an edge of the city itself, namely Manshiyyat Nasser, on the edge of industrial Helwan. Manshiyyat Nasser is one of Cairo's 111 Ashwayyats that, together, house over six million people.[26] Abu Golayyel gives a detailed geographical description of the place:

> Manshiyyat Nasser is besieged from the east by high pressure wires that continue on to Aswan; from west, by the receptacle that receives Cairo's sewage; and from north by the Omar Bin Abdel Aziz highway. From the south there is the holy area where Abdel Nasser stopped once and made his historic gesture.[27]

This area, as we read, is surrounded with death. Electrical wires, poisoned water, and the highway mean death for those who live inside the place, but they mean luxury for those who live in the other side of the city. It is as if the death of poor people serves the comfort of the others. Like Najib Mahfouz, Abu Golayyel also historicizes the emergence of Manshiyyat Nasser during the sixties, but his description is completely different from Mahfouz's, who began his text with a proud history of place.

> President Gamal Abdel Nasser paid a surprise visit to one of the factories in Helwan that was built after his revolution. He found a huge number of workers sleeping inside. Elated at their dedication to work, he approached one of them, and shook his hand enthusiastically saying 'Great work, brave man.' The man kissed the President's hand replying 'God Bless you, sir…my name is Abdel Halim, Abdel Halim. So, do you work two shifts?' The man thought that the President was interrogating him so he replied 'I swear to God I work only one, sir.' 'So why don't you go home?' 'Which home, sir?' The President was taken off guard for he was under the

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[25] Ashwaiyyat is a term widely used to refer to the informal communities in and around Cairo. For further information see Asef, Bayat, and Eric Denis "Who is Afraid of Ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt," *Environment and Urbanization* 12, 185 (2000): 185-199.

[26] Asef Bayat, "Cairo's Poor: Dilemmas of Survival and Solidarity," *Middle East Report* 202 (1996): 3.

[27] Hamdi Abu Golayyel, *Lusus Mutaqa'idun*, trans. Marilyn Booth, *Thieves in Retirement* (Cairo: The American University Press, 2007), 80.

impression that the workers were sleeping in the factory because they cherished their work not because they had no homes. In order to save his revolution, the President pointed his hand toward an empty space that happened to be within sight 'Let them live there.' The workers immediately marched toward that area. Within days, Manshiyyat Nasser came into being.[28]

In this manner, Nasser's spontaneous gesture in the novel leads to a haphazard reality where more than one million of Cairo's poor now live in abysmal conditions. This novel, like many other new Egyptian novels, reverses familiar directions and reconstructs Cairo by putting what we usually think about as the margin under the spotlight, in the center of the world.

- **Horizontal, Vertical, and Fragmented Relations**

This movement of the center and the margin is not only presented in Egyptian literary works through where the spot light is focused, but also through shape and dimensions of the relationship between the Margin and the Center.

Horizontal Relations:

Mahfouz in *Midaq Alley* focuses on the *Hara* or Alley, as a small model of big Cairo. He divides the text into two worlds: an internal one which is the alley, and an external one including all that happens outside of it. The relationships in the novel represent the duality of relations between these two worlds: Relationships in the alley in juxtaposition with relationships in the new Cairo. He creates a horizontal relationship between Here and There. The distribution of space along the horizontal grid supports an inside division of space between interior and exterior, inside and outside, in short, between the alley and world around it. Each of the two main spaces is subdivided into an inner, relatively private place like the interior of the apartments, and an outer, a public place like streets, shops and the café.

Although the new city has the power of gravity and is gradually taking over the old city, people still live and function in the alley in a productive way. The agency, the café, the bakery, the barber and the other small shops serve the tenants of the alley itself,

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[28] Ibid, 80.

and those who are leaving it are led by their own greed. This way of presenting the horizontal relation shows a sort of equality between these two entities and each one of them is independent from the other.

Vertical Relations:

Idris in *The Siren*, switches the dimension of the relationship into a vertical, hierarchical one that leaves no place for equality at all. It is a top-down or a bottom-up relation:

> She found herself at last, as she had dreamt she would be a thousand times, in the heart of Cairo, in the building whose ten stories she had always tried to picture to herself. It must be said that she did not actually live on any one of the ten floors, but in Hamid's room, which had been hastily constructed for him under the stairs by the owner of the building as an incitement to whoever might marry him, for they hoped in Hamid's wife, when he married, they would have a maid who would solve the problem of domestic help for them.[29]

As we can see, the country, the margin, is within the city itself, but it is at the bottom of the social scale, and those who live at the bottom are serving those who live above. Fathiyya is alienated and marginalized. She wants to get to know this place but its gravity has vanished and it has turned into a repulsive place.

> Faced with the curious stares of the tenants who stormed the threshold, boring into her for a few moments as they scrutinized her appearance, the way she sat, her clothes, and then smiled or muttered vaguely or merely mocked, she became more closed in on herself and the chains tightened around her.[30]

The Affandi who rapes Fathiyya also lives at the bottom of this building. He is a city man but he also belongs to the bottom of the social scale. While Mahfuz subdivided the space to inner and outer ones, Idris, on the other hand, subdivides the space to bottom and top ones. Using this geometric metaphor, he reveals that even those who belong to the bottom of the urban social scale still see the peasants as beneath them.

This geometric metaphor is "not only connected to where the characters locate themselves in relationship to the place but also to the continuous changes of the place itself."[31] As Cairo transforms, its description in the sphere of literature also changes. The

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[29] Idris, 105.

[30] Ibid, 108.

[31] My translation from: Hussain Hammouda, A*l-riwaȳah Waal-madiñah : Namaḏhij min Kuttaḇ Al-sitiñiȳaȋ fi ̄Miṣr* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-'ammah Li-quṣur Al-thaqafah, 2000), 296.

rapid growth of Cairo, the Infitah--Liberalization, and globalization, all led to a sizable rise in the wealth of the few and a middle class that is being squeezed out of existence. This situation is clear in the geometric metaphor Alaa Al-Aswani employs in *The Yacoubian Building* (published in 2002). The relationship is still vertical but as long as the margin is growing too fast, it starts to spread on the two far sides of the center, and what was located on one edge of the building (under the stairs) in *The Siren*, is now on both edges of the building in *The Yacoubian Building*, on the roof as well as the bottom floor.

Several examples of the marginalized are represented in Al-Aswani's novel; Taha is the son of a doorman, an ambitious, hard working young man who works at the bottom of the building, and lives at the top edge. He is rejected when he tries to become a part of the center through applying to the police academy. Bosaina, the girl that Taha loves, lives with her family in a little room on the roof of the very same building. She is being sexually assaulted by each boss for whom she works. Abdu, a police officer who is used by a rich, homosexual journalist also resides on the same roof. These examples are sometimes located above and sometimes below, but they all, on both edges, serve those in a center that is still the same crushing that Mahfouz and Idris implemented.

Al-Aswani describes these rooms on the roof as says "fifty small rooms were constructed, one for each apartment in the building. Each of these rooms was no more than two meters by two meters in area and doors and walls were of solid iron."[32] He also historicizes the existence of the population on the roof as he says, "in the seventies came the 'Open Door Policy' and the well-to-do started to leave the downtown area … the final outcome was the growth of a new community on the roof that was entirely independent of the building."[33] This new inhabited edge is no different from any other community in Egypt, children running around bare foot, women cooking, cleaning or gossiping, and men spending their days in a bitter struggle to earn their living.

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[32] Alaa Al-Aswani, *Imarat Ya'qubian*, trans. Humphrey Davies, *The Yacoubian Building* (Cairo: The American University Press, 2004) 12.
[33] Ibid. p. 13.

Fragmented Relations:

The urban explosion has produced social complexity with its attendant social problems: underemployment, poverty, congestion, squatting, pollution, slums, organized crime, and shortages of electricity, water and schools. The urban explosion puts pressure on the city. This pressure can be witnessed in these literary works when the enormous growth of the margin on the edges puts more and more pressure on the body of the building, and like with any object exposed to high pressure, it explodes in fragments. El-Fakharani's work, *The Shocking Line* (published in 2004) is one of several contemporary Egyptian literary works in which this fragmentation is presented.

The title of the novel is of a significant demonstration. El-Fakharani presents various individual worlds; each is shocking to those who don't know it. The lines separating these worlds are almost invisible, and the reader can not tell where each world starts and where it ends, neither can he give the center and the margin a clear position. The center in El-Fakharani's novel is the individual worlds of the fragmented marginalized. The reader faces individual lives that do not coherently form one world, and the characters' movement from one place to another is random and untraceable. The text starts with an exposition where the writer jumps from one slum to another using only few uncontextualized lines to introduce a shockingly violent community and to push his reader into these worlds without any preparation. From the slum of Hilaal[34]:

> Which one is Haram? Stealing or hunger, screams Hilaal at his mom. He throws the money he earned from selling drugs in her lap. She tosses the money aside. He cuts his shirt off his body, pulls a switch-blade out of his pocket, cuts the back of his arm, kicks the floor with his feet, and curses the one who put his dad in prison.[35]

The point of departure of this novel, the slums, is very well described as poor, dirty, and violent. While other contemporary writers mention these worlds in their works, they are here graphically described and the resulting picture is both shocking and depressing. Describing the one toilet in the whole slum area, the narrator says: "A tiny, made of tin toilet. Any person walking by can see inside through the cracks in the walls. On the floor, there is dirt, and there are dirty pieces of newspapers or clothes and used

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[34] All translations of quotations from *Fasil Lildahsha* are my own.
[35] Mohammed El-Fakharani, *Fasil Lildahsha* (Cairo: Al Dar, 2007) 5.

rocks. In the corner, there is a rusty can with some dirty green water in… on the walls, lots of paintings of big breasts."[36] The novel is a tale about fears, dreams, love, and the life of alienated worlds that one does not want to learn about, since this learning can be painful and shocking.

The other faces of Cairo do not appear as an active force in the novel, which turns life in the Cairo that most of us know into a dark invisible margin. Different places in the city are linked together by the individuals who frequent them, but they do not form part of an independent entity, and although the characters move between some slums at an edge of Cairo, Nile cornice, Ramisis square in downtown Cairo, and some café on the side of the street in downtown, the reader can not trace any real relation between them and Cairo the city. Even when the characters are physically on this other, invisible side or when the writer describes other places in the city, his characters still live in their own world with no real connection to the other side. Moving Ramsis statue from its place in the heart of Cairo to the museum is used as a metaphor to reveal how simple Egyptians, who are supposed to be the beating heart of Egypt, have been alienated and cut off from modern Egyptian social and political life. "You used to see Ramsis statue humanly standing there, surrounded by simple people with whom he shared a real friendship,"[37] Hussain, the narrator, says to himself. In another part of the novel, Hussain talks directly to Ramsis, explaining that the alienation and the deprivation is felt equally, by both the city and its peoples.

> They took the street away from you Ramsis. Now you have no chance to meet with your friends. They moved you to the Grand Egyptian Museum. You wonder what that strange place is. You are not touched by the sun or the dust anymore… You feel that you are no more than a statue of an ancient king.[38]

The only manifestation of the relationship between the city of Cairo and these people is the conflict between them and the police; "The hateful police take away whatever makes you happy, whatever makes you, specifically you, happy."[39] This conflict, to be discussed in detail in chapter two, is presented through Hussain and others

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[36] Ibid, 10.
[37] Ibid, 47.
[38] Ibid, 56.
[39] Ibid, 160.

like him, and the reader is not allowed to enter the other world but he or she does have the chance to see it through these peoples' eyes.

By looking at the map of the center and the margin in some selected Egyptian literary works, one realizes that they are constantly moving and that this movement is a response to changes and shifts that occur in the real city of Cairo. We notice that as the city transforms, so do the metaphors that come to represent it in literary texts. We also notice that the margin has become a fundamental element of modern Egyptian literature, and further, that the margins are not fixed—they are dynamic and in a near perpetual state of flux. The margin itself is variable, as is the text that represents it.

The Marginalized and Central Power

The swift changes that have taken place in the Arab world over the last few decades have intensely reshaped both its literature and its writers' perception of national identity, social role and the nature of their art. From the beginning of the twentieth century until World War II, the Arab world was focused on the struggle for the independence. In reaction to the spread of colonialism, people were driven towards more indigenous ways of life. This struggle was characterized by "a high degree of social cohesion and stability … with minimum of social tension."[40]

This struggle gained a supreme significance, and trumped most other social and national issues. However, when the enemy that united so many disharmonies disappeared, conflicts between different social classes and visions came to the surface. Modern social complexity and social problems, such as the flow of people from rural communities and small towns into the city, unemployment, poverty, and congestion nourished the clash between social classes and as a result "more groups share now a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty and loss of a sense of grounding."[41]

These social contradictions and conflict, and the rapid growth of the feeling of alienation among those who are not a part of the regime not only put Egyptian social cohesion into a state of upheaval, but also threw Egyptian narrative into a state of crisis and uncertainty. Writers, in turn, have been trying to capture the dispersed, the elusive elements that constitute every-day life on the periphery. As alienation and uncertainty became the central aspects of modern society, Ashwaiyyat and slum communities have become the clearest example of the marginalized. They symbolize, as Denis suggests in his social study on Cairo, the rising number of people in the Egyptian society that live completely outside the view and control of the Egyptian government and outside of the national economy.[42]

Literature functions as a symbolic form of the nation-state; a form that, unlike an anthem or a national flag, does not hide the nation's internal ruptures, but manages to

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[40] Hafez, 93.

[41] Harper, 4.

[42] See: Eric Denis, « La mis en Scene des Ashwaiyyat, » *Egypt/Monde arabe* n 20-4e trimester (1994) : 21.

turn them into a story. Since the novel does not simply find the nation as an obvious fictional space, it has to twist it, demolish it and then reform it as the narrative is being generated. The new Egyptian novel has become the writer's tool to resist alienation, the most powerful voice of the marginalized, and a mechanism to discover, uncover, reshape and present. The new novel has become an environment of contradictions and battlegrounds in which suppressed voices struggle for legitimacy; a struggle that "has become a condition of existence and an active agent in shaping the character's vision."[43]

- **Money and Authority as Central Power**

The struggle for liberty has been a struggle "to wrest power from one, or the few, and to lodge it with the many: that is to decentralize government."[44] To understand how this struggle is represented in the new Egyptian novel, we should, I think, start by mapping out the central powers in the novels themselves and then follow the transformation of these centers.

The main two forms of power in Al-Aswani's novel are money and authority. These two forces exercise, in the novel, absolute control over all of the characters. Money, as central power is represented through several primary and secondary characters:

El-Hagg Mohammed Azzam is one of Egypt's wealthiest men and a migrant to Cairo from the countryside. In a space of thirty years he has gone from shoe-shiner to self-made millionaire on the back of his cleverly-disguised activities as a drug dealer; "he disappeared for more than twenty years, suddenly to appear having made a lot of money. [He] says that he was working in the Gulf but the people in the street do not believe [that]."[45] He wears the mask of a religious man; he seeks an acceptable and legal outlet for his (temporarily) resurgent libido in a secret second marriage to an attractive, young and poor widow. Al-Aswaani, in more than one place in his work, points explicitly to the massive power El-Hagg gained because of his money. Al-Aswani introducing El-Hagg:

> Some attribute his love of silence to his application (with his strictly observant piety) of the noble Hadith that says "If one of you speaks let him be brief, or let

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[43] Hafez, 105.
[44] Badawi, "Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature," 5.
[45] Al-Aswani, 49.

him stay silent" —though at the same time, with his vast wealth and extraordinary influence, he does not in fact need to talk much because his word is generally has to be obeyed.[46]

Authority, on the other hand, is presented through corrupted politicians like Kamal El-Fouli, in Al-Aswani's novel, who, like so many talented people in Egypt, "has been diverted, distorted, and adulterated by lying, hypocrisy, and intrigue till the name of Kamal El-Fouli has come to represent in the minds of Egyptians the very essence of corruption and hypocrisy."[47] Politicians, represented through El-Fouli, "live in their own world spending their energy on furthering their own Careers, acquiring wealth and living a life of luxury."[48] Al-Aswani identifies them closely with the aristocracy, seeing them as a group of men whose salient characteristics are corruption and immorality. The Police in *The Yacoubian Building* are a force through which the powerful functions. Instead of serving the people's interest, they work closely with politicians and rich people, serving their agenda, practicing oppression and torture and terrifying simple people.

Both El-Fouli and El-Hagg are from poor origins. They made their way up to the top in illegal ways. They did not accept a marginal place in society and they sought to join the powerful, and since "they lack any sense of commitment; they abandon their values and become as unprincipled as the most corrupt members of it."[49]

While Al-Aswani covers various central powers through a wide spectrum of characters from different social classes, and uses *the Yacoubian building* as a metaphor for contemporary Egypt, El-Fakharani in *The Shocking Line*, on the other hand, concentrates on the community of slums, where money as a central power, does not exist. The only authority in that community is embodied by Police officers. The police in *The Shocking Line* represent the government and as the writer himself explains in a footnote at the very beginning of his work: "The marginalized say 'The Government' and they actually mean the police." [50] The police in *The Shocking Line* are, as in *The Yacoubian*

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[46] Ibid, 49.
[47] Ibid, 80.
[48] Kilpatrick, 168.
[49] Ibid, 195.
[50] El-Fakharani, 5.

Building, "depicted as harsh men unquestioningly obedient to orders and untroubled by doubts about the rightness of the policies they carry out."[51]

- **How the Powerful View the Marginalized**

When following the powerful in the novels under consideration, one sees how oppression is exercised by the powerful and how powerless poor people are no more than toys with which the powerful play and what they use in order to reach ambitions. Kamal El-Fouli the corrupt politician describes simple Egyptians:

> We've studied the Egyptian people well. Our lord created the Egyptians to accept government authority. No Egyptian can go against his government. Some people are rebellious by nature but the Egyptian keeps his head down his whole lifelong so he can eat. It says so in the history books. The Egyptians are the easiest people in the world to rule. The moment you take power they submit to you and grovel to you and you can do what you want with them. Any party in Egypt, when it makes elections and is in power, is bound to win. It's just the way God made him.[52]

The marginalized are not supposed to think of gaining better position in society. They are supposed to be silent and obedient. This is their role in life. Unless the marginalized follow illegal serpentine ways, like in the case of El-Hagg or El-fouli, they do not think to raise their voices, try to join the elite in an honorable way or threaten their interests, and if they do the powerful shows his ugly, aggressive face. We can see this, for example, in the experience that Taha goes through in *The Yacoubian Building*. He dreamed, for a long time, to change his life in an honorable way. He worked hard and got great grades in high school so that he might join the police academy and become a police officer, but he was rejected because of the job that his father held. Taha's father is a doorman-- one of those considered to be outside of the circle, and should not think or dream of joining it. The night that Taha was rejected, he "stayed awake for a long while thinking, recalling a hundred times the face of the presiding general as he asked him slowly, as though reveling in his humiliation, 'Your father is a property guard?' an unfamiliar expression, one that he'd given no thought to and that he'd never expected."[53]

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[51]Kilpatrick, 171.
[52] Al-Aswani, 84.
[53] Ibid, 60.

Souad in Al-Aswani's work is a good example of how the powerful use the marginalized and take advantage of them. She is a poor young widow whom El-Hagg Azzam marries secretly to satisfy his sexual desire in a socially accepted manner. For El-Hagg this marriage was no more than a deal. Business deals usually involve two equal parts, but this deal was an exception. It is a deal that follows El-Hagg's own strict conditions:

> 1. That Souad come and live with him in Cairo and leave her small son Tamir with her mother in Alexandria.
> 2. That the marriage should remain a secret and that it be clearly understood that in the case of Hagga Salha, his wife, finding out about his new marriage, he would be compelled to divorce Souad forthwith.
> 3. That, while the marriage was to be conducted according to the norms set by God and his Prophet, he had no desire whatsoever for offspring.[54]

Because the powerful are in full control, El- Hagg Azzam designs a marriage that fits his own life with no attention to be given to the needs or desires of the other side. When Souad breaks one of the conditions by becoming pregnant, El-Hagg does not hesitate to punish her. He sends her gangsters who tie her up and force her to take a drug that causes bleeding and abortion, and then finally, he divorces her. She is not allowed, even after she has lost everything, to think of bothering El-Hagg or causing him any trouble. El-Hagg's son tells Souad's brother in the hospital, while she is still recovering from the massive bleeding that caused the abortion,

> Get your sister to calm down, she's a bit unbalanced. The whole thing's over and done with and she's got what she's owed to the last cent. We started on a friendly basis and we've finished on a friendly basis. If you and your sister make problems or start talking, we know how to put you in your place. This country is ours, Hamidu. We have a long reach and we have all kinds of ways dealing with people. Choose the kind you want.[55]

In *The Shocking Line*, this brutal use of the marginalized is also practiced by the powerful; politicians and whoever represents them. In 2005, when Kifaya, The Egyptian Movement for Change, organized a protest against the amendment of article 76, which was seen to have imposed draconian restrictions on both partisan and independent presidential candidates, the Egyptian government wanted to find a way to punish the protestors without being questioned by the international society. It is then when the

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[54] Ibid, 54.
[55] Ibid, 194.

powerful thought of using the marginalized. A few days before the protests, El-Sharnouby and Badri; two men from the slums, were arrested. They spend three nights at the police station where they are abused and tortured. On the day of the protests, an important officer asks to see them. The voice holds a mix of threatening and rewarding tones at the same time: "The government needs you. You will get money, food, and you will be released. The officer/El-Basha, calmly sitting in his chair, says."[56] Their mission was, as civilians hiding among the crowds, to harass, hit, and even sexually assault the protestors.

- **How the Marginalized React to the Powerful**

A marginal person is one who is not at home at home, one who does not belong to his/her own place. He/she has lost any feeling of belonging. Busayna in *The Yacoubian Building* encapsulates the whole situation in her profound conversation with Zaki Basha as she says:

> When you've stood for two hours at the bus stop or taken three different buses and had to through hell every day just to get home, when your house has collapsed and the government has left you sitting with your children in a tent on the street, when the police officer has insulted you and beaten you just because you're on a minibus at night, when you've spent the whole day going around the shops looking for work and there isn't any, when you're a fine sturdy young man with an education and all you have in your pockets is a pound or sometimes nothing at all, then you'll know why we hate Egypt.[57]

The bitter feeling of alienation generates different reactions and is expressed in various ways. All of those out of power taste and feel the bitterness, but only some of the marginalized seek revenge and/or try to gain some kind of power. Reactions to alienation vary from one novel to another and from one character to the next. Some of the marginalized choose to run away from the reality in which they live, sinking more and more into drugs and violence. Others fight hard to prove that they can be in power. This can be approached individually or collectively.

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[56] El-Fakharani, 181.
[57] Al-Aswani, 138.

Souad in *The Yacoubian Building*, for example, seeks gaining power individually and on her own way. She wanted to keep her pregnancy. Winning that battle was her only way to prove to herself that she existed. It was her desperate attempt to feel in control.

> A deep-seated, instinctive desire drove her to fight ferociously in defense of her pregnancy. She felt as though if she bore the child, she would recover her self-respect. Her life would acquire a new decent meaning. She would no longer be the poor woman whom the millionaire Azzam had purchased to enjoy himself with for a couple of hours in the afternoon but a real wife who could not be ignored or slighted… Wasn't it her right after all that humiliation to feel that she was a wife and a mother? Wasn't her right to bear a legitimate son who would inherit the wealth that would protect her from the horrors of poverty for ever?[58]

The struggle for power, in some cases, is collective and shaped by organizations, while in others; the struggle is expressed through social habits that are ingrained in the community throughout a long period of marginalization. The main trends to be followed in the novels in consideration are violence against the other or against oneself, and immorality.

In times of globalization, dreams grow unrealistically among those who are poor and oppressed. When the marginalized dream to change their lives, they crash on the rock of reality and they realize the gap between expectations and possible achievements. This gap, as Nasser states in his study Globalization and Terrorism, "contributes to violence that often migrates to the land of the rich and powerful … The major motivation for terrorist violence is the struggle for power and justice."[59] The oppressed want power and justice. The rich want more wealth and power. The clash between them brings nightmares of violence and terror to both.

Taha, in *The Yacoubian Building*, like many of those in trouble, runs back to the divine shelter (God) when he feels weak and defeated, but this time, after he was tortured and raped by the police, he was not only weak or defeated, he was angry and he wanted revenge. He had had massive amount of anger but he did not know how to release it. So, when extremist Islamists offer him a channel to empty his frustration, he adopts it. They offer a system by which people like him can change the society and be in control. It is a system where violence against those who tortured him is not only legitimate but also

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[58]Ibid, 175.

[59] Jamal R Nasser, Globalization and Terrorism: The Migration of Dreams and Nightmares (Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), ix.

rewarded. This system is summarized in El-Hagg Shakers' speech, a religious leader who asks Taha to join the movement:

> Gihad is a pillar of Islam, exactly like prayer and fasting. Indeed, gihad is the most important of those pillars but the corrupt rulers dedicated to the pursuit of money and the pleasures of the flesh who have ruled the Islamic World in times of decadence have attempted, with the help of their hypocritical men of religion, to exclude gihad from the pillars of Islam, knowing that if the people cleaved fast to gihad, it would in the end be turned against them and cost them their thrones… The task before the youth today is to reclaim the concept of gihad and bring it back to the minds and hearts of the Muslims. It is precisely this that terrifies America and Israel and with them our traitorous rulers.[60]

Extremist Islamism is not a reaction against the vicious powerful anymore-- it is a central power in itself. It is a central power that does not really differ, in goals, from the other two in the secular society: Money or Authority. The difference between this center and the other two is in the way that extremist Islamists approach the poor; They promise the youth to provide them with what they need; implementing the carrot method. But at the end of the day, the youth go for Jihad, kill themselves and others, and the leaders get more powerful.

The Shocking Line, on the other hand, presents different type of violence. It is not violence against the other but against one's self. Violence in this novel has become a part of these people's daily habits. In his historic study of deviant marginal groups[61], Ashmawi states that "violence among members of these groups is linked to violence and oppression that are practiced on them by the powerful."[62] The marginalized in *The Shocking Line* have realized that they can not fight for their rights; they can not fight the powerful but they still need to pour their anger and devastation. This repressed anger has led to the development of a violent life where anger is directed towards those in the same community: family, friends, or even one's own self. Violence exercised on all of these levels is graphically described in *The Shocking Line*. All kinds of relationships, families, love, sex, and friendship are governed by and practiced through violence. It is in every small practice, even when they are in line waiting for their turn to get in to the only toilet in the whole

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[60] Al-Aswani, 95.

[61] Translations of quotations used from Ashmawi's study are my own.

[62] Saied Ashmawi, *Al-harakat Al-hamishiya Al-monharifa* (Cairo: Center for Research and Social Studies), 27.

area. "The door of the bathroom opens. Someone gets out cussing this life. Two men run towards the toilet. One at the door pulls a dagger from under his clothes "It is my turn, you sons of bitches" he says. Pocket knives, razors, and chains. You run away Hussain. You feel heat in the air, maybe because of the hot blood." [63]

The term "marginalized" does not only characterize economic conditions or social class, but also, a whole set of values and standards that govern a whole community. The marginalized represented in the novels under consideration all share a feeling of alienation, but the further they are located from the center, the more they deviate from social norms.

The marginalized in *The Yacoubian Building* are innocent people under constant oppression that ultimately forces them to accept immorality. Busayna, for example, is a good girl; all she wants is to work, earn a living and help her mother with the huge burden that her father's death left behind. She tries hard not to fall into sin, and she finds many different jobs.

> Every job she left for the same reason and after going through the same rigmarole—the warm welcome from the boss accompanied by the little kindnesses and the presents… all to be met from her side with a refusal well coated in politeness. The final scene that she hated and feared … [is] when the older man would insist on kissing her by force in the empty office. Then she would push him away and threaten to scream and make a scene.[64]

The pressure is more than she can bear; the poverty that the family is sinking in, being responsible for three siblings in schools, and an exhausted mother who works in cleaning houses and comes back home after long hours of work with a few coins and a bag of leftovers. All of this, forces Busayna to accept what she never imagined to, but even knowing that she was forced, her guilt consumes her.

> She found herself no longer able to perform the morning prayer because she felt herself unclean, however much she performed the ablutions. She started having night-mares and would start up from her sleep terrified. She would go for days depressed and melancholy.[65]

The marginalized in *The Shocking Line* and in *Thieves in retirement*, on the other hand, are different from those in Al-Aswani's. The margin in *The Yacoubian Building* is in

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[63] El-Fakharani, 11.

[64] Al-Aswani, 41.

[65] Ibid, 46.

the heart of the center, which keeps it following the center's norms and values. The other two novels dig deep into forgotten communities that are largely invisible to more affluent people, and since these communities "are totally not integrated into society, they have created other system of values and norms of legitimacy."[66] By the end of the nineties, the term Ashwayi (someone from Ashwaiyyat), as Denis states, "came to describe not just spaces but peoples, encompassing a near-majority of the city as risky, hazardous errant figures. The figures of the errant are which most frightens the urban society."[67]

Denis's claim is clearly embodied in both *The Shocking Line* and *Thieves in Retirement*. The narrator of *Thieves in Retirement*, for example, reviews a net of relationships among the residents of Building 36, which is also home to the narrator himself. Abu Gamal and his married sons are all residents of building 36. Gamal, the elder son, earns his living from bribery and corruption. He is an agent between the illegal marginal community of Manshiyyat Nasser and the powerful; he facilitates bribery between drug dealers on one side, and police and judges on the other side. Amer, the other son, moves between drug dealing and theft. Saif, the youngest, is a homosexual whose attempts to commit suicide are a strategy to gain fame. Strangers in the novel are as lost as the sons of Abu Gamal. The narrator himself surprises the reader with his sexual adventures with a donkey and ends up sleeping with Seif and killing Amer with an electric shock. All characters are trapped in a cycle of violence and immorality. They solve their problems "in a manner that skews them toward more deviation from the society on whose margin they live."[68] They reject mainstream society and its norms by creating a world of their own.

Escaping reality is another mechanism the marginalized use in order to express the same rejection of social norms in the center. Drugs are an essential part of their lives, a way to express anger and fight against alienation. When they are on drugs, they fantasize about being powerful and in control. "I indulge in drugs because they make me

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[66] Ashmawi, 29.

[67] Eric Denis, "Cairo as Neo-Liberal Capital? From Walled City to Gated Communities," in *Cairo Cosmopolitan*, ed. Singerman, Diane, and Paul Amar (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006) 51.

[68] Ashmawi, 29.

bold and make me believe that I can defeat the police;"[69] states Hussain, the narrator in *The Shocking Line*. The marginalized use illusion to liberate themselves from many of the horrors and problems that they are forced to face in their lives. "You swallow three pills of Apetryl every day. You keep it in your pocket so you are ready for the police and don't feel the pain when they torture you in the police station."[70]

- **Dimensions of Struggle**

By observing the two poles of Center and Margin in the novels under consideration, we notice that the two worlds overlap and constantly interact and relate to each other. These relationships take on shape and dimension according to the physical location of the center and the margin from each other. The paramount relationship between these two worlds, as demonstrated in this chapter, is the struggle for power on one side and the use of power on the other.

In *The Yacoubian Building*, Cairo is encapsulated in the building itself, and the margin, as mentioned in chapter one, is located at its two far edges. The center is located in the middle of a vertical structure, and it exerts pressure on the margins, just as the two edges exert their own pressure on the center itself. The practice of power, then, takes both a top down and a bottom up shape. Oppression and objectification are practiced against those on the two Vertical edges. The marginalized, on the other hand, are fighting back and practicing resistance against those in the center. Violence, as a tool of resistance, for example, is directed toward the powerful in a top down and a bottom up shape.

There is also another type of conflict; a horizontal one that is located within the center itself. Money and Authority as central powers are in a constant conflict for supremacy. This conflict is seen through the relationship between El-Hagg Azzam, representing money, and Kamal El-fouli, representing Authority. El-Hagg wants to perfect his status by having both money and authority, so he does all he can to become a member in the Egyptian Parliament, believing that he will then be invincible. Authority, on the other hand, represented by politicians, wants to control and take advantage of those with money.

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[69] El-Fakharani, 157.
[70] Ibid, 156.

Al-Aswaani, in *The Yacoubian Building* presents a net of vertical and horizontal conflicts. They correspond in dimension to the shape of the building itself, which is, at the same time, the writer's vision of conflicts in modern Cairo. The structure, as demonstrated in chapter one, can not withstand the simultaneous pressures from both edges and from within the center; it simply collapses into fragments.

We are, by following the margins and the centers in the novels under consideration, facing completely two different worlds. While *The Yacoubian Building* represents an interacting center and margin, the other two novels focus on the margin and deal with it as a whole, independent entity. They represent the unique experience of an isolated world. They reconstruct the city in the mind of the reader by ignoring what has always been considered its center, and transforming the margin into a new center.

In these two novels, the main feature of the new center, as demonstrated in chapter one, is fragmentation. The fragmentation of place itself in *The Shocking Line* and *Thieves in Retirement* is also reflected through a fragmented struggle for power. When looking at the two novels, we think for a moment that the police are at the top, but after a more careful look, we realize that the marginalized do not see them as the powerful. Yes, there is hatred and fear to be expressed but it is practiced through neglect. Violence is no longer directed toward the powerful, but rather toward everyone and even toward one's own self. Violence and immorality are practiced in the community with family members, friends, and neighbors. The enemy is no longer the (Other), but it has shifted to become among the (US). Girls are raped by family members and fathers are insulted by their own children and even when the marginalized have a chance to direct their anger towards the other world, as happens in the protests that Kifaya organized, they actually attack the marginalized of the other world, but not the powerful.

The three novels map out complex network of conflict and struggle; a network that embodies the complex reality in modern Cairo; a reality that is pregnant with tension and hostility. As the margin and the center transform from one novel to another, the conflict and the struggle transform as well. The margin and the center are related to each other vertically, horizontally, and in fragments: the conflicts are bottom-up when the marginalized resist and rebel against the powerful. The conflict is top-down when the powerful oppress and use the marginalized for their own purposes. It is lateral when power and authority

struggle for supremacy (when money purchases political power, for example). And finally the struggle is everywhere all at once when violence is no longer directed at the oppressor, but within a family unit or by an individual against himself. These three novels help us begin to realize that the term "marginalized" has been used in a superficial, two dimensional manner. It is now time to explore the fully formed, dynamic nature of the marginalized in modern Cairo, in three dimensions and beyond.

Human Security and the Marginalized

Human security holds that shifting from a state centered to a people-centered view of security is necessary for sustainable national, regional and global stability. Urban poor people, as we saw in chapter two, speak of the everyday violence afflicting them– that is simply a part of their daily lives. At night, the dark and unsafe environments populated by drunken men or unruly teenage gangs are dangerous for women, adolescents, and children. With lack of opportunities for employment, gangsters and criminality within the urban slums flourish. Yet, despite all of this, ordinary residents survive and make a better life for themselves under what are often extremely difficult and hazardous conditions in informal urban settlements. The chronic threats that are associated with poverty, a lack of state capacity and other forms of inequities fuel anxieties and fear among the Marginalized.

The culture of fear in the Arab world is a result of historical consolidation of power through family, class, totalitarianism, lack of social justice, and the widening divide between the powerful and the marginalized. All of the above factors participate in creating an individual and collective fear in ordinary people.

Literary works explore the human condition, and the Egyptian novel, in turn, has profoundly diagnosed the increasing feeling of alienation in everyone who has no connection with the regime. Fear is constantly controlling people's lives and producing characters of no vision, position, or effectiveness. It creates environments where individual will is crushed and where it is impossible to believe in people's ability to change. Instead characters are inhabited by fear and alienation.

By following the three novels under consideration, the reader can smell, see, and feel fear in every word. It frequently provides motivation for characters and is a dominant motif in the novels. The psychological and aesthetic qualities of fear are presented explicitly in the introduction of *Thieves in Retirement*:

> Death is one of the easy alternative solutions one can always use to get rid of danger. Death is the goal of all dangers and, at the same time, the ideal way to put yourself at ease with these dangers. To die in a car accident for example, a

careless bullet, or of an overdose is always much easier than trembling because of some danger.[71]

This fear governs all characters in *Thieves in Retirement*, for example, and leads them to search for alternative solutions to gain a bit of security. This fear is explicitly expressed as a dominant factor in the lives of the poor in different places in the novel.

> Fear is the surest refuge for anyone in circumstances like mine. It is natural to feel afraid when one finds oneself at the top of a sheer and rocky cliff or when one has to confront a mass of strangers. Fear and a good name, they are the key.[72]

The Shocking Line and *The Yacoubian Building* also represent clear examples of the culture of fear in the marginalized societies. The traumatizing experience of Taha in *The Yacoubian Building* exposes a culture of fear that inhabits the marginalized as a result of oppression. The humiliation that the powerful use makes the marginalized lose what's left of their humanity, reinforces the culture of fear and paves the way for culture of violence. After Taha was tortured and interrogated for protesting against the government, he was scared for himself and his family. "Taha felt a great shudder go through his whole body. He tried hard to hang tough but failed and a high-bitch sound like the howl of an animal escaped from him. Then he abandoned himself to a hot, uninterrupted bout of weeping."[73] After Taha got out of prison he expressed how humiliation took away his humanity:

> They humiliated me, Master. They humiliated me till I felt the dogs in the street had more self-respect than me. I was subjected to things I never imagined a Muslim could do… sometimes in detention I'd think what was happening before me wasn't real, that it was a nightmare that I'd wake up from to find it all was over. Were it not for my faith in God, Sublime and Magnificent, I would have killed myself to escape from that torment.[74]

Since fear is the dominant factor in the three novels, then it is inevitable to follow how the marginalized seek and create security. When the changing world around us shakes up our lives, we all seek security in one way or another. When thinking of security, we may think of state, family, authority, love, or maybe special people whom we set as examples and create our security through the stories we tell ourselves about

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[71] Abu Golayyel, 5.
[72] Ibid, 20.
[73] Al-Aswani, 152.
[74] Ibid, 167.

them. Strategies that people build in order to seek security differ from one person to another and, more importantly, according to the available opportunities people have in life. Since state authority is a source of fear in the marginalized lives and since money and stable jobs are rarely available, then one wonders which of the common concepts of security applies to these peoples' lives and dreams. By analyzing the three novels under consideration, we, in this chapter, will try to follow the transition of two main concepts that usually give the poor a sense of security; kinship and the concept of the hero.

- **Ethnic and Regional Identity**

Abu Golayyel, in *Thieves in Retirement,* represents a community of internal immigrants; a group of villagers who left their homes dreaming of better living conditions in the city. The residents of *Manshiyyat Nasser* are all strangers, and the more the city expands the more their fears increase, so they try to find something to hold on to against the growing giant city. They, seeking security, cling to their villages, which still live in their imagination. Although these people never visited their villages, they keep them in mind as an imaginary shelter. As the narrator explains,

> The Newtown. It is a mongrel place, part village and part unplanned city fringe, destination of squatters and incomers… [the residents] remain loyal to their villages, those faraway farming villages that they never, ever visit, yet the memories of which give them a sense of security and protect them from the betrayals of time and the bosses at the factory.[75]

If you ask a resident where he lives, he will respond proudly with the name of a tiny village in some governorate. He probably has not visited that village for decades and he is not planning on going back, but he has chosen it to be the place he dreams to end up in. "And so they are always on watch for the day in which they will leave the Newtown behind and return to their village, like the soldier impatiently anticipating his next leave or the emigrant longing permanently for his own people."[76]

Bringing the village into the city has several manifestations in Abu Golayyel's work. Extended family is historically the most significant unit in the Arab world. The bigger cities get, the more the concept of extended family fades out.   Lack of

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[75] Abu Golayyel, 78.
[76] Ibid, 79.

employment, rapid inflation and burdens leaves no room in modern urban people's lives for the extended family. But for those who immigrate to the city and feel more and more alienated every day, the idea of extended family brings back the security that the tribal belonging offer. In *Thieves in Retirement*, we can see this in the building that Abu Gamal and his sons and their families live in.

> Proud indeed. It was a distinguished building, five stories high. The distinctive overhang of the balcony, jutting out further than any other edifice on this street, gave it a commanding presence that tipped you off to its inhabitants' uniquely striking characters. The façade was green and marked out by ornamental squares of a more intense green. The strategic zone had been sprinkled down, and against the wall was tipped a chair befitting a fairly commanding backside. From above that door stared the head of a wild animal, its mouth open in a savage grin, its teeth so sharp you couldn't but feel that the blood still ran steaming through the veins.[77]

The building is the unit that gathers the whole family and makes them feel strong. They suffer all kinds of problems within their family but they know that the more they stick together against strangers, the stronger they are. This brings to mind the old Arabic saying 'Me and my brother against my cousin, but me and my cousin against strangers'. The scary wild animal, the open mouth, and the sharp teeth, are all visual messages sent by the family to show power and make them feel secure.

The city does not tolerate these new immigrants, and in response they withdraw into their own communities and gather around each other like a herd attacked by a predator. They try to re-create their village within the city-- and that does not only apply to family networks but also spreads out to ethnic and tribal origins. The very first thing Abu Gamal wanted to know about the narrator in order to rent him an apartment in his building was his origin. It is the only thing that determines if he is qualified to become a part of this unit.

> Welcome, now… you from the south, or from Delta?' I remembered facing questions like this once when the loss of my identity card led to my admittance as a guest of the residents of Pyramids Police District prison, the only difference being that those questions had been accompanied then by hard slaps to the neck that were impressive enough that I was reluctant to answer. I don't know why I expected Abu Gamal to do the same thing. From the way he phrased the question, I knew he belonged to our brothers the Saidis, those southerners who are constitutionally suspicious when it comes to sons of the north, perhaps in fear of

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[77] Ibid, 57.

them. So I said with a swagger, 'No problem—from the south for sure.' 'You are coming to live with us, then. Welcome, welcome!' He gave me a vigorous handshake that would do a sports hero proud, obliging me to feel the value of living in his home.[78]

The importance of ethnic or regional identity in such urban situations is less a survival of rural practices than a direct response to the exigencies of survival in a dependent, competitive urban economy where economic opportunities are scarce. "Such urban environments reinforce and exalt "traditional" identities, such as kinship ties and relationships with fellow villagers or co-believers, inasmuch as such primordial identities constitute an efficient means for survival; therefore, so-called migrant marginality is the product of a type of economic development rather than of any innate incapacities of the migrant."[79] Miller, in her study about the rise of tribal mentality among immigrants in Cairo, says: "Asabiyyat are an affirmation of modernity and not a manifestation of tradition… Living among a kin is perceived as a social ideal, because it provides individuals with a sense of comfort and security."[80]

Region-based, village-based and extended family clustering appears to be very important to the migrant ethos. Abu Golayyel, a migrant himself, presents in his work a network of social ties that provides these strangers with a sense of security in a gigantic city that could swallow them in any moment. While Abu Golayyel, because of his Bedouin background, provides us with a clear picture of the importance of ethnic identity to migrants, the other two novels are not lacking hints on such importance. In *The Yacoubian Building*, for example, after his son dies, Abdu breaks off his relations with Hatim Rasheed, the rich homosexual. When Hatim goes out looking for Abdu every where; Hatim recalls Abdu once saying "A Sa'idi can't live without other Sa'idis. You know, if I go any place I have to ask where's the café that the Sa'idis hang out at and spend time there."[81] It is there where Hatim finds Abdu. Amongst his *Saidi* fellows is the shelter where Abdu feels secure and regains his lost manhood. "He was wearing a

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[78] Ibid, 58.

[79] Rivlin and Helmer, 23.

[80] Catherine Miller, "Upper Egyptian Regionally Based Communities in Cairo: Traditional or Modern Forms of Urbanization?" in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Singerman, Diane, and Paul Amar (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006) 385.

[81] Al-Aswani, 222.

capacious, dark-colored galabiya and had a large Sa'idi turban on his head… he looked too as though he had returned to his true self, to his origin and his roots; as though he had taken off along with his Western clothes his whole contingent and exceptional history with Hatim Rasheed."[82]

- **Transformation of the of the Hero**

When following the concept of the Hero, we will focus on two different dimensions of the term itself. One is the Hero as a protagonist and the other is the Hero as an example that provides the protagonist with a sense of security.

The traditional Egyptian novel focused on a plot that revolved around the hero. But as Egyptian society evolved and became more complex, conventional narrative structure was not able to handle the burdens of contemporary life and writers sought new ways and new structures that discarded the concept of the hero according to conventional social values. Wuld Muḥammad Bashir in his study on the new Arabic novel[83] states that "the new novel comes with a new structure that aims to abandon the classical narrative which had presented super heroes who faced events with an ideal behavior."[84] The new novel represents normal people whose heroism is presented through being no more than normal people. "The traditional concept of the hero has died and a new one came to life; it is about the normal person who is living all the dimensions of the normal life."[85]

Contemporary life is saturated with so much fear and alienation that no one savior can come to the rescue. "The principle characters in novels share more of the characteristics of an anti-hero than a hero in the old-fashioned or traditional sense—a man or woman capable of heroic deeds, dashing, strong, brave and resourceful."[86] Although in the terminology of most literary critics, the word hero carries no implications of virtuousness or honor, but merely refers to the principle character in a literary work, it

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[82] Ibid, 222.

[83] Translations of quotations from Wuld Muḥammad Bashir's study are my own.

[84] Izyad Bīh Wuld Muḥammad Bashīr, *Tajdīd Al-riwāyah Al-arabīyah: Yusuf Al-qu'ayd Namudhajan* (Cairo: Al-hayaah Al-ammah Li-quṣūr Al-thaqāfah, 2006), 56.

[85] Ibid, 57.

[86] Paul Starkey, "Heroes and Characters in the Novels of Sunallah Ibrahim," *Middle Eastern Literatures* Vol. 9, no. 2 (August 2006): 147.

is rather the opposite term, anti-hero as 'a man or woman given the vocation of failure' that seems particularly applicable to much of the contemporary novels' output.

The three novels under consideration express the social death of the hero by replacing the concept itself with an elaborate network of relationships in which all the characters attain equal importance. They together embody the arbitrariness of life and the search for purpose and dignity in a social milieu that offers little of either. Al-Aswani, in his work, represents a good example of the way the concept of the hero has transformed over time; the building itself is the protagonist in *The Yacoubian Building*. There is no protagonist, but rather a network of main characters, where the stories of the primary characters are often intertwined, at times colliding or converging with one another. Together, they give a biting condemnation of a nation that has squandered its promise and which has been forced to compromise its own principles, resulting in a corrupt political system, a society whose most talented members abandon the country for promising careers abroad, and an increasingly disenchanted and restive populace that has no loyalty to the government. In this environment, extremist Islam comes to be seen as one of the few viable options to counter growing poverty, economic stagnation, and a perceived degradation of morals and lack of social cohesion.

The loss of the super hero in the novel is a manifestation of the loss of the hero in reality, and the reader is now involved in the same cultural maze that distresses the characters. The reader and the characters are now sharing the same feeling of insecurity, and in both fiction and reality, all of those involved know that there is no hope for a super hero or a savior.

The need for heroes/saviors exists in every society and goes back as far as written records. A study of the idea of the hero can provide an excellent point of liaison between cultural heritage and the contemporary world. This is one of the recurring aspects of human existence that is manifested today in no different a pattern than it was in the time of Oedipus. We all had a hero at some time. This hero might have been a father, a public figure, or just an imaginary character; someone we believed could change the world around us into a better place-- but we grow up to realize that there is no hero any more and that in the postmodern era, traditionally defined heroic qualities, akin to the classic

"knight in shining armor" type, have given way to the "gritty truth" of life, and authority in general is being questioned.

In Salwal Bakr's 1989 work, *Zeenat Marches in the President's Funeral*, Zeenat is an embodiment of how the marginalized believed in the political leader as a hero and the savior. Comparing that image to the new style of hero in *The Shocking Line*, one can follow the transformation of the savior.

Bakr's work takes place during the sixties when Gamal Abdul Nasser was the president of Egypt. Bakr does not explicitly historicize her work, but Arabic readers easily recognize that the story occurs during President Abdul Nasser's period. She does not mention his name, but he is there just like a god whom nobody can touch. Bakr chooses Zeenat to represent an entire segment of marginalized people. Zeenat, the main character in Bakr's novel, is a devastated, marginalized woman. She is poor, ignorant, and a woman in a patriarchal society. The reader sees the whole world through her eyes, and Zeenat's world is represented by two things: The Isha (shack) in which Zeenat lives on the side of a street, and a picture of President Nasser. Zeenat's misery is expressed by her simple hopes and dreams. She has no privacy. She lives on the side of the road. She moves between her Isha and the school cross the street, where she sells trinkets to students.

The most salient feature in this work is Zeenat's relationship with the president, whom she never met. Despite the poverty and oppression under which she lives, Zeenat loves the president, believes in him, and sees him as the savior who can solve all her problems. The work represents the general socio-political environment in Egypt during the sixties, when Nasser's philosophy of the revolution in conjunction with his views on pan-Arabism won him fame in much of the region. The story opens with Zeenat reminiscing with ' Abduh the Barber about the letters that she has written to the President (presumably Nasser). Thinking back to a letter she wrote to Nasser, Zeenat thinks that it resulted in a government official coming to inspect her living conditions and giving her a pension of eighteen pounds per month. Zeenat reconfirms, in her own mind, that Nasser, the busy President of the Republic, and whose ideas on Arab Nationalism she deeply respects, really does have the Egyptian people's best interest at heart. Zeenat recalls the

final years of Nasser's life and fantasizes about the special relationship that she had fostered in her mind with him.

> One could certainly say that during the final years of the president's life a very special relationship had grown up between him and Zeenat. Yet, although the two of them had never come face to face during that period – and despite everything – it would be difficult to maintain that this was a one sided relationship.[87]

In her work, Bakr reveals some brutal practices of Nasser's regime, but at the same time shows the absolute adoration that the marginalized have for the leader. Nasser is presented as a god that no one can reach or touch, and Zeenat spends most of her time trying to get her words to him or at least to see him face to face. Yet, while the text shows the huge gap between simple people and the leader, Zeenat, like the majority of simple Egyptians, cannot bring herself to be angry with him. Instead, she feels the need to rationally discuss her views with the President. One Friday before the afternoon prayers, she leaves her hiding place and rushes out into the street. Just as she approaches the car and tries to meet the President, she is suddenly trampled by a group of Egyptian soldiers, many of which "were encased in high leather boots. Against some where fixed pistols enough to butcher an entire town."[88]

This harsh accident could not change Zeenat's feelings towards the president and the "hideous pains from which Zeenat suffered afterwards, did not prevent her relationship with the president from continuing… the portraits of him remained exactly where they had always hung in her shack."[89] She deeply believed that "the accident took place behind the president's back; had he been aware that the bastards, those very ones, had prevented her from giving him her salutations and the piece of paper, then undoubtedly he would have sent them home, somewhere behind the sun. For he would understand, and know Zeenat's good intentions."[90]

Zeenat Marches in the President's Funeral represents a general environment that prevailed among Egyptians during Nasser's time. After a long period of occupation,

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[87] Salwa Bakr, Zeenat *fi Ganazet El-raes* (Cairo: Misr, 1988), trans. Marilyn Booth, "Zeenat Marches in the President's Funeral," in *My grandmother's cactus: stories by Egyptian Women* (London: Quarter Books Limited. 1991) 24.
[88] Ibid, 26.
[89] Ibid, 26.
[90] Ibid, 26.

people believed that Nasser, the son of the Egyptian people, had come to fix all their problems. They were in urgent need of a hero to look up to. They believed that the state could provide them with the security they had been waiting for.

This belief in the state as a source of security has faded, and the death of the hero in real life has been reflected through, lost marginalized characters in contemporary literature who have no savior. But in *The Shocking Line*, one faces a different kind of hero; more of a social hero than a literary one. This hero is the hero of the contemporary marginalized themselves. Hilaal, in *The Shocking Line*, represents a new vision of the Hero and heroic qualities. Through Hilaal, we can witness the transformation in the way the marginalized view security. The marginalized all over the world, as El-Fakharani states in his work, "search amongst themselves for a popular hero. They, for his sake, bear oppression… and they feel content as long as he has not been crushed yet. He represents them and they do whatever it takes to make sure that their hero does not fall. Hilaal is this hero."[91] So, who is Hilaal? And what role does he play in the life of the main character of *The Shocking Line*?

Hilaal is a young man in his mid twenties. Like all popular heroes, El-Fakharani states, "he is fraught with the struggling spirits of his people."[92] The new hero of the marginalized must be strong enough to protect them from the brutal society in which they live. He learned how to survive, and his strength is embodied not primarily by the power in his muscles, but by his ability to win any fight he enters by any means. When he was almost sixteen, he got into a fight with some guys from the neighborhood. They beat him and took his money. When he went back home, his dad slapped him on the face, took all Hilaal's clothes off, kicked him out and yelled that Hilaal could not come back home till he proved that he was a man. Since then, whenever he fights, he takes all of his clothes off, and he is never defeated.

The hero of the marginalized is not only strong but he also is one of the marginalized themselves. He lives the way they live and shares the same manners and morals. Hilaal is a drug dealer. When he was young, he sold drugs with two of his friends at the Nile Cornich while working as a shoeshiner. After his dad, a drug dealer, refuses to

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[91] El-Fakharani, 25.

[92] Ibid, 25.

pay one of the monthly payments to the police officers so he can safely run his business, they put him in prison and Hilaal has to run the business instead. His policy is to defeat the police by not paying them anything. This policy earns him massive popularity amongst those who live in the slum area. He becomes a hero because he revolts against the oppressor; a revolution that came from the heart of their daily lives and concerns, and the hero now carries their ethical standards and dreams.

> Great Hilaal ended the old policy. He deals drugs. He never pays the police, who by the way, could not capture him, not even once. When they chase him, he runs away among the shacks, protected by an army of the oppressed. They throw dirty water in the police officer's way or send their kids to slow him down… After Hilaal runs out of the slum area one can hear laughter filled with Hashish.[93]

The relationship between Hilaal and the people in the slum area and his influence on their lives are presented through how Hussain, the main character, views Hilaal. The whole world in *The Shocking Line* is presented through Hussain's eyes and Hilaal is the only way for him, a weak and lost guy, to gain any kind of power or respect. As Hussain always tells himself: "Great Hilaal opened all the doors of heaven for you, and made you one of the great people. No one would respect you unless you are with him."[94]

Hilaal is Hussain's only source of security, and Hussian needs to stay close to him in order to guarantee that he will be respected. But Hilaal is also the source of drugs around which Hussain's life is centered. He is strong enough to not only win any fight he enters, but he is also strong enough to handle any kind or amount of drugs. He is the one who introduced Hussain to that world "when he gave him the first pill of Parkinol[95]. He gave it to him and promised that he would fly to heavens."[96] He is the head of the group when it comes to drugs; the last one to loose control. Hilaal was Hussain's teacher and consultant; he introduced him to all different types of cheap drugs, helped him evolve and taught him how to avoid being caught.

The hero of the marginalized in *The Shocking Line* is the new hero. He is one of them on all levels; a drug dealer, drug addict, poor, violent, strong, and uneducated. He has a new set of heroic qualities that correspond to a new set of standards for a very

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[93] Ibid, 67.
[94] Ibid, 21.
[95] Parkinol is a cheap medicine usually used to help healing from Parkinson disease.
[96] Ibid, 22.

unique community. The hero of this segment is not the nation savior as it used to be in the case of Nasser, and it is not the unreachable god but the one who shares his people's burdens and struggles and is soaked, the way they are, in violence, crime, and drugs.

Fear and the desperate search for security are the two common threads that unite the different shades of the marginalized. As the margin changes in time or place, the concept of security changes as well. Literature, in turn, follows these changes and tries to deconstruct and reconstruct cities according to the writers' points of view.

Conclusion

The Dynamic Margin

Looking at the map of Cairo's city margins in three different texts, and comparing these texts to earlier works, we notice that as the city transforms over time, so do the metaphors that come to represent it in literature. We also notice that the margin has come into focus in new ways in the literature of the nineties and beyond. The concept of marginalization is, in most social studies, considered as "having three major components: powerlessness, normlessness and social isolation."[97] But acknowledging the overwhelming diversity of the marginalized in many modern and contemporary Egyptian novels, one realizes that it is a mistake to unify them under fixed categories. Marginalization in the novels under consideration is commonly represented to have been forced on the individual against his or her will, and yet it could be said to be "less a matter of the alienation of the individual from society than of the alienation of society from the individual."[98]

The novels under consideration may have represented some common features, feelings, and reactions of the marginalized, but they have also represented different shades and different levels of the margin and the marginalized. They show, for example, that an individual can be politically powerless on one hand, and yet wield great power in the sphere of religion. The novels also reveal that some individuals combat the marginalization or try to find a cure for it, while others escape by turning inwards. This diversity is also to be seen in the spatial relationships experienced within a particular class or between various classes. Diversity of the margin and the marginalized is presented through horizontal relationships, vertical relationships and finally through fragmented relationships that exemplify a fragmented social reality.

The changes and developments in the modern Arabic novel are clearly related to the social, political and cultural environment in which the novels were written. But perhaps not so clearly, these profound literary developments are also closely related to

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[97] Dean G Dwight, "Alienation: Its Meaning and Measurements," *American Sociological Review* Vol. 26. No. 5 (Oct., 1961): 753.

[98] Stefan G Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel* (New York: State University of New York, 2001), 6.

shifts in the social, political and cultural position of the modern Arabic novelists. Because Arab writers have themselves been fundamentally alienated from the political process and its institutions, one finds it inevitable to connect the focus on the issues of the marginalized and the search for selfhood in literary works to the marginalization of intellectuals in the Arab world. Their inability to find harmony within society and their political emasculation, in addition to the social and authoritative restrictions that they face, all together have intensified the writers' feeling of alienation and deepened their relationship to their characters. In discussing the general topic of writers' freedom in the Arab world, Roger Allan has noted that "those who crossed the line of official acceptability may suffer still worse fates: life imprisonment and even death."[99] The voice of the marginalized comes to speak for both the characters and for the authors. This voice is brutal and absurd and the text itself betrays a loss of certitude and omnipresence, for both the author and the character.

When following the relationship between the writers and the marginalized, one should also take into consideration the general politicization of the literary field in the Arab world in general and in Egypt in particular. To enter the literary field is to enter a public space where "all the ordinary acts of professional life, such as publishing a text, attending a conference … or putting someone's name on a prize, can be interpreted in political terms."[100] Although many writers in the Egyptian literary field demand readers to disassociate their creative writings from their political commitments, one should keep in mind that most of the contemporary writers whose works are considered in this thesis, lead parallel lives as political activists. Al-Aswani and Abu Golyyel, for example, are both members in Kifaya the Egyptian Movement for Change. Taking that into consideration, their works could be looked at as a counter-discourse that aims to challenge the regime's attempt to control and marginalize intellectuals.

"In modern Egypt, as elsewhere, the state of the nation has always been a natural topic for intellectuals in general and for writers in particular."[101] While the state of the

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[99] Roger Allan, "Arabic Fiction and the Quest for Freedom," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26, nos. 1-2 (March-June 1995): 39.

[100] Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, trans. David Tresilisn (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 105.

[101] Ibid, 105.

nation can play an important role in shaping and determining the directions of its literary works, the parallel dynamics within the literary social field itself can, on the other hand, also explain and determine its directions. The new Egyptian writers with social, academic, or other talents "have begun to develop a critical discourse aimed at theorizing their generation's diverse aesthetic experiments, all revolutionary in varying degrees."[102] They have aesthetically reacted to the malformation of reality through their narrative strategies. The fragmentation of reality and the death of the hero, for example, were manifested in intentionally fragmented texts. Multiple stories and multiple characters attain equal importance in the text and the relationship of the reader to the novel's characters is not one of superiority or humility but rather, one of discovery. The influence of precedent literary works as a guide for writing has faded out, and the new writers have been deriving literary structures from streets, Cafés, and media reports. The reader also faces a realm of taboos, both social and linguistic. Violence, drugs, homosexuality and even incest are all used to break down conventions, penetrate new spaces and establish new territories. Transformations in language and transformations in people have merged to become one entity where linguistic taboos are in proportion with social ones. The reader is invited to personally experience social, cultural and political transformation both substantively (through character transformation), and structurally (through textual transformation). The diversity of the marginalized requires, of course, diverse and multi-leveled language that allows the world of the novel to embrace the full spectrum of human experience on the margins.

Government disregard for the margin and for the marginalized is the only constant force that unites its shades. Modern Egyptian writers have been playing a paramount role in deconstructing and reconstructing cities and societies according to their points of view, and as the boundaries of literary style and content expand, so do the boundaries of this mega city that we call Cairo. The novels presented in this thesis, at times become condemnatory documents capable of revealing real social and political failure. The authors' noted success reconfirms the active role that writers play as undercover historians and, indeed, architects of Egyptian society.

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[102] Ibid, 171.

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