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Between the East and the West: Islam and the Post Colonial Arabic Novels in Libya

Akewula Adams Olufemi

Abstract

This paper explores how Islam appears and as viewed by the public in post colonial Libyan novels. It answers the controversial question regarding the shocking and dramatic change in ideology among Libyan intellectuals, especially the novelists, who switch to western ideologies at a certain stage in their lives. Although, critics have touched the similarity between Islam and Western ideology, but no one has investigated the Arabic novels of Libya that problematise this transformation, leading to a better understanding of this genre of literary creativity. Its emphasis on Islam in post colonial Libyan novels is not intended to minimise the role of non-literary writings by Libyan Arab and non-Libyan writers since the mid-nineteenth century. However, it is the contention of this paper that Islam in post colonial Libyan novels in the post colonial period goes beyond the limit of specific discipline. It is better equipped to provide us with multiple perspectives and concrete situations, which are very important to answer questions that are continually raised by scholars regarding the so-called issues on Islam and Libya post colonial novels.

Introduction

Since 1950 to date, barely a day passes without stories about Islam – the religion of about one-fifth of humanity – appearing in the literary circle across the globe. The profile of Islam has been raised throughout the world as subject for analysis and discussion. The debates in humanities have been heated and passionate, especially in post colonial Libyan Arabic novels.¹ Pierre Macherey's quotation from Lenin on Tolstoy is worth citing here, "for the scholars trust the evidence of the surveys

¹ M. Ruthwen, *Islam in the World*, (London: Granta Books, 2006), 2.

which are often partial and inadequate, which lack a sound theoretical basis, why should we not have faith in those observations gathered over the years by a man with a remarkable gift and an absolute sincerity, one who is intimate with his subject"?² Moreover, a great literary writer, Albert Camus contends that philosophical novelists, not thesis writer, and their works of arts are "the outcome of an often expressed philosophy, its illustration and its consummation." To this emphasis on literature he adds that "thought pauses to mimic it (the reality)" because it is incapable of "refining" it.³ Libyan novelists are more often concerned about ideas regarding their present life and situation. Their emulation of the literary tradition in the West may have falsified some of this experience and marred the prospects of addressing concrete situations, but at a later stage, there is much engagement with these realities. Both the Libya novelists in the West and their contemporary novelists at home have been trying for the last few decades to pose identical questions, usually without providing sufficient answers. Such questions pertain to the entire effort whereby some Libyan elites endeavour to emulate Westerners.

While it is taken for granted that the interest in the West has enforced forms of simulation, mimicry, appropriation, and emulation, some Libya novelists consider it a faulty effort at base. Muhsin al-Musawi in his provocative essay, "Islam and Modernization in the Arab World", provides a neat reconsideration of the so-called Arab *nahdah* (awakening) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, usually confused with such terms as enlightenment or renaissance.⁴ Stipulating that it did not constitute a renaissance, he further explains that it was not an intellectual awakening but a reaction to the military and political threat of the West. Even after the Westerners impact had been transformed into a cultural challenge, response to it remained largely defensive and negative.⁵ Instead of meeting the actual challenge of Western modernisation on its own grounds in order to become a driving force for an intelligentsia capable of wielding the meager but growing resources of the society and the emerging nation states, there was then an apologetic or, at best, compromising tone that proved too evasive to

² M. Pierre, *Theory of Literary Production*, (London: Trans. Geoffrey Wall, Routledge, 2006), 72.

³ C. Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (Penguin: Hammondsorth, 1942), 56.

⁴ Muhsin al-Jasim Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 13.

⁵ Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature*... 14.

monopolise social and political resources to the full. The response sounds pertinent, but it obviously looks at the matter in political terms only, since the secularists among Libya intellectuals were more intent on engaging science, especially during the reign of Ghaddafi and its applications to life and civilisation. Their incentive obviously derives from the enlightenment discourse, its emphasis on human reason and empirical evidence, with a concomitant neglect of metaphysics.

The Qur'ān, Islam and the Nation-State

There is another sense in which Musawi is right, the British and French colonial occupation that replaced an oppressive and autocratic Ottoman rule brought more pressure on a situation that was already in need of powerful engagement with social, economic, and cultural problems. More problems were created that diverted the intelligentsia from a purposeful effort aimed at achieving a full-scale mobilisation of manpower and resources toward change. Insofar as the role of Islam is concerned, it needs to be emphasised that it cannot be described or labelled as a homogeneous creed. On the social level, it includes common beliefs and practices that have a strong and tenacious hold both within and outside Arab world. Islam is one, but Islamic practices differ and its different sects and factions have often been overlooked in order to cater for homogeneous entity called Islam. Practices and factions, each with its own gradations and relevant interests, have their political unconscious too, or a cultural under-pinning that signifies identity and belonging regardless of the possibility of affiliation with secular-tracked religious sects and organisations such as Sunni, Shiite, Sufism that began to appear, especially in North African Arab nations. One of examples, apart from the fact that the Qur'an is the basic text for different sects and factions is that Qur'an had other priorities too, which continue to emerge whenever it is being challenged. The undebatable presence of the Qur'an does not preclude different applications or interpretations. On the other hand, its sonorous and rich Arabic language has exerted specific thoughts and evaluations⁶.

Although al-Musawi does not elaborate on this point, the Qur'anic-rooted Arabic is not limited to either the Arab themselves or to Arabic speakers all over the globe. Rather, it signifies a status of belonging and affiliation to millions of people outside the Arab region. Both eloquence

⁶ Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature...* 15.

and message have exerted an enormous hold, been responsible for the valorisation of the role of poetry for Arabs and Muslims. Conversely, poetry and belles lettres show a great deal of deviation from the text, not only in matter but also in manner. The separation between the Qur'anic language and belles lettres signifies an analog separation between Islam and the nation-state, their divergence rather than convergence. The common ground is a standard language, but the eloquence and message that are usually associated with Qur'anic rhetoric. This is not an ordinary divergence because secularising a discourse involves a basic Arabic that is divested of religious, metaphorical, or rhetorical aspects associated with the language of the Qur'an. Secular language, especially in its national guise following the emergence of the nation state and the subsequent rise of nationalism and its pan-Arabic rhetoric, retains its hold on professionals, educated publics, and middle-class audiences. However, its extension into the countryside has remained doubtful despite the spread of bookstores and the availability of newspapers and media communication concomitant with national revolutions.

Prose Renaissance and the Libyan Writers

Through literature, the press, media as well as educational systems, there has been a consistent codification and formalisation of communicative, pragmatic, and usable discourse. Standardised via these channels, are schools and teachers, functionaries, grammarians, and editors of school texts. The emerging secular discourse moves far from a religious or classical one, not only in terms of rhetoric and metaphorical devices but primarily through a departure from a basic lexical norm. The so-called prose renaissance, applies to the Libyan 'Kamil, Al-Maghuri, Khalifah Tablik, Muhammad Shaltam and others after the tribute paid to him by Yusuf al-Sharif in his popular lectures on *haqāhiq al-adab*,⁷ means two things a standardisation of prose away from classical rhetoric, and an effort to counter the degeneration of prose under the Ottoman neglect of Arabic. To grasp the divergence between two attitudes to prose in the practice of early twentieth-century writers, the reader has to check, for instance, on the debate between the renowned Libyan scholar and man of letters, Muftah Al-Ammari and his contemporary, a critic, Shaykh Salim Al-Ukali's dailies, weeklies, and

⁷ J. Beyrerl, *The Style of the Modern Arabic Short Story*. (Prague Charles: University Press, 2012), 59.

other journalistic forms that made it easy for debates to reach this relatively wide reading public across Libya and beyond. The press, schools, magazines, journals, and salons have been among the most effective means of consolidating and fostering a discourse that is agnostic and neutral. Most of the material published in the twentieth century has appeared in journals and magazines before being published in book form. The tendency would continue, and by the 1990s onward we have Muftah serialising his narratives in the popular daily *Al-Risalat*, and al-Ukali doing the same in the weekly magazines *Nasim Sabah*, (1990-2011). These channels are formative means in making and producing promising writers whose veiled autobiographical works or memoirs admit as much. Indeed, AbduSalam Al-Ajaili autobiography *Hayatu Wahid Mir'atu ghayr*, which has become since its early appearance the model and the source for narratives⁸ is no more than a journey from religious discourse, collapsed with traditions and outworn customs or practices, to another that combines in its formation, Libyan modernists, French scholars and philosophers, secular leaders, and well-known Orientalists.⁹ Apart from this fact, there is more to it than we think, for it also conveys indebtedness to a genre that has been growing in the West, namely the novel of education and autobiography. As Pierre Macherey argues, in the manner of T. S. Eliot and even more in keeping with the classical Arabic theory of plagiarism, “a book never arrives unaccompanied: it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them.”¹⁰

Language, with its symbolic power, is closely linked to issues of modernisation and indigenous culture. It is especially so in respect to Arabic as the language of the Qur'an and also as the repository of a rich tradition of poetry, poetic proverbs, maxims, sciences, heritage of every cultural colour, and narrative. The raging debates of the early twentieth century in Libya regarding mediums of expression and writing were soon to abate despite the involvement of many well-established writers in them, but these debates focused on expediency on the one hand, and confrontation with modernity in view of what was taking place in some Arab lands on the other hand, but there is little to indicate that debates were elevated to an open discussion of religion and heritage. The question that may come to one's mind, do Libyan intellectuals during the

⁸ Beyerl, *The Style of the Modern Arabic Short Story*... 60.

⁹ Beyerl, *The Style of the Modern Arabic Short Story*... 61.

¹⁰ Pierre, *Theory of Literary Production*... 78.

nation-state formation period after the World War II, actually have anything to say in this respect? According to Jaboury, readers are already aware of what learned scholars in Libya have said on this matter, but let us instead consider an article written in 1912 by the renowned Iraqi poet, Ma'rūf, al Rasāfī (d. 1945), whose popularity among both learned and common publics was remarkable. In the journal, *Lisān al-'Arab*¹¹ he has this to say: "The language of each nation is irrefutably one of its historical glories. Hence, each language of a nation is part of its nationhood." But, does this apply to religion? He explains, "For some nations like the Arabs, religion is the greatest factor in its glories; a great deal of its achievements rests on religion is included in its concept of nationhood." He concludes, "He who knows is homeland knows his God."

But, like Musāwi, intellectuals, whether in the Arab world or in the diaspora have searched in vain for an understanding of what al-Musāwi calls, "the relaxing of Islam's grip on the Arab society," something that later in the essay he relates to "an inner collapse and withering away of its position and effective power in social and political life."¹² No actual reasons are offered to explain this "collapse." Was it caused by the dwindling role of the Islamic scholars, *'ulamā*, who were "reduced to a small ineffectual body dependent on the toleration of the state and on a meager income from the rapidly dwindling pious foundations?"¹³ Isn't this an effect rather than a cause? Was it the result of the secularisation of education? Was it due to the rise of nationalism and the alliance between seminationalist revolts (the Hijāzī of Arabia for instance) and imperial powers, like the British, against the Ottoman caliphate in World War I? Could it be because this nationalism would soon espouse the cause of socialism in Libya? Were the foundations for this laid in the twentieth century, due to the reluctance of the dominant clergy to consider the challenge in cultural and economic terms? Did the predilection of the Arab intelligentsia for Western positivism win over the educated segment of the society to the disadvantage of traditional beliefs and practices? Another issue that may pose a challenge to Musāwi's point is whether in fact such a thing as a loss of grip exists? Or have intellectuals fallen into an intentional fallacy that confuses personal visions with realities?

11 J. Ghazoul, *The Arabia Nights: A Structural Analysis*, (National Commission for UNESCO, 2002), 25.

12 Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature*... 30.

13 Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature*... 31.

No single answer can lead us to a comprehensive understanding of the Arabicised Western modernity project, its achievements and failures. Within the parameters of the *nahdah* (modernity) movement, no single answer will ever venture beyond either a clerical dichotomous positioning involving either an Islamic state and a return to a Qur'anic-based rule, or else a compromise between traditional practices and Western science; or alternatively the various projects of "secular-oriented intellectuals" who were equally incapable of achieving a critical system of analysis through a sincere belief in the masses, that is, people who are either debased by elitism as rabble or elevated by western ideology as leading social forces. To the angry and disillusioned masses of 1967 and thereafter, the nation-state as well as the intelligentsia were shown to be disastrously incapable of leadership. Ideological rhetoric collapsed as never before and along with it a system of thought that was once considered rich, although only in promises and tokens of achievement. Throughout the process, contestation occurs in the framework of language. Even reliance on the Qur'an rises or falls in response to circumstances, though this basic frame of reference is always available as the symbolic system most effective in counteracting contending debates and shaking up positions and attitudes.¹⁴

Islam 'Asimah and the West

The term '*āsimah*, capital' is a new coinage derived from a Western legacy that has been appreciated and approved by Arab and Muslim travellers from the late eighteenth century onward. It situates itself plausibly and effectively in an emerging sense of nation-state during the fragmentary phase of Ottoman rule. No Muslim authority was strong enough to lay claim to supremacy in the Islamic world. World War I only added a colonial seal to a division of geographical spoils called nation-states under some mandatory imperial control. The nation state needs a replica of the metropolis as its centre. Only through partial duplication can it stand for a new order. Ironically, this replication also demands its own spatial divides that are no longer based on caste or lineage. Apart from hotels, cafes, and clubs with names that echo the metropolis, there are streets and squares that recall history and tradition. The emerging entity is a mixture of Arabism and Western legacy. The street as the locus and space for action assumes both historical and modernist

¹⁴ M. Allot, *Novelists on the Novel*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2004), 12.

connotations. It is space for a symbolic order and also an arena for other players and contenders. Its intersectional nature makes it rife with struggle among a number of contenders. Before defining the term “way”, its maturation into an animated presence, or an agent with a proper name of some significance or else another denoting a historical shift, we need to understand the street as indicative of all the properties of dialectics and, hence dynamism. It includes process, gain, motion, stability, and contradiction. Islam in the street is neither unitary nor homogeneous. Depending on the contenders, Islam splits into ideological positions, beliefs, and practices that are embodied in different agents and platforms. The interchangeable transaction between human agency, space, and faith makes the street a narrative of paramount power, which otherwise cannot be fully captured in news reports or anthropological surveys.¹⁵

The duplication of the Western metropolis was already being implemented through verbal constructions of sites and scenes, of landscapes that make up material space, as noticed and disseminated by travellers like Shaykh Rifa’ah Rāfi’ al-Tahtāwī (d. 1873) in 1838¹⁶. The verbal reconstruction of Paris was to become an incentive not only for more high-class ladies’ sightseeing trips but also, and more significantly, for commissioned reports that would prepare the public for a new kind of urban setting. City planners and architects had a share of this enterprise as collaborators in Khalifah Ismail’s project to turn Cairo into a piece of Europe. In Baghdad and other centres that came under British rule after World War I, only certain portions of the city, like al-Rashid’s way, would representationally duplicate some ways in London. The French did more to reshape Constantine and other Libyan cities into duplicates of Paris. Downtown should always duplicate the heart of empires. Emphasis was laid on functional spaces that were to be part of the colonial project, especially in the domain of communication and transportation. Railway stations and post office buildings were ironically designed as replicas of their British or French counterparts. The colonial mind was bent on seeing itself fitting well into a construct that was neither foreign nor alien. Thus, the railway station on the Ayman side of Tripoli was designed after Victoria Station in Paris, but without the size and grandeur of the latter. The metropolis has its

¹⁵ Beyerl, *The Style of the Modern Arabic Short Story*... 68.

¹⁶ Ruthwen, *Islam in the World*... 23

representational monuments in its colonies, in signposts that remind the beholder of the remote but omniscient centre, its supremacy and power. No mosque is nearby. It was only at a later stage in Tripoli, for instance, and with the growth of the Libyan government under the headship of Muhammad Ghadhafi that built a spacious mosque on the other side of the way that leads to the Libya national museum.

The mosque is both an iconic site, one that carries the connotation-, of a symbolic Islamic power, and a virtual lived space. Its grandeur, however, could make it more of a bureaucratic or governmental enclave with an authority of its own important official rituals, memorials, and state-directed sermons can find no better location. On general or common symbolic at all levels, the mosque holds the Islamic city together. At least in its early construction as the center of new cities, it has a functional role in holding life together. The urban centre flows from it and towards it, and hence markets are designed to lead to it as well as arc shrines, which have the double function of prayer and visitation. While the central mosque of the city may convey also the association with the symbolic power vested and instituted in the sovereign, shrines are more delegated by another consensus which is usually represented by the learned from among the religious society. Shrines as mosques, like Abū Hanīfah's in Baghdad, for example, have a different function from the central mosque. Nobody, regardless of rank or status, can manipulate a space that is claimed by a community. On the other side of Tripoli, Ayman, there is the Yammāma mosque, for example, which was established by the Fatimids.¹⁷ Such a mosque site cannot be manipulated by the state, not only because of its status as a Muslim community property shared by all, but also because it was never taken to represent an official line of thought. Reserved for Sunnis, it remains beyond the interest of the state, at least before the advent of so-called majority rule in 2005. On the other hand, the Sultan Hasan mosque in Cairo can be used by the state, for its name connects it to secular authority and hence divests it of public claims or sharp religious demarcations. Indeed, a study of mosques, old and new, may well indicate the parameters not only of public and official relations to Islam, but also the role of Islam in the fight against colonial occupation or imperial encroachments.

The way as space fulfills both a real and symbolic function. The

¹⁷ Ruthwen, *Islam in the World* ... 28.

actual space, the representational space, where interaction and possible proliferation and dissemination of opinion occur is the marketplace. But, in the Arab-Islamic tradition, the marketplace is part of a symbolic and functional order usually associated with the way: Its relative lawlessness, free interaction, transactional nature, gain, theft, exposition of tact, addressing an audience, and so on. The symbolic dimension lies elsewhere. To belong to the way does not resonate well in privileged or learned circles. When the jurist and preacher ‘Abdullah Ibn Ahmad Ibn al-Khashshāb (d. 1172) attended the gatherings around storytellers, he was reproached for leaving his sanctuary and mixing with the so-called rabble. Until very recently, it has been considered derogatory to speak of somebody as *Ibn shāri* (street scum, implying rootlessness or lack of refinement and education, a ruffian). On the other hand, the way, the square, the mosque, and the marketplace are the communal places in an urban center. They were so in tenth-century Islamic cities. In these places, many of Badi’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī’s (d. 1008 CE) *Maqāmāt* were enacted as assemblies whereby the narrator tells his readers about his protagonist’s fables, activities, tricks, and achievements.¹⁸

Space in Islamic cities is not a concept. It possesses an agency of its own whose origins relate in the first instance to its modes of production. By designing a place and giving it a function and a name, the state, the person, or the company has a mission, a goal, an interest, and an ideology. Indeed, whenever it loses its naturalness and gets mapped so as to fit into an ideology and repertoire of knowledge, it becomes a “conceptualised” space (to use Lefebvre’s terms).¹⁹ The moment when the way, the building, and the square appear, they have to be in keeping with their name and role; otherwise a gradual slippage takes place that entails a process of counter-naming chosen and used by its virtual manipulators. Whenever a correspondence between name, IUIH lion, location, and history is retained, there is more loyalty to the place. Nobody has tried to change the name of Ayman way in Tripoli, al-Rashid way in Baghdad, for example, or Tal’at Harb Square in Cairo. Even when Baghdad was ravaged as a consequence of an ongoing occupation since 2003, and Muhsin al-Sa’dūns (d.1929) statue was stolen, Sa’dūn Street retains its name. The name of the nationalist prime minister under

¹⁸ Ghazoul, *The Arabia Nights: A Structural Analysis* ... 28.

¹⁹ L. Henri, *The Production of Space*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: Trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, 1991), 18.

the British mandate still retains respect for refusing to become a cog in the wheel of empire, even while suffering the blame of his compatriots for not being tough enough. When cities and places like Baghdad suffer under authoritarianism or the ravages of occupation, they are forced at least for the new generations, to give up and forget locations and names that survive only in books of geography and history.

In such cases as these, history and its annals or recollections provide a reminder of a presence, a reminder that at times resonates in speeches and sermons as if it were still here, speaking and addressing all. Absence has amazing agency of its own. It is remarkable how Islamic sermons use this absence to re-create not only an accumulating archive of traces, but also a dynamic image of Islam in its ups and downs through ages of turmoil or achievement. An effective preacher can be a scourge to the present. This is what a Cairene preacher in the nineteenth century, for example, has to say in his Friday sermon: "God teacheth by allegory.... The happy is the one who maketh amends for the time passed in the time to come; and miserable is he whose days pass away and is careless of his time".²⁰ Time and place interact and continuity is sustained in order to convey the sense of meaningfulness and responsibility.

To speak of the way in spatial and symbolic terms implies a need to account for its many protean and permanent functions. Its symbolic role connects it to ideological state apparatuses, for it adopts as space monuments, mosques, stores, shops, cafes, schools, newspaper stalls, vendors, restaurants, police stations, banks, and so on. All these may have a coercive, ideological, and transactional function depending on use and manipulation. All respond to change and affect it. Even so, derogatory interpellation can still endow it with life as a subject nevertheless. To call it so also entails its subjection to the source of interpellation, that is, privileged discourse. Through the interpellation process it turns into a discursive body whose inscriber is no less than the privileged class or group. This derogatory status turns the street into an inventory of bruises and scars. There are bars, taverns, and merchants' shops. There are ruffians, carters, and also bullies. Everybody has God in mind. When referring to God, however, everybody means something different from the rest. Islam, the total way of life speaks in soft and

²⁰ C. Adams, *Islam and Modernization in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement*, (London, 2005), 23.

many languages. Even when a God-fearing individual invokes the name of God, he or she means something that can be debated by another, as can be seen in al-Khoni's novel, for example, and his first wife. He argues that it is God's will that draws him to the barmaid Fullah whom he plans to marry, an explanation that provokes his wife to describe the intention as no more than Satan's snares, not God's will.²¹ Interest colours ideological positions and informs, them. Whence comes the dynamic presence, not only of invocations, supplications, benedictions, vows, and visitations, bill also of group feelings, practices, decrees, speech acts, communiqués, sermons, heralds, rumors, and speeches. Taken together, these establish a discourse of one sort or another which cannot be studied in causal compartmentalised categories such as those that are regularly packaged for media use in a hegemonic discourse. In narrative, these differences, varieties, and variables take form more than any that we meet in reporting or even in historical accounts. Narrative alone can provide enough space for these to be played out in all their varieties. Its success depends on this availability where all agents participate in tossing out their products, vying for ascendancy in an arena where space and ideology interchange meaning, and where ideology is made to forego its limits to embrace its interlocutors in narrative.²²

Libyan Classical and Modern Arabic Narratives

The comparison between classical and modern narratives in Arabic literary writing may lead us to significant conclusions, but within the limits of this reading we will be looking at literary writing in terms of the quest for knowledge as an Islamic precept and slogan. Earlier travellers traversed the globe in search of experience and knowledge. The modernists have their commitment to study, too, and come back with enough knowledge to make them feel entitled to criticise their own cultures and social life. Previously, the Muslim traveller had to start from the center of the universe, the centre of power, where he was secure and powerful enough to notice, assess, and conclude. As late as the fourteenth century, such was the dominating feeling among Muslim travellers. Modernists are different. They go with a sense of desperate need for science and learning.

²¹ I. Al-Khoni, *Al-Insān*, (London: Al-Saqi, 2009), 13.

²² M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West*, (London: Ithaca, 1985), 21.

The sense of cultural and social dependency overwhelms them. They are burdened by a feeling of limitation and inadequacy. Their writings convey a mixture of certainty and anger, hope and despair, appreciation and distrust. Arabic *Bildungsroman* narratives of the first half of the twentieth century that focus on the journey to Western world are not the usual journeys of old. This is the feeling that stays with the reader after putting down 'Kamil, Al-Maghuri, Khalifah Tablik, Muhammad Shaltām and others. Education becomes a process of acculturation, especially in Libyan narratives (and despite the relative absence of a clear educational purpose in *Al-Insān*, for example), wherein there is association between the acquisition of knowledge and an anxiety that keeps protagonists in suspense. As if driven to confront a frightening challenge, their sojourn in Paris, or inside the sanctuary of Western education back home is more focused on hanging a mindset whose ability look like full accountability of circumstance and responsibility is laid at the door of a person, usually a woman, who has to make decisions for them and, often, to push them out of her wished for company and love.

The experience may well betray some awe in the face of the West that obviously operates in their subconscious as knowledgeable and capable of either leading them to heaven or banishing them to hell. The *nahdah* intellectual, the bearer of certain enlightenment, is also the internaliser of a colonial legacy as carefully nurtured and reproduced in literature since Macaulay laid the early foundations for a strong colonial control of the minds and souls of the colonized intelligentsia in India. Accordingly, a total cultural dependency becomes the norm for an assessment of a colonized selfhood. Only through this dependency can such selfhood ensure survival. Tradition is put aside as another source of nuisance and fear. All connotations that relate to family, community, and representational space (shrines for example) are looked upon with distrust. Sharahi is not far off the track when he discerns such awe and ambiguity regarding knowledge:

Knowledge (*ilm*) came to the viewed with a kind of awe, and insistence upon its possession assumed a desperate urgency. For 'ilm was seen not as the basis of truth validity (in theological and philosophical contexts), but primarily as the source of power and strength in a concrete political and material sense. West came to be

respected and feared in terms of its science and industry, the means of its fast power.²³

This is what Libyan narratives before 1990 tell us. Not all narratives deal with this dependency, however, and particularly not after 1990 when writers have tended to become more disposed to taking responsibility.

Libyan Writers and the Novel Discourse

This paper intends to provide brief analyses of a number of narratives that will take us beyond the interpretations commonly encountered within academic where attendants and disciples tend to conform to their teachers' visions. Narratives in translation are commonly focused on doubt, sarcasm, revisionist readings of the sacred text, and godlessness. Under the impact of Western thought and certainly as a consequence of widespread disillusionment at the state of society, a sense of absurdity and nothingness invaded Libyan novels from the 1990s onward; all other preoccupations and obsessions seem no more than expression of bad faith that prevent or complicate human free choice. Authors became more closely attached to Western theories; while faith sounds in their writings as little more than a hollow premise.

Of great relevance to Islam in Libya region is the fact that Western theories, as valorised in translated narratives was popular among Libya philosophical novelists in particular. It was no less in vogue, however, among other Arab writers of the Modern periods. Like such predecessors as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Camus's view of absurdity is very much a response to the collapse of philosophy and religion in the West. Only through recognition of the absurdity of the universe can another philosophy of liberation emerge. Giving up hope in a life that is meaningless, the human can achieve a recognition of choice, a release from false and misplaced hopes and values. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus lays emphasis on literature's ability to depict personal experience in concrete terms.²⁴ Unlike philosophical reasoning, narrative is not bound by general or universal laws, Lean Paul Sartre urges that narrative and literature are necessary in order to maintain the contention that human freedom and choice can be thwarted by falling

²³ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West*... 41.

²⁴ Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*... 60.

into bad faith, into “being-for-others,” when the person resorts to self-absolution from responsibility, thus ending up by laying the blame for one’s “existence on other people.

More than metaphysics, narrative and literary criticism of major writers functions as a significant oppositional philosophy where there is, in Camus’s words, “a confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity.” Camus celebrates “a kind of reason pervaded by creativity and a kind of creativity characterised by critical self-consciousness”.²⁵

Libyan writers were no less engaged in this discussion. Abdullah Al-Ghazali in his novel, “*al-Lughat wa Mūhimatuhā*” (“Language and its Importance”) argues for a choice that is free from social and moral imperatives and obsessions.²⁶ In this world, religious faith has no place. Choice is first and foremost a secular affair, a perspective that ironically fits in well with enlightenment discourse.

This emerging Arabic literature is unconcerned with the actual presence of Islam as part of a collective conscience that shows up in times of redress, distress, calamity, siege, war, and occupation. The presence of religion as solace in the face of inexplicable corruption or degeneration, and its existence as integral to a collective consciousness are factors that relatively emerge rarely in the Arab East. Libyans’ novels, which became available to the readership especially in the contemporary period, have many things to offer. Ahmed Faqīh’s *Imra’atu min dhaw’hi* (*A women of Light*), for instance, provides a new style that is in keeping with the French new novel, but significantly integral to Arabic narrative tradition. The anecdote is mixed up with the poem; and anthems, songs, and slogans are interspersed through a narrative of struggle whose heroes are ordinary Libyans with mixed parenthood, hybrid origin, as befitting a nation under occupation for more than a century. Jamil and his murdered father, the teacher, who has been accused of main-things, but the real cause for his expulsion and subsequent murder is in support of the student committee held to constitute the Muslim Congress.²⁷

The novel distrusts *muftis* like its Arab East counterparts, but it does through a specific context where lawyers and *muftis* are vested with a

²⁵ Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*... 61.

²⁶ A. Al-Ghazali, “*al-Lughat wa Mūhimatuhā*”, (2011), 13.

²⁷ A. Faqīh, *Imra’atu min dhaw’hi*, (2004), 24.

power that makes them part of a system whose discourse demands their acquiescence and participation. They are part of a bureaucracy that Bourdieu associates with an official discourse,²⁸ and whom Lefebvre finds necessarily complicit in managing the abstract space of power.²⁹ They are also Frantz Fanon's intellectual elite whose interests deter them at times from sacrificing these for the sake of their fighting nation. Thus, the lawyer asks the demonstrators to "have confidence in your leaders, we promise you. . . ." He cautions them "to be careful, we cannot fight against tanks." But he and the mufti "brought up the rear" in the end, as the masses moved on thundering, "No more talk, no more leaders, old rifles were spitting, far away the donkeys and mules were loyally lending our young army, there were women at our heels and dogs and children".³⁰ Another contribution is that it does not confine itself to ideological positions or modernity paradigms. There is pure Islam as the Prophet teaches and there are institutions that manipulate it for their own benefit. These institutions are like their own officials who, "in their English gaiters," wear "the suspect uniforms evidently taken from the rejects of the main foreign armies". They remind Jamil in his pilgrimage to Makkah of their parents, "clowns glistening with vanity," and who "had banished the Prophet as they were banishing progress now, along with faith and all the rest, merely in order to choke the desert with their arrogant ignorance." "They" forced him to transplant his dream, to disseminate it wherever there was a "favorable wind".³¹ It is only after the 9/11, 2001 for example, that Libya novels in both East and West find itself called upon to connect with the dynamics of the francophone Libyan novel, a fictional genre that grew in response to occupation and depicted the culture of the society and with a whole series of narrative journeys to the heart of readers and in the wake of the scandalous exposure of modernity and heavy handedness that had been depicted in the Libyan novel, no Arab elite could any longer claim to need any kind of cultural dependency on the West.³² Indeed, the subsequent disillusionment with the concept of the nation state, its ideological

²⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, (Cambridge: Trans. Gino Raymond & Matthew Adams, 1991), 45.

²⁹ L. Henri, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 72.

³⁰ F. Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 75.

³¹ Faqih, *Imra'atum dhawhi...* 27.

³² Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West...* 57.

apparatus and its claims and promises, has drawn writers more closely, not only to the post colonial question as dissected in Fanon's works, but also to a mode of distrust in the nation-state. Its claims of resistance to foreign powers are exposed as no more than a camouflage to bureaucracy, absolutism, repression, and coercion.³³

Perhaps recently, with the total defeat of the nation-state and the bankruptcy of its rhetoric, Libyan intellectuals, including those on the left, have relied for the most part on their middle class familial and educational experience. Their family, office, readings, and acculturation inform their worldview. In the process of encountering the rise of secular thought ever since the *nahdah* (Modernity), they rarely speak of religion as a reality that also informs structures and currents of feeling. They consistently speak of it in a pejorative or condescending manner. Religion falls outside their immediate concerns. Its representations in narrative can serve to either debase or elevate it beyond its actual existence in the lives and practices of people.³⁴ Thus, Ahmed Faqih's protagonist, Jamil, is shocked to hear his French friend, Jacque speaks of the café and church as "public spaces." For him, church and mosque both derive their representational power from an association with heaven. However, Faqih's understanding of representational space cannot be taken out of context, and it needs to be noted that in Islam the mosque serves a different function. Traditionally, prayers and other practices are only part of its function. On the other hand, and in the western context of Faqih's work, there is a deliberate western debasement of the mosque.³⁵

No wonder therefore that writers like Ibrahim Al-Khoni speak of religion in conceptualised paradigms where there is a divide between upholders of faith on one hand, and believers in science and material progress on the other hand. One may conclude that this great novelist believes in religion as a moral force, but he also considers it in opposition to science. Multiple perspectives complement each other, to be sure, but they also betray an unfortunate subscription to a dichotomous pattern that is disconnected from the dynamic forces to be found in Islamic thought. In his novel, *Al-Insān* (Human being) (2009), there are three sets of characters: Ahmad, the believer; 'Ali Husayn, the

³³ Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*... 78.

³⁴ Ruthwen, *Islam in the World*... 41.

³⁵ Faqih, *Imra'atu min dhawhi*... 38

ardent advocate of knowledge and a perfect world whose intellectual itinerary is from Tripoli to Toronto or from faith to socialism and reason; and 'Abdullah, a skeptic who sees religion as mere mythology.³⁶ The divide between faith and skepticism, usually mediated through an intermediate character, is pursued in Al-Khoni's novel.

The need to study novel writing, especially its notable counter narrative since the beginning of post colonial period emanates from a number of cultural facts that constitute an epistemological terrain central to any discussion of Islam as faith. When we speak of the *nahdah* for example, there is an underlying premise suggesting that nineteenth century contact with the West led to a number of changes, transformations, and also, problems. Al-Khoni felt more at ease to speak of religious achievement as worthy of emulation, duplication, and transposition to the fullest extent. Even literary genres, the novel, the opera, and drama, are copied and transferred in order to satisfy the needs of a rising environment.³⁷ Of more significance and appeal to the emerging in lapses are translations, appropriations, imitations, and emulations that constitute a large portion of literary writings. Significantly, since that time Western novels and poetry have become household products that are more familiar than the traditional heritage and folklore.³⁸ In other words, the narrative structure of material reality is heavily mediated through these lenses. What becomes a dominant trend in modern Arabic, literature, that is, from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid 1960s, is not only a secular worldview focused on the education of a group or a protagonist, but also a deliberate critique of whatever sounds different. Even when a novelist opts to strike a balance between these seemingly opposed positions, namely modernity and traditional faith, as in the conclusion to al-Khoni's novel there is still an unwarranted conciliatory approach that treats the forged compromise in Ali Husayni's attitude as a faulty choice. Forged dichotomies and contrived compromises betray a strong dependency on Western enlightenment discourse and its subsequent representations.

Issues relating to elite consciousness and evolving as master narratives demand their own formative space. Representational space, including opera houses and theatres, assumes another meaning which

³⁶ Al-Khoni, *Al-Insān*... 13.

³⁷ Al-Khoni, *Al-Insān*...29

³⁸ Allot, *Novelists on the Novel*... 67.

usually addresses the attitudes of the beholder and narrator. Language itself loses its innocence in this use, for its preferentiality resides in sets of metaphors that do not exist on the customary practices and uses. The choice of the “way” as a location is not necessarily tied to its significantly lived sites (such as shops and cafes) as loci of action, as spaces of representation in Henri Lefebvre’s terms, in spite of their obviously central role as meeting places and points of intersection. Its function, first and foremost, is as a producer of meaning.³⁹ There, through the exercise of passion, deeds, and life, actions acquire power, and a materialization of concepts takes place. On the other hand, its relevance to an Islamic site resonates with multiple dimensionalities that have always been in keeping with a tradition of criers authorized by the state or other holders of power, including, until very recently, cinema halls and theaters, so as to reach a wider public and hence to claim, in the case of the state, the validity of a law or rule, a lack of knowledge of which does not negate or absolve responsibility. It emerges, as usual, as the symbolic space whereby the state or the sovereign proclaims and exercises power. We should remember, too, that the semantic and linguistic equivalent of a capital or metropolis, as the center where authority primarily resides and proliferates, is *al-‘āsimah*, cities like Tripoli, Cairo, Rabat, Tunis, Algiers and so on.⁴⁰

While not excluding commercial or social power of competing cities, and centers, the Muslim *‘āsimah* is the recognized centre of authority. It is the centre, the abode, and the *hādirah* (which combines omniscience and civilisation or urbanity). Its traditional preferentiality emanates from its connectedness to the centre of Islamic rule, like Baghdad before 1258. Even when after being weakened in the mid-tenth century, Baghdad continued to enjoy a symbolic role as the capital center. The competing Fatimid Cairo and, later, the Andalusian Cordoba remained peripheral within the context of that symbolic space with its actual or moral and religious obligations. More significant is the association between capital, as wealth channeled into a capitalist economic order, and space is differently assessed in Arabic historiography and tradition. The root *‘asm* signifies power, control, guidance, and protection. Its Qur’ānic dimension is even more powerful, for it is only God who holds or confers such a power. Hence, the omnipresent Deity is the agent, the

³⁹ Henri, *The Production of Space...* 77.

⁴⁰ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West...* 62.

doer, the guide, the protector, the preserver, and so on. He is the *'asm*, and hence the *ma 'sūm*, the infallible. To confer this sacral power on a space implicates the modern nation-state in a deliberate act of power transposition that is derived from the model of Western modernity and its predication on a total separation of the state from the place of worship. The emerging homogeneous space is bound to combine its absolutism and differentiability in dialectic of consensus and opposition which Lefebvre studies in "The Production of Space".⁴¹

Conclusion

In this context, it is time, perhaps, to ask question of some relevance to Islam in a nation-state. Why do we have a number of novels that apart from narrative encounters with the West focus primarily on a plagued quarter or town? Why do we have a plague in Al-Khoni's *Al-Insān*? We know that Al-Khoni's novel uses the plague as an occasion to portray the pious Jamil as being worthy of piety, someone who is ready to sacrifice everything, even working as "crow" to carry the sick, clean patients, and be always available to offer support and assistance. He is not the crow of late seventeenth century Europe that is of "little substance" and doing "many vile and abject offices," but a notable in a community that recognises him as the most benevolent and charitable among them.⁴⁰ Even authority recognises him as such. However, his entire community shows less of what Michel Foucault calls "the utopia of the perfectly governed city" where every person, district, action, and function is tightly registered, supervised, and watched by an anonymous power which, since the Napoleonic combination of monarchical ritual sovereignty and hierarchical exercise of power, has been associated with the state. In Al-Khoni's novel, is still far away from this tight control, whereas communal and religious lies still pertain on more than one level. Fear of contagious diseases does not as yet deprive the community of a certain carnivalistic and also organic wholeness that is more prioritised in a religious ethic and belief than in any procedural state exercise of power. Unless we take Al-Khoni's novel as a counter-critique or a reminder of beliefs, attitudes, and practices that compose a

⁴¹ Henri, *The Production of Space*... 81.

culture in danger of erosion, we may miss the significance of *al-Insān* as a text of cultural commitment that prepares us to debate and interrogate not only the state, its institutions, practices, and functionaries, including official preachers, but also the ever-present religious institution that shows up and appears in times of comfort and peace to furnish more benefits and privileges.

This is the institution that Al-Khoni deliberately delineates in the aftermath of the devastating plague in *Al-Insān*. To sap the virtual power of the hero, Ahmad, and the religious fervor attending his anticipation of the plague and ultimate survival as the "Saved" one, the preacher or mufti visits him as the state representative, a herald not of good news but rather of forebodings that communicate to the hero's transgression of state laws when residing in a deserted palace after the plague. The state has been absent during the plague and most residents have perished. Only a few have fled. Now, Ahmad wields a power granted to him by the public as the person endowed with a vision which allows him to see things that the state is too blind and careless to either realise or anticipate. The plague is used to illustrate this separation between the state and the public.

Although a terminator of life, the plague ironically functions as a narrative catalyst to valorise a religious faith which mobilises the masses that are as yet beyond the power of official propaganda and media reports. Only through the dying of an old self can a new religion be reborn, innocent and sincere. Islam as popular faith operates in these narratives as never before in modern Arabic fiction. Between this self-profane as someone who can be responsible for the making of the new order, and the vision and dream that take Ahmad away from the plagued city, there is a difference that can be our capital metaphor to understand the role of the public and its "Islam as a way of life". The actor as the outsiders in the first instance is unlike the insider, the visionary, and the actionist of the second, plague in the first instance unsettles positions and assumptions, but in the second it brings power back to people who now fill the streets with their clamour. The city in the first example ostracises for its absolute space is ruled by manipulators and things; but in the second its power lies in its legacy of visions and ultimate

harboring of its people who pertain to the natural and historical forces that Lefebvre analysis so cogently. It is reborn through its new born inhabitants, evolving as a social space lived and experienced and hence produced by its users before the encroachment of state power and other monopolies.

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