SPATIAL POLITICS AND GENRE IN THE 21ST CENTURY ARABIC NOVEL IN ENGLISH

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for Megan, for your time and care
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SPATIAL POLITICS AND GENRE IN THE 21ST CENTURY ARABIC NOVEL IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of four 21st century Arabic novels translated to English, each of which narrates a regionally specific process of state-sanctioned property theft. I argue that the authors of these novels use and subvert conventions from genres of fiction such as the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction to counter the logics of state power represented in each novel. The first chapter studies Abdo Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar* (*Throwing Sparks* 2009), which uses Gothic conventions such as monstrosity and narrative frames to challenge the logic of authoritarian impunity that drives property theft in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The second chapter analyzes Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* (*The Dove’s Necklace* 2010), which counters the elitist individualism at the root of conventional detective fiction with a community of detective-like characters who investigate gentrification in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The third chapter examines Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya* (*Using Life* 2014) for how science fiction tropes of utopia and dystopia offer imaginative tools to rethink the logics of progress and sustainability used to justify green gentrification in Cairo, Egypt. And the fourth chapter reads Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014) for how orality and polyphonic narration counter the logics of security and exceptionalism that drive the U.S. occupation of Baghdad and the Iraqi state’s theft of property left behind by the displaced and the deceased.
Introduction

1. The 21st Century Arabic Novel in English

The novel, one of the most widely circulated genres in the global literary marketplace, is a central subject of inquiry to Anglophone postcolonial criticism on literary works that engage with the global impacts of colonialism and nation-building. But the Arabic novel has received little attention from Anglophone postcolonial criticism despite the abundance of novelists from the Arabic-speaking world responding to the circumstances of hegemony, the globalization of technology, global warfare, and transnational relations (Moore 3). With a few exceptions like Tayeb Salih’s *Mawsim al-Hijrah ilâ al-Shamâl* (*Season of Migration to the North* 1966) and Abdelrahman Munif’s *Mudun al-Milh* (*Cities of Salt* 1984), the Arabic novel is also seldom taught in world literature, global literature, or postcolonial literature classes in the English-speaking university (Elsadda xxix). My dissertation counters the marginalization of the Arabic novel in global literature and postcolonial critique by placing it at the intersection of two discourses: one about the politics of the urban, built environment and its representation in literary fiction; and the other about genre and the global politics of its increasingly popular use in texts that receive a widespread readership from consumers and literary scholars alike. In my dissertation I make two main claims. The first is that reading the built environment in fiction for the ideologies and structures of power that the production and organization of space represents can help think through the possibilities of inhabiting public and private space in a world where capitalism governs the human ability to inhabit space in community with others. The second is that reading genre conventions from the
Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction for how they are used to engage with spatial politics and the imbalances of power between socio-economic classes can further illuminate the capacity of popular genres to reimagine literary and lived space and the individual’s relationship with one’s community.

The Arabic novel is particularly suitable for examining spatial politics, as its authors use the genre to explore the impacts states have on the formation of individual and collective senses of self within the boundaries of the state. As Muhammad Siddiq has observed, the Arabic novel has played a major role in communicating “the major constituents of identity in modern Arab culture” (xi). And Hoda Elsadda concurs that the Arabic novel is “an ideal site for understanding the processes of inclusion and exclusion that have taken place in the cultural sphere, processes that are imbricated in the dynamics of power relations” (xvi). Additionally, more than ever, Arabic novels published in the twenty-first century are reaching wider audiences across the world and being translated into several different languages to accommodate their global readership. Their translingual popularity is due especially to the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, started in Abu Dhabi in 2007, which awards the winners by translating and publishing their novels into English, primarily, and then other languages according to popularity and appeal. Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), the most popular winner thus far, was translated into twenty-one languages after it won the prize in 2014. However, translation isn’t anything new to the Arabic novel. In fact, the Arabic novel began in translation when the increasing practice of translation, the founding of newspapers, and the establishing of presses made space for the growth of Egyptian fiction in the nineteenth century and, soon after, the same in other Arab countries (Allen 21-22).
Additionally, the novel itself, in any language, owes its genesis to the literary exchange between different languages and parts of the world. In *Stranger Fictions* (2020), Rebecca C. Johnson writes “the Arabic novel takes translation and cultural transfer as its foundation, *as does the European novel*. The novel did not ‘rise’ in one context and ‘travel’ fully formed to another; it emerged in and through a dynamic process of translation” (8). Translators in the Arab world are participants in the global exchange of the novel in all languages, and their role in the production of the Arabic novel with its unique cultural import is vital to the Arabic literary tradition. My study, an analysis of four Arabic novels published in the twenty-first century and translated into English, owes itself to the translators who brought these works into English. Three of the novels I examine are winners of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and one of them, Ahmed Naji’s *Using Life*, was published in English translation by University of Texas Press after the novel garnered global attention with the imprisonment of its author in Egypt, an imprisonment that was directly related to the novel’s publication and one reader’s response to it.

In this project, I present a postcolonial critique of four novels that represent and respond to moments of dispossession and displacement historically rooted in legacies of European, U.S., and Arab imperial violence against populations vulnerable to the dislocating effects of gentrification and military occupation. My critique of each novel falls upon the ideas and values the elite and the state use to justify their property theft, such as authoritarian impunity, elitist individualism, progress and sustainability, state exceptionalism, and state security. In each chapter, I locate in the novels literary devices and generic conventions that counter these elitist ideas and values. Common to all works
is a concern for the collective self subjected to violence by the powerful individual. In
“Postcolonialism and Arabic Literature: Rerouting or Re-Rooting?” Samia Al Hodathy
writes about how Arabic literature has been the subject of few postcolonial critiques
despite postcolonial criticism’s origins in Edward Said’s writings about the ongoing
Israeli occupation of Palestine. Al Hodathy suggests one way to reroot postcolonial
criticism in Arab thought is to attend to Palestinian and Arab Gulf literatures, whose
“[focus] on the collective self” offers methods of imagining interconnectivity beyond the
oppressive systems that comprise the colonial projects and their successors in the Arab
world (108). Although my project does not engage with Palestinian novels, it includes
analysis of three novels by Arab Gulf writers, all of whom use innovative literary
strategies to write the collective self into narratives of displacement. Saudi authors Abdo
Khal, who writes about Jeddah, and Raja Alem, who writes about Mecca, channel the
collective self by weaving threads between characters whose shared experiences of land
and property dispossession signal toward a common home being erased by gentrifying
forces. And Iraqi novelist Ahmed Saadawi uses polyphonic narration to assemble the
values and efforts of several characters, reflecting the assemblage of Frankenstein’s
monster, in order to counter the dismembering and fragmenting conditions of the U.S.
occupation of Baghdad and subsequent sectarian warfare. The fourth novel I study, by
Egyptian author Ahmed Naji, widens the scope of the project to include a region in the
Arab world that has played a vital role in the Arabic novel’s development and has seen

1 All referenced, paraphrased, and quoted material from this article was translated personally by Zeena
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some of the most drastic transformations to the built environment as a result of European colonization and Egyptian nationalism.

2. The Built Environment

The fact that the built environment appears as more than a setting in the novels I examine in this dissertation—that narrative space becomes itself a site of conflict for characters and the society they represent rather than just a place where conflict happens—means that to some extent the built environment is alive and active as a technological agent in the state’s biopolitical agenda. In the novels I read here—some of which feature buildings that can think and talk and buildings that reengineer the human body according to an agenda of eugenics—the built environment is represented as a technology for the structuring of human society according to the wishes of those in power. Set in Jeddah, Mecca, Cairo, and Baghdad, each respective novel depicts the state using the built environment as a tool for exerting power over its citizens, consistently resulting in the displacement of economically disadvantaged populations. Across these narratives, the message that power lies in the hands of those who produce, own, and manage space is loud and clear. In urban studies, the notion that where there is architecture there is power has become common knowledge over the last few decades, especially with the publication of Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991), where the author explains the relationship between the built environment and the state’s control over the productivity of its subjects. Building on this growing research of spatial politics and extending it into the study of how states assert their national legitimacy in capital cities, Michael Minkenberg writes “public architecture, official buildings, and the urban design
of official places can always be interpreted as ingredients of the establishment of political legitimacy” (3). My analysis of representations of the built environment in Arabic novels carries this observation further by noting how the state’s involvement with the real estate sector in the form of redevelopment projects and other legitimized forms of property theft enacts one form of the privatization of the nation.

Even when a state assumes responsibility for the housing of its citizens, power is still a dominant influence in how the state goes about distributing and designing space for those whom housing is an urgent need and by whom the state achieves its imagined national community. In the name of serving all of society, a state will often disguise their interests in controlling their people spatially in deceptive gestures toward providing housing for all. This is especially relevant in Naji’s Using Life, wherein the Society of Urbanists uses a unifying rhetoric to advance its project of implementing high-cost developments at the expense of those lower-income people displaced as a result. In Mass Housing (2021), Miles Glendinning historicizes mass housing on a global scale to illuminate this tension between state obligation and state manipulation, examining how “[m]ass housing developments reared up in cities across the world…in a vast wave unleashed by the confluence of the strong modern state and modernist architecture” (1). Glendinning writes “[b]ehind the public rhetoric of housing need and social solidarity, many mass housing campaigns, with their language of combat and power, were bound up with authoritative, patriarchal social structures and strategies of forcible intervention or segregation—including residential zoning by race or social class” (6). The novels I examine represent this type of segregation by illustrating the spatial boundaries the state and developers produce between the rich and the poor.
In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I study novels that explore the consequences of gentrification for populations without the economic and political privilege of the elites whose development projects erase neighborhoods for lower-income citizens. In “The Order and Simplicity of Gentrification: A Political Challenge” (2005), Eric Clark defines gentrification as “a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through reinvestment in fixed capital” (258). With the progression from chapter to chapter, gentrification is represented at increasingly larger scales, beginning with the national scale in Jeddah and Mecca and then moving to the global scale from the vantage point of planners in Cairo. What is happening to cities in the Arab world is similar to what is happening to cities all around the globe, which Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang, Shin, and Ernesto López-Morales observe when they write “gentrification is becoming increasingly influential and unfolds at a planetary scale” (4). The urban built environment is a technology globalized by developers and investors who are looking to profit from increasing populations, the acceleration of international trade, and the concentration of people and trade in global urban hubs, all of which tends to result in the production of socio-economic homogeneity in the form of higher- and lower-income districts, states, and hemispheres. According to Lees et. al., gentrification is “a displacement process, where wealthier people displace poorer people, and diversity is replaced by social and cultural homogeneity,” which they observe “undermines urbanity and the future of cities as emancipatory places” (9). The novels I read represent the consequences of gentrification for those who are negatively
impacted by this process and who are pushed further away from the city’s center, the place the displaced used to call home.

The story of the built environment in major cities like Jeddah, Mecca, and Cairo is a story about state management of the built environment’s occupants: in other words, the built environment is a narrative mechanism for the unfolding of civilian life. Much of the unfolding that happens as a result of gentrifying city space and displacing urban dwellers occurs because urban planners and developers work with the state to bring about a so-called advanced version of their society. The built environment is a medicine, they think, and can cure the people of poverty, sickness, and degeneration to produce a harmonious, civilized society. In *Eugenics in the Garden: Transatlantic Architecture and the Crafting of Modernity* (2018), Fabiola López-Durán writes about how “architecture was made complicit in a genetically inspired program that mirrored eugenics’ attempts to ‘improve’ the human race” (16). Led by architects like Le Corbusier, the project of architectural modernization adopted the ideology of eugenics to support its mission to advance human society through the improvement of the built environment. Focusing her study on Latin American countries like Brazil and Argentina, López-Durán writes “[i]n the Latin world, eugenics—the so-called science of race improvement—gave scientific authority to social fears, respectability to class and racial prejudice, and extraordinary power to the construction and management of the built environment” (6). In Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* (*The Dove’s Necklace* 2010), which I write about in chapter two, it is obvious how the Saudi state views the poor as a disease that threatens the well-being of the rich when the process of eviction and displacement is literally represented as a surgical removal. And in Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya* (*Using Life* 2014), which I write about
in chapter three, the rhetoric of eugenics is directly referenced when the fictional Society of Urbanists articulate their plan to redesign the human race through the advancement of the built environment.

Interdisciplinary projects are needed in a time when the humanities are pitted against disciplines in science, technology, engineering, and math under university pressure to prove the material worth and value of each field. The novels I read here demonstrate how literature, itself a part of material culture, narrates the world to us in ways that make visible the ideologies, technologies, and systems that contribute to the unfolding of our individual and collective lives.

3. Genres of Fiction

Each chapter of my dissertation focuses on one novel and the generic conventions that novel features from one of three genres of fiction: the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction. These three genres are rooted in tensions between tradition and progress, and these tensions characterize the processes of gentrification, dispossession, and displacement represented in the novels I read here. The Gothic, for example, has always been about the encounter between an antiquated past and a rapidly changing present, as in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), where the author explores the conflicts between “the ancient and the modern,” specifically in terms of these two forms of Romantic narrative (Walpole 65), the former granting license to depicting the improbable and the latter leaning toward naturalistic representations of the actual world. In this novel, inexplicable phenomena haunt the owner of the castle, Manfred, until he ultimately surrenders his property to the rightful owner. From *The Castle of Otranto* all the way up
to the genre’s twenty-first century iterations, the Gothic has been used to interrogate the ideals that undergird modernity. Jerrold E. Hogle writes “the Gothic is endemic to the modern. After all, the ever-extending tentacles of modern enterprise are always haunted by the doubts, conflicts, and blurring of normative boundaries that the Gothic articulates in every form it assumes because, at its best, it is really about the profoundly conflicted core of modernity itself” (7). As Hogle hints at here, embedded in the Gothic is the antagonism between the normative and the nonnormative, an antagonism which is visible in the genre’s hybrid construction. The Castle of Otranto, which mixes the older and newer modes of Romanticism, and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), the most influential Gothic novel and first science-fiction novel, are testaments to the Gothic’s tendency toward the unconventional.

Considering that detective fiction’s beginnings are rooted in the Gothic, it makes sense that these genres would share a similar concern about the implications of modernity for social order. After all, one of the Gothic’s earliest practitioners, Edgar Allan Poe, is widely considered by critics to have authored the first detective fiction story with his “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), which would later influence Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous Sherlock Holmes tales. Furthermore, the Gothic’s explorations of the mysterious and the monstrous find a place in detective fiction, where criminals are the progeny of social dissonance and reason is well equipped to explain away the mysterious. Ruth Anne Thompson and Jean Fitzgerald underscore the role of mystery in the narrative structure of both genres, writing that “Occupied as the gothic is with the task of uncovering secrets, identifying motives for heinous acts, and restoring justice in human affairs, it prefigures the detective literature that follows. Stories of mysterious family
secrets and threatening strangers present the kinds of puzzles and sensational thrills that drew in readers as crime fiction still does today” (4). And while the Gothic arose as a response to Enlightenment rationalism’s intolerance of the improbable, challenging the ideal of reason as a measure of human action and the natural world, detective fiction adopts rationalist ideals to help make sense of the social disorders of modern life in the new industrialized city of the nineteenth century, characterized by poor working conditions, low wages, and rising crime rates.

Science fiction, like the Gothic and detective fiction, is marked by suspicions about the effects of modernization on social order, specifically the impacts of technological advancement on the human body, the ecological environment, and our notions of what it means to be a human living in the world in modern times. For example, in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor’s monster and the medical technological advancements he represents challenge Enlightenment definitions of the human. Ironically, in this novel, it is mystical scientific ideas and practices that bring the monster into existence, further challenging the idea that reality—and the modern, rational concepts that sustain the notion of such a reality—is fully reducible to the scientifically explainable. *Frankenstein*, the first science fiction novel, testifies to the Gothic origin of science fiction and to the shared conventions of these two genres. Roger Luckhurst suggests “that we read Gothic fiction and SF as always interrelated responses to a self-reflexive, scientific modernity that begins in the eighteenth century” (36). And Patrick Brantlinger observes in “The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction” that detective fiction and science fiction both originated from the Gothic, and all three genres are united by the idea that at the extreme limits of reason lie “nightmare, delirium, and ruin” (36). In the first part of my dissertation, I begin with
the Gothic and then move to detective fiction, and from there move to science fiction. This movement parallels the shift from the internal, psychological response to disaster found in the Gothic to the interpersonal, social response to disaster found in detective fiction and science fiction (Brantlinger 35).

Genres like the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction are invested in the built environment’s capacity to symbolize social, political, and economic structures. For example, the Gothic castle, such as in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), has often been used in fiction to revisit the feudal power systems of medieval Europe, wherein landlords granted their peasants lodging on their estates in exchange for labor and military service. In detective fiction, on the other hand, the city is often a spatial representation of a society in disorder, where crime is rampant because populations are consolidated yet their needs are not fully accommodated by the state. And in science fiction, the urban built environment is a site upon which the elite imagine a utopian society, where technological advancement carries humanity beyond the failures of past societies. In addition to engaging with spatial politics, these works also all employ genre conventions that stray from a realist aesthetic and instead move toward forms of literary representation that seek to record what lies beyond the individual’s capacity for knowing.

As Ziad Elmarsafy observes, “the field of the Arabic novel is dominated by realist texts” (12), and this is especially evident given the fact that the International Prize for Arabic Fiction has privileged realist texts over all others, with the exception of the three winning novels I examine here.

Literary scholars in Anglophone academia have yet to study extensively Arabic Gothic novels for their use and subversion of the Gothic tradition, with a few exceptions
like Haytham Bahoola’s “Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War” (2015), Roxanne Douglas’s “Situating Arab Women’s Writing in a Feminist ‘Global Gothic’: Madness, Mothers and Ghosts” (2021), and Amna Matar Al Neyadi’s 2020 PhD dissertation on two Arabic Gothic novels. This is despite the large number of Arabic novels written in this tradition such as Mansoura Ez Eldin’s Matahat Maryam (Maryam’s Maze 2004), Wajdi al-Ahdal’s Bilad bila Sama (A Land without Sama [Sky], published in English as A Land without Jasmine 2008), and Abdo Khal’s Tarmi bi Sharar (Throwing Sparks 2009), to name a few. Arabic crime fiction has received much more attention from literary scholars. Additionally, several Arabic crime novels have recently enjoyed a popular reception in many parts of the world, such as Ahmed Mourad’s Vertigo (2007) and The Blue Elephant (2012), Essam Youssef’s 1/4 Gram (2008), Magdy El Shafee’s Metro (2008), Raja Alem’s Tawq al-Hamam (The Dove’s Necklace 2010), and Donia Maher Ganzeer’s graphic novel The Apartment in Bab El-Louk (2017). And Arabic science fiction has received the most attention from literary scholars out of these three genres. Several studies have been published on Arabic science fiction such as Reuven Snir’s “The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature” (2000) and Ian Campbell’s Arabic Science Fiction (2018). It will be no surprise that my third chapter is about an Egyptian novel, since most Arabic science fiction is written by Egyptian authors (El-Din Aysha 6), such as Tawfik Al-Hakim, Saad Mikawi, Mustafa Mahmoud, Nihad Sharif, Ahmed Abd Al-Salam Al-Baqali, Umayma Khafagi, and Ahmed Naji.
4. Chapter Outlines

In my first chapter, I analyze Abdo Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar* (*Throwing Sparks* 2009), focusing on how authoritarian impunity is the underlying logic enabling the head of a merchant family in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to steal property without consequences. Taking without consent is the common denominator for other human rights abuses represented in the novel such as human trafficking and maiming. The novel uses Gothic conventions, which are especially equipped to explore the ways individual greed gives rise to forms of monstrosity that base one’s power in the subjugation of other human beings. The Master of the Palace exerts monstrous authority over those whose property he steals and whose bodies he traffics into the Palace to perform cruel forms of labor. I argue that, to counter the authoritarian impunity represented by the Master, the novelist uses narrative frames and prolepsis to structure Tariq’s spiritual journey out of subjection. The confessional frame in conjunction with the framing “thresholds” anticipate Tariq’s salvation at the end of the novel, which sees the destruction of the metaphorical house of demons imprisoning Tariq, and then the protagonist’s submission to Allah with the help of His forgiveness.

In my second chapter, I move to Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* (*The Dove’s Necklace* 2010), which I read for how elitist individualism is the guiding logic for property theft and gentrification around the Kabba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The novel’s antagonist embodies elitist individualism in his development projects that aim to erase historical neighborhoods around the Kabba and replace them with high-rise hotels, malls, and parking lots for rich pilgrims fulfilling the Hajj. Alem uses tropes from detective fiction, which is concerned with how social inequities stem from the failure of state
institutions to deliver justice to wronged communities, especially when those state institutions are complicit with the crimes of the offending parties. When Saudi elites demolish historic neighborhoods in Mecca to replace them with developments for rich pilgrims fulfilling the Hajj, the state places its official stamp on their property theft, criminalizing the homelessness of the displaced. While the Gothic depicts the psychological impacts of subjugation, detective fiction applies a wider lens to record the social fractures caused by state crimes against its subjects. Instead of a single detective who solves a single case, however, the novel features a community of detective-like characters who collaboratively solve the mystery of property theft. I argue that this community detection asserts the ideology of collectivism, which contrasts the individualism represented by elitist real estate deals in the novel (and by the conventional Western detective story).

In my third chapter, I read Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya* (*Using Life* 2014), focusing on how the company in the novel uses the logics of progress and sustainability to justify gentrifying Cairo, Egypt, as well as the rest of the world. Expanding the scope of the previous two genres, science fiction stages the dire consequences of extreme advances in technology on a global scale. In Naji’s novel, the Society of Urbanists reengineers human biology to accelerate its evolution and facilitate the colonization of the entire world. At the same time, they reengineer the built environment with green architecture, gentrifying urban areas and relegating the economically disadvantaged to the margins of society. The author uses science fiction conventions to question the technologies and rhetorics of progress and sustainability that disguise gentrification in Egypt as eco-friendly efforts to go green. In the novel, the company leading this process
imagines a society where technological advancement in the form of green architecture could speed up human evolution toward a higher biological form. However, the logic of linear progress used to justify the city’s new architecture only serves the rich, leaving the poor to suffer from the same old dystopia of low-paying labor in the era of global warming. I argue that the novel’s nonlinear narration, prolepsis, and multimodal composition challenges the logic of linear progress and refuses the narrative privilege those in power use to dictate the future of Cairo’s people.

In my fourth and final chapter, I read Ahmed Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad (2014), focusing on how the U.S. and Iraqi states use logics of security and state exceptionalism to justify the War on Terror. While each of the first three chapters focuses on one genre, the last chapter focuses on the interplay between the Gothic and science fiction, a generic hybridity pioneered by Mary Shelley in Frankenstein (1818). Drawing on Gothic conventions, Saadawi explores the relationship between monster and monster-maker in the context of the U.S. as a producer and sponsor of terrorist groups. Additionally, the novel engages with science fiction tropes like extreme technological advancements and the living dead to interrogate how the accelerated development and deployment of war machines produces forms of living death in occupied lives. To counter the U.S.’s failure to address the causes of terrorism, Saadawi uses orality—forms of oral narrative—to ground characters and their motivations in origin narratives and interpersonal relationships. The author, who appears as a character in the story, assembles these narratives into a novel wherein polyphonic narration is a way of centering local Baghdadí experiences of the war while decentering U.S. and Iraqi authorities’ perspectives. Meanwhile, a more destructive form of assemblage occurs when Iraqi authorities collect
abandoned property left behind by the deceased and the displaced. I read this property triage as a state effort to root the process of rebuilding the nation in privatization.

While my central concern for this project is the spatial politics of the built environment, this concern is also an entry point into other important discourses relevant to my discussion of the novels such as disability studies, trauma theory, ecocriticism, and terrorism studies. In chapter one, I use concepts from Jasbir K. Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017) to examine how the Master in Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar* traffics and enslaves humans into disabling and debilitating forms of labor. His “right to maim” is upheld by the authoritarian impunity he has achieved through his family’s legacy of property theft. In chapter two, my analysis of Aisha’s trauma and recovery in Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* is informed by important voices in rape cultural criticism such as Régine Michelle Jean-Charles and Traci West. Their commentary on the victim-survivor model of reading rape narratives helps to account for the ways victimization structures Aisha’s experience of trauma as well as how she heals and recovers from rape. In chapter three, my close readings of Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya* are informed by Hamil Pearsall, Roshan Mehdizadeh, and Martin Fischer, whose criticism on green gentrification assists in reading how the rhetoric of progress and sustainability represented in the novel is premised on exclusionary logics that dictate who receives the benefits of eco-friendly architectural development. And in chapter four, I engage with ideas from Natsu Taylor Saito’s *Meeting the Enemy: American Exceptionalism and International Law* (2010) to untangle the ways the U.S. uses logics of exceptionalism and security to craft notions of terrorism that justify U.S. military violence. These ideas are
helpful for analyzing how the monster in the novel is the embodiment of this entanglement.
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Chapter 1: Taking without Consent: Property Theft, Maiming, and Authoritarian Impunity in Abdo Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar*

1. Introduction

This chapter examines how Saudi author Abdo Khal uses Gothic conventions in *Tarmi bi Sharar (Throwing Sparks)* 2009 in narrating dispossession in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This interpretation contributes to the dissertation’s overall argument that popular genres like the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction help readers understand the ideologies and tactics of property theft, displacement, and gentrification. This chapter differs from the others, however, by focusing on the ideology of authoritarian impunity behind the antagonist’s habits of taking without consent. Authoritarian impunity is the belief that one’s unrivaled and unchallenged superiority and power grants one exemptions from the consequences of actions harmful to others. In *Tarmi bi Sharar* the 2010 winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, or the “Arabic Booker,” Khal uses Gothic conventions such as oppressively imposing architecture, claustrophobic confinement, monstrosity, the haunting past, the abject, the uncanny, and incest to engage with the logics of authoritarian impunity wielded by merchant families in Jeddah. One aspect of the logic of authoritarian impunity the novel highlights is the notion that a member of a merchant family, in this case “the Master,” possesses the power to take without consent and without consequences for his wrongdoings. This includes stealing people’s property; illegally trafficking, exploiting, enslaving, and maiming the Palace workers; ordering punishers to rape the Master’s enemies; and intruding upon privacy through surveillance. The novel highly exaggerates the affairs of actual merchant families
in Jeddah, but it is in the nature of Gothic tropes to exaggerate the horrors of inequity. Khal presents the Palace as a Gothic building whose magnificent and inviting exterior contrasts with the squalid neighborhood to evoke the inequities of radical class difference. In addition to the horrors of property theft that displace neighborhood residents, extend the Palace, and restrict access to the sea, the Palace’s interior reveals further horrors of unspeakable and atrocious acts combined with the claustrophobic confinement felt by the Palace’s enslaved workers. Khal writes the protagonist and narrator Tariq Ibrahim Fadel as the novel’s central monster, and the unnamed Master as the novel’s monster-maker. Like many Gothic tales such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), Khal’s novel explores the relationship between monster and monster-maker, highlighting how Tariq experiences abjection by internalizing the Master’s monstrosity and seeking to expunge his atrociousness from within. Tariq’s enslavement by the Master is another form of taking without consent, since Tariq was brought to the Palace without knowing what his duties would be and was not given a chance to agree. Additionally, Khal writes Tariq as a character haunted by his past. His role in the Palace as punisher is an uncanny, hell-like replaying of a heinous act from his past, which underscores how Tariq adopts the Master’s authoritarian tendency to take without consent. Another type of punishment Tariq endures is committing incest with the Master’s partner Maram, who turns out to be Tariq’s sister Mariam. Here, incest poses a critique of the nepotistic inheritance of power within merchant families in Jeddah. This nepotism reflects the absolute monarchy of Al Saud’s regime, which has financially supported merchant families in Jeddah.
In addition to using Gothic conventions to unpack the logic of authoritarian impunity, Khal uses other formal devices such as confession, prolepsis, and narrative frames to challenge this same logic. For example, Tariq frames the narrative as a confession, thereby claiming responsibility for his atrocious acts instead of assuming impunity, which makes room for his salvation at the end of the novel. Furthermore, the author uses prolepsis to foresee Tariq’s last assignment under the Master, locating an end to Tariq’s labor under the Master and countering the logic of eternal authority embedded in the system of inherited power. Finally, the confessional frame fits within the novel’s larger framing device of “thresholds,” a device which establishes an architectural metaphor for Tariq’s journey out of his house of demons and into Allah’s kingdom. These “thresholds” borrow excerpts from Tariq’s brother Ibrahim’s sermons to forecast the protagonist’s salvation upon Ibrahim’s spiritual intervention. Tariq’s freedom is structured as a metaphorical demolition of the architecture of terror, which places his resolution in the Gothic tradition of the fall of the Castle of Otranto in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

*Tarmi bi Sharar* is narrated from the first-person perspective of Tariq, a man from a neighborhood in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. When the Saudi elite begin building palaces on Jeddah’s coast, Tariq and his neighbors are enchanted by the glamorous structures that juxtapose their own dilapidated houses. Everyone wants through the palaces’ doors. Issa, one of Tariq’s friends in the neighborhood, starts working inside one of these palaces for the owner, whom the novel refers to as “the Master,” the head of an elite merchant family. Issa offers Tariq a position in the palace, but not until Tariq enters does he realize what his job will be: to torture the Master’s male competitors and enemies. Conducted in
a torture chamber, this brutal form of labor resembling medieval practices of punishment
aligns the narrative with a Gothic tradition of importing barbaric methods from the
distant past—and it requires the reader to suspend their disbelief as well. Those who enter
cannot escape, since palace workers will suffer grave consequences if they try to leave.
Tariq, now isolated from his family and friends, is haunted by his past. His last night in
the neighborhood, he raped the woman he loved, Tahani, and within the strictness of her
family’s religion, ruined her honor, causing her downfall and death by her own father’s
hands. Osama, who is also assigned to torture the Master’s victims, shared a similar love
for Tahani and casts constant shame upon Tariq, whom he suspects was the reason for
Tahani’s death. Tariq runs from crime in addition to fleeing his own family
responsibilities. He is only interested in continuing his secret affair with the Master’s
love, Maram, regardless of his overwhelming paranoia about being caught. He embodies
his Master’s cruelty when he imprisons his Aunt Khayriyyah in a villa, starves her, and
cuts her tongue out, mirroring the same mutilation his mother suffered when his Aunt
caused her fall from a ladder. Tariq’s last assignment is to rape his friend Issa, whom the
Master condemns to suffering after Issa marries the Master’s sister Mawdie and after Issa
attempts to kill the Master. Shortly after, the Master shoots and kills Issa, and Tariq is
dismissed from his job at the palace. Upon returning to visit his brother after years of
absence, Tariq seems to reconcile his past by reentering the family and following the
spiritual guidance of Ibrahim, his brother, who is imam of the local mosque. Tariq’s
reconciliation, however, must accommodate a new troubling realization: that his half-
sister Mariam, whom he has never met until now, was his lover Maram. Attending his
brother’s sermon at the end of the novel, Tariq thinks “[t]his was the exact moment I had
hit rock bottom” (348). This final blow to Tariq’s soul, while causing him much anguish, ultimately pushes him to surrender to Allah’s mercy and bask in his Lord’s forgiveness.

2. The Gothic: Theory and Criticism

The Gothic had a poor reputation during its inception in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Often dismissed as a cheap, popular form of entertainment that uses sensationalist tactics to evoke horror, the Gothic was associated with a low literary culture. In contrast, Romanticism built its reputation as a genre of high literary culture by way of its practitioners, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, condemning the Gothic as an immature aesthetic and promoting their own artistic commitments to accessing childhood, memory, and nature through art. Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, quoting a Wordsworth poem, describe Romanticism as “the lyrical outpourings of a refined poetic consciousness that both ‘perceives’ and ‘creates’ the sometimes picturesque, sometimes sublime world around it, the poetic outpourings of a psyche that, through its visionary powers of recollection, is tenderly expressive of feelings of ‘unremembered pleasure’” (2). This aesthetic tendency to represent the sublime and interrogate a distant yet reemerging past, however, is also part of the Gothic aesthetic. It is only in the recent century that literary critics have returned to the relationship between the Gothic and Romanticism to uncover how the two forms are inseparable instead of antagonistic to one another, how the Gothic carries within itself Romantic aesthetics, and how the Romantic poets, despite their rejection of the Gothic, relied on the Gothic aesthetic to engage in their Romantic literary pursuits. Recalling the past with nostalgia, encountering the
sublime, and seeking forbidden knowledge, then, are themes shared by the Gothic and Romanticism by virtue of these aesthetics’ conjoined nature.

When authors needed a form to bypass the confining strictures of literary naturalism that dictated how fictional narrative should record the real world according to the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism, the Romantic aesthetic found a home within the Gothic, mainly as a formal structure for the exploration of the imaginative and the improbable as systems of thought that can help readers access the past. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), often cited as the first Gothic novel, takes the Romantic fixation on the improbable and blends it with the naturalism of the early novel to produce a hybrid work of fiction built on the tension between what he called “the ancient and the modern” (Walpole 65), and between the supernatural and the real. Responding to David Punter’s observation that the Gothic emerged as part of a rejection of rationalism’s omission of actual human, emotional experience in an account of the real, Deborah Russell writes “[b]y dealing in terror and the taboo, Gothic very explicitly positions itself as the inverted mirror image of Enlightenment systems of thought, but it was its persistent entanglement with romance that made the novel the ideal vehicle for such a development” (59). Out of the project to reinstate the human in the novel came the narrative emphasis on the psyche and its grappling with the irrational and unexplainable. Running parallel to the Gothic Romance’s opposition to Enlightenment rationalism was a related movement in which “historians, literary critics and writers showed a new desire to discover, understand and recreate the literature and culture of the [British] nation’s distant medieval or ‘Gothic’ past,” as Russell writes (59). Their urge to access the nation’s past followed a period of widespread historical amnesia wherein the people of
Britain needed “to move on from the revolutions of the seventeenth century, the 1707 Act of Union and the rise of commercial capitalism” (Russell 60). And so, the Gothic, along with the importing of the Romantic aesthetic into the genre’s form, resulted from a collective need to understand the relationship between the past and the present, revisit the war between tradition and progressive ideologies, and locate a national origin lost to the forces of modernity.

Where the Gothic is useful for challenging Enlightenment rationality is also where it is useful for thinking through the problems central to postcolonial criticism. In their introduction to the collection *Empire and the Gothic* (2003), Andrew Smith and William Hughes write about how postcolonial fiction writers and critics have found in the Gothic a literary mode for interrogating the Enlightenment conception of a Cartesian subject defined against the nonhuman. This conceptualization “helps to construct the racial hierarchies which would come to underpin colonialism” by instating “a series of binary oppositions such as Occident/Orient, black/white and civilized/savage” (1, 2). By exploring the unknown capacities of the human psyche and leaning on nonhuman or subhuman figures such as monsters and ghosts, the Gothic interferes in the Enlightenment project to rationalize human knowledge and behavior in ways that complement postcolonial criticism’s challenge against colonialist ideologies.

Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* is, like the Arabic novel I will examine in this chapter, partly a novel about property theft and the monstrous acts people will perform to protect the property they have stolen. When prince Manfred sees his ownership of the Castle of Otranto threatened by the loss of his only son and heir Conrad, he plans to divorce his wife Hippolita and instead marry Isabella—formerly promised by her father to
Conrad in marriage—in hopes that she will have sons with him. Manfred is haunted by the circumstances of his ownership of the castle, however, knowing well that his grandfather Ricardo did not inherit the property through blood, but instead poisoned the lord Alfonso and doctored a “fictitious will [that] declared Ricardo his heir” (164). Alfonso’s relative, Frederic marquis of Vicenza, demands that Manfred return his daughter Isabella back to his family and forfeit ownership of the Castle of Otranto to its true inheritor. Manfred resists, but supernatural forces intervene to restore order on Alfonso’s property. Before Conrad can marry Isabella, he is crushed by a giant helmet that mysteriously traveled from atop Alfonso’s statue in the church of St. Nicholas to the castle’s courtyard. Later, there are other unexplainable phenomena in the castle that foreshadow the resolution of the castle’s disputed ownership at the novel’s conclusion: the portrait of Manfred’s grandfather unfastens itself from the wall and walks on the ground, leading Manfred to a chamber; Diego and Jaquez encounter a giant “clad in armour” in the great chamber with a foot and leg in proportion to the size of the helmet that fell on Conrad (89-90); Bianca sees a giant’s hand on the uppermost banister at the great stairs; and Frederic discovers a living skeleton kneeling at the altar in the castle’s oratory, who tells Frederic to “forget Matilda,” Manfred’s daughter whom Frederic hoped to marry (157). In the last scenes of the novel, Alfonso’s ghost appears in gigantic form, as if the previously sighted parts of the giant had assembled into a whole, and causes the fall of the Castle of Otranto, an event that would inspire many Gothic climaxes such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). Alfonso’s ghost declares “Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso!” (162), after which Manfred forfeits the castle and Frederic offers Isabella for the new prince to marry.
The ancient prophecy mentioned at the beginning of *The Castle of Otranto* is accomplished: “That the Castle and Lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it” (73). While Theodore develops into the status of prince and inheritor, Manfred becomes too greedy for the power and wealth he feels he deserves but only acquired through his grandfather’s transgression and maintained through a system of feudalism. One thing that bound together the aesthetics of the Gothic and the Romance was their shared concern about the legacies of oppressive systems such as feudalism. In his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), published two years prior to Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Richard Hurd writes

Giants were oppressive feudal Lords; and every Lord was to be met with, like the Giant, in his strong hold, or castle. Their dependents of a lower form, who imitated the violence of their superiors, and had not their castles, but their lurking-places, were the Savages of Romance. The greater Lord was called a Giant, for his power; the less a Savage, for his brutality. (28)

In *Tarmi bi Sharar*, Khal adopts this Romantic formula, where the Master of the Palace is the Giant, and where Tariq and the other punishers are his dependents, forced to replicate the Master’s brutality. While *The Castle of Otranto* features the supernatural as a force of good that restores order to the castle, *Tarmi bi Sharar* accesses the supernatural through the spiritual, following Tariq’s journey toward submission to Allah’s mercy and forgiveness. Furthermore, Khal relies on other Romantic conventions such as the torture chamber to imagine the unimaginable for Palace workers who are made to sustain a state of living death under the Master’s tyranny, along with a social death upon leaving their
families and friends for a life within the Palace. And while extraordinary powers return property to its rightful owners in Walpole’s novel, in Khal’s novel it is extraordinary evil powers that cause the dispossession and displacement of property owners in Jeddah, and then extraordinary spiritual powers that return Tariq from the Master’s rule to Allah’s rule. The Palace’s owner in Tarmi bi Sharar, unlike Alfonso in Otranto, remains unchallenged throughout the novel, reflecting Frederick S. Frank’s observation in his edition of Otranto that “Later Gothic would replace the colossal figure of goodness with gigantic forces of evil reigning supreme over a fallen world” (162). Additionally, Khal refers directly back to Walpole’s tradition in his representation of monstrosity through human modes. In Tarmi bi Sharar’s Master of the Palace, we get a monster unlike Frankenstein’s, Dr. Jekyll’s, or Dracula, and more like the despotic Manfred.

3. Property Theft, the Gothic Palace, and Modern Slavery

One of the main Gothic conventions Khal uses in Tarmi bi Sharar is the castle beyond the reach of the law. The Master of the Palace obtains his land and buildings through property theft for which he experiences no legal consequences. As an elite individual who inherits power and wealth from his family of aristocrats, the Master also inherits legal impunity for any transgressions he commits. Toward the novel’s beginning, the Master’s palace is constructed shortly after property is confiscated from people living in the Firepit, a fictional neighborhood close to Jeddah’s coast. As the Palace grows, more property is stolen from people whose property rights are nullified. One of these individuals who shows up at the Palace to “[d]emand payment for land he owned that bordered the Palace grounds and that had been expropriated by the Master…was dragged
off by the collar to languish in the Palace jail...[and] local notables who interceded on [his family’s] behalf became marked men” (21). The Master and his power exist beyond the reach of the law, allowing him the capacity for property theft without consequences. The “Palace jail” and its prisoners who challenge the Master’s authority underscore the Master’s impunity and locate the moral code as internal rather than external to the Palace. The Master is the “author” of the moral code within the Palace, and his authority extends to every space his palace occupies, including those spaces stolen for the Palace’s growing structure.

The consequences of the Master’s property theft extend beyond the land and into the sea, where local fishers’ source of labor suddenly vanishes when the coast is designated Palace property. No one except for elite landowners can access the beautiful coast once barriers are constructed to separate the elite from the residents of the Firepit. Land inheritance means nothing once the Master uses his authority to confiscate another square of space for his palace. The neighborhood’s residents can do nothing to retrieve their land or receive compensation:

Their land, whether on the shore or adjacent to it, had been passed down from father to son for generations. But when they showed up with their documents in the halls of justice, they discovered the decree for expropriation had already been issued; flying in every direction, they lodged complaints. All their protests fell on deaf ears. The seafront was parcelled off to the highest bidders and the high and mighty succeeded in hiding the seafront from view. (44)

The “decree for expropriation” is a nod to the Master’s authority, which bends the law to suit his interests. The market for land here is more relevant than legal property
attribution, where the “highest bidders” determine who receives land instead of the law. The sea itself is treated as real estate, and the Master steals the space from its rightful heirs to develop and sell more land to the rich: “Their patch of the sea was already buried under hundreds of thousands of tonnes of earth and divided up into valuable plots of real estate and housing developments. None of the carefully preserved deeds confirming their ownership could help them recover the lands of their ancestors” (44). The Master’s Palace and the properties he steals, both on land and sea, represent the extension of his authority across space. His authoritarian power nullifies the rights of the people whose land he steals. In extending his Palace through property theft, the Master designates the vicinity of his power, which exists beyond the reach of legal or moral codes.

In delineating a space beyond the reach of the law and housing unimaginable cruelty—cruelty I will write about in the next section—the Palace is a type of Gothic building with imposing and oppressive qualities. But from the outside, the Palace wouldn’t strike one as a conventional Gothic building whose haunting, sinister demeanor discourages entrance, like the building in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The Palace is described instead as majestic and enchanting. Rather than a decaying structure, the Palace exudes life and vitality with an exuberant and elegant display of materials and colors: “Its exquisitely crafted white marble shimmered all night long in a sequence of rainbow colours…projected from lights that had been subtly concealed by a state-of-the-art lighting design” (16-17). And far from the gloomy character of the Gothic castle, the Palace’s character is heaven-like, possessing the charm of a place blessed by divinity: “The Palace seemed like a gift from heaven, as enchanting as a droplet of water turning into a snowflake as it floats to the ground” (17).
Palace’s architecture is a stark contrast to the backward-looking structure of the crumbling Gothic castle: “The towering outer walls were dotted with golden domes, the bases of which were embossed with dark green calligraphy inside double-helix crowns. Above these, precious stones glinted, set in the veins of polished pink marble imported from Spain” (17). Everything around it complements the Palace’s grandiose nature, including the landscaping, animals, and luxury vehicles: “its grounds were a succession of lush gardens, luxuriant with flowers and fruit trees, and also with birds, horses and other animals. Whenever the space grew too confined, the sea was there to be reclaimed, making way for the arrival of the latest models in luxury cars, yachts and motor boats, as well as ornamental statues” (18). Everyone outside of it fantasizes about entering the Palace to witness and be close to its extravagance and splendor: The Palace is “suspended between the great blue of sea and sky, at once mesmerising and redeeming. Gazing at it, all one wanted was to enter and see it from the inside” (17). The Palace’s awe-inspiring exterior mimics the pretensions of the Master and his elite merchant family, who boast of their goodwill and righteousness while carrying out heinous activities behind the doors of the Palace.

The Palace’s grandeur juxtaposes the Firepit’s disrepair. The “dilapidated neighbourhood” just outside the Palace has “fetid alleyways swollen with rubbish and the crumbling houses [are] propped up by makeshift metal girders and trusses” (16). Only when the Firepit is made an appendage to the Palace do the slightest improvements occur: “After the neighbourhood was made to relinquish its original name and consented to being improved with broad, well-lit streets that were paved and lined with trees, the Palace became our new address” (16). The poor neighborhood is a crucial accessory of
the Palace since it accentuates the Palace’s magnificence with the Firepit’s paltry existence. And while the Palace does not invite dread in the way the conventional Gothic castle does, it symbolizes the oppression of the lower classes whose property has been expropriated for the development of the Palace and whose class status defines the elite’s wealth. The Palace is oppressively gorgeous, inviting a dread that is based in the miseries of class difference.

While from the outside the Palace is beautiful, from the inside it is horrifying. The Palace houses a torture chamber where Tariq and other punishers perform the unspeakable on the Master’s entrapped subjects, and these punishers themselves are entrapped in their roles under the Master. The Palace is not merely a passive stage for human violence, but also the architectural structure that defines the boundaries of confinement, contains its subjects within the vicinity of the Master’s power, and hides the unspeakable from those excluded from the Palace. The Palace’s spaces were designed specifically for atrocity—and built upon and made possible by the property theft against the Firepit’s inhabitants. The Master brings his enemies to the Palace for punishment because they have intruded on the Master’s power. As a consequence, the Master, through morbid modes of intrusive bodily harm, violates the moral codes that dictate boundaries between bodies.

The Palace’s inviting exterior hides the confinement felt by the Palace workers who are forbidden to leave: whereas “some on the outside are still haunted by these old dreams and continue to ask themselves how they can enter the Palace…those of us on the inside count the days to our escape” (13). The Master is a modern slave-owner who traffics and maims humans and forces them into dehumanizing and destructive labor.
Women are human trafficked to be the Master’s sex slaves while men are trafficked to be punishers ordered to torture the Master’s male enemies. Madame is the woman in charge of trafficking women from outside the Palace, using the Palace’s distance from the law as an incentive: “She made the rounds in places known to throng with young women such as weddings and malls, and enticed them with descriptions of fairytale nights at the Palace where they would be safe from scrutiny of detention by the ubiquitous religious police—the roving squads from the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice” (69). The Palace marks the boundaries where the Commission’s influence is no longer a threat to the offenses that happen inside its walls.

Men are also trafficked from beyond the Palace to serve as “punishers” responsible for torturing the Master’s male victims. When Tariq’s friend Issa brings him to the Palace for what he characterizes as “employment,” the Master examines Tariq’s body as if inspecting a slave before purchase: “He pulled and tossed my member this way and that, making his own assessment. He flipped it to the right, then to the left, raised it, lowered it, pulled and stretched, and finally released it as nonchalantly as if he were examining a fish for its freshness” (125). Shortly after Tariq’s first few assignments, the Master “put [him] in charge of recruiting for what came to be known as the ‘Punisher Squad’” (141). After being trafficked by Issa into the Palace, Tariq becomes the trafficker, perpetuating a cycle of violence that extends the Master’s power to more bodies as if vampirically. But the squad is shortly after disbanded, leaving Tariq as the sole punisher. The fired members were threatened to conceal what they did to anyone beyond the Palace: “all its members were subjected to the same treatment they had meted out to the Master’s adversaries, with photographic evidence as back-up. They were duly
warned to forget what took place in the Palace on pains of some unspecified punishment. All understood the veiled threat and the consequences of breaking the team’s vow of silence” (142). In attempting to secure himself from consequences of breaking moral codes outside the Palace, the Master invents new moral codes inside the Palace, where transgressions and punishments are defined according to the Master’s interests. And just like the Master extends his power across space through property theft, he extends his authority across bodies through human trafficking and enslavement.

With his authoritarian rule of those within the Palace, the Master is essentially a slaveowner, as Tariq reflects upon when considering his own enslavement:

Slavery has not been abolished. It exists in many guises and lurks behind all sorts of façades. How I yearned to be my own master. Wealth and power are the foundations of sovereignty: throughout history these alone have determined whether one belonged to the master class or to the mass of slaves. Without wealth and power, we are slaves even if it does not feel like it. (248)

The Master’s enslavement of others is an allusion to Saudi Arabia’s recent history of slave trading. If Chris Baldick is right that “it is perfectly possible to have a Gothic story set in the author’s own time, provided that the tale focuses upon a relatively enclosed space in which some antiquated barbaric code still prevails” (xv), then the Palace is a time capsule for a barbaric past that haunts the present. In this case, the Palace preserves the realities of the Saudi slave trade, which only began to be eradicated as recently as November 6, 1962, when Prince Faisal issued a Ten-Point Program to abolish slavery and free all enslaved people in the country. In Slavery in the Arab World (1989), Murray Gordon notes that the effects of this decree varied across the country. Gordon writes that
while “Faisal freed several tens of thousands of slaves in 1963,” “there were anywhere from 100,000 to 250,000 slaves in 1962,” and the Saudi state failed to respond to the United Nation’s request in 1965 for a report on the status of slavery in Saudi Arabia (233). Most of the enslaved people who were freed even stayed to work for their previous owners, who were rewarded compensation by the state for freeing their enslaved, while the enslaved did not receive compensation upon being freed (Gordon 234). Slavery in Tarmi bi Sharar is brought into twenty-first century Saudi Arabia by the Master, whose name itself signals the relationship between master and enslaved. Tariq “[yearns] to be [his] own master,” and in this yearning he internalizes the monstrosity of the Master while also solidifying his own abjection and desire to expunge the monster within himself.

4. Monstrosity, Authoritarianism, and Disability

Khal uses the Gothic trope of monsters and monster-makers to explore the relationship between the Master’s tyranny and the Palace workers’ violence against the Master’s enemies. By narrating the origin of its monsters and interrogating the nature of their monstrosity, the novel follows the tradition of earlier Gothic stories such as Shelley’s Frankenstein. However, unlike Victor Frankenstein, who makes a monster without knowing the heinous acts that monster will perform, Khal’s Master of the Palace intentionally makes Tariq and the other Palace workers into monsters so that they can commit atrocities according to the Master’s commands. And unlike Frankenstein’s monster, whose life is sustained by the supernatural, the Master’s monsters are humans
who do monstrous things, making them more like Manfred, the monster of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, than the monsters of Shelley, Stevenson, and Stoker.

In hiring people who commit atrocities at the Master’s will, the Master creates monsters of his victims. He complicates the monster-victim dichotomy, blurring the lines between torturer and victim, since the Palace slaves’ work is torture. The Master’s monstrosity manifests in inhumane desires to inflict cruel forms of punishment upon his rivals. Tariq, the narrator and protagonist, is the Master’s most trusted punisher. The Master films all of Tariq’s acts, forcing Tariq to repeat certain acts again until the Master is satisfied. These recordings are used as blackmail to keep the Master’s victims and punishers quiet about the crimes that occur in the Palace. Tariq is made into a monster, but at the same time is a victim of the Master’s monstrous will. Tariq reflects on how the torturer-victim binary is disrupted: “In all such instances, torturer and victim were inexorably drawn to the edge of the abyss. Their individualities dissolved and they became one, united in torment” (xii). Tariq describes this dual victimhood as a loss of individuality, as both torturer and victim lose their dignity and control to the Master’s vile wishes. It’s as if Tariq dissolves into the Master’s monstrosity, extending the Master’s power and exerting the Master’s force upon other bodies. And when Tariq rapes his victims, he feels as though he is the one being raped: “Even though I had engaged in countless acts of sodomy, I felt as if it were I who was being raped— that I was the one vainly begging for mercy” (128). Tariq is trapped in a role he had no idea he would play, with no way out except through the Master’s dismissal.

Monstrosity in *Tarmi bi Sharar* is a device for thinking through authority, and transgression, and the sources of power. Blurring the lines between the torturer and the
tortured, Tariq challenges the binary that distinguishes between monster and victim. In “Postcolonial Gothic,” Sarah Illot writes that the difficulty of distinguishing between monster and victim and the challenge of determining whether we should regard the monster-victim with horror or pity “turns the gaze on the monster-maker” (29). The Master, the monster-maker in Khal’s novel, increases his power with every person he forces into inhumane labor. The monsters he makes are reflections of his own power. But in contrast to the Master, Tariq and the other punishers are hybrid monster-victims whose monstrosity only extends as far as the Master’s authority and is never exerted toward the Master himself. “[Turning] the gaze on the monster-maker” in this novel means interrogating what the Master’s monstrosity represents: unlimited and unchecked power concentrated into a single person who forces his human subjects into awful forms of submission; essentially, authoritarianism. The Master’s authoritarian rule within the Palace squashes the individuality of his subjects, rendering their lives extensions of his own power in a similar way to how the Master makes land and ocean along the coast extensions of the Palace through property theft. The Master marks his subjects as extensions of his power by maiming them, producing the disabilities and debilities that keep them under his authority.

The Master secures control of the Palace’s enslaved workers through maiming, forcing them into submission, dependence, and fear. Any errors committed, and any escapes attempted, are met with severe physical and psychological harm. As a result, everyone who works at the Palace possesses some sort of disability that marks them the way enslaved people are marked as property:
As one adept at mutilation, he filled his palace with a variety of human puppets and his incessant abuse left no one whole: eyes were gouged, limbs were broken, hair and nails pulled out. Some were burned, others castrated and still others were emotionally maimed or made chronically sick. For those lucky enough to escape bodily injury, inner demons and untold nervous disorders would soon appear. In his perpetual search for new diversions, all of us were disfigured in some way or another. That is what puppets and dolls are made for; which child could resist playing with his toys? (5)

In maiming his subjects, the Master pins them to the Palace and solidifies his authority over them. They become “puppets” subject to the arbitrary whims of a “child” amused by his own capacity for destruction. His production of disabled subjects who do monstrous things is part of a strategic effort to confine the Palace workers by their disabilities and use their transgressions as blackmail against any attempts to escape.

Being maimed is a condition of labor inside the Palace, an endemic procedure and expected consequence of occupying the spaces and roles the Master produces. The Master uses disablement as a technique of control to maintain authority over his subjects, and in doing so he takes their bodily capacities without consent. The logic of authoritarian impunity upholds the Master’s “right to maim” his subjects. In The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability (2017), Jasbir K. Puar examines “the right to maim” alongside “the right to kill” in order to unpack the interdependencies and uses of the categories of debility, capacity, and disability central to biopolitical exertions of power. Puar argues that these three categories triangulate to justify slow violence against populations: the state recognizes certain disabilities, privileging them over the forms of
debility endemic to laboring, living, and surviving in neoliberal capitalist society and neocolonial occupation; and these disabilities and debilities work to establish what constitutes capacity, pushing the expectations of bodily ability closer toward impossibility to justify increasingly demanding standards of productivity and bodily health. In one example of “the right to maim,” Puar writes about the Israeli state’s settler colonial rule over Palestinians and the Israeli state’s “creating injury and maintaining Palestinian populations as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them” (x). The right to maim is justified by the state’s proclaimed authority to protect itself and what it considers its legitimate subjects. In Tarmi bi Sharar, the Master and his family are the only “legitimate” subjects worthy of protection and capacity. Those who work under the Master are permitted their capacities only insofar as they serve the Master’s purposes. The Master’s production of disabilities in his subjects is normalized, making it difficult to discern between disability and debility due to both the traumatic and endemic features of their maiming. The Master debilitates to injure, not to kill, so that his subjects remain confined between life and death, performing their work to remain alive and avoid dying.

The Master’s right to maim is ironically underscored by his status as a philanthropist for groups that center people with disabilities. His “donation of ten million riyals to a special-needs charity,” for example, further secures his authority over bodies with disabilities since he has already performed what he would consider adequate aid and balanced the score. In a newspaper feature displaying his empathy and compassion, “he handed a cheque to the president of the Association for the Disabled” and “he chastised the wealthy for their stinginess and expressed his hope that they would redouble their efforts, calling for new initiatives and bolder philanthropic endeavors. He exhorted his
well-heeled peers to focus on assisting the less fortunate and to lend a hand in launching voluntary support and relief projects” (4). This gesture is a way of sponsoring disability while promoting the systemic debility of his own staff. The Master appropriates disability causes to cosmetically refine his public image and appear generous and caring while behind doors he disables and debilitates his enslaved workers. This juxtaposition between his external presentation and the maiming occurring internal to the Palace works in a similar way to the juxtaposition between the Palace’s magnificent exterior and its horrifying interior. Much like the Master extends his authority and wealth status through the Palace’s architecture, he also extends his right to maim through his philanthropy for organizations centering disabled people.

Maiming enhances the Palace workers’ confinement by augmenting their fear of punishment for attempting to leave and diminishing their ability to move beyond the limits of the Palace and the Master’s power. In addition to this confining abuse, the Master installs a surveillance system throughout the Palace to monitor his employees and prevent attempts to challenge his power or leave the Palace. This surveillance technology is an extension of the Master’s power and his body, as his cameras and microphones extend his ability to see and hear. Surveillance also makes the Palace like a sentient subject with eyes and ears. The Master’s body and power stretch across space as well as time, since he sees and hears across multiple spaces in the Palace and can rewind to any point in time. Wester and Reyes write “Gothic monsters of the twenty-first century, tied as they are to the past and to a long representational tradition, are necessarily inflected by modern technological developments” (6). The Master’s surveillance technologies make him more monstrous, and call attention to the monstrosity of surveillance itself as a tool
for forcing compliance and protecting property. And, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng writes in *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives* (2015), some Gothic stories, like Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” explore “the role of space as colluder with, and accuser of, the guilty subject in both hiding and exposing, respectively, his crime” (3). The Master makes the Palace into a “colluder” of his own crimes by using its rooms and faces to extend his perceptive capacities. Using undetectable cameras and microphones to watch and listen in on his employees from above, from afar, and from all around, the Master achieves a god-like presence in the lives of his subjects, exercising his authoritarian power over humans as if he is the “author” of their lives. Even when the Master grants Tariq permission to live outside the Palace while fulfilling his duties, he secretly installs cameras in Tariq’s villa, monitoring his activities to prevent Tariq from having sex with other people. Tariq reflects on his confinement: “I needed to get away from the twenty-four-hour surveillance. I had become cautious and was circumspect at all times. I moved like a rat trying to get across an open space full of hungry cats: security precautions preceded my every step. I became increasingly desperate to leave the villa” (186). By comparing himself to “a rat trying to get across an open space full of hungry cats,” Tariq underscores the dehumanizing effect of surveillance. The “security precautions” that disturb Tariq to a state of paranoia point to what needs to be secured and protected so urgently: the Master, his power, the Palace, and the people who make the wheels of his cruelty turn.

As a monster made by the Master himself, Tariq has learned the ways of cruelty. Both monster and victim, villain and hero, he adopts many of the Master’s practices of wielding power and maiming the vulnerable at the same time as power is wielded upon
him. In the same way the Master confines Tariq to the palace, Tariq confines Aunt Khayriyyah to his villa where he locks her inside to starve almost to death. Tariq loathes his aunt for how she treated his mother, Aunt Khayriyyah’s sister-in-law. The only way he will assume responsibility for housing her and keeping her close to family is by making her life miserable and treating her like a prisoner. And in the same way the Master tortures and mutilates his victims and servants, Tariq tortures and mutilates his aunt. Knowing his aunt was responsible for his mother’s fall from a ladder and her severed tongue—a dreadful family secret only he knows about—he seeks revenge against her, and one day cuts her tongue out, feeding it to a cat the way Aunt Khayriyyah did his mother’s. The Master’s cruelty extends to Tariq, tracing a line of power that points back to the thing that power secures: one’s own authority over other human beings. And in the same way Tariq was human trafficked into the Palace to become a punisher, Tariq furthers the cycle of human trafficking by recruiting more punishers into the Palace for the Master. As a figure who permeates the boundaries between the Palace and the Firepit, Tariq is a hybrid insider-outsider. Tariq is the novel’s narrator and focalizer, and through these roles he communicates both his marginalization and his occupation of central power. Sarah Ilott writes that the postcolonial gothic “[centralizes] those who were once marginalized and made monstrous” (20). When the Master’s family created the Palace on land that belonged to the Firepit, the family began a process of exploitation that would harm the people of the Firepit for a long time. Tariq represents the history of this exploitation, since his life started in the Firepit then moved to within the Palace boundaries. Tariq’s hybridity as an insider-outsider allows us to read across the land and across class to observe the ways the Master’s property theft and enslavement are
interconnected habits of violence that go unpunished because of the Master’s authoritarian impunity.

The novel is framed by Tariq’s desire to seek revenge against his monster-maker and kill the Master. This paragraph appears in identical form at the beginning and end of the novel: “My decision to kill the master had fully ripened. I had been carrying around images of his dead body in my mind for a very long time, summoning up visions of murder while lying in bed, killing him a different way before falling asleep every night” (xiv, 348-349). The last iteration, however, concludes the novel with one final line: “But how vast the ocean that separates imagination from reality. I closed my eyes.” The Master is so powerful it’s as if he is invincible. Tariq isn’t just up against a single man—he faces a system where transgression against the Master is immediately punished. Anyone in the vicinity of his power is captive to his wishes and restrictions. In this way, he is much like Sheikh Khalid al-Sibaykhan in Raja Alem’s Tawq al-Hamam (The Dove’s Necklace 2010), who is never made to suffer for his atrocities and whose power extends across all of Saudi Arabia. Tariq suffers abjection in his simultaneous internalization of the Master’s monstrosity and his rejection of the Master—as well as rejection of “the Master” inside of himself. Tariq wants revenge against the Master for the ways he makes Tariq suffer, but being a monster made by the Master, Tariq is programmed to make himself suffer. In a 1980 interview with Elaine H. Baruch, Julia Kristeva describes abjection as “a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside” (Baruch 118). In confronting the Master’s offenses, Tariq faces the atrocities born from within himself. Tariq thinks “I was able to shed my past thanks to the Master. Now, I
needed to shed him. Trying to block him out was futile. He had the power to make himself heard and ensure I did his bidding, regardless. Ever since the night that Issa had led me to the Palace, I had been captive to his every command” (311). While Tariq’s revenge fantasy is unrealized, Issa attempts revenge against the Master, walking into the Palace one day with a gun. The Master kills Issa for his revenge attempt, and forces Tariq, Issa’s best friend, to rape him before his murder. The revenge narrative in *Tarmi bi Sharar* is left incomplete, but other forms of revenge are exacted elsewhere in the novel. Maram exacts revenge against Issa for trafficking her into the Palace. She reports to the Master that Issa secretly married the Master’s sister, after which Issa paid a lethal price. Additionally, Tariq exacts revenge against Aunt Khayriyyah for the harm she caused his mother. While he fails to exact revenge against the Master, Tariq deals with consequences of his own as he encounters the demons of his past.

5. The Past, the Uncanny, and Incest

In *Tarmi bi Sharar*, the past is a threat to characters’ security and power. In “The Contemporary Gothic,” Xavier Aldana Reyes writes “[o]ne of the elements that characterizes Gothic literature is a tension between the barbaric past and the modern present” (4). The past haunts Tariq in many ways. Before being trafficked into the Palace, Tariq was in a romantic relationship with his lover Tahani, whose family already arranged for her marriage to another man. One night, Tariq goes to Tahani’s family’s home and rapes Tahani after Tahani’s multiple attempts to communicate non-consent. Tahani doesn’t consent to having sex with Tariq because having sex will, for her family, ruin her honor and render her unfit for marriage to the partner they have chosen for her.
According to custom, she must remain a virgin until marriage, so she begs Tariq not to continue: “‘Spare me, because I love you,’ she cried in one last gasp of resistance” (118). Tariq was fully aware of Tahani’s situation, but raped her anyway. Later, he remembers the moment, reflecting on the clear signs of her non-consent: “Escaping with Tahani’s blood on my conscience, my mind replaying the whole episode, I could no longer tell which had been louder: Tahani’s languid moans or her cries begging me to stop” (120). Tariq not only ruined her marriage, he ruined her life. After her father discovers what happened, he drives Tahani out of town and murders her. Osama is a constant reminder of Tariq’s sin and a manifestation of the past that haunts. Osama, also a punisher at the Palace and also in love with Tahani, torments Tariq about the secret, dreadful event that got Tahani killed, suspecting all along that it was Tariq’s fault.

The uncanny is a helpful concept for reading the ways Tariq’s past and present are intertwined in a way similar to the Firepit’s connection with the Palace. The night Tariq rapes Tahani, Issa traffics Tariq into the Palace, where Tariq believes he will be able to run from his past and be protected from the consequences of his action. However, Tariq’s role in the Palace involves an uncanny, hell-like repetition of the atrocity he committed. In “Postcolonial Gothic in and as Theory,” Alison Rudd, paraphrasing Freud, writes “[t]he uncanny effect is aroused by a recognition of the familiar in the unfamiliar, an old, familiar feeling, which through the process of repression has become alien” (73). Rudd explains further that when a character experiences the uncanny, “the postcolonial subject is confronted by a disturbing vision of the past erupting into the present, effacing the boundaries between past and present, between public and private” (73). As punisher, Tariq must relive the unspeakable act he committed against Tahani. The Master’s
impunity does not extend to his subjects. While Tariq thought the Palace would protect him from the consequences of his past actions, he ultimately is punished brutally. And the uncanniness of Tariq’s assignments is strengthened by his confinement in the Palace, since he is trapped in his role and must repeat his abuses for what seems like an eternity. In “The Contemporary Gothic,” Reyes writes “the past, often in the shape of a curse or nightmarish presence, returns to either exert its evil grasp or impose a revision of forgotten, repressed, or unknown events or memories” (5). For Tariq, the past returns to remind him that he has been in this heinous position before. In reliving his transgression, Tariq’s personal past manifests in a barbaric mode, burying him further in the consequences of his actions. And Tariq’s punishment highlights the Master’s impunity, since the Master does not suffer consequences for trafficking and maiming humans, only those who are hired do. Similar to how the Firepit’s squalor accentuates the Palace’s grandeur, so too does Tariq’s assignments reinforce the Master’s immunity to the consequences of these transgressions. Moreover, Tariq’s uncanny acts relate to the Firepit’s gentrification in the similar act of taking what is not granted. Tariq takes Tahani without consent; the Master takes property without consent, human bodies into slavery without consent, and their capacities without consent. Tariq betrays the Firepit and its community by perpetuating human trafficking into the Palace and upholding the Master’s rights to do whatever he wishes with their land and the people who are transgressed on that land.

The novel’s closing scene when Tariq attends his brother Ibrahim’s sermon would seem to suggest that Tariq has seen the last of the consequences of his transgressions: Ibrahim says “‘Oh my servants who have transgressed against themselves, do not despair
of God’s mercy. God forgives all sins: He is all-forgiving, compassionate to each”” (348). After witnessing Tariq suffer the consequences of his actions the whole novel and then being dismissed from the confinement of the Palace, it would seem as though Tariq’s punishment is complete. But also in the last scene, he discovers he has committed incest with Mariam, his half-sister. Mariam is trafficked into the Palace and lives there under the name Maram as she fulfills the role of the Master’s main sexual partner. Since Tariq has never met his half-sister due to his own disdain for his family, he has no idea that by sharing a romantic and sexual relationship with her he is committing incest. Incest becomes the new past that will haunt Tariq for the rest of his life. At a more conceptual level, Tariq’s incest is a critique of nepotistic power in Saudi Arabia. Most directly, it calls attention to the merchant families in Jeddah who inherit enormous wealth and thereby preserve family power and influence in the region. Additionally, the novel’s incest is a critique of the Al Saud regime and its centuries of rule. Al Saud’s support of the merchant families in Jeddah further reinforces the nepotistic element of authoritarian rule and influence as represented in the novel.

Brother-sister incest here presents a critique of blood-based power where genetics is the basis of elected authority. One of the most striking features of Tariq and Maram’s incest is that what makes their love forbidden is not so much the fact that they share the same blood but that they both promise allegiance to the Master: one in terms of sexual commitment and the other in terms of servitude. Their defiance of power is conducted through same-blood romance, which invokes the logic of sameness at the core of inheriting genes and power while transgressing against the terms of that logic since incest disrupts inheritance. In *Gothic Incest: Gender, Sexuality and Transgression* (2018),
Jenny DiPlacidi writes that sibling incest is “tied to questions of equality, natural desires, the bonds of blood and the law” (87). The entanglement of desire with the bond of blood Tariq and Maram share in their secret affair draws attention to their shared condition as subjects under the Master, who doesn’t represent a father figure to them but asserts patriarchal authority that has been granted to him by his genetic lineage: the Master is a type of father of economics and class in Jeddah. DiPlacidi writes “[t]he potential for equality…underpins the relationships between brothers and sisters and makes the bonds between siblings so dangerous and potentially destructive to patriarchal society” (85-86). The half-siblings engage in a subversive relationship that challenges the strictures of their own blood family at the same time as it questions the logic of sameness that underpins the Master’s nepotistic inheritance of absolutist power as a head of his merchant family. Tariq and Maram’s sibling incest is also a transgression in that through this relationship they achieve a type of internal and interpersonal depth and complexity that the Master prohibits in his demands that palace laborers leave their personal lives out of the Palace. The Master intends for his servants to be replaceable and dispensable, so they might as well conduct themselves as if anonymous.

Conventionally, the Gothic castle usually preserves the past in the form of historical or moral codes. In some ways, the Palace in *Tarmi bi Sharar* returns to a barbaric past where inhumane practices such as enslavement and corporeal punishment remain. In other ways, however, the Palace keeps the past out of its boundaries. For example, the workers in the Palace are considered to have no pasts and perform their duties as if from a blanket identity of anonymity:
No common history bound them and none of them knew each other’s personal history. With the exception of a group of employees from our neighbourhood who were assigned different jobs, all of us discharged our duties anonymously, whether in the open or behind closed doors. Our given names were unnecessary to our roles and we were known by the jobs we performed. No one asked about anyone’s past. (30)

Without “personal history,” the enslaved laborers lack a fundamental aspect of personhood. Instead, their existence is defined more by the “jobs we performed.” By stripping them of their histories, the Master is divorcing them from their humanity and reducing them to units of labor. The Palace is a vacuum that seals out personal histories at the same time as it keeps out national and global histories: “The towering walls of the Palace kept out all global and local news, whether the bloodshed in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, the terrorist attacks in the country or the rovering patrols of the religious police. People came to the Palace bent on cutting a deal, or the promise of a deal, and nothing else mattered. Bloodshed and dignity were irrelevant” (250). The Palace as a building outside of history is a reflection of the Master’s insulated power. His authoritarian rule over everyone within the Palace is another form of insulation where moral codes differ from the ones outside the Palace.

In addition to his betrayal of Tahani, Tariq runs from other aspects of his past, including the shame he has caused his family by working at the Palace and evading the responsibilities that come with family. Aunt Khayriyyah haunts Tariq after he left her to starve in the villa they shared when he was supposed to give her care in her elder years; Tahani haunts Tariq after he raped her and left her to die at her father’s hands; Osama
haunts Tariq for taking away the one person he loved most; his brother Ibrahim haunts Tariq after he lied to him about coming to visit and be back with his family to meet his half-sister, nieces, and nephews. Tariq feels pressure from all these aspects of the past as he continues to suffer through his role as punisher: “They were all embedded in my flesh and in my memory like so many hooks, each one tearing at some part of me. I was unravelling and felt myself being propelled into the abyss” (222). Tariq feels the waves of his past transgressions increase until these climax with his last assignment at the Palace. Before then, he feels the weight of his grief reach unbearable magnitudes: “The past is like a dormant volcano. We settle on its slopes, firmly convinced that the lava has cooled and petrified. But before we secure our hold, the volcano erupts and we are swept away, scorched and covered in ash. Every hurt I had ever caused anyone was erupting into flames before my eyes and all the grief of my past was surging into view” (332).

Tariq’s encounters with his past are cyclical like the volcano’s eruption cycle. Tariq’s visits to Aunt Khayriyyah, Ibrahim’s visits to Tariq, and Osama’s questions toward Tariq all occur in a rotation that keeps Tariq in a continual encounter with his past. To narrate his story, Tariq uses formal elements like confession and prolepsis in an attempt to assert control over his spiraling fate, a fate which is ultimately driven by the novel’s larger frame of salvation.

6. Confession, Prolepsis, and the Fall of the House of Demons

Tariq formulates his narrative as a confession for the heinous acts he committed against Tahani and all of the Master’s enemies. The confessional form challenges the logic of authoritarian impunity that defines the Master’s power. Tariq’s confession to acts
of atrocity is a way of claiming responsibility and owning the consequences of his
transgressions. An epigraph written by Tariq precedes the opening scene of the novel and
categorizes the story as a confessional narrative:
   A wave is a marker of distance, of absence.
   And Tahani never raised her hand…
   How I betrayed her when she did not wave from afar!
   This confession, in all its sordidness, is for her and for all the
   others I ruined along the way. (ii)

Tariq seeks closure through his confession, hoping that he will be able to live beyond the
atrocities he has committed. By framing his story as a confession, Tariq takes
responsibility for his actions in a way that the Master does not. In confessing his crimes
against the Master’s enemies, Tariq is owning responsibility for actions he performed as
an enslaved person under the Master. After the confessional epigraph, the novel opens
with the scene of Tariq’s final assignment at the palace: the Master orders him to rape his
friend Issa for Issa’s revenge attempt against the Master, and for Issa’s marriage to the
Master’s sister Mawdie. This prolepsis reveals the depth to which Tariq will fall as a
protagonist throughout the narrative. Since Tariq’s epigraph opens the novel declaring the
story a confessional narrative, this first scene immediately demonstrates him being
punished for the sin he has committed. The palace is outside the reach of the law, but
Tariq is not outside the reach of punishment, and neither is he beyond the reach of
salvation. Tariq’s only way out of the Palace is to punish his best friend Issa, the person
who brought him to the Palace in the first place. The novel creates a circular narrative at
its start, mirroring the circularity of Tariq’s assignments and the circularity of the
Master’s authoritarian power in the Palace. But whereas the Master’s circuit of power is closed, ensuring his dominance remains unthreatened by outside forces, Tariq’s circuit of power is open, allowing for his eventual escape from the Master and the Palace, with the potential for a new life and metaphorical rebirth. Temporal logics of eternal rule underpin the ideologies of authoritarianism and nepotism. Tariq’s prolepsis upsets this logic by locating the end of his own trajectory of power at the beginning of the novel. In conjunction with his confession, the prolepsis terminates his punishment under the Master, suggesting he has endured what he and the Master would consider enough. And by positioning his epigraphic confession immediately adjacent to the opening scene’s prolepsis, Tariq links the action for which he confesses—raping Tahani and the Master’s victims—with the action that permits his escape from the Palace—raping Issa. While the confessional form juxtaposes Tariq’s self-blame against the Master’s impunity, prolepsis juxtaposes Tariq’s freedom from enslavement against the Master’s interminable power. Both devices draw the reader’s attention again from the monster in Tariq to the monster-maker of the story.

Tariq’s confessional frame is part of a larger structure the novelist crafts to follow Tariq’s journey through the depths of despair and upward toward a salvation grounded in an Islamic encounter with Allah’s forgiveness. The reader is given a few signs that this is Tariq’s journey when the novelist divides the narrative into two parts, signaling these phases with two brief “thresholds,” formatted like epigraphs, each of which features an excerpt from a sermon by Tariq’s brother, Ibrahim. The message of the first threshold, located at the beginning of the novel, is that “No good can arise in a nation that punishes the weak and turns a blind eye to the deeds of the rich and powerful” (1). This threshold
directly acknowledges the impunity of “rich and powerful” individuals such as the Master while making room for the forgiveness of those who are subjected to their dehumanizing demands such as Tariq. The message of the second threshold, located roughly toward the last third of the novel, articulates the idea that systemic forms of terrorism often become invisible against the spectacle of isolated instances of terrorism, an idea which is relevant to how the Master’s “corruption” structures the “values and principles” that would guide his “injustices” of property theft, human trafficking, and maiming: “Terrorism is the corruption of society as a whole, the withering of its values and principles: that is the real terrorism. It is the inevitable outcome of grievances that are left unaddressed and of the relentless perpetration of injustices” (243). The spatial connotations of these thresholds suggests that Tariq is being guided through an architectural structure, either inward to locate the innocence of his soul or outward to find his spiritual home in Allah’s kingdom; for Tariq, both inward and outward journeys happen simultaneously.

Before Tariq can be completely led out of the chamber of his misery and freed from his sin, the house of his despair must be destroyed. The thresholds mentioned above lead up to the novel’s conclusion when Tariq visits his brother Ibrahim to see if his aunt went there after escaping Tariq’s villa. Instead, whom he finds there is the son of his half-sister, whom he has supposedly never met before. Upon hearing that the father of this son was Waleed Khanbashi, the man whom Maram married before Issa stole her away to the Palace, Tariq realizes that his sister Mariam is his former lover Maram, and that he has been in an incestuous relationship that will ruin his relationship with the half-sister he longs to be united with. Tariq crumbles like a collapsing building under this realization: “When a building collapses, the roof tiles and the brickwork do not ask who betrayed
whom. As soon as the soul rises and departs the body, the dead begin to decompose, and the flesh sets to rotting. The earth opened up and I fell head first, seized with terror. There was no longer a place for me on this earth” (347). Without a sense of home or origin, Tariq wanders at Ibrahim’s will, and they both go to Ibrahim’s mosque where Ibrahim will conduct the prayers as imam. Ibrahim’s Quranic verse speaks directly to Tariq’s sin and despair in an attempt to reground his brother in a life of recovery and revival: “‘Oh my servants who have transgressed against themselves, do not despair of God’s mercy. God forgives all sins: He is all-forgiving, compassionate to each’” (348). At these words, Tariq’s house of despair is demolished, and the “demons” that kept him prisoner in his corrupted soul are “vanquished”: “As the rubble settled, I looked at all the dust billowing up from within me filling the prayer hall. Smashed into a million shards, my spirit gave up the ghost. I disappeared behind a veil of tears, and with the breach not yet healed, I sobbed as Ibrahim’s voice finally vanquished the demons playing havoc with my soul” (348). Like with the fall of the Castle of Otranto in Walpole’s novel, which saw the transfer of the castle from its transgressive usurpers to its rightful owner through supernatural means, the house of Tariq’s soul is returned to its rightful owner by way of a spiritual intervention. Tariq’s soul, like the Master’s Palace, was designed by the Master for sin, but Ibrahim restores Tariq to a holier state in the hands of his original maker. In the last sentences of the novel, Tariq lets go of his wish to exact revenge against the Master, beginning his journey toward peace and away from the miseries of abjection. Tariq is freed from the architecture of terror that previously structured his life, and he is welcomed into the house of God, represented here by Ibrahim’s mosque. After years of
abandoning his origins, leaving his family and friends behind, and forfeiting his soul to sin, he returns home.

7. Conclusion

Taking without consent is a prominent theme in current Saudi Arabian politics. In recent decades, the state has carried out a massive revision of its own history, altering the collective national memory and centering Al Saud’s hereditary monarchy in the narrative of state formation. The mechanisms of this historical elision include removing significant materials from museums, archives, and historical sites and destroying national monuments and historical architecture. In Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia (2020), Rosie Bsheer examines the Al Saud regime’s late twentieth-century and ongoing campaign to erase the country’s Islamic history and present the ruling family’s legacy as national history. Bsheer analyzes how “the battles to erase and remake history through archives and the built environment, and the commodification of historical artifacts and space, were part of the same state project to erase and remake the country’s discursive and material history” (4). Saudi Arabia’s project of state formation is twofold: manipulate archives to delegitimize the nation’s religious past and erase the historical monuments and architecture that attests to the nation’s Islamic past, replacing these with high-cost commercial development projects that displace economically disadvantaged people. Bsheer links the archive wars in Saudi Arabia to the state’s investment in gentrifying major cities such as Riyadh, Mecca, and Jeddah, since the built environment is a historical site itself.
Abdo Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar* fits into the framework of the “archive wars” in Saudi Arabia. The Master is a member of a merchant family in Jeddah who, like many merchant families in Jeddah, receives support from the Al Saud regime. As the Master expands his palace, erasing the neighborhood that previously stood there in the process, the Master also expands his authority over more land and people. The Master ensures that the Palace remains without history as palace workers enter and leave their pasts behind them and as the Master demands that the discussion and consumption of current events does not occur within the Palace walls. The Master asserts his authoritarian rule to control the narrative of the Palace and disconnect that narrative from the world outside.

Tariq, in his multifaceted hybridity as insider-outsider, monster-victim, and hero-villain, navigates the boundaries between the Palace’s present and the past outside, articulating his emergence as a subject under the authority of the Master, and eventually as a subject under the divine will of Allah.

In the next chapter, I read another novel from Saudi Arabia that also earned the Arabic Booker the following year in 2011: Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* (*The Dove’s Necklace* 2010). This novel employs and subverts detective fiction conventions to interrogate the logic of individualism as it manifests in elitist real estate deals in Mecca. Like *Tarmi bi Sharar*, Alem’s novel also unfolds narratives about rape, investigating this atrocity alongside gentrification and the destruction of historical buildings in Mecca for the construction of high-cost developments. Alem’s novel features literary devices that engage similar logics of power as Khal’s novel.
Works Cited


Chapter 2: Community Detection and Victim Focalization: Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* as a Collectivist and Feminist Critique of Gentrification and Violence against Saudi Women

“God help us. Why are they trying to make the holiest city into George W. Bush Land?”

*Tawq al-Hamam*, 262

1. Introduction

Around the time Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam (The Dove’s Necklace)* was originally published in Arabic in 2010, Mecca was being torn apart and its residents were forced out of their living spaces so developers could make more money on other people’s land. In a 2010 article titled “Choking Mecca in the Name of Beauty and Development,” Rosie Bsheer writes “[w]hole neighborhoods have been completely gutted out, their residents displaced to the outskirts of Mecca and other neighboring cities.” Alem’s Lane of Many Heads, the setting of the novel’s crime and investigation, finds plenty of neighborhoods in actual Mecca that experienced and are experiencing a similar process of demolition and redevelopment, and the neighborhoods’ residents undergo the same displacement as the characters in the novel. Bsheer explains how these development activities are backed by a corrupt Saudi state who punishes those who voice resistance to these development practices:

Some have had their passports rescinded and are banned from traveling for an indefinite period of time. Others were banned from writing in local newspapers—
partially, on anything related to development plans in Mecca/Medina, or completely, on any topic. The latter were banned from publishing in all print media, and from teaching at schools and universities...In all cases, they are branded threats to national and societal security and completely isolated.

(“Choking Mecca”)

Alem’s critique of commercial development and state corruption in Mecca in the novel is significant considering the threat of consequences for such critique in a state of severe censorship. The author isn’t concerned about censorship, though; she cares more about telling Mecca’s story, highlighting its beauty, and exploring the lives of its human residents. In an interview with The National, Alem says that even though some of her books are banned in Saudi Arabia, it doesn’t stop Saudi readers from reading them, and it certainly doesn’t stop Alem from writing them: “‘People can still read the books, even if you can’t get them in the bookshops of Saudi Arabia,’ she says. ‘The thing is, I wouldn’t call The Dove’s Necklace a negative portrait of Mecca; it’s more human than that. But anyway, I never think about censorship when I write.’” Rather than allow Saudi censorship the ability to constrain her thoughts, Alem ignores it. What does state censorship mean for an author whose works are circulated in a global literary market anyway?

Alem’s representations of real estate developers who use the Hajj to create elitist spaces around al-Masjid al-Haram is also an accurate depiction of Mecca, especially five years after the novel was written when such gentrification has accelerated. In a 2015 article titled “The Property Regime: Mecca and the Politics of Redevelopment in Saudi Arabia,” Bsheer writes about how developers have “increased class inequalities and
created ‘gated communities’ where rich worshippers can separate themselves from the
crowds. Effectively, people who can afford the four-to-five million-dollar apartments or
pay upward of three thousand dollars per night for a hotel room do not have to hear,
smell, touch, or be near other pilgrims.” Displaced residents and other non-elite pilgrims
are dehumanized as a population whom the rich would resent having to “hear, smell,
touch, or be near,” in the same way the Lane’s people are dehumanized by the novel’s
main antagonist, al-Sibaykhan, his real estate company Elaf Holdings’s developments,
and his blueprint of a city without the poor.

But these assaults on the built environment and their residents are not unique to
Ziauddin Sardar writes that the destruction of Mecca’s historical architecture started in
the mid-1970s: “Innumerable ancient buildings, including the Bilal mosque, dating from
the time of the Prophet Muhammad, were bulldozed. The old Ottoman houses, with their
elegant mashrabiyas—latticework windows—and elaborately carved doors, were replaced
with hideous modern ones. Within a few years, Mecca was transformed into a ‘modern’
city with large multilane roads, spaghetti junctions, gaudy hotels and shopping malls.”
Unfortunately, Mecca eleven years after Tawq al-Hamam’s publication looks a lot like
the Mecca in the futuristic rendering by the fictional real estate company Elaf Holdings
toward the end of the novel. The reason why the novel ends in such doom is because
Alem saw the trajectory of the city’s gentrification and saw no hope in sight.

In this chapter, I read Alem’s novel for how it offers a critique of gentrification
and violence against Saudi women by using and subverting conventions of detective
fiction. My reading of Tawq al-Hamam mainly engages with critical discourses about
detective fiction in two ways. First, I enter into conversation with scholars of detective fiction such as Andrew Pepper, David Schmid, Yan Zi-Ling, and Stephen Knight about how the detective novel has conventionally been about the unfolding of the private detective’s narrative, in which a lone individual works out the details of a crime to single-handedly correct social disorder. Since the order this detective seeks to restore is the order of the capitalist state, these scholars agree, the private detective represents the privatization of the public good and the preservation of bourgeois values. Alem subverts this convention by introducing a community of detective-like characters who seek to undermine the capitalist forces at the heart of crime and the detective’s complicity with such crime. My reading here begins to fill a gap in Anglophone scholarship on detective fiction, which has neglected the work of Arabophone writers, whose immersion in Islamic cultural history and thought leads to insights about how to imagine the collective anew through a conventionally individualistic genre like detective fiction. Second, I enter into conversation with detective fiction scholars Sabine Binder and Kathleen Gregory Klein about how the narration of women’s trauma in detective fiction has conventionally emphasized women’s victimhood while omitting narratives of survival, recovery, and resilience. Furthermore, narratives of women’s trauma have often been focalized by male characters, especially the male detective. Through close readings informed by scholarship on trauma by critics such as Régine Michelle Jean-Charles and Traci West, I argue that Alem subverts these detective fiction conventions by focalizing women characters who have experienced trauma, highlighting important aspects of their victimhood, and providing an account of their survival and recovery.
Alem’s detective novel *Tawq al-Hamam* interrogates gentrification as a crime against Saudi citizens. Instead of a single detective who solves a single case, however, the novel features a community of detective-like characters who collaboratively solve the mystery of property theft. I argue that this community detection asserts a collectivism that contrasts the individualism represented by elitist real estate deals in the novel, and by the conventional detective story. In the novel, elitist individualism is characterized as destructive—mainly through the novel’s central antagonist, Sheikh Khalid al-Sibaykhan—since the accumulation of wealth and property for one man means the displacement of economically-disadvantaged communities whose neighborhoods are being demolished and redeveloped. Furthermore, gentrification in the novel also disrupts the Muslim community’s ability to fulfill the Hajj, since more and more property around al-Masjid al-Haram is developed for rich travelers, making the mosque and its surrounding areas less accessible to the poor. A community of detective-like characters including Yusuf, Khalil, the newspaper *Umm al-Qura*, detective Nasser, and users of an online forum together represent a collective interest in the preservation of Mecca’s historical architecture and a shared disdain for developers who threaten the lives and homes of Meccans.

The novel also presents a feminist critique of the violence against women of a Meccan neighborhood called Abu al-Roos, or the Lane of Many Heads. While the traditional detective novel omits the perspective and narrative of a woman victim, failing to acknowledge the woman’s trauma, Alem assigns Aisha as focalizer of her own narrative of trauma and healing. I argue that this focalization highlights Aisha’s humanity and resilience and centers her narrative of healing from trauma and escape from confinement. Moreover, Alem refrains from leaning too far into the resilience trope that
too often mischaracterizes women of color survivors as invincible and inhuman; instead, the author creates a balance between acknowledging the ways Aisha is victimized and highlighting the ways she reconstructs her identity after rape. Aisha engages with artistic practices like reading, writing, and painting that offer her support for healing and communities that value her as a person. Overall, Aisha evens the scale between detective fiction’s conventional criminal, victim, and detective, claiming more space and power for her narrative of victimization and reconstruction among the surrounding narratives of the criminal’s transgression and the detective’s investigation. Gentrification and violence against women in the novel are related, as women characters are treated like property and exploited for real estate purposes. Community detection and the focalization of the woman victim’s narrative of trauma and healing are formal efforts to challenge the idea that an elite individual has the right to steal property from communities and the idea that this individual has the right to violate women’s bodies.

In *Tawq al-Hamam*, detective Nasser al-Qahtani investigates a murder in a poor neighborhood of Mecca called the Lane of Many Heads. At the same time the community finds the unidentified body murdered in the alley, two members of the Lane’s neighborhood, Aisha and Azza, both disappear. Nasser believes one of these women is the murder victim. Suspects include Yusuf, a graduate of history who is in love with Azza; Mu’az, who is training to be prayer leader at a mosque; Khalil, a reckless taxi driver; and a man named Salih, sometimes referred to by his nickname “the Eunuchs’ Goat,” who collects and dismantles women mannequins and seeks to gain Saudi citizenship despite being unhomed and displaced by the state. During the murder investigation, the Lane of Many Heads’ residents are evicted and the neighborhood is
prepared for demolition and redevelopment. Sheikh Khalid al-Sibaykhan, a real estate tycoon and business leader at the company Elaf Holdings, acquires the Lane and plans to gentrify the area to build on the tourism industry associated with the Hajj, an annual Muslim pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca. The Lane of Many Heads narrates most of the story and provides insights into the neighborhood’s secrets until it is demolished at the end of the novel’s first part. Right before the demolition, Aisha is raped by her ex-husband, who works with al-Sibaykhan to acquire and develop land. Aisha’s rape happens the same night the unidentified woman was murdered, doubling the victim of the detective novel and framing the narrative with violence against women. Readers discover toward the end of the novel that Aisha is still alive and was living a triple identity as herself, Azza, and Nora all along. At the end of the novel, Aisha meets with Yusuf, and together they attempt to find out more about Elaf Holdings’s plan for Mecca’s architectural future, until they are both killed by al-Sibaykhan and his assistants.

2. Individualism, Elitism, and Gentrification

In *Tawq al-Hamam*, individualism, hand in hand with elitism, is represented as destructive to the social fabric of a socio-economically diverse community. Meanwhile, collectivism is represented as a grounding principle for the maintenance of community in Mecca’s holy site. The novel critiques individualism and elitism, specifically how these ideologies feed into processes of gentrification that displace non-elite communities and privilege the construction of high-value properties over the maintenance of affordable living spaces. One way the novel represents the social ideologies of individualism and elitism is through its characterization of the central antagonist: Sheikh Khalid al-
Sibaykhan, a real estate tycoon and leader of the company Elaf Holdings. Al-Sibaykhan sets out to redevelop neighborhoods in Mecca to profit from elitist tourism associated with the Hajj. He is only interested in acquiring more property, and he will hurt anyone in order to do this, as Yusuf explains to Aisha toward the end of the novel:

He’s the bulldozers on all our mountains. He’s the buyer, he’s the deeds that strip people of their properties, the one eliminating and demolishing. He’s your father, who contracted, annulled, and sold...Sold you, and your house. Al-Sibaykhan is the sin that has possessed us all. The Lane of Many Heads, you, and I are nothing but dots being erased on a map of genocide. We’re dots floating in the dust after a city has been ravaged. Dozing eyes, the moment before a city, many cities, are razed to the ground. (467)

Yusuf characterizes al-Sibaykhan as monstrous, mechanical, referring to him as the “bulldozers” destroying houses to clear space for new developments. Furthermore, Yusuf highlights al-Sibaykhan’s legal and economic omnipotence, calling him “the deeds that strip people of their properties.” The repetition of the masculine singular pronoun “he” to describe different facets of his power reinforces the individualistic and patriarchal motives behind his actions. Al-Sibaykhan is individualism embodied, and the built environment of his dreams contrasts with the community-oriented Lane of Many Heads, who speaks about its residents as if they are a part of the Lane. Yusuf gestures toward this community identification when referring to “The Lane of Many Heads, you, and I” as a unified group subjected to “genocide.” The association between the Lane of Many Heads and the human bodies of the Lane’s residents is strengthened by the imagery of “dots floating in the dust,” suggesting the residents are fragments of the shattered built
environment they called home. Al-Sibaykhan’s entitlement to others’ land brings to the forefront detective fiction’s conventional investment in the question of “what our place is in the world,” as the lives of the Lane’s people are upended and the very nature of human worth is called into question (Martin xix).

_Tawq al-Hamam_ also explores how the ideologies of individualism and elitism are embedded in the structure of detective fiction itself. Andrew Pepper and David Schmid write in _Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction_ that the private detective represents the state’s “surrender of the public ‘good’ to private interests” (5). In this novel, state corruption creates the conditions for crime and real estate schemes to occur, and Nasser serves to investigate crime and restore order. But “order” is defined in terms of the capitalist state, whose economic relationships are means for further corruption. Therefore, Nasser serves the interests of the state elites, who would like to see their real estate multiplied across space and time. In _Economic Investigations in Twentieth-Century Detective Fiction_ (2015), Yan Zi-Ling writes about how the detective figure is invested in preserving “homogenous relations,” where state, businesses, and citizens operate according to the same values, the values of the capitalist state: “Instead of accumulation, the function of detective labor is often the securing and guaranteeing of a ground upon which homogenous relations can operate” (20). Nasser conducts the investigation of a crime that disturbs social homogeneity; at the same time, however, Nasser furthers the interests of state elite who seek to increase their property. Commercialization reinforces bourgeois order by attributing more property to state elite and producing more capital-generating space, all of which worsens the social, judicial, and moral order. In discourse with critic Peter Hühn, Zi-Ling writes “the detective is a
narrative necessity because those entrusted with the maintenance of order have failed, and the guardians of social order cannot encode events with meaning” (26). In Tawq al-Hamam, Nasser’s conflicting roles as arbiter of justice and preserver of bourgeois values invites the reader’s doubt about his ability to deliver ethical resolution to the Lane’s community.

Nasser’s status as a representative of state intelligence, an institution whose individualism and elitism are built into the system to preserve the status quo, makes it difficult to see the interconnectedness of other bodies related to the Lane of Many Heads. When Nasser thinks through whether it was Aisha or Azza who was found murdered in the alley, the idea of the woman’s body gets refracted and obscured until it is the Lane’s body that Nasser sees. The Lane narrates: “He was torn between Aisha and Azza: which one of them could he tie to the body? The wretched, crumbling houses around him defied him; Nasser felt he was being watched in that moment in which he was seeing through to my body and my many distracted heads” (112). The identity that Nasser is able to “tie to the body” is not Aisha nor Azza, but the Lane, whose demolition intersects with the murder of the unidentified woman. The Lane’s “many distracted heads” signify the multiplicity of the built environment’s body, a multiplicity sustained by the community of its inhabitants. Nasser’s inability to disambiguate the woman’s identity stems from his integration in a system of state intelligence, which prioritizes preserving property and order for the elite individual man over protecting the non-elite community of women from violence.
3. Collectivism and Community Detection

While individualism and elitism are represented by the novel’s antagonist and his mission to acquire property for his own economic gain, collectivism is represented by several characters’ communal detection and their concern for the good of the community. And while traditionally the detective novel puts a private investigator in charge of solving a crime, *Tawq al-Hamam* extends these investigating powers to multiple characters, reimagining the quest for justice as a public process instead of a private one. Stephen Knight writes “[e]vidently aware of the implications of the disciplinary individualism at the core of detective fiction, postcolonial crime fiction will often disavow the simplicities of the all-solving detective and his single evidentiary sequence leading to an indisputable conclusion, and will vary the detective-linked patterns for what are felt to be more veridical, and less colonial, forms of the genre” (3). The reader’s doubt about Nasser’s ability to provide resolution to the Lane’s crime opens space for other members of the community to enter into collective action. One way the novel represents the social ideology of collectivism is through multiple characters’ communal investigation of al-Sibaykhan’s company, Elaf Holdings, and its real estate activities in Mecca. Yusuf, Khalil, Nasser, and other journalists and residents of Mecca cooperate in a process of collective detection that departs from the traditional, singular detective figure. As narrator, the Lane of Many Heads provides the reader access to all of these characters’ research, which helps transition the reader from ignorance to knowledge. Altogether, the community detectives investigate a large-scale crime against Saudi citizens that involves displacing residents, exacerbating socio-economic inequality, destroying the built and ecological environments, and overturning the local significance of Islam.
Yusuf starts by researching Elaf Holdings’s “octopoid portfolio projects: factories that made cement, plastic, bottled water, and prayer rugs; meat-packing plants where they processed the animals slaughtered in the pilgrimage ritual; real-estate developments for both low-income and high-income housing” (213). As Yusuf learns, Elaf Holdings expanded its company through horizontal and vertical integration, forming a housing monopoly that generates arbitrary prices across incomes and controlling various important features of the Hajj like hotels and food. By securing a housing monopoly, Elaf Holdings ultimately secures the right to keep growing itself through development.

Yusuf’s insights about Elaf Holdings combine with Khalil the cabdriver’s insights to inform the reader about the company’s wide reach of power: “It has investments everywhere, like an octopus, and the right to requisition private property within belts one and two in the perimeter of the Holy Mosque in the name of development” (263).

Khalil’s observations about private property’s seepage into the realm of al-Masjid al-Haram, the world’s largest mosque that houses the Kaaba, combined with Yusuf’s notes about the company’s monopoly on the Hajj illustrate how Elaf’s gentrification is exploiting one of the world’s largest community gatherings for its own profit. The newspaper *Umm al-Qura* contributes to the investigation, adding how Elaf Holdings buys the Lane of Many Heads in order to turn it into commercial space: “The company has released plans for two towers, one boasting 123,000 sq m of commercial office space and a 30,000 sq m five-star hotel, and the other offering 77 sq m luxury apartments. The area between the towers will house a 36,000 sq m luxury mall and parking for approximately four thousand vehicles.” The company prioritizes providing space for cars more than it does providing space for non-elite citizens. Additionally, the company plans to exploit
Mecca’s rich history by converting cultural signifiers into profitable design features:

“Developers say the project’s proximity to the central commercial and historical district will give strategic value to the project in the form of distinctive design features” (356).

Yusuf, Khalil, and the journalist at *Umm al-Qura* all contribute to helping the reader interpret clues about Elaf Holdings’s activities in order to deduce relationships between commercial redevelopment, gentrification, and the elitist tourism industry in Mecca.

The communal investigation continues with detective Nasser’s own curiosity about the company, and when Nasser follows the story of Elaf Holdings on public forums, he sees users detect the rise in land prices throughout Mecca:

[S]upporters and detractors were coming to blows over the dramatic rise in land prices to the north and northwest of the Holy Mosque--from thirty thousand to a hundred thousand riyals per square meter--since the announcement of the decision to expand the mosque complex northward. The expansion would push settlement and amenities northward toward Mount Shahid and al-Tan’im--and who would benefit from this but Elaf Holdings, who owned most of the land in those areas, and who based on this had just released their plans for the five coming years? (356)

Increased land prices around al-Masjid al-Haram creates more distance between this holy site and the non-elite. Elaf Holdings gives the elite privileged access to the land around the Holy Mosque, emphasizing the company’s values of individual economic profit over collective religious fulfillment. Yusuf, Khalil, *Umm al-Qura*, Nasser, and these forum discussants participate in a communal detective process that strays from the individualism of the traditional, singular, all-knowing detective figure. Their communal
investigation reveals that the built environment is being redeveloped, and its structure maps the social ideologies of elitism and individualism that reshape it. This polyphonic formulation of communal detection poses a new way to imagine the social in moments of architectural and historical erasure and social-economic inequity.

The Lane itself is a type of community detective, giving the reader access to information about the neighborhood and its residents using its many heads. In this way, the Lane asserts a sense of selfhood that is interconnected with the social in that knowledge about the self (the Lane) is knowledge about the community (its residents). The Lane of Many Heads, as its name suggests, is inherently plural and polyphonic, and the notions of selfhood and the social manifested therein are ones that promote communal identification. The Lane promotes collective identification in its role as narrator and informal detective, whereby the Lane gestures toward its own relationship with its residents, about whom the Lane knows all. The architectural narrator accompanies the reader for the remainder of part one, roughly three-hundred or more pages until the Lane is demolished and a more uninvolved, less intrusive, third-person omniscient narrator picks up in part two.

There is a brief moment in Tawq al-Hamam when the communal detection about the built environment’s redevelopment points to a future that is both unfamiliar and unreal. Toward the end of the novel, Yusuf and Aisha secretly go to al-Sibaykhan’s office and find a DVD in the safe. It is a promotional film for Elaf Holdings, a vision of the company’s future, and a blueprint for a new Mecca: “They couldn’t fathom the images of the Mecca of the future that rolled across the screen: everything around the Kaaba had been erased and replaced by a vast marble space that extended northwest from the Haram
Mosque, rising in three tiers, like a sundial, to another five tiers that led to a flat, paved plain stretching to the very edge of the city, sweeping away the Lane of Many Heads” (469). The new, commercialized Mecca erases the Lane of Many Heads and replaces it with a homogenized built environment resembling a “vast marble space” and a “flat, paved plain.” The futuristic melds with the fantastic when the renderings of a demolished and reconstructed Mecca center giant-like buildings displaying heroic postures and sporting guards that accentuate their regal omnipotence: “Skyscrapers enclosed the horizon on three sides, a line of seventeen giants on the right and the same on the left, meeting in the center in a vast idol that looked like the Empire State Building and was flanked on each side by a miniature version of itself. Next came another ring of skyscrapers, seven to the right and seven to the left, and in the center two enormous creatures guarding the great idol” (469). The comparison to the “Empire State Building” invokes U.S. imperialism as a political-economic, colonial logic that informs this elitist imagining of the new Mecca. The built environment adopts the form of “giants” and “enormous creatures,” relating the built environment to the body in a different way than the Lane of Many Heads relates to the body.

The vision turns other-worldly, as the built environment is compared to aliens from outer space who come to attack the Kaaba: “They all looked like spaceships that had landed on Earth to besiege the Kaaba in a postmodern metallic standoff. The whole lot was surrounded by an outer ring of inferior towers that stood like wretched guards protecting the backs of the giants against the assault of the sand and the poor who were massed like ants outside the massive conurbation. It looked like life itself had been chased outside the circle of the Holy Mosque” (469). The video’s conclusion envisions a
city without the poor and without environmental circumstances, who are both figured as inherently violent in their “assault” on the “giants” and “wretched guards.” The built environment’s homogenization is a geographical representation of the homogenization of class as the poor become eliminated from the city. This striking scene in *Tawq al-Hamam* is a brief glimpse into the imagination of the elite, whose fantasies about the built environment involve violence against non-elite human bodies. But this elitist imaginary figures lower-class living and existence as a violence against the city and the rich. Living outside of wealth constitutes a state of life that is unfamiliar and unhuman to those who build the giant cities that sustain individualism. The built environment in this film maps a social ideology of individualism and elitism, an ideology that excludes the masses and privileges the elite. The towers that resemble giants promote a vision of personhood based on the individualistic tycoons who are redeveloping Mecca. It would be a city outside of space and time. It would be a city without life.

4. Saudi Women, Misogyny, and Mannequins

The novel’s critique of elitist real estate practices in Mecca is also a critique of violence against Saudi women. The novel presents the Lane’s demolition as intersecting with the murder of the unidentified woman to suggest how individualism and misogyny are interconnected ideologies that the elite use to justify gentrification. The elite operate according to the notion that property belongs to the rich man, not the poor woman. Alem reinforces the relationship between gentrification and violence against Saudi women by making associations between the woman body and the built environment. As buildings become demolished, women become violated and assaulted.
Alem associates the built environment with women’s bodies to reinforce the relationship between gentrification and violence against Saudi women. For example, Alem equates the unidentified murdered woman with the soon-to-be demolished Lane of Many Heads. Early in *Tawq al-Hamam*, detective Nasser maps the details of the novel’s central murder. He records names of suspects, draws lines between clues, and creates a visual web of information. When he pauses to look at the center of the map, it’s empty, so he puts the name of the neighborhood where the unidentified woman was murdered—The Lane. The Lane then jumps in to analyze the irony of the detective’s work:

He couldn’t leave it empty so in the center he wrote ‘Lane of Many Heads’—me, the victim! And on the periphery, the spot furthest from any suspicion, he was again at a loss so he put ‘Lane of Many Heads’ there too! Nasser leaned back and surveyed his ingenuity: the criminal and the dead woman were both me, the Lane of Many Heads. Though the symmetry of it invited ridicule, I must admit I was flattered nonetheless. I felt it meant something that I’d succeeded in adding a little spice to the stifling lethargy around this Nasser fellow. (41)

This equation of the woman’s violated body with the Lane of Many Heads creates a tight connection between the built environment’s redevelopment and violence against Saudi women. To further strengthen this connection, the Lane is also associated with the murderer, which forms a causal network between the demolition of the Lane and the breakdown of community represented by the murdered woman. As the Lane falls, it takes human bodies down with it.

Misogyny in the Lane runs deep, bleeding into the ideological foundation of systems like public education. Furthermore, the education system treats Saudi women as
property, and schools in the Lane teach women to submit themselves to authority and subtract their own individuality from their sense of self. Students are taught the sexist ideology that women are property. When Aisha sends an email to her surgeon and lover, David, about her work as a teacher at a girl’s school, she says “I was the executioner in the doll factory. Their bodies were our private property and my job was to color them, head to toe, in a drab gray moderated only by black shoes and white hair ribbons” (51). Aisha’s role as “executioner” is to remove individuality and agency from a woman until only a body is left. Comparing the school to a “doll factory” emphasizes the way women’s bodies are objectified in this environment. The formulation of women’s “bodies” as “private property” solidifies an association between identity and possession, suggesting these women’s sense of self will come from being owned by a man, similar to how Aisha presents them as owned by the patriarchal state through the school.

While Aisha likens her students to dolls, she likens herself to a mannequin. If dolls and mannequins lack personhood, then Aisha applies this lack of personhood to her students and herself. The metaphors objectify Saudi women and reduce them to mere bodies. Aisha considers herself her husband’s property, and this represents a more systemic ownership by the patriarchal Saudi state. In an email, Aisha says “the plastic doll reminded me of me in my wedding dress. It reminded me of how Ahmad had carried me as if he were shouldering a bundle of firewood. If you ask me, these mannequins are invading the neighborhood, possessing our bodies, sowing tumors in men’s imaginations” (98). The mannequins are described as “invading,” “possessing,” and “sowing tumors,” all of which ascribe animacy to the plastic dolls, animacy not afforded to the school girls. The anonymity of the mannequins resonates with the ambiguity of the murdered
woman’s identity. And while the woman’s murder is representative of large scale violence against Saudi women, the mannequins in the novel represent a societal subscription to sexist ideologies about women as men’s property.

The association between mannequins and the misogynistic notion of women as property is strengthened by a male character’s obsession with mannequins. Umm al-Sa’d’s son, Salih, has a peculiar interest in mannequins. He steals them from shops, takes them home, dismembers them, and burns their parts in a heap, thereby producing a unified melted body that gives him access to what he considers unreachable: “I collect all the mannequins I can get my hands on and recycle their parts so I can create one real living woman out of them” (451). When detective Nasser finds a room full of mannequins in Salih’s room, he first thinks they are dead bodies: “They were all in pieces and rigor mortis had long since set in, but they were still wrapped in evening dresses of lace and tulle and satin, embroidered with beads and crystals, girded in velvet and silk” (175). The juxtaposition between fine fabrics and accessories and what seem like corpse limbs experiencing “rigor mortis,” the stiffening of corpse limbs, reflects the novel’s corresponding themes of capitalistic growth and the violence this growth inflicts on communities. The clothing and accessories unite these body parts across the room as if they are communing in the same formal occasion, the same death. This image relishes in the extravagant, both in terms of elegance and an excess of dying. Yusuf theorizes about Salih’s obsession with disassembling bodies:

He understood that parts of his body became parts of other bodies... He works in a kitchen. He enjoys slaughtering animals and butchering them, preparing them for the oven, slicing them up into pots. All his senses have been trained to slice, and
to relish the act of taking bodies apart and cutting them up. When he sees someone’s leg or their rear or even their back, he feels like his leg is being summoned, that his own rear end wants to join all the others, that his back is unconsciously falling in line with all the backs of man. To him, these are just separate parts ready to join whatever body calls on them. (176)

His fetish of “taking bodies apart and cutting them up” and his obsession with disassembling mannequins both objectify the human body, rendering the body as a mere sum of its parts. To Salih, bodies, especially women’s bodies, exist for the male gaze and imagination to manipulate and make suitable for male purposes. What Salih wants most is to own a woman, but his tampering with mannequins is also an experiment with the concept of personhood. Salih lacks Saudi citizenship, and he longs to be recognized as a person by the state. Without citizenship, Salih feels unhuman. He and a community of other unhoused, undocumented people in Jeddah live in a trash dump they treat as a city. Adding mannequin limbs together isn’t going to get Salih his citizenship, but it might be his way of exploring what constitutes a citizen in the first place. Is a person a collection of body parts? Is a citizen a collection of documents? Salih feels more like a mannequin in the eyes of the state than a human. He asks Mu’az: “Can you honestly tell me...which one of us is real: me or the mannequin?...Who can promise me that I’m not just a puppet?...That I won’t be tossed onto a trash heap while the souls of real humans are transported to some other existence that will forever remain a mystery to us...To some paradise somewhere” (453). Mannequins might give Salih the illusion of proximity to a woman; at the same time, they give him clarity about how the state estimates him as a human being.
Salih’s mother, Umm al-Sa’d, provides contrast to the comparison of women to mannequins. After experiencing violence at the hands of her brothers, she recovers and becomes one of the most powerful women in the Lane. One day, Umm al-Sa’d was found as a “skeleton” in a bag in an alley (116). When taken to a hospital, doctors realized she was still alive and found her uterus full of jewelry. Umm al-Sa’d had taken all of her jewelry—“twenty-four-karat gold jewelry...: necklaces, bracelets, earrings, solid gold coins” (118)—and hid it inside her body so her brothers, who took everything else she had, would never find it. Police investigations concluded her brothers locked her in a room and starved her until they thought she was dead. Her brothers pronounced her dead and “took her share in the Arab League building—the same inheritance that had led them to get their father declared insane so that they could stop him from giving it away to any young man from the Lane of Many Heads” (118). Umm al-Sa’d’s brothers treat her like she is just a container of wealth. They plunder her for her possessions and her property. But her brothers later “gave up their claim on the first-floor apartment in the Arab League building...in order to get her to drop the charges against them” (119). Umm al-Sa’d became a master of the stock market, but she lost her share of the Arab League building when the stock market crashed. Later in the novel, the Arab League building goes to al-Labban’s sons, who bribe the judges, evict the residents, and demolish the building for redevelopment (306, 336). The process leading to the building’s redevelopment started with violence against Umm al-Sa’d, whose assault closely resembles the murder of the unidentified woman. Both women experience violence related to the acquisition of property, and both are treated as if they are men’s property.
Umm al-Sa’d and other women in the Lane respond to violence by infiltrating spaces dominated by men. Characters like Umm al-Sa’d and Nazik breach male spheres of power to accumulate wealth through the stock exchange and property sales. Umm al-Sa’d does this by trading stocks and becoming the most powerful woman in the Lane. Her financial savvy wins her the admiration of all the other women in the Lane, who “see her as a symbol of perseverance in the struggle against men” (119-120). Many of these women form an alliance with Umm al-Sa’d and share in her profits: “They rallied under the banner of her stock market piracy. They entrusted her with what little wealth they had, giving her power of attorney so she could sell and buy on their behalf in the hope she would bring them unimaginable wealth” (79). This collective of powerful women angers the narrator, the Lane of Many Heads: “This fills me, the Lane of Many Heads, with an overpowering desire to crush that lone female head sprouting up like a parasite weed among my male heads” (79). The Lane itself embodies the misogyny of its residents, compounding the containment women of the Lane feel as a result of sexist treatment. The Lane’s antagonistic perspective toward women’s success accentuates the systemic nature of misogyny in the neighborhood. Umm al-Sa’d navigation of cyberspace compares to Aisha’s movement through the digital sphere with her emails, and both women stretch the boundaries of their containment in order to breathe and be in community with other women seeking freedom.

Umm al-Sa’d stands in line with a whole legion of Saudi women, “a vast female army advancing” toward the realms previously occupied solely by Saudi men: “women in chamber of commerce elections, women in the arts, women in advertisements, in the journalists’ syndicate and in official delegations, women in politics and ministries,
women educators and humanitarians, a woman leading the organization for human rights” (178-179). To illustrate this movement of women toward power, the author reappropriates mannequins as a symbol not of women objectified but of women united, represented here by the shift from their appearance solely in shops to their appearance in spaces of power: “Mannequins suddenly disappeared from all the shops...The mannequins were attacking and they were about to overrun all our biggest cities” (178-179). Alem adds nuance to the mannequin, expanding its representative power to include meanings of unity, strength, possibility, and infiltration. The nondescript features of the mannequin are placeholders for any woman’s identity, where any position of power can be assigned. Nazik, also known as the Turkish seamstress in the novel, is another woman of the Lane who breaches the Saudi male universe of finance in order to grow her personal capital and power. Although Nazik shares values with other women of the Lane, especially things concerning freedom from containment, her values also align with those of the novel’s antagonists who gentrify the Lane. Like many of the businessmen in the novel, Nazik steals the properties belonging to individuals from the Lane, using the money to fuel her career as seamstress and manager of a clothing-making business that gives jobs to women: “Neighborhoods where the people were so worn down by poverty they could easily be cleared and the land taken from them, endowed properties whose heirs had died...and who knows who [Nazik] sold it to? [Khalil]’d left the seals there in her possession all that time, allowing most of Mecca’s old houses and endowed properties to be stolen from their unsuspecting heirs” (380). Nazik’s character offers nuance to the individual-collectivity binary by one the one hand being a supportive
community member to her fellow neighborhood women and on the other hand perpetuating the trade of property that is undermining the neighborhood community.

5. Trauma, Confinement, and Resilience

In addition to using community detection to challenge the individualism of traditional detective fiction, Alem challenges the misogynistic treatment of woman victimhood that is an all-too-common trope in detective fiction. Traditionally, detective fiction assigns the role of the victim to women characters, reinforcing gender stereotypes of women victims as helpless and passive. Furthermore, detective fiction conventionally neglects to highlight how women process trauma and live beyond the traumatic event, ceding instead to the narratives of the criminal’s transgression and the detective’s investigation. In *Women and Crime in Post-Transitional South African Crime Fiction*, Sabine Binder writes about how women’s victimhood tends to emphasize women’s trauma rather than their recovery. Expanding on the commentary of Kathleen Gregory Klein, Binder writes that women’s subordinate status to the male criminal and detective are confirmed by “the victim’s occupying the second position in the criminal/victim binary and in the victim’s gradual disappearance as, in the course of the investigation, the detective gains ascendancy over the criminal” (23). Additionally, the victim’s disappearance from the narrative refuses “the need to highlight victims’ agency, resistance and resilience in the face of trauma,” the narrative centering of which would open up the possibility for healing (27). In *Tawq al-Hamam*, Alem subverts the convention of the victim’s disappearance from the narrative by granting Aisha more narrative space in which to process the traumatic event of her rape and heal from this
experience. As the novel progresses toward her long-suspended appearance and the unveiling of her identity toward the end of the novel, Aisha focalizes the story, underscoring her agency and power over her own narrative of trauma and healing. Throughout Aisha’s accelerating role in the narrative, she makes several attempts toward healing from her sexual trauma through artistic practices of reading, writing, and painting. These place her in community with others, relieving her of isolation and providing her support through the healing process. Across the activities of reading, writing, and painting she creates an arc of transformation from a consumer to an interlocutor to a producer of original art. The moments she is painting and showcasing are the happiest moments we witness in the novel. Moreover, she seeks companionship with herself by way of creating multiple identities that, like pillars, help her distribute and carry the weight of her trauma.

While it is crucial to highlight how Aisha subverts the role of the victim by focalizing the narrative of her healing from sexual trauma, it is also important to account for the ways Aisha is victimized and how she struggles to recover and reconstitute herself after this trauma. Reading Aisha’s experience of rape requires careful thinking about the representation and criticism of sexual trauma, victimization, and survival so that no aspect of Aisha’s experience is ignored. In rape cultural criticism, there is broad affirmation of the idea that those who have experienced rape should be regarded as survivors instead of victims.² Victimizing people who have experienced sexual violence without accounting for how they heal from and live beyond their traumatic event denies the person agency and power to claim their narrative, heal, and move forward. However,

² See Wendy Hesford’s “Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation” (1999) and Carine Mardorossian’s “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape” (2002)
an overemphasis on survival risks eliding important aspects of victimization that may provide a fuller account of the survivor’s experience. In “Toward a Victim-Survivor Narrative,” Régine Michelle Jean-Charles writes “[a]ccounting for victimization is an integral aspect of the rape experience that can be too easily subsumed in the hyperfocus on survival and overcoming” (42). Borrowing a term from black feminist theologian Traci West, Jean-Charles suggests a “victim-survivor” model for reading rape narratives that combines a focus on how survivors heal from sexual trauma and “reconstitute their subjectivity” with careful attention to how victimization structures the experience and aftermath of rape (41). What the victim-survivor model accounts for that the rape survivor model doesn’t, Jean-Charles explains, is “the struggle or even the failure to survive, heal, continue on, and recreate life, which is as much a part of rape stories as the triumph over their occurrence” (41). Reading Aisha as a victim-survivor avoids assigning her the resilience trope that often characterizes women of color rape survivors as “invulnerable” and “denies their humanity” (41). Alem strikes a balance between accounting for Aisha’s victimization and acknowledging her resilience, and this balance lends to Aisha’s complexity in occupying and subverting the role of victim in the detective story.

Alem prioritizes Aisha’s narrative of self-reconstruction instead of the event of rape itself. The event’s occurrence more than half-way through the novel and at the end of part one prevents this event from becoming the foundation of Aisha’s identity. When it does happen, the scene begins “An hour before the dawn of the body” (294), returning non-chronologically to the beginning of the novel when the murdered woman was found in the alley. Readers learn here that Aisha was raped, and that it happened the same night
the unidentified woman was murdered. But up until this point and beyond, Aisha focalizes the narrative without referencing her rape, instead focusing on the things that define her such as reading, writing, and painting. As Jean-Charles writes, “Foregrounding the rape victim-survivor narrative, rather than the scene of sexual violation, at once identifies its force as an origin story and undercuts the usefulness of creating origin stories to characterize violence” (44). Instead of an origin story that bases Aisha’s identity in her sexual violation, the rape scene is a pivotal moment that marks a beginning of Aisha’s escape from the confinement of her relationship with her rapist, Ahmad.

After the scene, readers are led to believe Ahmad has killed Aisha. We witness “her deadly silence” at the same time as we see Ahmad pick up a D. H. Lawrence book on the floor, open to a passage about a “cold, mute, material face” with a “bluish cast” (296). The Lawrence passage concludes “Those who die, and dying still can love, still believe, do not die. They live still in the beloved” (296). Gerald’s death in Lawrence’s Women in Love parallels what readers think might be Aisha’s death; but the “do not die” and the “[t]hey live still” both deny closure and resolution to Aisha’s life, anticipating her reappearance in the novel shortly after. The juxtaposition between Birkin’s love for Gerald in the passage and Ahmad’s rape of Aisha creates tension between the binaries of lover-beloved and abuser-abused. Ahmad leaves Mecca the same night he rapes Aisha and the same night the murdered woman was found in the Lane at the novel’s start. Only a few pages later the Lane is demolished and the novel’s second part begins in Spain, where we follow a character named Nora, who we eventually discover is Aisha living under a false identity. In this second part of the novel, Nora enters into a relationship with al-Sibaykhan, who physically abuses her and allows his business partners to do the same.
His atrocious complicity in this abuse finds him and his real estate dealings violently
criminal, yet unpunished. In a scene typical of hard-boiled detective fiction where
characters descend to a type of underworld, Aisha—now living as Nora—and al-Sibaykhan
fly to a place with mountains like “devil horns” and “no sign of life anywhere” so that al-
Sibaykhan can do business with another real estate giant referred to as the “Building
Crow” (435). Al-Sibaykhan, whose anger toward Nora was “like a layer of fire
immediately beneath the skin,” says that the Building Crow “could get his hands on
Satan’s property if he wanted to” (435). Nora descends further into the underworld when
she is forced to attend a party the Building Crow hosts where his assistant, Bundug,
looked to Nora like “the face of Satan himself” (437). After realizing all the women at the
party are expected to make themselves sexually available for the Building Crow, Nora
attempts to escape, but is stopped by Bundug, who verbally assaults her before leaving
her in shock: “She wasn’t breathing…She couldn’t move or hear” (440). Another night,
Bundug intrudes on Nora’s tent and physically abuses her. Al-Sibaykhan ignores the
marks on her body, choosing not to interfere in the abuse since doing so would risk him
losing real estate business: “Her sheikh pretended not to see the signs of whipping on her
body. He knew, but he chose to obey the rules of a vital partnership that enabled him to
enact the final stage of his plan” (441). This isn’t the only time Aisha has been used as a
reward for real estate deals. Sheikh Muzahim, Azza’s (Aisha’s) father, marries her to
Mushabbab to receive financial awards from Mushabbab’s illegal property deals in the
neighborhood. Then, Mushabbab sells maps and deeds to properties in the Lane to Khalid
al-Sibaykhan, and at the same time hands Azza over as an accessory to these documents.
Azza is caught in a relentless cycle of victimization where violence against women is currency for real estate deals.

Aisha’s victimization includes other forms of confinement she shares with the women of the Lane of Many Heads. The theme of confinement in Tawq al-Hamam highlights how misogyny against women of the Lane takes spatial forms that involve the built environment as an apparatus of control where women are confined to domestic space. The women of the Lane of Many Heads are confined to their homes by the men of the neighborhood, whose written permission is required for leave. They are even confined by documents like their passports, which require a male guardian’s consent in order to permit travel, as Aisha explains: “My passport is temporary, for one trip only: I need a close male relative or guardian to renew it for me. Not having any male relatives left, I won’t bother looking for a miracle if I’m going to be stopped by a piece of paper in the airport” (151). Aisha and other women in the Lane search for an escape, “[a]n escape that we, the women of the Lane of Many Heads in the twentieth century, had failed to achieve” (44). The degree of their confinement is such that only a miracle could provide an exit: “Girls were always getting abducted in the stories they told us when we were children. Why do you think that is? Because the girls of the Lane of Many Heads are born into little containers. The only way they can get out, the only way they can stand in the doorway of their houses and get some fresh air, is magic” (142). From this confinement, Aisha finds escape through artistic activities that tether her sense of self to communities. Additionally, she breaks free of confining forces by constructing multiple identities that allow her to compartmentalize trauma and navigate male spheres of power.
One way Aisha finds escape from her confinement and healing from her trauma is through reading, especially D. H. Lawrence, one of whose books she quotes extensively in her emails. Aisha writes about how she and her friend Leila read books despite the punishment they would endure if caught: “Leila and I both risked expulsion: getting caught with a book was like getting caught hiding a man inside your school notebook” (96). Reading in Leila’s company, Aisha has a woman accomplice in an act that is as transgressive as being seen with a lover. Both women share a joy in reading that is thrilling because it is forbidden. Aisha’s favorite novel is D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, a novel full of sex and from which Aisha copies entire pages of passages into her emails. Reading this book feels electrifying and dangerous: “In the mood for dying, I read *Women in Love*--a scandal--in the open air of the rooftop...By reading it out in the open like that I knew I wasn’t just goading my father, I was challenging every one of the Lane of Many Heads’ many heads. Including my own” (250). Using the detective fiction archetype of the deviant character, Alem illustrates how Aisha wants her transgression to be seen, witnessed, and understood as a personal defiance of the authorities that threaten her independence and the limits she has internalized as a result of those authorities. She wants to replicate the daring and erotic prose of Lawrence, embody it in her own passionate letters to her lover. Reading Lawrence is a way of returning sex and love to the body, healing from the physical and psychological pain caused from undergoing the trauma of rape.

While reading is a way for Aisha to assert her right to entertainment and to reclaim the sexual sphere for love and enjoyment, writing is a way for her to amplify her voice and affirm her humanity in a virtual space free of the rules of conduct found in the
Lane. Aisha writes emails to herself and to her lover, David, a German surgeon. Cyberspace allows her an alternative to the built environment of the Lane through which to travel in forms more informed by ideas and choice than by body and physical movement: “The universe is swarming with messages sent back and forth. In the virtual world, borders have been shattered and people in every corner of the globe are engaged in an exhausting quest for love, desperate to exchange a laugh or share a little company...My words mingle with throngs of other desperate voices searching for a way out” (43). In cyberspace lies a place where Aisha can save herself from the threat of harm by tuning into her inner self and being a friend to herself: “The challenge we face is how to be superwomen, a cross between our Bedouin grandmothers who never raised their face-veils, not even when eating with their husbands, and the pop stars and dancers who writhe and moan in music videos. I feel like there’s a woman made of stone inside of me. My salvation lies in writing to her” (52). Her emails recall Rajaa Alsanea’s novel Banat al-Riyadh (Girls of Riyadh 2007), where an anonymous woman sends emails to her subscribers about the romances, conflicts with society, and professional careers of a friend group of four Saudi women. In both novels, cyberspace, much like a built environment, provides a means for being in community with others, especially where the actual built environment is structured to contain women and keep them isolated from one another.

Aisha’s main strategy for managing her trauma is creating alternate identities for herself. Alem uses the conceal-reveal structure and the archetype of the mysterious character typical in detective fiction to highlight the complexity and depth of Aisha’s character, involving the reader in a book-length process of piecing together Aisha’s
several identities. Applying the conceal-reveal structure to the mystery around the novel’s victim is a variation on its conventional use, which is to take the reader from ignorance to knowledge about the story’s criminal and the detective’s realization. One of Aisha’s selves is Azza, who is most anchored in the world she shares with others in the Lane, especially since Azza lives with her father Sheikh Muzahim. Azza creates an alternate self in Aisha, who is most anchored in the narrative, since we read about thirty or more of Aisha’s emails throughout the novel and grow closest to her in the process. When Azza transitions from being Mushabbab’s wife to being al-Sibaykhan’s victim, she creates another alternate self in Nora, who travels to Spain with al-Sibaykhan to do business. Aisha’s trauma confines her, and she splinters her identity into multiple parts to compartmentalize that trauma into different selves whom she doesn’t have to fully inhabit, separate selves with whom she doesn’t have to surface all her memories. In one of Aisha’s emails to David, she writes “I never came to you as an individual...No matter how hard you squeezed me in your arms to extricate only me, three bodies emerged” (226). Azza, Aisha, Nora. Not all of Aisha’s selves share the same experiences. In another of Aisha’s emails to herself, Azza speaks to Aisha as if separate from her, noting how Aisha enjoys more freedom than Azza feels in her confinement: “Aisha, you’re free to roam through books and the minds of those who wrote them. But my world is here between these four walls, which reflect nothing but my own face” (145). And when Nora finds Aisha’s emails in al-Sibaykhan’s possession, she reads them and experiences a dissociation at the same time as she feels a sense of connection with the author of these emails: “She was the one who’d dropped her name and identity: anything that would cause her to be born out of pre-existing memory, the memory of the woman who’d
written these emails, which inhaled and exhaled her in their naked lines” (465). In her efforts to escape the confinement of her trauma by splintering the self and pushing alternate selves toward freedom, Azza is allowed to breathe in the spaces that separate her from her other selves.

Her final method of escape and healing is through painting. Toward the end of the novel, Nora’s artistic abilities are discovered and she is featured in an art exhibition at a gallery called Earth Gallery in Jeddah. Her art not only finds entry into the artistic market, but is recognized as some of the best in Saudi Arabia: “Nora has been hailed as one of the most promising female artists of Saudi Arabia’s contemporary art movement,” reads an article in a newspaper (442). After the exhibition, Nora thinks back on what she saw and felt at her exhibition, providing a glimpse of her art’s subject matter and the effects it had on her audience: “She shut her eyes and pictured her paintings hanging on the gallery walls. Beings not male or female, limbs severed, in the paintings and the gallery, visitors were all on a single plane. They held animated conversations. Saying things they’d never dared to say before, or hadn’t been able to fit in, as the sea air salted their exchanges. They missed their missing limbs, or criticized them, or justified their absence” (463). Nora’s paintings depict human subjects whose bodies are fragmented in a way that reflects her own splintered identity. The severed limbs recall the mannequins Salih collects and dismembers, suggesting her art engages the theme of objectification and critiques the equation of a person with the sum of their body parts. Nora’s works are transgressive, and their subject matter invites dialogue from their audience who were “saying things they’d never dared to say before,” the commentary itself defying a moral code concerning appropriate content. Within this community of similarly artistic-minded
people, Nora feels seen, and her creations find life in the eyes of their viewers, but the joy she feels is brief: “For a few days, her figures were more than a monologue delivered by her fingers to the canvas. They’d become human in those gazes, but the exhibition was over and at that altitude, she allowed her figures to be wrapped up, like a cinema reel, back to their hiding place, back to the faint El Greco sky on the grave” (464). Her isolation yields to belonging when her artistic “monologue” becomes something greater than an individual act. Instead, her art becomes a dialogue between bodies and minds, and in the process, her humanity is affirmed by her appreciators, in much the same way as her pieces “become human in those gazes.” Nora finds a community in her appreciators and her dreams of artistic merit and recognition are actualized, if only for a short time. After the exhibit, her art returns to a confinement of its own, and Nora is again on a plane back to a reality where her trauma is reflected back to her in cruel ways.

In the same way the novel begins with a murdered victim, it ends with another. The framing of the novel with these two women victims emphasizes the misogynistic structure of violence in the Lane. Traditionally, the woman victim in detective fiction is singular and absent from the narrative. Alem’s doubling of the victim and Aisha’s focalization of her own narrative highlights her humanity and reminds readers that a crucial aspect of the story was to interrogate violence against women, not just the demolition of a neighborhood. The narrative frame of both women victims reinforces the relationship between gentrification and violence against Saudi women. At the beginning of the novel, the murder of a woman catalyzed the Lane’s demolition; and at the end of the novel, Aisha’s murder lines up with the novel’s final real estate deal. After accompanying Yusuf to al-Sibaykhan’s office and uncovering materials proving his
crimes, including the DVD blueprint of the future Mecca, Aisha is cornered by his forces and resigns to her fate knowing there is no escape from the most powerful man in Mecca: “A click: she felt it deep in her spine, like the sudden flowing feeling after a tooth’s been pulled out. Had the door clicked shut or had she snapped?” (472) It’s as if Aisha is shut down like a computer, erased along with her tracks through digital and physical space. Readers travel through the novel in search of the identity of the murdered woman only to discover at the end the tragic fate of yet another woman, whose identity was suspected all along to align with the murdered woman at the beginning.

The novel concludes with al-Sibaykhan paying detective Nasser an enormous amount of money, a sum that would set one for life. Nasser is bought out, and we discover on the last two pages of the novel--with no clues anywhere else in the novel to suggest this--that the detective has helped al-Sibaykhan achieve what he wanted. The murdered body was never identified, but Aisha becomes another victim of the violence inflicted on the women of the Lane of Many Heads. The closing scene watches Nasser burn Aisha’s emails, sobbing as he regrets choosing to assist al-Sibaykhan instead of saving her life. So much of Aisha’s forged identity existed through her emails, and with these emails’ destruction, she herself finds one of her selves erased, along with any possibility of punishment for her killer’s act of murder. Nasser chooses individualism, which confines him to a role that serves the rich, leaving no hope for the community of the Lane. About detective fiction, Emily S. Davis writes

By taking the detection process into the ‘mean streets,’ the detective novel demonstrates that crime is not an isolated phenomenon associated with disturbed individuals but is part of a larger field of social disorder and inequality. While the
detective might be able to unearth the truth about a particular crime, he (or, rarely, she) is frequently unable to bring about justice on an individual scale and is utterly unable to right the wrongs of the social system as a whole. (17)

In *Tawq al-Hamam*, crime is systemic, rooted in ideologies of individualism, elitism, and misogyny that enable powerful men to profit from the dehumanization, displacement, and abuse of non-elite communities. Corruption in Alem’s Mecca runs so deep even the detective responsible for bringing justice furthered injustice. Readers are denied the resolution typically offered by detective fiction’s conventional restoring of order; instead, they are shown what the private detective truly represents: the transfer of moral authority from the state and the citizens it represents to private interests.

6. Conclusion

Raja Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam* (*The Dove’s Necklace* 2010) made her the first woman to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction—the “Arabic Booker”—in 2011. Alem shared the 2011 prize with Mohammed Achaari, the first Moroccan to receive the award, for his novel *Al Qaws wal Farasha* (*The Arch and the Butterfly* 2010). Awarding the prize to two authors was also a first for the Arabic Booker, and it sparked controversy among the Arabic literary community, who questioned why two authors from marginalized communities should have to split a prize (Qualey). Interestingly, both novels interrogate gentrification as a social issue, even a crime, in their respective cities—Alem in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and Achaari in Marrakech, Morocco—although in these novels Alem also interrogates violence against Saudi women, and Achaari focuses more on a father’s grief over losing his son’s life to extremism. Additionally, considering that
Abdo Khal won the same award the year before for his *Tarmi bi Sharar*, it seems that the twenty-first century Arabophone novel and the award that celebrates its success the most have privileged the theme of gentrification as a significant issue that defines part of the human experience in the Arab world, at least for the time being. In the next chapter, I read Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya* (*Using Life* 2014), which, although not a recipient of the Arabic Booker, continues to treat the theme of gentrification as a serious topic of Arabic literature. My analysis of Naji’s representation of green gentrification expands my first two chapters’ analysis by considering how the author uses conventions from science fiction and climate change fiction to interrogate the rhetorics of progress and sustainability for the elitist and classist values that ground them.
Works Cited


Chapter 3: Evolution toward Empire: Bioengineering, Geoengineering, and Green Gentrification in Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya*

1. Introduction

A secret organization called the Society of Urbanists orchestrates a series of climate disasters in Cairo that kill residents or cause them to evacuate, making room for a new city built by and for the elite. After the environmental catastrophes, the Society submits Cairenes at large to mind control that makes them forget about the old Cairo and numbs them to their new life of accelerated labor. Hooked up to machines, citizens develop a sexual desire for work, making them more attached to the workplace than to their own homes. This is the premise of Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya* (2014), sometimes translated as *Using Life*, other times as *The Use of Life*.

Naji’s novel applies science fiction tropes to the built environment to accentuate gentrification’s dehumanizing and displacing powers.³ In *Istikhdam al-Haya*, the built environment is pushed to technological extremes, granting buildings the power to reengineer human bodies, manipulate their minds, and cultivate obedience. The Society of Urbanists uses the built environment to reengineer the human body to maximize human labor and urban space. They also use the built environment to restructure human attachment to place, privileging the workplace over home. Finally, they use the built

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³ According to Dalia A. Elsorady, gentrification is occurring in Khedive Cairo, where “the public sector is considered the largest real estate owner in the area” and where the Egyptian government is conducting a revitalization of downtown in accordance with their Cairo 2050 development plan (53). Community interviews showed that “[t]he restoration of heritage buildings will raise the prices and rents of real estate to an extent beyond the capacity of the middle class” (59). Additionally, community stakeholders said in interviews that the “Khedive Cairo revitalisation project will lead to the sale of properties to investors, which will eventually lead to gentrification” (60).
environment as a tool for mind control to manage people’s nostalgia about the old city. Eliminating people’s attachment to the old Cairo allows the Society to more easily confiscate people’s property and gentrify Cairo. While the novel illustrates the built environment enhanced with extreme capabilities, it also captures the human body undergoing an inversely dramatic devolution. Characters’ human-machine hybridity illustrates the mechanization of human labor that accompanies the new built environment. Other characters’ human-animal hybridity represents the devolution of humanity, a parallel change to lower class citizens’ displacement and dehumanization. Modifying the human body is a state tactic to reduce personhood, confiscate property, maintain obedience, and incapacitate utopian imagination.

*Istikhdam al-Haya* is not only a science fiction novel, it is also a cli-fi novel: the Society uses climate disaster as a tool for ecological imperialism so that more space is cleared and more people are evacuated for constructing architectural utopia. Climate change in the novel is the catalyst for cities’ evolution toward empire, the dissolving of national boundaries by global capital, and the consolidation of power. Furthermore, the Society employs the ethics of environmentalism to enact green gentrification, increasing the value of housing by implementing green architecture, and thereby displacing lower-income individuals. Green urbanism packages the Society’s urban development campaign as eco-friendly while passing construction as a natural process that is coextensive with environmental growth. The Society uses the deterministic logic of evolution to naturalize dehumanization, the mechanization of labor, climate change, gentrification, and the dissolution of national borders into a unified empire.
To counter the evolutionary logic the Society uses to gentrify Cairo, the novel employs several narrative strategies. While the Society attempts to dictate the progression of Cairo toward a so-called utopia, the protagonist’s proleptic narrative frame at the beginning forecasts the dystopian end toward which Cairo devolves. This frame establishes the novel as a report cataloging Cairo’s transformation and the protagonist’s ambivalent involvement in the city’s demise. And while the Society promotes the logic of a “natural” progression of dehumanization, the novel’s nonlinear narration belies this logic, instead relaying fragmented events that pan back and forth from the protagonist’s romantic and sexual pursuits to his meetings with members of the Society. This nonlinear narration humanizes the protagonist amidst all the dehumanization he has undergone alongside his fellow citizens. The narrative continues to humanize with its multi-generic composition, which includes graphic novel vignettes illustrated by Ayman Al Zorkany. Prolepsis, nonlinear narration, and multigeneric composition counter the Society’s evolutionary logic by juxtaposing the Society’s hope for a better future with the protagonist’s fatalism, challenging the progressive sequence toward purity, and questioning the notion of categorical integrity supposed by the utopia-dystopia binary.

In this chapter, I read Naji’s novel for how it offers a critique of green gentrification. My reading of *Istikhdam al-Haya* mainly engages with critical discourses about science fiction and climate change fiction in two ways. First, I enter into conversation with scholars of science fiction such as Frederic Jameson and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. about how the genre engages with ideas about utopia and dystopia. By interrogating how Naji’s novel resists both utopian and dystopian closure, I observe how the novel explores the ecological and biological ramifications of imagining social
progress through the consolidation of nations into a unified empire. Second, I enter into
correspondence with climate change fiction scholars such as Rob Latham, Axel Goodbody,
and Adeline Johns-Putra about how the genre typically represents climate change
unfolding within the capitalistic societal contexts that give rise to, and are exacerbated
by, such ecological transformation. Through close readings informed by scholarship on
green gentrification by critics such as Hamil Pearsall, Roshan Mehdizadeh, and Martin
Fischer, I argue that Naji’s novel exposes the elitist and classist values that undergird the
seemingly ecologically friendly rhetoric of architectural sustainability. My reading here
begins to fill a gap in Anglophone scholarship on science fiction and climate change
fiction, both of which have neglected the work of Arabophone writers, whose
simultaneous exposure to extreme climate crisis and accelerating processes of
gentrification in the Arab world offers regionally significant insights about what Susan
Sontag called the “imagination of disaster.”

2. Changing Buildings, Changing Bodies, Changing Minds

*Istikhdam al-Haya* provides a window to see how the built environment, if
modified to maximize commercial space, has the potential to make human experience
inhuman. In my previous two chapters, I write about how dehumanization is a tactic for
confiscating property and controlling the poor. In Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar*, the Master’s
authoritarian impunity upholds his right to steal property and his right to maim, disable,
and debilitate his enslaved workers. In Alem’s *Tawq al-Hamam*, the Saudi state evicts
residents and criminalizes displacement caused by gentrification and dispossession. This
chapter explores how the Society of Urbanists deploy the built environment to
dehumanize the poor and facilitate the Society’s eco-friendly architectural development for rich residents. From the Society’s perspective, this confiscation of humanity from humanity justifies displacement, property theft, and commercial development, since the inhuman are not deserving of property. Strip the human from their property and then take their property. In this way, the built environment becomes a dangerous tool for the elite to control the masses. It becomes a dynamic object and one of the central agents conducting much of the novel’s action. And while the novel posits a world in which the built environment literally re-engineers the human body, this human reengineering is a metaphor for the built environment’s capacity to restructure human life, in the way commercial space restructures life to maximize profit so that only labor counts as living.

In Using Life, the built environment is a technology for conducting the evolution of the human body toward a form that maximizes colonization. Metaphorically, bodies and buildings synthesize to create a new organic system wherein the built environment functions as the body’s programmer and the human body functions as the built environment’s proliferator. When the protagonist Bassam interviews his co-worker Reem about her work with the Society of Urbanists, she explains how architecture is capable of “engineering” the human body to facilitate the expansion of Cairo, maximization of urban development world-wide, and world domination:

Architecture is about modifying and conditioning the natural resources of the city in order to better suit the needs of all living creatures, including humans. It also entails the engineering of human beings on three levels—physical, psychological, and spiritual—in order to better condition them to their habitat. This engineering will speed up the wheel of evolution, which, in turn, will help us live up to our
most sublime purpose on this planet: to settle the earth, to spread civilization over the land. (141)

Reem characterizes architecture as a tool for colonization, and she points toward architecture’s capacity for bioengineering. The novel takes the built environment and its connection to colonial control and twists it into another wicked sci-fi tool for bioengineering the human body. Postcolonial critic Michelle Reid writes “[l]anguage and writing are often seen as the main tools of colonial control, but sf enables writers to explore other mechanisms of imperial authority, such as the ways in which scientific discourse and practice construct ideas of truth” (262). The built environment is another “tool of colonial control,” and *Istikhdam al-Haya* stages its implementation for reengineering society. The Society’s mission to “settle the earth, spread civilization,” and condition the human body to its new environment brings to the forefront an important question: what constitutes personhood in such a society and urban setting? Is a person one who belongs to this settled earth and for whom this earth is settled? If the type of architecture the Society invests in reproducing is one that conditions the body to maximize labor and commercialization, then what constitutes personhood is the act of laboring and maximizing the built environment. A person is a resource for urban growth, in the way that petroleum is a resource for vehicles to go far fast.

The Society uses evolutionary logic to justify bioengineering the human body so that it will supposedly be better suited to its new environment. After Reem talks about architecture’s capacity for “modifying and conditioning the natural resources of the city,” she moves into ideas about bioengineering the human, another natural resource to be modified and conditioned. This idea of using the built environment to engineer the human
body fits with the novel’s representation of labor, which features humans hooked up to machines that condition people to form sexual attachments to those machines, and thereby sexual attachments to work. Ultimately, this new attachment to one’s place of work replaces one’s older attachment to home so that the human body’s orientation toward the built environment is characterized mainly by labor instead of habitation. The consequence is that the state can more easily appropriate one’s property.

The Society’s construction of architectural utopia leads to a capitalistic dystopia where the mechanization of human labor dehumanizes and sometimes destroys the human body. In one of the graphic novel vignettes, Bassam watches a news report playing on a television at the grocery store. The story is about a man who died working at a printing factory. At the printing factory, employees do their work hooked up to machines that read information from their nerve fibers. One frame shows a futuristic machine made for the human body to rest on, almost like a hospital bed, with cords and nodes reaching out to be connected to a worker’s body. In the same frame, there is a speech bubble for the “Managing Director of Biological Security” at the printing factory: “Each of our employees gets connected to our machines through artificial nerve fibers planted directly into his brain and spinal cord.” The next frame shows a close-up of the Director’s face. He says “All employees are subjected to regular tests to make sure their nerves and cognitive abilities are in good condition.” In another frame, the same machine is shown, now with blood splattered on it, and a speech bubble for the reporting journalist: “The medical report indicates that Kareem suffered a psychic disturbance that led him to desire a sexual relationship with the machine, which, in turn, had defended herself.” The next frame shows the printer, a giant, monstrous machine with a large hole
that looks like a mouth. The reporter continues: “This led to the destruction of Kareem’s nervous system. The last thing the machine printed, over and over again, was...I want to fuck you to death” (133-135). By attributing femininity to the machine and attributing the repeated text to the machine, the medical report suggests this murder is heterosexual gendered violence against a male victim. But by justifying the machine’s violence as self-defense, the report interprets Kareem as the aggressor. The sexually explicit intentions repeated in the printed text, then, could be either Kareem’s or the machine’s, and this reinforces the idea that the two are seen as if members of a common species. Kareem is dehumanized through his labor and human-machine hybridity, and the machine is humanized through female attribution and integration into the legal discourse of sexual assault and self-defense. In this case, the machine represents a larger neoliberal capitalistic system in which the corporation is attributed personhood and rights, and these rights are often privileged over the rights of people whom the corporation takes advantage of.

In contrast with the factory workers’ submission to machines, the built environment is represented as a dominant structure. The reporter stands in front of the printing factory, and her body is illustrated with wavy outlines that make her look like she is melting. Behind her, there is a photorealistic image of the printing factory. The building looks pristine, straight-edged, and stable in contrast with the reporter’s body, and anyone else’s body in the novel. The visual contrast between architecture and the human body here suggests that while the built environment remains stable, the human body is undergoing destabilization. Metaphorically, the human body melts and enters into the built environment like fuel, a natural resource to be modified and conditioned by and
for the built environment. The destabilization of the body suggested by these illustrations of the human body mirror the devolution represented in the human-machine labor. And the dehumanization wrought by human-machine labor is paralleled by the mind control tactics the Society uses to break down individuals psychologically.

In the novel, the built environment is not only a technology for engineering a more productive human, but also a more obedient human. While the Society of Urbanists infiltrates the biological in order to produce compliant citizens and productive laborers, they also infiltrate the psychological in order to manage nostalgia and reconfigure personhood. Their purpose is to numb people’s emotions and eliminate their attachments to the old Cairo that existed before the natural disasters:

After the Storm, new theories of psychology were devised that happened to dovetail with the policies of construction and real estate companies. They would be applied to the re-engineering of the individual, the re-engineering of the family, and eventually the re-engineering of society as a whole. Among the new clinical-scientific fads that swept the world was the idea of ‘exterminating nostalgia.’ This went beyond the treatment of the shock and agony suffered by many as a result of the loss of friends and loved ones. Even after such emotional disturbances had been corrected, it was still difficult to control the unexpected relapses that might occur when a patient happened to hear an old tune, or catch a clip of an old movie. (166)

The Society’s mind control ensures that Cairenes will not resist the new built environment the Society is constructing. The built environment is a brain chip to make one forget the old and subscribe to the new. Throughout Cairo’s redevelopment we
witness Bassam’s memory lapses, which suggest the architectural redevelopment itself eliminates nostalgia and distorts memory. In managing nostalgia, the Society imprisons citizens in the present: they cannot remember the urban past or imagine an inclusive city.

The Society’s manipulation of the body and the mind impacts people’s capacity to imagine an alternate reality to the one the Society created. The elite reserve exclusive access to imagining the future, their use of which leads to a dystopian city and society. Paprika’s utopian dream depends on the dystopian dehumanization of Cairo’s capitalized subjects and the mechanization of their daily lives. In Istikhdam al-Haya, citizens are subjected to what Fredric Jameson calls the “incapacity to imagine the future” (“Progress Versus Utopia” 218). Unable to remember the past, non-elite citizens are confined to the present, which they spend working and fulfilling their more animal needs. The Society attempts to embody what Herbert Marcuse calls the “utopian imagination” by designing a future where the built environment supplies the foundation for a perfect life, but this only leads to a dystopian future where the foundation buries the poor and supports the elite (“Progress Versus Utopia” 218). The Society reserves the capacity to imagine utopia for themselves and eliminates that capacity in all other individuals.

While the elite reach toward utopia in their dreams of a pure, pristine city, the underdogs fall helplessly through ecological apocalypse toward urban dystopia. Our protagonist, Bassam, navigates the borders of utopia and dystopia in his hybridity as an insider and outsider of the secret organization. His hybridity allows him access to the organization’s history, insofar as he uses this knowledge for the company’s marketing and advertising, but he is denied access to the organization’s history-shaping tools of power. Furthermore, what the Society formulates as architectural utopia—the city at its
greatest potential and most spectacular form—is actually a gentrified, urbanized, and commercialized city, the actualization of which is predicated upon human-caused ecological disaster—in a word, an urban dystopia.

The novel resists both utopian closure and dystopian closure, offering us neither the achievement of an advanced society operating in a better world than the present, nor the failure of such a society in a worse world than the present. Instead, we’re given a world that looks awfully similar to our own, where climate disasters wrought by capitalistic forces destroy homes and create climate migrants. Bassam occupies this middle ground between utopia and dystopia as he carves out a space for himself to live amidst radical societal transformation. His adaptation to inevitable change is also a refusal to be swept away by power.⁴

3. Ecological Disaster, Geoengineering, and Green Gentrification

The novel further complicates the relationship between architectural utopia and urban dystopia in its exploration of ecological disaster, geoengineering, and green gentrification. *Istikhdam al-Haya* uses the science fiction trope of extreme technological advancement to interrogate human agency in climate disaster and explore the relationship between climate change and urban development. In the novel, commercial redevelopment’s environmental impacts are masked by the deceiving rhetoric and practices of green architecture, which seeks to justify architectural formations by giving them features that would suggest they are integrated into the natural environment. And

⁴ See Benjamin Koerber’s *Conspiracy in Modern Egyptian Literature* (2018) and Teresa Pepe’s “Ahmad Nājī’s *Istikhdām al-hayāh* (Using Life) as “Critical Dystopia” for more on how the novel offers resistance to utopian and dystopian closure.
while *Using Life* critiques architectural developments that create the conditions for climate change, it also reveals the ways in which climate change creates the conditions for architectural development.\(^5\) Naji invokes the relationship between capitalism and climate change, but emphasizes the inverse of this causal network: how climate change, in creating climate migrants and destroying built environments, paves the way for redevelopment, commercialization, and labor productivity. According to this logic, an elite investor would be fond of climate change’s impacts if such impacts led to the creation of negative space conducive to the development of commercial places where labor could happen. The main antagonist, the Society’s Director of Futurist Planning, Paprika, organizes a team of scientists and magicians to orchestrate climate disasters that will wipe out Cairo’s architecture, displace its current inhabitants, and clear the way for development. The “Tsunami of the Desert,” “The Great Quake,” and then “an eruption of sinkholes that swallowed entire streets and distorted the flow of the Nile” all make more room for the type of developments that the Society wishes to build (1, 2). Confident in their ability to reconstruct what they destroy, the elite both cause and benefit from climate change. As Rob Latham observes, this type of “ecological imperialism” was taken up by new wave science fiction as a way to represent how “the most effective genocidal technique by far is the environmental transformation wrought by the invaders” (494). Bassam survives these catastrophes because he is part of the Society’s project of documenting its history, but a large number of Cairenes were killed or displaced.\(^6\)

\(^5\) The 2017 United Nations environment report states, “buildings and construction together account for 36% of global final energy use and 39% of energy-related carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions when upstream power generation is included” (6).

\(^6\) See Alison Gibbons’s “Nurturing Life Writing in Egypt after the Arab Spring: Fiction as ‘Survival Mechanism’” for her commentary on the political connotations of *Istikhdam al-Haya’s* climate disaster.
The author uses elements of climate fiction to address the built environment’s relationship to the ecological environment. Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra write that, in cli-fi texts, “[t]he changing climate is often one source of anxiety among others, alongside unsustainable levels of consumption and population growth, concerns over the role of science in society, genetically modified foods, genetic engineering and geoengineering, and more generally what is perceived as the slide into ever more individualistic, virtual and ‘unnatural’ forms of life” (5). Istikhdam al-Haya stages climate disaster alongside the commercial redevelopment of cities, the modification of the human body, and the maximization of labor productivity in order to illuminate the relationship between these processes. Invoking capitalism’s relationship with climate change is apt here since ultimately it’s the poor who are displaced and the elite who are served by the new development.7 In Ahmed M. Soliman’s “Tilting at Sphinxes: Locating Urban Informality in Egyptian Cities” (2004), the scholar writes “state interventions in housing have privileged the interests of private capital over the local working class” by “[ensuring] that publicly subsidized projects are profitable, so they can eventually be transferred to private-sector interests” (176). The Egyptian government has intervened in housing shortages to establish public/private partnerships, which are “market-based remedies” to “maintain control over the urban poor” and “overcome the problem of the international debt” (177). Public/private partnerships between Egyptian local governments and private enterprises also “allowed private enterprises to construct huge housing projects in newly developed satellite towns” (177). In the novel, privatization is also the remedy for climate disaster’s damage to the city. And the Society views this shift

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7 See also Milad M. Hanna’s “Real Estate Rights in Urban Egypt: The Changing Sociopolitical Winds” in Property, Social Structure, and Law in the Modern Middle East.
from before the disasters to after the disasters as a form of evolution where the city advances itself almost like a creature adapting to a changing environment.

In the novel, climate change is the catalyst for cities’ evolution toward empire. Part of this evolution involves the dissolving of borders: “The nightmarish cities that had been founded by the old nation-states were destroyed in the dust storms, earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes. Some were swallowed up by the sea. The cities that survived were reformatted and recolored by the Corporation. Borders were melting away, geography was getting a facelift” (169). Geography’s “facelift” parallels the Society’s work in reengineering the human body, and while this bioengineering disrupts what we imagine to be human, the geoengineering disrupts what we imagine to be natural. The melting of borders consolidates territory under one power, furthering the Society’s production of empire. In “Science Fiction and Empire,” Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. says “[Science fiction]...has been driven by a desire for the imaginary transformation of imperialism into Empire, viewed not primarily in terms of political and economic contests among cartels and peoples, but as a technological regime that affects and ensures the global control system of de-nationalized communications” (444). Science fiction’s obsession with technological possibilities stems from an interest in representing the lifelines of capitalism and global networks of communication and control that compress space and time. *Istikhdam al-Haya* demonstrates this kind of “technological regime” with its antagonists’ transnational corporation and their long history of conquest, which condenses nations into a unified empire that further transforms human experience of space and time. This unified empire compresses space by bringing remote regions within its power and compresses time by bypassing state regulation and streamlining control.
The Society dreams of a future where the world is one big transnational unity where companies can operate with less interference from state policies. When Bassam meets with Paprika to discuss the effects of the climate disasters on Cairo, she explains that

[Humankind had now reached a point where it was ready to move beyond the narrow nationalisms imposed by modern states and their militaries. This could be achieved thanks to the new economy. Large corporations should be given freer rein to operate. The most powerful corporations will inevitably be in construction and real estate, thus it is necessary that the Society become one too. Perhaps it should become the only one, and competition could take place as a nice little game between its various subsidiaries. (164)]

Since the main technologies being used here to restructure the world are construction and real estate, the spatial categories of property and the built environment play a role in the restructuring of state power in addition to their role of restructuring the categories of time and the human. Whereas the default space of human life shifts from place of habitation to place of labor, and whereas the new built environment prioritizes future development over past conservation, the Society’s ideal world experiences a power shift from a collection of nation-states to a system of corporations that stretches across national boundaries.

The Society’s intervention in environmental ecosystems continues with their scheme to change the course of the Nile in such a way that disturbs Cairo’s climate. This intervention echoes the same kind of human engineering involved in the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal was a feature of the built environment that facilitated trade and European
colonial control. The Society’s science fictional manipulation of the Nile is thus reminiscent of imperial amendments to Cairo’s built environment for the sake of Cairo’s manipulation by international commerce. Bassam explains in an internal monologue that the documentary he is making for the Society would feature a series of interviews with “architectural experts” about “what might happen if the city lost the Nile”: “It had been suggested that such a scenario was one way to save the city from its nightmarish present. Cairo would wither and empty out as a result, with a massive population shift to the suburbs. As every crisis is an opportunity, the heart of the city would be much more easily redeveloped, and possibly turned into an open-air museum of sorts” (92). The loss of the city wouldn’t matter much to its prior inhabitants since the Society has already done the work of eliminating nostalgia through psychological manipulation. Thus, the plan to relocate Cairenes and commercialize Cairo wouldn’t be impeded by resistance. The prior inhabitants would be grateful to be away from the miserable Cairo: “the new suburbanites wouldn’t care about what happened to their old city, so it would just be abandoned and life could start anew elsewhere. Millions would be saved from their misery. The western provinces of the country would certainly benefit, and it might even be possible to revive Alexandria as the capital of Egypt” (92). The Society’s destruction of Cairo would lead to Cairo, New Cairo, and Alexandria experiencing simultaneous development.

New Cairo is not the only phenomenon of its kind in the Middle East. Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen discusses the emergence of new cities outside old cities in the 1970s and how “[n]owhere in the new cities is the state the driving force. Private capital is. For the regimes of the Arab republics, this was the natural way to go: the state could not
afford to guarantee welfare to populations growing by several percentage points a year” (89). In Naji’s novel, the relocation of Cairo’s population to New Cairo and Alexandria provides further justification for the development of the latter two cities. And the development of all these cities is funded by the Egyptian elite, whose stake in the global economy suggests the Egyptian nation’s forfeiting of state power to private interests. In “In Transit: Arab Identity and Architecture in Times of Change” (2014), Hanna Ziadeh writes that Egyptian nationalism, the construction of New Cairo, and Egypt’s entrance into the global economy mark a “dislocation between the historically incubating natural environment, the shore of the Nile, and the nascent human community of al-Tagamu’a,” a dislocation Ziadeh says “is the expression of a deeper social rupture where the new origin of the wealth of the ascendant class is located outside Egypt’s natural, national territory” (60). Geoengineering in Naji’s novel, then, also acts as a metaphor for how neoliberal capital reconfigures politically and geologically imposed boundaries with the globalization of technologies like the urban built environment and processes like gentrification, dispossession, and displacement.

Not only would Egypt as a whole undergo architectural transformation, the whole world would: “The entire world had begun to change. What had happened in Cairo repeated itself along roughly the same lines in New York, Copenhagen, Fukushima, and a number of other major cities I’m not sure I can remember at the moment. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and strange, unexplained sandstorms” (168). In the same way the Society promotes the view that climate change is part of nature, a feature of the world’s natural evolution toward a future world, the Society also naturalizes urban development by staging the growth of Egypt’s cities alongside other major cities world-wide.
In response to these global climate disasters, urban development markets take advantage of societal fear of climate change to promote their own green architecture practices. Though packaged as eco-friendly, developers of green architecture in the novel use the rhetoric of going green as a tool for gentrifying urban areas to benefit the rich. Green gentrification, referred to sometimes as environmental or ecological gentrification, is another method the Society uses to naturalize gentrification and exploit the environment for the purpose of architectural development. Green gentrification is a process that occurs when city governments and developers collaborate to improve the environmental conditions of an area--reducing air pollution, improving water quality for example--or implement green architecture, and thereby increase the value of housing in the area, leading to an influx of rich residents and the displacement of low-income residents. Hamil Pearsall writes “[l]ow-income residents, homeless residents, tenants in informal housing, and people of color, have found themselves excluded from the benefits of these new environmental amenities and vulnerable to unintended, yet negative, consequences, such as residential, commercial, or industrial displacement” (329). The Society uses the rhetoric of green architecture to package urban development as a natural phenomenon, and even as a process of revival after disaster, like trees regrowing after a forest fire:

In the aftermath of the great earthquakes and tsunamis of sand, an alliance of new construction companies introduced “green” as a catchword in their promotions and advertising. Within the space of a few years, the adjective had become a verb, and from the verb were derived diverse neologisms, which in turn came to form the contours of a veritable discourse. From this discourse sprang forth yet more
discourses, which gave rise to a whole new meta-phenomenon that expressed itself in numerous art forms and socio-cultural practices. Even the moon, once silver and white, would “go green.” (21)

Employing the rhetoric of green urbanism, the Society turns urban development into another fad that environmentalists can join while riding the class train to wealth. Roshan Mehdizadeh and Martin Fischer write that “[a]s being green becomes in vogue, and the next way to compete with the ‘Joneses’, communities will market themselves to the wealthy as ‘green’. Conceivably, ‘green’ may become a code word for safe, rich, professional, and privileged” (6). Our narrator Bassam follows the thread of linguistic elements from “adjective” to “verb” to “neologisms” and emphasizes the nested and self-referential qualities of green rhetoric, revealing how it is mere rhetoric. The buildings aren’t green, the developments aren’t eco; but the architecture is friendly to the rich, who decode “green” as meaning exclusively for those who can afford it.

To accentuate the exclusivity of the Society’s new urban spaces, the organization manufactures new markers between green development—what they represent as the new city—and the surrounding desert, that which represents the old Cairo. Their efforts to naturalize gentrification and urban development results in the denaturalization of other geographical features like the desert. They mask their own exclusivity through pretend gestures of environmental justice:

The city has been seized by an overwhelming obsession with green spaces, green walls, and green dams to prevent desertification and keep out the dangers of the great yellow expanse. The moisture and makeup of the soil are monitored by the tentacles of a great computer, which sets the appropriate times for watering the
plants, and dispatches little robots to pick up people’s trash and leftover food when the parks are less crowded. (178)

Here, “green spaces, green walls, and green dams” are associated with automated up-keep technologies, symbols of progress that gesture toward neighborhoods with wasteful practices, like sprinkler systems that collect and consolidate city water for the rich. The monotony of “the great yellow expanse” is meant to elevate the kind of visual spectacle and stimulation of the urban environment and its omnichromatic, labyrinthine topography. The organization fosters hostility toward ecological variants that contrast with these new green spaces, generating rhetorics of exclusivity that resemble social exclusions like classism, sexism, racism, and ableism: “All this was taking place at the same time that the National Campaign to Greenify the Desert was touting its new slogan, ‘Together, Egypt Fights Yellowism’—a variation on its older slogan, ‘Let’s Go Green!’” (20). The purchase of such environmental movements for urban developers is the expansion of high-value property and the increased investment in spaces that generate more capital for rich land-owners.

Green gentrification, as the novel shows, profits from ideas of environmental purity, which parallels the socio-economic purity of the elite, who reap the benefits of green urbanism. In the novel, the Society enacts air purification in Cairo, making the area more habitable and thereby more profitable. As many studies show, air purification in large cities has the effect of increasing the value of housing in poorer areas, which invites the rich into these areas, displacing lower-income individuals. The novel illustrates the evolution of the city after purification into an idyllic space touched by divinity:
After the storm, it had taken four whole years to purify the air of Cairo, or what was left of it. During the night, the massive pumps along the border with 6th of October City would begin sucking up the air. After purification, small quantities of fresheners would be added to the air, and mixed together with some innocuous bacteria to break down the carbon monoxide and other pollutants. This made the air perfectly fresh each and every night, as though it were a kiss from the gods, a kiss from Reem. (111)

The novel centralizes areas that benefit from the technological advancements while erasing areas that suffer the environmental consequences of these energy-sucking technologies. The “massive pumps” remake the built environment into one large air conditioner unit in a metaphorical palace for the rich. Cairo resembles the familiar image of the science fiction city in a dome. The built environment is preserved in a vacuum that protects it against the wear of environmental contexts. It is a city in the abstract, “perfectly fresh” and close to “the gods.” The evolutionary logic the Society uses to justify bioengineering the human body to accelerate redevelopment and gentrification is the same logic used to enact ecological disaster, geoengineering, the consolidation of empire, green gentrification, and Cairo’s purification.

4. Prolepsis, Nonlinear Narration, and Multimodal Composition

While the elite deploy evolutionary logic to naturalize and justify processes of commercialization and gentrification in Cairo, the novel uses several narrative strategies to counter this logic. The protagonist’s proleptic narrative frame at the beginning establishes the novel as a report cataloging Cairo’s transformation and the protagonist’s
own ambivalent involvement in the city’s demise. This frame forecasts the dystopic end

toward which Cairo devolves, denying the Society narrative privilege to dictate and

inscribe the progression of society toward a so-called utopia. Bassam lists the climate
catastrophes that inflicted Cairo, then writes

That all seems like such a long time ago. Yet I do not write here in an attempt to

remind us of what was, or to analyze what happened. What you’re reading is no

more than a collection of papers and memories gathered in secret, over a number

of years, by a lonely old man. It is a lengthy epistle addressed to the past, an act of

narrative trickery in the form of a travel guide. There’s no real justification for

this writing, either because I’ve never found any, or because no such justification

has ever existed. (3)

Bassam’s narrative frame gives odd shape to the report, characterizing it almost as an

anti-report that borrows form from other genres like the diary, the letter, and the travel

guide. The protagonist humanizes the report by denying it its report-ness, instead coloring

it with an attitude of apathetic fatalism informed by a careful attention toward the

cohesion of this “collection of papers and memories” and the intentions of its “narrative

trickery.” In humanizing his report, he introduces human subjectivity where a report

would exclusively deliver inhuman objectivity. Later, Bassam informs us of how he

began the report, and we discover that its origin is owed to his efforts to recover his

memories and his capacity to feel nostalgia, both of which the Society and their new built

environment reduced. Again, he writes

As I recollect all these events, I try to recapture the perspective I had back in my

twenties, forgetting everything I’ve come to know since. Perhaps that is why I
began to write this report. I remember the moment I started writing the report entitled “Using Life.” I was winding down my daily routine, which consisted of a series of exercises to help me feel my loneliness and work my way into nostalgia. Suddenly I noticed the day’s date. Tomorrow would be my forty-sixth birthday.

(20)

Bassam interrupts the narrative to recenter the protagonist in his twenties, but is suddenly caught by the fact that it has been about twenty years since the events in his report occurred. This causes a deeper rupture in memory: as he attempts to remember how he tried to remember, he all of a sudden remembers his birthday is tomorrow. The nested memory takes the shape of the nested narration, where the report recalls events the significance of which the author forgets.

While Bassam explicitly recounts his efforts to resist the mind control that the Society deems natural according to their theory of evolution, his nonlinear narration also belies the logic of a “natural” progression, instead relaying fragmented events that pan back and forth from the protagonist’s romantic and sexual pursuits to his meetings with members of the Society. This nonlinear narration humanizes the protagonist amidst all the dehumanization he has undergone alongside his fellow citizens. This nested, nonlinear narration subscribes to a different logic of growth and assemblage than the Society’s blueprint for architectural utopia. While Bassam’s report assembles the past nonlinearly, the Society assembles the future linearly. While the architectural utopia creates negative space only for the rich to live and the poor to work, Bassam’s report creates negative space for the human to live.
Another way the novel disrupts the Society’s vision of a linear evolution toward a pure utopia is with its multi-generic composition, which includes disjointed graphic novel vignettes and an encyclopedia of human-animal hybrids and cyborgs. As the earlier close reading of the printing factory suggests, Ayman Al Zorkany’s graphic novel vignettes provide a glimpse into chaos while infusing that chaos with creative form. The illustrations that interrupt the prose of the novel are perhaps Bassam’s creative outlet, a chance for him to practice a creativity that advertising and marketing stole from him. In what might be the most hilarious vignette, he looks bleary-eyed into space, and a caption reads “Sometimes, after smoking too much hash, I get a little washed-out.” He picks up a plastic bag, looks inside, and finds himself sitting in a paper boat, floating to an island, where he walks until falling down, falling up, descending in a hot air balloon, then reemerges from the plastic bag, sitting on a sidewalk. Vignettes like these accentuate the surrealism and satire of the narrative.

The graphic novel vignettes throughout the novel are not cohesive, and each one is illustrated in a different style than the rest. In “Strategies of Engagement in *Istikhdam al-Haya: A Multimodal Novel,*” Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih writes “[i]n addition to the absence of a sequence linking the panels, occasionally, the panels and plot-line are not logically related. These visual strategies disorient the reader and make it difficult to infer a single interpretation, opening multiple semiotic possibilities” (118) This formal subversion counters the logic of natural progress that the Society uses for their development campaign. The illustrations’ disjointed style and the unrelatedness in content of the several vignettes defies the narrative continuity that the Society seeks. One example of this is an illustration toward the end where the moon is illustrated with a baby
in its womb, its umbilical cord stretching toward the earth, suggesting future colonization of the moon. While this image connects the story with a tradition of science fiction by alluding to the ending scene of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it interrupts the narrative with an abstract representation of galactic colonization, a distant correlative to the Society’s colonization on earth.

To complement the graphic novel vignettes and their narrative discontinuity, the encyclopedia toward the middle of the novel called “The Animals of Cairo” features a variety of illustrations and poetic descriptions of humans and human-animal hybrids. In contrast with the Society's linear goals of progress, the encyclopedia interrupts the narrative much like the graphic novel vignettes, without connecting to what comes prior to or after itself. And in opposition to the Society’s vision of societal and architectural purity, the encyclopedia presents a diversity of life where each caricature either magnifies the humanity in the dehumanized subject or dehumanizes the elite subject. In one illustration, large feet in sandals with leather straps stretch across two pages, and underneath them is the title “The Wild Rhinoceros” and its entry: “Certain creatures are able to adapt to the pollution and filth of Cairo through mutations in their genes. Their voice acquires a particular coarseness. The voice box is replaced with a live frog that subsists on carbons monoxide and dioxide, sucking up cigarette smoke and the exhaust of automobiles” (76). The entry characterizes the rhinoceros-human using evolutionary logic that justifies the ecological impacts of gentrification.

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8 The encyclopedia might be a reference to ‘Ajā‘īb al-Makhlūqat (*The Wonders of Creatures*), written in Arabic around 1270 and featuring illustrations and descriptions of celestial and terrestrial cosmography. If this is the case, then the reference would reinscribe historical context onto memoryless humans by alluding back to a traditional Arabic narrative form.
While some illustrations depict the dehumanization and so-called evolution of the non-elite, other illustrations satirize the elite’s lust for power by characterizing them using the same evolutionary logic. In another illustration, a man wearing a business suit smokes a cigarette in front of towering buildings. In place of his genital area is a German shepherd head with his tongue hanging out. Above is the title “Junkyard Dogs” and a brief description: “The first specimens appeared in old black-and-white films, but the breed really started to propagate in the seventies. They generally live close to the Nile corniche, and prefer dimly lit spaces. They communicate in more than one language. The males breed outside of the pack, and the females are forbidden to commit to a single mate” (73). This encyclopedic entry satirizes the elite who work and live along the Nile corniche, where expensive hotels and office spaces house them. Naji characterizes the junkyard dogs in a way that reflects the Society’s dehumanization of non-elite citizens. Referencing an evolutionary logic similar to the Society’s, the entry creates a temporal arc between the “first specimens” and the later generations they “propagate,” alluding to the acceleration of Cairo’s urbanization and gentrification in a way that makes it seem natural. But the reuse of evolutionary logic to characterize the elite also reveals how the Society suffers from the consequences of its own dehumanization of the non-elite. Together with the graphic novel vignettes, these encyclopedic illustrations complement the novel’s nonlinear narration and its formal resistance to logics of linear progress.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on how Naji’s novel reveals the illusory nature of rhetorics about progress and sustainability as they relate to the promotion and execution
of green gentrification. The idea of progress, attached to the elitist imagination of an advanced society forwarded by the Society of Urbanists, is rooted in a colonialist ideology that claims empire as the desired goal of humanity. Complementary to this, the idea of sustainability, articulated in the eco-friendly rhetoric of the Society of Urbanists, is likewise rooted in an imperialist ideology that claims the ecological environment as collateral damage in the pursuit of wealth and productivity through technologies of control like the built environment. In the first three chapters of my dissertation, I have focused on the impacts of gentrification on populations dispossessed and displaced by such urban redevelopments. In my last and fourth chapter, I will focus more on the spatial politics of the U.S. occupation of Baghdad as represented in Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013). Toward the end of the next chapter, I will connect my analysis of the novel back to ideas of property and dispossession that I explored in these first three chapters.
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1. Introduction

Ahmed Saadawi became the first Iraqi author to win the Arabic Booker in 2014 with his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013). Before this novel, the award—which exclusively favored realist works—had never gone to a work of science fiction. The novel is set in Iraq 2005-2006 during the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion. In the novel, a junk dealer named Hadi al-Attag collects dismembered body parts from Baghdad’s bomb-ridden streets and assembles a corpse. Once the corpse is completely assembled, he plans to give it a proper burial to make up for the Iraqi state’s negligence. After sewing the last part onto the body, however, it disappears. The soul of Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, a security guard killed by a suicide bomber, wanders into Hadi’s house and, upon finding the corpse, inhabits its body and leaves. Elishva, an Assyrian Christian whose son Daniel never returned from the Iran-Iraq War twenty years prior, sees her son Daniel in this animated body and welcomes him back into her home. Meanwhile, Mahmoud al-Sawadi, a journalist and soon-to-be editor at the magazine *al-Haqiqa*, listens carefully to Hadi’s mysterious stories about his creation, whom he calls the Whatsitsname—*Shisma* in Iraqi Arabic—and his disappearance; Mahmoud sees an irresistible story that may accelerate his career. The Whatsitsname gains national attention; however, he is seen more as a monstrous threat, a “terrorist” some say, than a miracle. When the Whatsitsname returns to his creator Hadi, the monster intends to kill him to avenge a death Hadi might have accidentally caused. The Whatsitsname believes his life’s mission is to avenge the deaths
of everyone whose body parts compose his. But as he acquires new body parts to replace the deteriorating old ones, he can no longer tell the difference between those who must be killed and those who must be saved. The Whatsitsname begins to resemble the logics and forces that drive the War on Terror, whose violence claims innocent lives in the name of eliminating terrorism.

Characters like Hasib Mohamed Jaafar and the Whatsitsname embody the logics of security and exceptionalism that drive the U.S. occupation of Baghdad. According to security logic, U.S. and Iraqi military personnel have a right to enforce security measures and violent methods of occupation upon one group in order to protect another, supposedly more important, group of people like U.S. and Iraqi government officials who reside in the Green Zone. The logic of exceptionalism compliments this security logic: the U.S. claims that its exceptional military and outstanding moral authority warrants its leadership in enforcing security during the War on Terror. The Whatsitsname highlights the contradictions of security and exceptionalism when he wreaks havoc on Baghdad’s civilians under the rubric of delivering justice to victims.

Saadawi’s rewriting of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) borrows the figures of the monster and the monster-maker to explore how terrorism is made and how rhetorics of terror help circulate myths about the nation and threats to the nation. By exposing the faulty rhetoric of terror the U.S. and Iraq use to justify their military force, the Whatsitsname creates room to interrogate the concept of terrorism, behind which a loose assemblage of state control logics and tactics hide. Saadawi uses Gothic tropes—monstrosity and the supernatural—in conjunction with science fiction tropes—technology’s dire consequences and the living dead—to interrogate
the war machines that debilitate occupied lives. The Whatsitsname’s monstrosity is produced by his illegibility and abnormality, which defy his classification into categories like race, ethnicity, and nationality that states use to assign citizenship to, and exert control over, bodies. His illegibility underscores the way states exploit otherness to define and identify terrorism and justify their anti-terrorism intervention in other states. Furthermore, the Whatsitsname’s assemblage of bodies is a science fiction rendering of a chaotic war machine at the same time as it is a representation of the precarity of occupied lives as the living dead.

Saadawi uses formal strategies like orality and polyphony to challenge U.S.-centric narratives of terrorism that occlude the political and economic circumstances that give rise to acts of terror. In the novel, oral narratives such as Hadi’s creation story for the Whatsitsname and the creature’s own address to the public focus on the origins of the monster and the reasons for its terrorism. Furthermore, narrative polyphony produces an assemblage of points of view that highlights local perspectives of the occupation and decenters the U.S. and allied forces in a story about occupied subjects. In addition to connecting the novel to an oral tradition that goes as far back as ninth-century Iraq, the novel’s emphasis on orality and the embodiment of narrative signals toward a propensity for human exchange and negotiation that is missing in the U.S.’s exceptionalist response to terrorism, which ignores the conditions that cause acts of terror.

Up until this chapter, the built environment and property theft have served as my entry points into the analysis of spatial politics, state control logics, genre, formal literary devices, and the entanglement of all of these in twenty-first-century Arabic novels translated to English. But here, I end the chapter with an analysis of property theft,
beginning instead by looking at how the novel engages with the ideas of U.S. exceptionalism and security. Foregrounding the logics of security and exceptionalism and the terrorist-monsters from which these joint ideologies claim to protect people enables us to consider the role of spatial politics in the U.S.’s presence in the Middle East. Additionally, leaving the built environment for this chapter’s end aligns with the novel’s own closing scene, which take place in an abandoned, bomb-ridden hotel where a certain monster lurks, anticipating what is to follow after authorities have convinced themselves the work of anti-terrorism is done. State-sanctioned property theft in Saadawi’s novel signifies a concerted effort on the part of Iraqi governments—no doubt with the encouragement and discipline from the U.S.—to designate territories that fall under the domain of nation-building, or in this case rebuilding. In a story about assembling the abandoned dead and animating this assemblage with the will of security—a will underscored by the freedom of its wielders—what might assembling “abandoned” buildings tell us about the disparity between how occupied subjects are treated, either with or without the capacity for freedom, compared to the land they are forced to forfeit to the state? In this context, might property have more liberty to exist and become something in the future?

Recently, literary scholars in the Anglophone criticism community have given more attention to *Frankenstein in Baghdad* than other Arabic novels translated to English because it maintains global success in the literary market—due partly to its Arabic Booker status and its Penguin publication, translated by one of the leading Arabic-English translators Jonathan Wright—and because it carries on the legacy of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Recent studies have examined Saadawi’s acclaimed novel for its use of
grotesque aesthetics and magical realist techniques; situated the novel at the intersections of literature and medicine, within translation studies and science fiction studies; and analyzed how the story engages with the political contexts of U.S. imperialism, Iraqi nationalism, and biopolitics in general. Building on the latter three areas of inquiry, this chapter provides further insight into how the novel critiques state exceptionalism and security politics. Furthermore, the chapter continues the work of situating the novel within Gothic and science fiction studies, which, in Anglophone literary criticism, have neglected Arab literature, even in volumes that claim global scope. Finally, the chapter introduces two new angles to scholarship on the novel: first, it analyzes how the novel uses orality as a literary device with which to root characters and their interpersonal relationships in origin narratives; and second, it interprets the novel’s engagement with the theme of property theft as a critique of privatization as the primary method for rebuilding the nation. Ultimately, this chapter concludes that the novel’s formal experimentations with ideas of community and orality defy the logics of security,

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9 See Sabah Kareem’s *Grotesque Characters in Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) and Rawad Alhashmi’s “The Grotesque in Frankenstein in Baghdad: Between Humanity and Monstrosity” (2020)
10 See Jinan F. B. Al-Hajaj’s “Magical Realism, the Oracular, Mysticism and Belief Legacy in Ahmed Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad” (2020)
11 See Annie Webster’s “Ahmed Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad: A Tale of Biomedical Salvation?” (2018)
12 See Christina Phillips’s “Ahmed Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad as a Case Study of Consecration, Annexation, and Decontextualization in Arabic–English literary translation” (2020)
13 See Ian Campbell’s “Double Estrangement and Developments in Arabic Science Fiction: Ahmad Sa’dawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad” (2020)
14 See Fred Botting’s “Infinite Monstrosity: Justice, Terror, and Trauma in Frankenstein in Baghdad” (2019)
16 See Sinéad Murphy’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad: Human Conditions, or Conditions of Being Human* (2018)
counterterrorism, exceptionalism, and property that the U.S. and Iraqi states use to justify occupation and property theft.

2. Security, Exceptionalism, and the War on Terror

Saadawi uses characterization to represent ideas of security and exceptionalism that underpin the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the War on Terror. In the context of the War on Terror, the logic of security reasons that in order to protect one set of people, the U.S. and Iraqi militaries have the right to impose enforced security and military occupation upon another, supposedly less important, set of people that is claimed to pose a threat to the former. Defining each set of people becomes difficult as increasing numbers of people are labelled terrorists and the militaries themselves pose a threat to the safety of local civilians. One of the characters who represents security is Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, a security guard who protects the Sadeer Novotel hotel in Baghdad at the hotel gate. Hasib meets his death when a suicide bomber drives a “dynamite-laden garbage truck” toward him, “planning to crash through the hotel’s outer gate, drive the truck into the hotel lobby, and detonate the explosives, bringing down the whole building” (35). Hasib shoots the bomber and causes the truck to explode near the gate. He reasons that protecting the people in the hotel—who also uphold the agenda of “security”–justifies killing anyone who poses a threat to their safety: “There were security companies and important people and maybe Americans in it. He had a license to kill, as they say” (36). Hasib assumes his unimportance, that his own safety is inferior to the safety of more “important people” such as “Americans.” And his providing security for “security companies” themselves points to the circularity of the idea that in order to protect, we
must kill. His “license to kill” is also a license to die for these important people. When he pulls the trigger, he doesn’t so much choose this course of action, but instead lets security logic choose for him:

The thoughts raced through his head in fractions of a second as his finger squeezed the trigger, maybe even before he had decided on the best course of action. The truck blew up, and Hasib was aware of himself observing the explosion, but not from his position between the wooden sentry box and the big hotel’s outer gate. He was looking at the flames, the smoke, and the flying pieces of metal from high in the air. He felt a strange calm. (37)

Hasib views the situation not from the perspective of a human threatened by immediate circumstances, but from the perspective of security itself. He achieves a view of the explosion “from high in the air” as if he has transcended his body and inhabited the logic he dies by. His “strange calm” is a way of settling into and being carried by a decision made for him.

When Hasib’s ghost searches for his body, he fails to find it, only recognizing his “burned boots” among the aftermath of the bomb. Instead, he finds a body lying in a house in the Bataween neighborhood, and decides “[t]he two of them were made for each other”: “Overwhelmed by a heaviness and torpor, he lodged inside the corpse, filling it from head to toe, because probably, he realized then, it didn’t have a soul, while he was a soul without a body” (40). Hasib inhabits the corpse Hadi assembled and becomes the Whatsitsname’s soul. The Whatsitsname, in turn, internalizes the logic of security by which Hasib operated. As a response to his inherent programming to avenge the deaths of those who compose his body and soul, the Whatsitsname visits Hadi to kill him for
causing Hasib’s death. The Whatsitsname reasons that since Hadi was walking past the hotel before the suicide bombing, he caused Hasib to come out to the hotel gate, which put him closer to danger. Hadi tries to argue his way out of his death by pointing out that Hasib’s actual killer was the suicide bomber, to which the Whatsitsname responds “Yes, but he’s dead. How can I kill someone who’s already dead?” (129) The Whatsitsname embodies a U.S. exceptionalist security logic in thinking that military offense is the only way to address the problem of terrorism: in other words, someone must die for another’s death, even if that someone is merely adjacent to the initial threat.

The Whatsitsname’s “How can I kill someone who’s already dead?” is indicative of a U.S. exceptionalism that bypasses the type of political negotiation characteristic of formal war, and instead seeks to eliminate the source of violence. Such an approach to delivering security to one’s nation not only uses discriminatory judgment to determine what groups are worth complying to international standards of warfare, but also fails to address what is at the root of these groups’ terrorist acts. In Meeting the Enemy: American Exceptionalism and International Law (2010), Natsu Taylor Saito writes that the U.S. exceptionalist belief “that war is the most appropriate response to terrorism, is an ideological choice, not an inevitable conclusion. If the long-term goal is prevention of terrorist attacks, many scholars and political analysts have pointed out that the underlying causes of terrorism must be addressed” (13). In Saadawi’s novel, the Whatsitsname isn’t concerned with addressing the “underlying causes of terrorism;” instead, he takes a reactionary approach and combats violence with more violence. In other words, he makes himself an exception to his own principle that killing must be prevented, reasoning that in this case his violent intervention is justified by his superior moral and military status. The
What'sitsname’s attempt to locate a subject responsible for Hasib’s death is an attempt to restore a sense of security to others whose lives are threatened. This gesture is similar to how the U.S. occupation was an attempt, not to address the “underlying causes of terrorism,” but rather, to reassure the U.S. people that measures were being taken to prevent an event like 9/11 from happening again.

The What'sitsname and the U.S and Iraqi militaries both exploit fear to justify violence. Iraqi government spokesman Farid Shawwaf, after an incident on a bridge where a thousand people responded chaotically to a bomb threat and died from drowning or being trampled, says “all the security incidents and the tragedies we’re seeing stem from one thing—fear” (123). Farid explains that all the fear of what is called terrorism across Baghdad has caused a movement of killing to prevent that terrorism: “It has created a death machine working in the other direction because it’s afraid of the Other. And we’re going to see more and more death because of fear. The government and the occupation forces have to eliminate fear. They must put a stop to it if they really want this cycle of killing to end” (123). Killing to prevent so-called terrorism produces its own kind of terrorism. The What'sitsname and the security guard who inhabits his body make security more about maintaining the right to kill than preserving life, and they proceed under the illusion that their exceptional status grants them this right. In “Infinite Monstrosity: Justice, Terror, and Trauma in Frankenstein in Baghdad,” Fred Botting writes that when the What'sitsname is faced with uncertainty about whether he should end his infinite justice campaign, his decision to continue to “exploit this distinctive talent in the service of the innocent—in the service of truth and justice” (Saadawi 200-201)
signals that preserving his exceptional status as a piece of military technology is the fundamental motivator for this choice. Botting writes:

His appeal to his own exceptionality does not resolve questions of distinction or legitimacy but mean that he puts himself first, preserving his body and concentrating on his ‘own survival,’ and carrying on killing while waiting for clarity to return…Without clear rationale, divested of external legitimacy, his autonomous functionality as an indiscriminate mechanism of death becomes primary. (21)

TheWhatsitsname is a “death machine” whose greatest fear is termination. Once the Whatsitsname reasons that his survival depends on his legitimacy in public perception, he plans to further secure his own survival by censoring media coverage on his story. After the journalist Mahmoud publishes in al-Haqiya magazine a story titled “Frankenstein in Baghdad” where he “made up parts of the story” (184), the Whatsitsname asks Hadi to warn the journalist Mahmoud against writing any more false statements about the monster: “I’m now taking revenge on people who insult me, not just on those who did violence to those whose body parts I’m made of” (185). The pivot to preserving his own public image is a method by which he disavows his illegitimacy in favor of perpetuating his streak of violence and bodily renewal. “Truth and justice” become handy abstractions for maneuvering his military operations “in the service of the innocent,” whom he eventually might end up killing to sustain his own existence.

TheWhatsitsname believes he is exceptional in his capacity to address what the U.S. and Iraqi militaries call terrorism. Like these militaries, the Whatsitsname assumes his moral and martial superiority and asserts this authority over the people in Baghdad
who he claims cannot help themselves. The Whatsitsname uses the logic of exceptionism to justify his own War on Terror, reasoning that his inherent and superior sense of justice is needed in what he sees as a morally corrupt and chaotic country. After explaining to his creator that he needs to kill more victims to retrieve more body parts in order to stay alive, the Whatsitsname tells Hadi “people have been giving me a bad reputation. They’re accusing me of committing crimes, but what they don’t understand is that I’m the only justice there is in this country” (135). The Whatsitsname assumes his own exceptional status as a supplier of justice, which he believes exempts him from societal strictures against crime and violence. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor Frankenstein’s monster critiques this same type of exceptionism when Frankenstein threatens to kill him after his creature killed William and caused the innocent Justine’s execution: “You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature” (119). The Whatsitsname can excuse his murders, and Frankenstein can justify killing his creation, because each disavows the ways his intentions rely on the same violent strategies he condemns. In *Contemporary Historical Fiction, Exceptionalism and Community: After the Wreckage* (2020), Susan Strehle writes “exceptionalism supplies assumptions that not only enable and justify forms of social wreckage, but indeed sanctify the wreckage and cloak it in invisibility through habits of disavowal” (5). The Whatsitsname creates an exception to his principle that killing is unjust, arguing that violent means are necessary in order to address terrorism, and thereby “[sanctifying] the wreckage” he causes in the name of security.

Influenced by the Assyrian Christian ideology Elishva practiced in her home, the Whatsitsname adopts a savior complex that reflects the U.S. military’s belief that a
Christian nation’s duty is to lead a Muslim majority country to salvation, helping that country help itself: “I’m the answer to the call of the poor. I’m a savior, the one they were waiting for and hoped for in some sense…I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty” (142-143). In the same way the U.S. occupation was part of a project to shape the Iraqi state to be more U.S.-like, the Whatsitsname’s campaign is an attempt to “set an example” for those “who have no protection,” exemplifying the self-determination of a security state: “I will at least try to set an example of vengeance–the vengeance of the innocent who have no protection other than the tremors of their souls as they pray to ward off death” (143). Saito writes that one of the assumptions that undergirds the War on Terror is the U.S.’s belief that “the American model of social, political, and economic organization is the only truly viable option for any society and, as such, represents the highest stage of human development” and that “the United States has not only a right but a responsibility to remake the rest of the world in its image” (18). Like the U.S., the Whatsitsname perceives himself as the only exceptional model for the type of justice and security he sees lacking in Baghdad. The Whatsitsname solidifies his representation of U.S. exceptionalism when he puts on “the uniform of a U.S. special forces officer” and a “Marines cap” (151, 152). And when he begins to lose his vision because the clock runs out on seeking vengeance for that body part’s victim, he kills an “innocent victim” and takes his eyes, symbolizing the U.S. military’s perception of its own innocence as an intervening force in Iraq (161). As a result of his belief in his exceptionality, the Whatsitsname does not detect his own monstrosity.
3. Monstrosity, the Living Dead, and Gothic Science Fiction

Mary Shelley’s representations of exceptionalism and terrorism make *Frankenstein* (1818) especially suitable for a rewriting in the contexts of U.S. exceptionalism and the War on Terror. It is Victor Frankenstein’s belief in his own exceptional knowledge and scientific capacities that motivates him to create a being who defies the principles of organic life. But when the creature becomes aware that his own differences render him monstrous to humankind, he murders Frankenstein’s innocent family members and friends, hoping to terrify Frankenstein into creating a companion for him. Frankenstein almost commits to addressing the underlying motivations of his monster’s acts of terror—“I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (120)—but decides against it, fearing that creating a companion for his creature would breed more terror. After negotiating false promises, Frankenstein seeks revenge, making himself an exception to the violence he condemns, an exception his creation is keen to observe: “You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature” (119). Monster and monster-maker are then caught in a circular chase where each blames the other for his miseries, Frankenstein disavowing his responsibility for the acts his creature committed. Such ambition and greed on Frankenstein’s part are reflected in the narrative’s frame, too, where Captain Robert Walton conducts a pioneering expedition, “a voyage of discovery towards the northern pole,” despite the threat such an adventure poses to his crew (59). Saadawi’s novel adapts these themes of exceptionalism, terrorism, and pioneering to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, where the U.S. claims exceptional authority to combat terrorism, yet
fails—like Frankenstein—to address the political and economic conditions that motivate acts of terror.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* uses conventions from the Gothic—monstrosity and the supernatural—as well as tropes from science fiction—the living dead and the chaotic extremes of (military) technological advancement—to critique the state logics and practices that make monsters of occupiers while dismembering and debilitating the occupied. Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, what Brian Aldiss suggests is the first science fiction novel (*Billion Year Spree* 20-31), marked science fiction’s origins in the Gothic. Victor Frankenstein, the mad scientist and individualist, creates a supernatural monster that testifies to the destructiveness of technology and ambition. The monster’s unspeakable violence sends a message to Victor and Shelley’s audience about the dangers of applying reason beyond one’s limits and tampering with the natural order. Saadawi’s *Whatsitsname*, too, destroys and murders, and his violence communicates the dangers in the U.S. rationale that military technology will solve the problem of terrorism and save “civilization”. In “The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction” (1980), Patrick Brantlinger argues that “the power of the irrational over the rational” binds the Gothic with science fiction and locates science fiction’s origin in the Gothic (31). Brantlinger observes “the conventions of both Gothic and science fiction involve a rejection or a symbolic putting to sleep of reason; they are both forms of apocalyptic nightmare fantasy characterized by themes of demonic possession and monstrous distortion” (31). In Saadawi’s novel, science fiction looks back to its origins in the Gothic, and conventions of both genres coincide in one monster whose reason tells him he was made for revenge, yet whose consequences tell him he is catastrophically misled. He is a “war machine” spiraling out
of control at the same time as he is the “living dead” of Baghdad subjected to the “apocalyptic nightmare fantasy” wrought by the war machine.

Saadawi’s reformulation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* recontextualizes the monster within the discourse of the War on Terror. In the novel, the Whatsit’sname’s monstrosity is registered through its origins in Shelley’s novel, in which technological innovations have dire, unintended consequences for humanity. Saadawi uses monstrosity to examine the contradictory categories of human classification wrought by discourses about terrorism. His central monster complicates the valences of the concept of terrorism by interrogating the monstrosity of the U.S. as a primary authority in the War on Terror. The monster-maker, in this case the U.S., is responsible for tailoring the idea of terrorism to the enemies they would like to kill, inventing terrorist monsters and producing racist imaginaries that characterize Iraqis as inherently violent and incapable of governing themselves. In the introduction to *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2019), Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes write that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* demonstrates how “Gothic tropes contain racial and ethnic discourses” (10). Monstrosity as a Gothic trope excavates the threat that racial, ethnic, and national “others” pose to imperial nations whose ontological bases depend on power dynamics that privilege sameness and regulated difference like “diversity.” Part of what makes the Whatsit’sname so terrifying to battling parties is the ambiguity of his alliance and the opacity of his violent intentions, both of which the U.S. underscores in their justification for the War on Terror. In “Black Diasporic Gothic” (2019), Wester writes “[f]amiliar monsters are so overloaded with meaning that it is nearly impossible to escape re-instituting the very racial and classist ideals already encoded within their texts” (301).
Saadawi’s multiracial and multiethnic monster moves beyond “re-instituting the very racial and classist ideals already encoded” in Shelley’s monster by occluding the legibility of the Whatsitsname’s human categories. The Whatsitsname doesn’t belong to the races, ethnicities, or nationalities its parts represent for very long, and this makes it impossible for nations like the U.S. and Iraq to assign him citizenship. Conversely, his lack of citizenship makes it easier to classify him with a similarly arbitrary label like terrorist. The only reason his gender is so legible is because discourses of terrorism are tied up with those of masculinity and patriarchal power.

The Whatsitsname’s monstrous body is a ligature for the abnormal, and his illegibility produces fear within systems of classification like citizenship and security that rely on racial and national hierarchies to maintain order. When U.S. and Iraqi forces surround the Bataween neighborhood to attempt to capture the Whatsitsname, they don’t find exactly whom they were looking for; instead, they capture people who are “ugly” and “disfigured” like the Whatsitsname: “Mahmoud saw some young and middle-aged men being herded into army trucks, their hands tied behind their backs. What they all had in common, Mahmoud soon noticed, was that they were ugly. Some had genetic defects, others had been disfigured by burns, and others seemed to be insane: their faces were relaxed, with no signs of fear or anxiety” (137). What marks these bodies as potential suspects is difference and abnormality. In Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film (2014), Xavier Aldana Reyes writes “[t]he [Gothic] genre is invested in representational excesses of the body, like monstrosity, partly because these are helpful in negotiating larger concerns about humanity and its shifting boundaries” (7). Reyes observes that “Gothic bodies produce fear through their
interstitiality: they are scary because they either refuse absolute human taxonomies or destabilize received notions of what constitutes a ‘normal’ or socially intelligible body” (5). In Saadawi’s novel, the military personnel view these people with defects and disfigurements as monstrous because they don’t possess “‘normal’ or socially intelligible [bodies].” And because they don’t express “fear or anxiety” the way so-called normal people do, they must be “insane”—as if anyone could decipher, desire, and achieve any sort of normality, whatever that would look like, while under U.S. occupation.

In Shelley’s novel, too, difference inspires horror and a sense of one’s own monstrosity. When Frankenstein’s creature, upon eavesdropping and intercepting Felix’s instruction and Safie’s learning, evaluates his own status in terms of descent, inheritance, and property, he finds himself despicable: “And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome…Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?” (136) If poverty, isolation, and deformity render one monstrous, then it would take a lot of privilege to achieve humanity and escape the type of criminalization to which those “disfigured” and “insane” characters are subjected in Saadawi’s novel. People vulnerable to living the unlivable—military occupation, economic depression, impoverishment, incarceration, and displacement for example—are common populations science fiction has reimagined in the form of zombies and the living dead to critique the political systems that engender such conditions. The Whatsitsname is no exception: at the same time as he embodies the ideologies that justify inflicting violence upon the innocent for the sake of preserving liberty and democracy, he also represents the very people
whom allied forces and sectarian groups dehumanize and devalue when they tread upon them in their missions to capture their enemies. In “Frankenstein in Baghdad: Human Conditions, or Conditions of Being Human” (2018), Sinéad Murphy writes about how Saadawi uses the science fiction trope of the living dead to create a monster who is “an entity through which death takes on the guise of debilitated life” and who is a testament to how “contemporary warfare has given rise to forms of ‘living death’ in Iraq” (276). The critic observes how the Whatsitsname is emblematic of the suffering occupied subjects experience when the occupiers and allied forces engage in processes of valuation that render certain lives as already worth less than those being protected elsewhere. Murphy writes “Saadawi’s novel focuses not on the frontier between human life and death, but on the ‘unequal distribution of vulnerability’ (Butler, Adorno Lecture 15), through which human lives are differentially valued in an effort to control entire populations through political power derived from the institution of collective insecurity and fear” (282). And the same monster who represents “the institution of collective insecurity and fear” also signifies those whose lives that institution “differentially valued,” which reinforces the idea that the engine of warfare depends on the precarity of occupied civilians, whose lives and deaths are strategically mined through structures of debilitation for the maintenance of power.

The Whatsitsname activates yet another register of the “unequal distribution of vulnerability” as he performs miraculous instances of “biomedical salvation” in which his bodily rehabilitation sustains the myth that war is horrible for some but can lead to medical advancements—prosthetics, cell reconstruction—for others. In his living death, he embodies how some lives are built upon the dead, mirroring the innovations in medical
technology that reconstructed U.S. soldiers’ bodies while Iraqi civilians’ bodies were left dismembered in the streets. In “Ahmed Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad: A Tale of Biomedical Salvation?” (2018), Annie Webster argues that “through mirroring and inverting narratives of biomedical salvation, Saadawi’s novel destabilizes their narrative logic and brings into question the ways in which the human consequences of the Iraq War have been imagined by the international community” (440). Narratives of biomedical salvation that emerged during and after the Iraq War, wherein U.S. soldiers receive miraculous treatment for their injuries, sustains a logic of war that justifies war and violence in another country (Iraq) with medical advancements made throughout that war in one’s own country (the U.S.). Webster argues that Saadawi’s novel engages with narratives of biomedical salvation by “[testifying] to the violent destruction of Iraq’s medical infrastructure through consecutive conflicts” (440) and demonstrating how the Whatsitsname’s biological circumstances reflect the same faulty logic of narratives of biomedical salvation, where “a body is rebuilt; it promises healing to the wider community; and this figure echoes the broader destroy-and-build dynamics of the Iraq War” (445). Medical advancements’ rewards then become another justification for losing lives that are “differentially valued” and whose medical infrastructure cannot sustain similar medical acts of rehabilitation. Both of these iterations of theWhatsitsname as the living dead—living the unlivable; killing to sustain the rehabilitation of the chosen few—underscore the exceptionalist logic that renders Iraq another stage for the perpetuation of U.S. hegemony.

The monstrous Whatsitsname and those “disfigured” and “insane” people arrested for their associated “monstrosity” are monstrous because they do not fit the ideal of an
imagined national community that exceptional states produce to perpetuate a myth about belonging. In *Contemporary Historical Fiction, Exceptionalism and Community*, Strehle writes that exceptionalism is “the invocation of an idealized national community that excludes its Others and legitimates violence against them” (2). The Whatsitsname’s illegibility challenges state exceptionalism by refusing identity categories, but his abnormality still consigns his fate to the exceptionalist logic that the state has the right to inflict “[legitimated] violence against [Others].” Furthermore, the equation of abnormality with monstrosity—and the strategic propping of this abnormality as justification for carceral practices—is one formulation of the type of U.S. definition of terrorists as evil, uncivilized, and irrational monsters, a definition that results in state authorities assuming the right to perform questionable military actions against usually innocent suspects. The Whatsitsname and those arrested as suspects, in their abnormality and “insanity,” prompt the U.S. and Iraq to create an exception to war procedures since these subjects are categorized as evil and irrational, opposite to the U.S.’s self-assigned standard of “civilized” society. Saito writes “[a]ccording to the United States, the laws of war, developed over several centuries by ‘civilized’ states, cannot be adhered to in the current war on terror because ‘the enemy’ consists of individuals, nonstate organizations, or ‘rogue’ states that are motivated by ‘evil’ rather than by discernable political or economic interests and because their leaders are irrational, or ‘madmen’” (14). The Whatsitsname represents the evil terrorist the U.S. defined and mobilized in their exceptionalist justification for the War on Terror and for the exceptions the U.S. made in violating international law regarding war.
While the Whatsitsname’s monstrosity signifies Othering practices that exclude one from national belonging and thereby fortify the U.S. occupation of lives outside of state legitimacy, it also gestures toward the fragmentation of the Iraqi nation, whose subjection to the violences of the war with Iran, the Gulf War, and the dismantling of state institutions since 1990 contributed to its failure to produce a coherent nation. In “Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War” (2015), Haytham Bahoura writes that the Whatsitsname is “a metaphor for the fragmented and injured nation” and for “the monstrous incarnation of a colonial experiment gone awry” (196). The Iraqi nation’s failure to materialize is satirized by the “young madman,” one of the creature’s followers, who believes that the Whatsitsname represents the Iraqi nation that was never achieved: “Because I’m made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I’m the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks” (Saadawi 146-147). About this idea that the monster represents Iraqi nationalism, Bahoura writes: “From its inception and during the years of the Hashemite monarchy, to the nationalist rulers who followed, the Iraqi government, tasked with fashioning a cohesive national space, has failed. That this model citizen only exists in the form of a supernatural being is a commentary on the viability of Iraqi pluralism” (196). Furthermore, the idea that the only way the Whatsitsname can sustain its cohesion is through violent practices that mirror military occupation and sectarian warfare speaks to how the ambition toward national coherence is based on a compulsion to reanimate the state in the image of the colonizer, whose assertion of a unified self depends on the subjection of its embedded Others. With this creature, Saadawi reimagines the Iraqi
nation as the living dead, “revived” by U.S. invasion yet constantly dying as its citizens suffer the violences of war.

Disfigurement and “insanity” go a long way in qualifying one as a monster and a criminal, as Hadi finds out when, after becoming unrecognizable from the impact of a bomb and subsequent fire, he is arrested by officials and compelled to—forced to?—confess to everything the Whatsitsname did. At Kindi Hospital, Hadi stands in front of the bathroom mirror and inspects the damage done to his body:

The fire had completely disfigured him…He was a horrible creature, and even if he made a full recovery he would never look the same as before…He wanted to cry, but all he could do was stare. As he looked closer, he detected something deeper: This wasn’t the face of Hadi the junk dealer; it was the face of someone he had convinced himself was merely a figment of his fertile imagination. It was the face of the Whatsitsname. Hadi let out a horrible scream. (267)

Of course, Hadi isn’t really the Whatsitsname, and the Whatsitsname wasn’t just “a figment of his fertile imagination.” But the coalescence of Hadi and his creation, the monster-maker and the monster, as he looks into the mirror is striking because of how tightly it associates abnormality with monstrosity, and how drastically this association can switch-on one’s compulsion to reassess one’s humanity. Furthermore, the horror Hadi feels when convinced that he was the Whatsitsname all along is a fascinating reversal of the abjection Tariq feels in Abdo Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar* (*Throwing Sparks* 2009) when confronting his internalization of the Master’s monstrosity, as I mentioned in chapter one. In Saadawi’s novel, Hadi might find a somewhat messy correlative in the U.S. as a monster-maker, one who contributed to the birth of the kind of terrorism it
claims to save people from. The Whatsitsname’s intentions to seek revenge against Hadi could then be read as similar to the 9/11 revenge narrative associated with Al-Qaeda, whose training, funding, and equipment the U.S. made possible.

When Hadi sees his creation in his own image, he locates the origins of his monster in his own need for social legibility. As a junk dealer, a “liar,” and a “madman,” as some have called him, he couldn’t be more alienated. And Hadi encourages the Whatsitsname to supply his own origin story to the public so they can understand his acts of terror. Orality is the medium for these and many other origin stories in the novel. The embodiment of narrative through oral performance, and the polyphonic assemblage of these narratives in the novel, piece together accounts of violence that give rise to forms of monstrosity and the living dead.

4. Orality, Origins, and Collectivism

In Frankenstein in Baghdad, orality–oral communication, especially, in this case, orature and verbal storytelling–primarily facilitates the communication of origins, particularly those that explain the circumstances of terrorist acts. Hadi’s origin story for his creature and the Whatsitsname’s address to the public provide concrete reasons for why the monster was created and why the monster performs acts of terror. Furthermore, the unnamed author of the novel, who appears in the penultimate chapter, writes the work by assembling oral narratives told to him by characters such as Mahmoud, Hadi, the Whatsitsname, Aziz, Abu Salim, Father Josiah, and an unidentified employee at the Tracking and Pursuit Department, all of whom provide insight into the factors motivating violence and responses to violence in Baghdad. Additionally, orality makes explicit the
urgency to account for local voices and centralize local Baghdadi perspectives of the U.S.
occupation while decentering the points of view of U.S. and Iraqi militaries. In Shelley’s
novel, too, orality plays a key role. Frankenstein communicates his origin story through
oral narrative, seeking to gain Captain Walton’s sympathy and support so that Walton
will carry out his revenge mission after Frankenstein’s death, a request Walton declines.
Additionally, Frankenstein’s creature performs through orature his own origin story,
hoping to convince his maker to create for him a companion. Moreover, while U.S.
exceptionalism during the War on Terror is rooted in a myth of a unified nation whose
best response to acts of terrorism is war and preemptive security measures to protect itself
from threats to freedom and democracy—where state authorities decide how their citizen
subjects will engage with “terrorists” or “monsters”—the plurality that characterizes the
unnamed writer’s polyphonic narrative assemblage points to a less exceptionalist way of
imagining community, as well as a more cooperative manner of constructing a narrative
about collective and individual fears.

While the U.S. military’s effects permeate the world in which the novel’s events
occur, U.S. personnel themselves are decentered and remain peripheral to the events
throughout the novel. When they do enter the reader’s field of vision, they appear briefly
and anonymously, as if their presence is so normal and ubiquitous it is barely worth
mentioning. Their fleeting appearances include U.S. helicopters flying over houses (17,
61, 203), U.S. troops searching hotels for “terrorists” (57), investigating a crime scene
(68-69), and driving Hummers with gun-wielding soldiers down streets in traffic-
jamming convoys (73). The rest include U.S. troops conducting “routine sweeps for
weapons” in the Bataween neighborhood (88), raiding homes they suspect are housing
the Whatsitsname (136), creating road blocks (205, 256), and accompanying Iraqi intelligence at an interrogation as liaison (250). Although U.S. military personnel are everywhere, they occur in the background, never speak, and serve more as props than characters. The narrative is never delivered through their perspective. The novel decenters them, instead centering local Iraqis who endure the chaos of occupation. 

Furthermore, the novel registers the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism not through U.S. characters but through a monster made of bodies from various races and ethnicities.

Orality is one medium by which stories are transmitted and relations are drawn between characters in the novel, and by which local Iraqi perspectives are centered. The characters’ oral narratives activate a register of community in their distribution of responsibility for carrying forward narratives and assuming multiple roles as speaker and audience at different times. The narrative assemblage characters cooperatively produce about their experiences during occupation represents a way of imagining community when the institutions responsible for supplying a sense of belonging fail to do so. When the Whatsitsname visits Hadi to kill him for causing Hasib’s death, he tells his own story, updating Hadi about his activities since his creation. Hadi then tells this story to the journal editor Mahmoud, who then records himself speaking the narrative, customizing it with his own style and tone: “Mahmoud recorded all this on his digital recorder, aware that he was paraphrasing the words that Hadi had attributed to the Whatsitsname and that he was adding his own personal gloss as well” (131). In three transmissions, the

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17 See Ian Campbell’s “Double Estrangement and Developments in Arabic Science Fiction: Ahmad Sa’dawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*” (2020) for a different perspective on why the novel decenters the U.S. Campbell writes that “by focusing on violence upon Iraqis by Iraqis, and never confronting the Americans at all, *FB [Frankenstein in Baghdad]* is engaging in double estrangement, a trope that critiques its own society’s failings, which existed long before the American invasion and which continue to exist even in the time the novel was written, after an Iraqi government replaced the Coalition Provisional Authority” (8).
Whatsitsname’s oral tale becomes assembled, modified, and digitized. Later, the
Whatsitsname records his own oral narrative when Hadi gives him Mahmoud’s recorder
so that the Whatsitsname can explain his cause to the public and avoid being targeted
further. Hadi tells the Whatsitsname “‘You should defend yourself, to win some friends
to help you in your mission. Right now, you’re everyone’s enemy’” (135). The
Whatsitsname takes the device and records his story, explaining everything about his
revenge campaign and his followers. When Mahmoud’s journal folds because of a
scandal with Mahmoud’s boss Saidi, Mahmoud sells all his possessions to make the
money for his employee’s salaries. He sells the recorder to the unnamed writer, who uses
it to compose the novel. The writer also collects oral narratives from Abu Salim, who
knows everything that happens on his street and represents the eyes of the Bataween
neighborhood. After a bomb explodes in the neighborhood, Abu Salim is taken to the
hospital, where the writer visits him and asks him “‘Tell me everything’” (248).
Additionally, the writer visits Aziz the Egyptian who owns the coffee shop where Hadi
told all of his stories to customers and friends; he visits with Father Josiah who relays the
stories of Elishva, her son, and her daughters; he corresponds with Mahmoud, who sends
him updates about his relations with Saidi; and he receives from someone called “the
second assistant” documents from the Tracking and Pursuit Department (269-270).

The novel’s polyphonic composition implies a negotiation of the local with the
global that counters U.S. exceptionalism and the assumptions the U.S. makes about what
kinds of assistance Iraq needs. Additionally, through the orality in which these characters
perform a narrative assemblage, Saadawi looks back to the local tradition of oral
narrative performance that was born in Iraq in the form of the mujālasāt, literary salons
where communities came together to participate in and listen to the oral performance of narrative. And Saadawi’s use of this tradition is a way of putting the global into local context, highlighting the ways the War on Terror tears at the communal fabric through which stories are born. In *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages* (2010), Samer M. Ali writes that these literary salons “emerged in the ninth-century Iraq and flourished in the tenth century, spreading from Iraq to the west, to Andalusian Spain and to North Africa” (3). Ali observes that these literary salons were “[o]ne of the primary mechanisms for forming Abbasid society and literature,” a society centered in Iraq A.D. 750-1258 (13). The shared sense of togetherness that literary salons of the Islamic middle ages underscore is also present in the assembly Saadawi’s characters form to record the fractures and monsters created by the conditions of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. About assemblage, Ali writes that “[a]ccording to the historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), the defining feature of Arabic knowledge was not merely language, but the norm-driven imperative to perform it and teach it to the young, to learn it by heart, and to recite it *in assembly*” (14). Saadawi’s emphasis on the novel’s author draws much attention to the act of assembly required for the writer to put all the pieces of the local narrative together into a novel. The unnamed writer could very well be attempting to mine the local tradition of orality to increase his characters’, and thereby his own, credibility, in much the same way stories heard in *mujālasāt* carried authority by virtue of being performed in assembly. Ali writes “[c]ompilers of anthologies bolstered the authority of their works by framing their literary content as having been heard or overheard in *mujālasāt*. This framing device indicates the texts were current, alive, circulating, and widely performed—thus important” (18). Furthermore, Ali writes that one of the most important uses of oral
performance of narrative in *mujālasāt* was to “shape and adjust communal memory of [an] event and to give meaning to trauma” (193). The narrative assemblage the unnamed writer uses to form a novel articulates the very fissures—produced by military occupation—that make necessary the kind of piecing together the writer and his contributors do to produce a narrative about societal trauma in Baghdad.

Orality and the narrative assemblage it entails in the novel poses challenges to other assemblages throughout the text. For example, the sense of fractured collectivity inherent to the local Iraqi characters’ oral narrative assemblage contrasts with the self-glorifying atmosphere of the Whatsitsname as an assemblage of national interests and ideologies such as exceptionalism and security logic. Additionally, while oral narrative assemblage in the novel is a way of sewing up the tears in the social fabric, the Iraqi state conducts a different type of reassemblage in their attempt to collect property of the deceased or displaced under state ownership. Instead of mending the social fabric, the state perpetuates its fragmentation by turning to privatization as the process by which it will rebuild the nation.

5. Property Theft, Privatization, and Rebuilding the Nation

In the novel, the Iraqi state’s commitment to acquiring abandoned property is a way of underscoring land and property as fundamental bases for what the state considers proper nation rebuilding. By picking up pieces left behind, the state assembles these lands and buildings into a collection of state property, similar to how Hadi assembles neglected body parts into a corpse. Whereas the Whatsitsname’s assemblage represents the coalescence of state exceptionalism and security logics, the state’s property assemblage
represents the idea that Iraq’s recovery as a nation lies in trusting property as the system that will establish national coherence. And whereas the Whastsitname was animated by security, the Iraqi state attempts to reanimate its own nationhood with property. Frantic property acquisition while one of the world’s most notorious land thieves occupies its country is an ironic gesture toward how Iraq follows U.S. exceptionalism, taking steps to achieve the excellence the U.S. exemplifies.

The Iraqi state’s intentions to acquire abandoned property are illustrated in the novel when a charity goes door to door with civil servants to mark houses in the Bataween neighborhood for renovation or demolition and Faraj senses that the state might be trying to steal his properties:

They obviously wanted to take over his houses, or the houses he had rented from the state under contracts that were legal and in good order. They told him it was just a routine procedure for statistical purposes and to identify the historic houses, especially the ones that had wooden mashrabiya windows. But Faraj, who had got his hands on four or five of these old houses, took it as a plan to wrest the properties from him. (91)

These individuals, who operate under an agenda of “preserving Baghdad’s old houses” (90), aim to transfer property to the state. During the U.S. occupation, this active pursuit of property while people are left dead on the streets looks a lot like a form of triage that privileges land over people. This lack of concern for the dead and the dying is evident again when these same civil servants and charity organization members offer to buy Elishva’s house, telling her she would be able to live there for the rest of her life, after which the state would assume full ownership: “Some of these people had been coming to
the area individually and had visited Elishva to try to persuade her to sell her house to the state, with the concession that she could remain there, for as long as she lived, without paying any rent. The state would automatically acquire unrestricted ownership of the house when she died or vacated it” (91). What sounds like a generous allowance disguises a more disturbing posture: the state’s care belongs not to Elishva but to her house and her land; in her elder years, Elishva won’t contribute to the state’s national coherence, but her property will. This type of proactive budgeting on the state’s part suggests that during the occupation Iraq orients its imaginative capacities toward a future where its deceased and displaced citizens provide the territories that will comprise the rebuilt nation. In this way, the future Iraq would be built on its dead and displaced. By using the occupation as a convenient supplier of the conditions for property theft, the Iraqi state’s goals and methods resemble those of Faraj the real estate owner.

Saadawi uses characterization to represent Faraj the realtor as the Iraqi state’s correlative insofar as he also uses the occupation as a chance to steal abandoned property. Faraj not only profits from abandoned houses, but also generates income from those whom the occupation displaces and who need temporary housing: “Faraj had taken advantage of the chaos and lawlessness in the city to get his hands on several houses of unknown ownership. He turned these into cheap boardinghouses, renting the rooms to workers from the provinces or to families displaced from nearby areas for sectarian reasons or because of old vendettas that had come back into effect with the fall of the regime” (12). Faraj’s opportunism when it comes to “[taking] advantage of the chaos and lawlessness” is similar to U.S. opportunism in terms of using terrorism as a justification for its occupation of Iraq. And like the U.S., with its exceptional status as a military
power and governing institution, granted itself exemptions regarding compliance to international standards of conducting war, Faraj too claims exemptions regarding fair and orderly transferals of property:

The dire state of the country offered opportunities only to the bold and adventurous, and Faraj was not short of a sense of adventure. Gangs were on the rampage in the streets of Baghdad, and people were abandoning their homes or shops for fear of being kidnapped or killed. Faraj was seizing these opportunities. Overnight he had become a major landlord with a growing staff. Some people accused him of leading a criminal gang, but except for some slaps and kicks that he dispensed liberally to those who had the misfortune of standing in his way, he hadn’t killed or robbed anyone, not openly at least. (233)

Describing property theft as an “adventure” makes it sound a lot like pioneering and conquering an uncivilized frontier. And Faraj’s belief that “he hadn’t killed or robbed anyone” suggests his own subscription to exceptionalism, in the sense that an exception was made for his property theft owing to his exceptional status as Baghdad’s leading real estate agent. In the same way the Whatsitsname is not aware of the contradictions of his exceptionalism and security logic, Faraj is not aware of the contradictions of his exceptional property theft.

Faraj’s exceptionalism is sponsored by the Iraqi state, whose officials excuse his unlawful practices, even when they interfere with the state’s own regulatory processes: “[Faraj] had many relatives and acquaintances, and when the regime fell, they were the means by which he imposed authority, winning everyone’s respect and legalizing his appropriation of the abandoned houses, even though everyone knew he didn’t have the
papers to prove he owned them or had ever rented them from the government” (13). The
Iraqi state’s complicity with Faraj’s property theft contradicts their own commitment to
collecting these lands and buildings under state ownership unless they seek a form of
nationalism whose basis is privatization. And the “[legalization of] his appropriation”
points to another contradiction: granting exceptions to laws designating property
practices upends the very idea of property as something that exclusively belongs to a set
of people under state law. These contradictions are represented at the end of the novel,
when the two plots about the Whatsitsname’s revenge campaign and property theft
converge for one last time.

At the end of the novel, Baghdad celebrates the capture of their long pursued
enemy. But instead of capturing the Whatsitsname, they captured his maker, Hadi,
thinking this man conducted the series of killings. Meanwhile, the Whatsitsname has
found a new home where he will hide from his pursuers and, we can assume, wait until
it’s time to kill again. His hideout is the hotel Faraj bought from his real estate
competitor, in ruins from multiple nearby explosions, a suitable space for a clandestine
figure like the Whatsitsname. Concluding the story with a brief scene of the
Whatsitsname standing in the abandoned hotel, overlooking the Iraqi citizens celebrating
his capture, is a perfect gesture to the coalescence of state security and property. Here,
Saadawi illustrates Faraj’s hotel in ruins:

Since Faraj had taken down the sign outside, the hotel hadn’t had a name. It was
no longer the Orouba Hotel, and it hadn’t yet become the Grand Prophet Hotel, as
Faraj had been planning to call it. He had lost a large part of his fortune on the
two properties, one of which had been totally destroyed, the other seriously
damaged. To repair it he would have had to spend a fortune, so he left it as it was—
deserted, a ruin. He didn’t give it another thought. (280)

Faraj leaves the hotel “deserted, a ruin” much like the state leaves the bodies of its
citizens on the streets, neglected and unattended. The hotel is a symbol of Arab life and
identity—“Orouba” meaning “Arabness”—and Faraj’s desire to change the name to “Grand
Prophet Hotel” reveals his prioritization of profit—prophet’s homonym—over human
relations.\textsuperscript{18} Next, the novel shows an “unknown man” standing in the hotel, who we
know is the Whatsitsname because he is accompanied by Nabu, Elishva’s cat, and the
warmth they share is a result of the Whatsitsname’s stay with Elishva: “Nabu the cat
roamed around the hotel. The specter of an unknown man also lingered there, standing
for the past hour at the glassless window of a third-floor room, silently watching the
people celebrate, smoking and looking every now and then at the dark clouds
overhead...Thunder shook the sky, and it began to pour. People ran home, and the music
and celebrations stopped” (280). The “dark clouds” and “[t]hunder” work with the
imagery of the hotel as “deserted, a ruin” to reinforce the ongoing turmoil of the
Whatsitsname’s infinite revenge, a symbol of the infinite War on Terror. The alignment
of the Whatsitsname and the abandoned hotel at the novel’s end indicates that what will
reanimate the hotel and the nation upon which it stands is a form of state exceptionalism
and security logic that the Whatsitsname embodies. If privatization and property logics
form the bases for Iraq’s nation rebuilding, then the abandoned hotel at the end of the
story signifies the faulty logic of property in a state that steals from the deceased and

\textsuperscript{18} This might be unique to the English translation; nevertheless, it’s possible the author and translator
were intentional about infusing irony into this particular translation.
displaced. Furthermore, the Whatsitsname—who represents state exceptionalism and security—and his taking refuge in the abandoned hotel suggests that he feels safe and at home in a privatized space, and that he senses his own motivations are consistent with a state that sacrifices the security of its inhabitants for the sake of its own preservation.


The publication and translation of Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* close to the bicentennial of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a testament to the lasting impact of the original tale as well as the increasingly horrifying realities being experienced as a result of global warfare and the continual violence of U.S. imperialism. By centering Iraqi narratives of trauma and resistance, Saadawi’s rewriting supplies new methods of understanding the nature and consequences of power in areas of the world most impacted by systems of security that misleadingly provide the impression of care and concern. One of the most impactful elements of the novel is the Whatsitsname’s flexibility as a signifier of countless aspects of the Iraq War, from the ideologies of security and U.S. exceptionalism to the existential conditions of occupied lives. The malleability of this character and his simultaneous representation of the imperial war machine and the living dead resonate strongly with a similarly multifaceted phenomenon in one of the most popular works of contemporary Iraqi art, Wafaa Bilal’s *Domestic Tension* (2007).

In May 2007, Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal moved his living space to a small room in Chicago’s Flat File gallery and confined himself there for thirty-one days. In his new living space, sparsely furnished with a bed, office desk, computer, floor lamp, and a few
house plants, he and his team installed a robot made of a rotating paintball gun and a camera. He connected this robot to a website where users could see Bilal and his living space 24/7 through a webcam, control the paintball gun, and try to shoot him. The interactive installation *Domestic Tension* is a representation of surveillance technology and remote technologies of warfare that enable someone across the globe to use weapons like drones in a manner similar to a video game, casually inflicting harm on others as if those victims aren’t real. Furthermore, the gallery experience resembles the very real conditions shared by occupied people all over Iraq who are confined to their homes and threatened everyday by violence that could at any moment enter their living spaces. And the systems of security and surveillance the project simulates through virtual space are global systems whose effects manifest beyond the context of Iraq. The fact that the installation is situated in Chicago, where the U.S. police force is highly militarized, especially against Black and Latinx populations, suggests the work locates military occupation in Iraq within larger systems of security embedded in U.S. power structures. In “Genres in Detention” (2020), Angela Naimou notes that “outside *Domestic Tension*'s gallery space of controlled risk, the notoriously militarized police of Chicago kept working: where officers have the asymmetrical power to do what they want to their targets of presumptive suspicion, to shoot, kill, torture, frame, exploit, all in the name of ‘law and order,’ community policing, public safety, the fixing of broken windows.” The participants in Bilal’s installation are also allowed to “do what they want to their [target]” with or without knowing exactly why they want to *Shoot an Iraqi*, as Bilal phrases it in the project’s original title, censored “because the gallery thought that *Shoot an Iraqi* was too provocative” (Rice).
Bilal’s robot and Saadawi’s Whatstname are simulacra of real war machines. Each assembles human bodies and engages that assemblage in mechanized acts of violence that humanize the mechanic and dehumanize the targets. Bilal’s robot puts participants from around the globe in the control center of the machine, using their bodies to perform acts of security and surveillance similar to those conducted in the U.S. occupation. Hadi’s creation pieces dismembered parts into a body whose primary function is to kill more victims in order to maintain a supply of new body parts. And similar to how the Whatstname is composed of bodies from all different races, ethnicities, and nationalities, Bilal’s robot is also supplied the means to function by people from around the world: “By the end of the live event, more than 65,000 shots had been fired at me by viewers from 136 countries” (Rice).

In addition to depicting war machines inflicting 24/7 violence on civilians, Domestic Tension and Frankenstein in Baghdad also record how these war machines produce spectacles of violence wherein their own impacts are put on display through media technologies like internet chat rooms, news channels, and newspapers. Haytham Bahoora writes that while Domestic Tension is mainly about the psychological and physical distance between drone operators and victims, it is also about what this type of violence communicates to those in the war-torn country and those sitting in comfort elsewhere:

As a staged performance, Bilal’s exhibition did not attempt to simulate a drone strike’s real dismembering effects on his body, but rather confronted the psychological mechanisms through which such violence is enabled, in this case using a hyperreal video-game simulacrum to draw attention to the ways that
technology and violence function together to abstract the destructive effects of violence on its victims. Moreover, such a staged performance of violence highlights the ways that enactments of extreme violence are intended to communicate structures of power and domination to those who witness such spectacles. (187)

Another way Bilal’s work “[abstracts] the destructive effects of violence” is by sustaining his own status as target for an extended period of time, mirroring the perpetuation of violence conducted by war machines programmed to kill indefinitely. By prolonging his subjection to the weapon and lens of surveillance, and by supplying a constantly rotated and renewed personnel to inflict the violence, the artist assembles a war machine that is inseparably fixed upon its subject, the eternally debilitated living dead.
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Conclusion

My approach in this dissertation has been to combine the study of spatial politics in the Arabic novel with the studies of genre and form. This dissertation explores the connection between the ideologies driving the processes of gentrification, dispossession, and displacement and the counter ideologies found in the novels’ engagement with genres of fiction like the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction. My project demonstrates that Arabophone authors have found innovative ways to use these genres to interrogate the logics of state power represented in their novels, which in every case reflect real circumstances of biopolitical control in the twenty-first century Arab world. In Abdo Khal’s *Tarmi bi Sharar*, the author engages with the Gothic trope of the monster and the monster-maker to explore the ways property bestows power, and how power, when abused by the elite, has a tendency to make property of other people. In her novel *Tawq al-Hamam*, Raja Alem subverts the conventional individualism of detective fiction by introducing a collective of detective-like characters who investigate gentrification as a crime that inflicts violence by disposesssing and displacing the economically disadvantaged. Ahmed Naji’s *Istikhdam al-Haya*, with conventions from science fiction and climate change fiction, engages with the ideas of utopia and dystopia to uncover the relationships between climate change and the notions of progress and sustainability that fuel processes of green gentrification disguised as eco-friendly urban design. And in Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which uses conventions from both the Gothic and science fiction, the Iraqi author resituates Shelley’s monster within the context of the U.S. occupation of Baghdad, where the monster represents forms of living death occupied subjects endure during the War on Terror.
The novels I read here reveal the built environment to be a significant agent in the intersecting biopolitical arenas of state control and neoliberal capitalism. As such, these works also demonstrate that the genres of the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction have something special to offer in the way of offering tools to read the built environment for what it signifies in the contexts of state-sanctioned property theft and displacement. For example, the Gothic all the way from its origins in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* has been a genre authors use partly to illustrate the built environment as a container of the past. As with Khal’s novel, where the Palace represents the Master’s legacy of inherited genes, wealth, and power, the Gothic convention of the past that haunts the present is useful to interrogate the ways Saudi Arabia’s recent history of slavery lives on in contemporary forms of taking without consent like abusive labor and property theft. And in detective fiction, which has always been invested in dramatizing the preservation of bourgeois ideas like protecting property and punishing criminals, the urban built environment with all of its juxtaposed splendor and squalor is a symbol of societal disorder in the city. Alem’s novel portrays the city of Mecca in disorder as its historical built environment, which narrates part of the novel as if it is a crucial member of the local community, is upended and to be replaced by commercial developments for elite Hajj pilgrims. Science fiction, on the other hand, has long paired ideas of utopia with the image of the built environment as a technologically advanced setting for humanity’s progression toward more improved modes of living. Naji’s novel, instead, illustrates how the utopian-like vision of the future city proposed by the Society of Urbanists actually materialized into a dystopian landscape where the city is a vacuum for the elite to escape
the catastrophic symptoms of climate change while continuing to profit on ideas of architectural sustainability.

Saadawi’s novel, which like Shelley’s original text blends the genres of the Gothic with science fiction, is not as concerned with ideas of property as the other three novels I read here, but it does explore the built environment’s capacity to symbolize the privatization of the nation after warfare on one’s homeland. If the Gothic lends *Frankenstein in Baghdad* the means to represent nations haunted by their pasts—such as how the U.S.’s past support of terrorist groups haunts the U.S.’s ongoing War on Terror—then science fiction offers the novel tools to explore the causes of the dystopian nightmare city that is occupied Baghdad. The property the Iraqi state recovers from its deceased and displaced citizens throughout the occupation then represents a placeholder for the rebuilding of the Iraqi nation, which is suggestive of how the state seeks to adopt from the U.S. not only the notions of security and exceptionalism explored in the novel, but also the ideals of the neoliberal capitalist nation that takes property as one of its core ideals.

My four dissertation chapters show how the boundaries between the Gothic, detective fiction, and science fiction are porous, especially due to the fact that the latter two genres originated from the Gothic. Gothic pasts and monsters inhabit all of these novels: the Master, Sheikh Khalid al-Sibaykhan, Paprika, and the Whatsitsname all represent logics of state power such as authoritarianism, individualism, imperialism, and exceptionalism taken to extreme limits. Additionally, property theft is investigated as a crime—and the state is interrogated as a criminal—against the economically disadvantaged in each novel, whether that theft occurs in Jeddah, Mecca, Cairo, or Baghdad.
Furthermore, every novel here explores the built environment as a technology whose advancement by way of gentrification has catastrophic impacts on humanity in the form of dispossession and displacement.

This dissertation unfolded against the pressure of several constraints related to language, existing scholarship, and the relevant geopolitical regions of inquiry. The first and most limiting constraint was my own limits of understanding regarding the Arabic language. All of the novels I read were translated from Arabic to English, but much of the scholarship written about the Arabic novel and its relationship with the three genres of fiction I study is written in Arabic. As a result, the dissertation could only account for Anglophone scholarship on Arabic literature, which is extremely scarce. One exception was Samia Al Hodathy’s “Postcolonialism and Arabic Literature: Rerouting or Re-Rooting?” which I received generous financial support from the English Department at University of Missouri, Columbia, to have translated from Arabic to English by the incredible Zeena Faulk, a PhD candidate in Translation Studies at the University of Warwick.

Given more time and resources, I would have sought translation for every relevant article and book I could find. Furthermore, given more time, I would have applied my reading methodology to the Palestinian novel, since Palestine is probably the Arab world’s most critical site of state abuse and spatial technologies of biopolitical control. For example, my dissertation research could expand to include an analysis of the Palestinian author Ibtisam Azem’s Sifr al-Ikhtifa’ (The Book of Disappearance 2014), which stages the mysterious disappearance of the entire Palestinian population followed by the collapse of Israeli infrastructures of power and productivity due to the absence of
their colonial subjects. Notably, the novel also explores the explosion of the Israeli and Palestinian real estate markets due to the sudden vacancy of the disappeared Palestinians’ property.
VITA

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