Mapping Arabic Dystopian Novels: Double-Edged Sword

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Abstract: This article explores the literary trajectory of dystopia from Western to Arabic literature and vice versa, seeking to reveal a double-edged aspect of the genre, particularly in the works of Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2013) and Mohammad Rabie's *Otared* (2014). I examine how these texts reflect Western influences while simultaneously engaging with the status quo in post Arab Spring countries. By drawing on Edward Said's "Travel Theory" and David Damrosch's "double refraction" metaphor, I seek to highlight the round-trip journey of dystopia from Western to Arabic literature and its transformation to the global capital. Equally important, I discuss the role of translation in influencing the development of Arabic dystopia and refracting it back to its origin, albeit dynamically. Here, translation assumes significance in the bilateral influence of the genre, particularly the dynamic absorption of Western forms in the Arabic dystopian novels that manifest these with the existing sociopolitical conditions while refracting such grisly circumstances onto global literary capital.

Keywords: Dystopia, translation, literary travel, genre, Arabic novel

Introduction

The emergence of dystopian novels in the new millennium constitutes a groundbreaking development in modern Arabic literature. Influenced by the translation of Western dystopian literature, the rise of the genre has been triggered by revolutionary changes in the sociopolitical spheres in many parts of the Arab-speaking world. Several novelists, including Basma Abdel Aziz and Mohammad Rabie have adopted dystopia to engage with ongoing circumstances after the Arab Spring.[1] In an interview titled "Islam and Sci-Fi," Ada Barbaro argues that the Arab Spring has unequivocally impacted the production of dystopia, giving "voice to a sense of dramatic disappointment or delusion for the results of this revolutionary movement." Meanwhile, Sinead Murphy opines that a new literary mode is necessary to investigate the underlying motive for the uprisings in several Arab societies. This need is fulfilled by dystopian narratives, which represent very public protests against totalitarianism. Murphy discusses Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia*, Abdel Aziz's *The Queue,* and Rabie's *Otared,* arguing that each text reflects a "significant variation in lived experiences of the uprisings, and the diverse perspectives on its outcomes across the region." However, she dismisses the role of translation in circulating dystopian fiction from the Anglophone to the Arabophone and vice versa. Indeed, the genre shapes its narrative not only from within but also from without—precisely, the internal factors can be attributed to the consciousness of local writers in dealing with complicated situations and the rapid changes in the wake of the Arab Spring, whereas the external factor is that of Western influence, which cannot be ignored.[2] Barbara Bakker stresses "the need of an Arabic and/or more specifically Egyptian characterization of Arabic/Egyptian dystopian literature" (80).

Having said that, this study examines Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* ("al-Tábúr" 2013; translated into English by Elisabeth Jaquette in 2016) and Rabie's *Otared* ("Uṭārid" 2014; translated into

English by Robin Moger in 2016) with an emphasis on the bilateral trajectory of dystopia. These texts engage with an intrinsically complicated reality, invoking a new literary wave of dystopian fiction against the backdrop of the Arab Spring while being influenced by the translation of Western dystopian literature. The agency of Arabic dystopian novels confronts real, serious events unfolding on the ground, and thus the narrative engages with the status quo critically to address local readers and reflects such existent circumstances dynamically to global audiences. In this regard, translation is a vital key in understanding the dynamics of the genre in influencing Arabic dystopia to engage with ongoing dire conditions and refracting them to the global literary scene. Notably, Abdel Aziz's and Rabie's novels elicit public interest globally after their English translations, as evidenced in the reviews in major English language news outlets, such as *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *National Public Radio* (NPR), and *The New York Times*. Their reception in the Anglophone is extraordinary because unlike general books written in English, the translation of Arabic literary texts is seldom reviewed by established book critics and well-known newspapers (Allen, "Translating Arabic Fiction" 166).

Since the genre is in its infancy in Arabic literature, Arabic dystopian novels are heavily influenced by Western dystopian literature. For this reason, this article relies on Western scholarship to contextualize Arabic dystopia. Keith Booker's *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* is highly pertinent. According to Booker, "The treatment of imaginary societies in the best dystopian fiction is always highly relevant more or less directly to specific 'realworld' societies and issues" (19). Booker's proposition applies to Arabic dystopia as it is concerned with prevailing sociopolitical issues in the present, including political repression, violence, terror, death, and corruption. Thus, Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* and Rabie's *Otared* can be contextualized in such a dystopian framework as they are deeply concerned with confronting ongoing societal issues in the here and now, and thereby protesting dystopian elements in their surroundings. I seek to situate both texts within a new ongoing literary project of dystopia, authored originally in Arabic by novelists who live in the Middle East and North Africa and then translated into English to reach Anglophone readers. This is not to say that dystopia is an entirely new theme in Arabic literature, but rather, these texts exemplify the emergence of a new genre that has been influenced by Western dystopian literature and simultaneously affected by the revolutionary changes and violence in several Arab countries. For the aim of this article, a distinction should be made between theme and genre. The former deals with a motif of a story within the genre itself, while the latter[3] constitutes a specific art form in a specific period with distinct characteristics and contains multiple themes within its narrative. This classification of genre applies to the post-Arab Spring dystopian novels.

The salient generic characteristics and frontloading elements of Arabic dystopian writings are sharing Western thoughts of being protest literature as well as critiquing dictatorships and violence. Namely, Abdel Aziz criticizes the mysterious political power of the Gate and its repressions of the citizens. Rabie's line of attack is on the dark power of both foreign occupation and local dictatorship. Additionally, Abdel Aziz's novel denounces revolutionary violence, which is triggered by the 'Disgraceful Events' when the security forces wiped out the protests that sought to overthrow the authoritarian regime of the Gate. As a result of this brutal response, many people were killed and injured. Similarly, Rabie's text sharply criticizes gory violence while demonstrating that its source derives from colonialism and dictatorship. He highlights a dark relationship between colonialism and authoritarianism, underscoring that they are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, by drawing on dystopia, both authors depict a miserable fate in the protagonists' journey to protest gruesome realities and shatter the reading experience, albeit each novel does so in distinct ways.

In the following sections, I map out the trajectory of dystopia from Western to Arabic literature by drawing on Said's "Traveling Theory." I then elaborate on how the translation of West-

ern literature played a crucial role in influencing the development of Arabic dystopian novels. By relying on Damrosch's "double refraction" metaphor, I aim to underscore the refraction of Arabic dystopia in world literature. Lastly, I show how Abdel Aziz and Rabie consciously use national characters to establish a compass of the original language and convey lived experiences of their society even in Western forms to navigate their characters home and abroad.

Mapping the Dual Trajectory of Arabic Dystopian Novels: Dynamic Transformation

Like "people," "Ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another" (Said, "Traveling Theory" 226). Said's theory suggests a single direction from the place of origin to another, which postulates one-way movement— either from the West to the East or vice versa. He provides an intriguing example of the one-way mobility of ideas between Eastern and Western cultures in the nineteenth century whereby some Eastern ideas about transcendence were transferred to the West, whereas "certain European ideas about society were translated into traditional Eastern societies" (226). By advocating the journey of ideas from one culture to another, Said contends that the practice invites positive innovation and promotes intellectual endeavors—if utilized consciously. Before accruing dynamic momentum, the unilateral mobility of ideas/genres to a new place is subject to acceptance or rejection by a different culture. If it is accepted, it will create a dynamic space, which characterizes the transfer of theory in a novel environment. By investigating an idea's form after it is received in a different environment, he opines the predetermined outcome of mobilizing ideas into a new milieu is metamorphosed. Thus, the journey of ideas indicates that ideas/genres are flexible when adjusting to new settings, creating a dynamic space, a blend of cultural interaction, and intellectual reflection. Although Said's "Traveling Theory" suggests a unidirectional movement, it illuminates a great understanding of the genre's movement from Western to Arabic literature. Expounding on that, the trajectory of dystopia becomes a bilateral track through the role of translation in circulating it between Western and Arabic cultures and impacting both. The genre's movement becomes a round trip, as opposed to a one-way journey. Such a dual trajectory is not merely a matter of departure and arrival; rather, it is a dynamic transformation that carries local conditions denoting signs of resistance. Here, the refractive dynamic of the Arabic processing of Western dystopian forms allows the genre to flow between the two channels but retains differences showing a blend of the two influences in a hybrid mode—thereby occupying a matrix status. Accordingly, Abdel Aziz and Rabie reconstruct their narrative in a Western genre to engage with existing realities unfolding around them to address local audiences while simultaneously aiming to transfer local experiences globally.

Indeed, both writers have localized the genre while reproducing its politics. In *Travels of a Genre*, Mary Layoun argues, "While the novel was not a particularly indigenous literary genre in the 'third' or non-Western world, it quickly predominated as a privileged narrative construct. And yet, on the site of that hegemonic narrative form, there emerged counterhegemonic opposition as well" (xii). Layoun's proposition holds true to the development of Arabic dystopian novels as they share Western thought as protest literature, yet they go beyond that to challenge Western hegemony by transferring local experiences globally. Such a striking characteristic is best exemplified in Rabie's *Otared*. Rabie sets his novel in three timetables unfolding in medieval Cairo (AH 455), revolutionary Cairo (2011), and futuristic Cairo (2025). He mostly focuses his narrative on Cairo in 2025 where half of the city is occupied by the Republic of the Knights of Malta, whereas the other half is controlled by a resistance group of former police officers. Initially, Rabie portrays the struggle for the liberation of the Egyptian people against the occupying army. The novel's protagonist, Otared states, "we shall never, ever give up. We shall persevere until the occupier has been driven out completely. In a few days' time, you shall ignite the revolution that will sweep him away" (Rabie 66). At the same time, the Knights of Malta

continue to launch rocket and artillery attacks against the liberated region of Western Cairo, causing a huge amount of death and destruction. As is described in the following hazy scene:

> [the rocket] dropped quickly toward West Cairo and the rocket's body opened to release hundreds of little objects, small bombs that would complete the descent, widening the area of impact and the damage done. They hit a number of buildings and flattened them, even as the bodies of the third and fourth rockets broke open, spilling the cluster bombs that would make sure this patch of West Cairo was utterly destroyed. (111–112)

Rabie delineates the image of dark clouds overshadowing the capital city of Egypt, along with a smell of destruction to highlight the destructive force of occupation in invading the city making it a city of ruins, as it were. In such a barbaric event, violence becomes ordinary, death becomes certainty, and people's lives become trivial. The narrator recounts, "Many were killed and a great number were wounded, most of whom died shortly afterward. Anyone abroad in any of the public squares would have seen one or more bodies lying on the ground, patches of dried blood beneath them" (176). Rabie shows how colonial actions reaped many people's souls like a machine. "And death passed between the people, like a wave taking them, raising up souls and casting bodies down. They were dying in mid-motion, then dropping" (340). In these terrifying scenarios, Rabie limns how the city is wracked by the evil of foreign occupation and dominated by violence. Even when the Knights of Malta withdrew from the country; repression and violence reclaimed the city. The narrator portrays, "In just three months, everything turned upside down: the smiles vanished and violence reclaimed its place in people's lives" (277). Here, Rabie portrays the adverse effects of colonialism, which are subtle, as such effects persist even after the colonizers are vanquished. The narrator describes the period after the foreign occupation as a greater torment: "three months of false hopes and silky words: a short breather in preparation for a greater torment, but without an occupation this time around" (278). His work attacks both foreign power and authoritarian rule along with unleashed violence that caused by these dark forces. In doing so, he artistically invokes the historical experience of Egyptian people under Western occupation; namely, the French in 1798 and then the British in 1882 by referring to the Republic of the Knights of Malta. And he indirectly critiques the rule of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. By relying on a Western genre, Rabie captures the colonial and postcolonial situation of Egypt, depicting to local and international readers that in both situations the living condition of Egyptian people is macabre. In this way, Rabie's novel reflects a double-edged sword metaphor in remonstrating foreign occupation and local dictatorship.

Abdel Aziz sets *The Queue* in a nameless society, governed by a mysterious regime, known as the Gate. The Gate assumes power after a robust uprising referred to as the "First Storm." The narrator narrates, "Since the Gate had materialized and insinuated itself into everything, people didn't know where its affairs ended and their own began. The Gate had appeared rather suddenly as the First Storm died down, long before the Disgraceful Events occurred" (Abdel Aziz 31). Subsequently, the Gate issues laws and decrees to exert total control over its citizens, requiring them to have permission even for their basic needs. As a result, people stand in line in front of the Gate and the queue grows longer, but the Gate never opens. People are fed up and attempt to overthrow the Gate. The narrator delineates:

> The Events had begun when a small group of people held a protest on a street leading to the square. There weren't many of them, but they boldly condemned the Gate's injustice and tyranny. Their demands were lofty, the stuff of dreams … the protestors called for the dissolution of the Gate and everything it stood for. Before long, others joined the demonstrations, too. They chanted with passion, their numbers grew, and the protest started to move, but they were quickly confronted by the Gate's newly formed security units. These accused the protesters of overstepping their bounds, and said they wouldn't tolerate such insulting behavior. Then the forces attacked …

The protesters quickly regrouped and met the security forces again, in a street battle that lasted for four days. More and more people fell. The Quell Force had been created to suppress this kind of riot and was better armed than any government agency before it. On the final day, it cleared the square effortlessly, wiping out everyone at the rally in just a few hours. In the end, the Gate and its guardians had prevailed, and they emerged stronger than before. (Abdel Aziz 7–8)

In this revolutionary scenario, Abdel Aziz invokes the Arab Spring metaphorically through the designation of "the Disgraceful Events." They resonate with the Egyptian uprising, the January 25 Revolution, which took place in Cairo, Tahrir Square in 2011. It is the second wave of the Arab Spring, inspired by the successful revolution in Tunisia. Millions of protesters chant with one voice, the downfall of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak in Tahrir Square. However, the peaceful demonstrations were met by violent confrontations from the Egyptian security forces, causing the death and injury of several hundreds of people. Abdel Aziz's allegorical rendering of the 2011 events and their aftermath enables her to avoid political censorship while serving an aesthetic function in conveying the uprisings implicitly. By orchestrating revolutionary vocabularies, such as "square," "the Quell Force" and "newly formed security units," instead of directly using Tahrir Square and police forces, Abdel Aziz conjures political revolutionary connotations of the Arab Spring allegorically. In other words, by portraying the revolutionary scenario of the Disgraceful Events, Abdel Aziz engages with Arabic Spring, in general, and the Egyptian revolution of 2011 in specific, criticizing Mubarak's regime and its violent reaction to the protesters who sought to overthrow the regime to achieve freedom, justice, and a better standard of living. Thus, *The Queue* serves as a striking metaphor for political struggle in a revolutionary and postcolonial context.

Generally, Abdel Aziz portrays the struggle of several Arab Spring countries under dictatorship while indirectly blaming the West for many of the problems. Muhsin Al–Musawi argues that the Arabic post–colonial novel "questions authority, in its colonial, postcolonial and native formations. It debates ambivalence, to be sure, and argues for freedom, equality and understanding. It interrogates and questions stratagems of oppression and abuse of power" (19). Al–Musawi's argument dovetails with Abdel Aziz's novel as it cries out "bad place" in the time of writing, facing its bitterness while aiming to change the situation into a peaceful and prosperous one. Lindsey Moore opines, "*The Queue* disturbingly mirrors the 'morbid symptoms' of an Egyptian postcolony" (208). Needless to say, *The Queue* becomes a metaphor for a community's struggle under a hegemonic power while signifying citizens striving for justice, freedom, and a flourishing future. The significance of this metaphor is conveyed in the English translation as well. Anglophone readers can follow the community's struggle and the uprisings against the Gate's authority, which sought a better way of living, freedom, and justice to protect them versus the oppressive rule of the Gate's dictatorship, bureaucracy, and repression. In this way, Abdel Aziz provides a powerful political commentary on the status quo of Egypt and other post–Arab Spring countries through a dystopian lens, while refracting such content to the world–literary circuit. Essentially, Abdel Aziz's novel manifests dual characteristics of dystopia in that it draws on Western models to protest against existing political upheavals, and it conversely bears essential features to criticize Western dominance by convening local experiences globally. In doing so, she conveys internal and external critiques in one go.

Binary Influence of Translation in Circulating Genres between Arabic and Western Literature

The history of translation has witnessed notable circulation of genres between the Arab and Western worlds, playing an indispensable role in exchanges, influence, domination, and resistance. As such, it does not occur in a vacuum since "There is always a context in which translation takes place, a history from which a text emerges and another one into which a text

is transposed" (Bassnett and Lefevere 11). One prime example is the translation of "Alf Layla Wa-Layla" (*One Thousand and One Nights*) into Western languages. It was first translated into French by Antoine Galland (1646–1715) in the early eighteenth century. Shortly after its reception, it was translated into other major European languages and became very popular. Perhaps this is one of the most influential tales about Orientalism that marks a profound impact on Western culture and still exhibits a continuing influence in contemporary times.

As far as Western influence is concerned, the role of translation is evident in transferring Western genres to Arabic literature as well, such as the emergence of the novel form in the Nahda (the Arab Renaissance) in the nineteenth century. The Nahda is a modern project that has developed in Arabic literature through the revival of classical literature, as pursued by a 'neoclassical' movement and the translation of Western literary works, which is followed by adaptation and imitation.[4] Translating Western fiction during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century plays a key role in developing modern Arabic literature in general and the novel in particular. In addition to the apparent influence of translating Western fiction, Arabic novels have been profoundly impacted by the waves of changes that have colored the modern landscapes of Arabic literature. Allen argues:

> as historical events [i.e., colonialism, modernity, revolution] bring about a process of change whereby the Arab world begins to challenge the hegemony of European colonialism and to play a much larger part in the course of its own destiny, so the novel, as reflector and even catalyst of change, assumes a more significant role. ("The Mature of Arabic Novel" 193)

Allen observes that the momentous change occurred not only in Arabic literature but also in the Arab world itself. He stresses the importance of the novel, among other literary genres, insofar as it has the capacity as a leading force to cope with these enormous changes in the Arab regions. Remarkably, the Nobel laureate in literature Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006) is a critical player in developing Arabic novels. Mahfouz has made a significant contribution and registered his name with golden ink in modern Arabic literature. His achievements culminated in receiving the honorable Nobel Prize in 1988, becoming the first novelist to achieve this prestigious prize in the Arab world. He encourages Arabic writers to adopt the novel as a new mode of artistic writing.

Within the context of literary influence, translation movement in the Nahda "not only introduced Arab writers to the techniques of the different genres of fiction, but also taught them the true value of using characters whose actions might serve to represent life and make it more meaningful" (Moosa 202). In the mid of the twentieth century and afterward, translation introduced many Western works, which in turn, inspired several Arabic novelists. Eisam Asaqli opines that "Translations of Western SF books, short stories etc. were a critical feature in the introduction of the genre into Arabic literature" (1446). Prominent Western works that have been translated into Arabic include Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,[5] Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Kafka's *The Trial, Metamorphose,* etc., making them available to Arab audiences in many bookstores and libraries. There is no doubt that such seminal works have influenced the ongoing development of Arabic dystopian novels, as pointed out by many reviewers. Murphy observes, "Aziz's novel sometimes seems like an obvious cross between *1984* (1949) and *The Castle* (1926)." Specifically, Abdel Aziz's text echoes Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), especially in criticizing totalitarian regimes. Abdel Aziz reveals how the Gate's authority alters the information of the citizens, as in the case of the protagonist, Yehya's medical file. When Dr. Tarek checked Yehya's file, he was astonished when he did not find some information that he wrote himself about Yehya's condition:

> He [Dr. Tarek] was searching for the detailed description he had written and signed off himself after seeing the X-ray, but it wasn't there. There were pages missing; he did not know how they had disappeared, but some other hand had clearly been through this version in front of him. All

> the useful information had been crossed out and replaced with a superficial report; not even a fresh graduate would write something this worthless, and he hadn't an idea who had altered it. (Abdel Aziz 41)

In this passage, Abdel Aziz resonates with Orwell's text regarding how the Party alters history for the sake of total control by depicting how the Gate's authority mysteriously changes the medical history of Yehya to manipulate his report ensuring that no one is injured in the protest. In this way, Abdel Aziz's account shares some elements of Orwell's writing against the evils of a totalitarian regime, but Abdel Aziz protests ongoing oppression and tyranny, instead of elaborating on the possible conditions under a power-obsessed authoritarian regime. This is an important distinction between Arabic and Western dystopia in that Abdel Aziz's text addresses what actually happened as opposed to imagining what would happen in the future. Abdel Aziz processed and refarmed some dystopian elements to engage with prevailing issues in her environment while reverting them to the global readerships. In turn, Anglophone readers gain some insights about the revolutionary situations against the background of the Arab Spring, but in a dynamic content in which the dystopia elements have been localized to address ongoing sociopolitical conditions. Therefore, for a Western reader, from a culture where dystopia has rather more of a history, read an English translation of an Arabic version of dystopia, containing elements of Arab culture/politics/language that have served to tweak dystopia so as to make it more Arabic while manifesting nuances in a dynamic lens. In this vein, the transformation of dystopia denotes shocking realities, instead of a cautionary tale in the case of Western literature.

In a similar manner, Rabie's *Otared* is inspired by Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (1915), especially when Gregor Samsa suddenly wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into a giant insect. The physical transformation of Samsa influences Rabie's characters, albeit reflecting a noticeable transformation in Samir and Zahra. Samir is defaced, but when the medical team examines him, nothing is wrong with him. All the test results seem fine:

> But the boy had no eyes. No mouth, no ears. His face had been smooth and featureless except for a nose, and a few days later that nose had turned dark brown and dropped off. He had been hooked up to a feeding tube that ran into his stomach, and they had had to cut out a section of the tubing to remove the fallen nose. Despite it all, the boy had managed to live a normal enough life. (Rabie 283)

This passage denotes a dreadful distortion of human anatomy. Sadly, Samir has lost all of his senses; eventually, he dies at the age of ten and many more like him share the same fate—death (284). Indeed, the topography of the grotesque, which represents a deformation, reveals the affected characters, Zahra and Samir, to be out of focus and death is mercy for them. By being robbed of their senses, Zahra and Samir become slowly trapped within themselves, insofar as they are cut off from the real world, culminating in a silent death, then an actual death. On the one hand, Kafka's treatment of Samsa by depriving him of his human form, forces him to accept solitude as his locus of living experience. Consequently, Samsa is denied by society because of his countenance, with the initial exception of his family; but eventually, even his family ignores him, and he dies in his bed. On the other hand, Zahra and Samir are accepted and embraced by society even though they are unaware of the real world. For instance, the four-year-old, Zahra is adopted by Insal and his wife Leila after she is abandoned in the school where Insal works as a teacher. The new family feels compassionate about Zahra and treats her with care and love. This somehow speaks to Samir as well, insofar as he receives medical care until the very last moment of his life. Despite their disfigurement, both Zahra and Samir are treated with care, respect, and acceptance in their society, unlike Samsa, who is rejected by society and lives in solitude until he dies. Kafka underscores an abrupt change, which takes place overnight, wherein the human image is totally lost in Samsa, except for physical sensations in terms of thinking and feeling. In Rabie's *Otared,* by contrast, both Zahra and Samir are affected by a mysterious disease, yet their transformation reveals a gradual change regarding the disintegration of their

sensory organs. Kafka's notion of metamorphosis seems to be a critique of alienation, whereas the disfigurement of Zahra and Samir can be interpreted as a critique of the deformation in the sociopolitical landscapes in Rabie's environment, serving as a fictional site to protest against a transitional stage of reality by reflecting a deformity in the real world. Thus, Rabie echoes the notion of metamorphoses to meet a local condition and transforms it aesthetically by invoking the deformation of realities in local and international contexts.

It is noteworthy that *The Queue* and *Otared*, among other twenty-first-century dystopian novels, have gained attention after their translation into English. Such visibility is attributed to translation-related developments by establishing many pan-Arab literary Prizes as well as the genre's capacity to explore ongoing sociopolitical issues in post-Arab Spring countries—which, in turn, attracts Western interest (Alhashmi 317). This suggests that Arabic dystopian novels celebrate global success not because of the aesthetic merits per se; rather, their manifestations of Western genres in dealing with ongoing conditions. In this situation, translation typically has never divorced from its political context. Lawrence Venuti argues that translation facilitates the circulation of national literature globally while simultaneously being governed by the "values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving situation [Anglophone cultures]" (Venuti 193). Venuti suggests that translation circulates "what is intelligible and interesting to the receptor" (193). Accordingly, translation is affected by Western cultures' values and literary patterns, which in turn, reflects these dynamically in Arabic dystopian novels. Insofar as these texts cope with the rapid changes in the Arab-speaking world, particularly after the Arab Spring, the genre manifests Western ideology concerning some parts of the Arab region, and that is why it triggers Western readers' curiosity. It carries interesting and serious issues for global readers as they are curious about the sociopolitical changes unfolding in post-Arab Spring countries and thus, they gain an alternative insight through novels as such beyond the mainstream news media. At the same time, Abdel Aziz and Rabie write their narrative in Western models with Western readership in mind aiming to transfer their experiences globally. This is something that Allen discusses in "The Happy Traitor" stating that "Certain Arab authors write specifically for translation purposes and with a Western readership in mind" ("476). Therefore, the secret recipe for the genre's popularity and its global success is not its poetic per se, rather, it is dynamic in manifesting Western modes of expression while engaging with prevailing states of affairs in post-Arab Spring countries.

Navigating National Characters in World Literature: Reading Through Elliptical Refractions

After their English translations, *The Queue* and *Otared* entered world literature by being read as works of literature and "by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and culture of origin" (Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 6). These novels are refracted in their new contexts while bearing the marks of their national origin as pieces of world literature and thus can be viewed "as an elliptical refraction of national literatures" (283). Based on this understanding, translation functions as a channel to transform national literary works beyond borders, whereby English readers find themselves "amid a multitude of partially overlapping ellipses, all sharing one focus in the host culture but with their second foci distributed ever more widely across space and time" (284). In this vein, translation is an indispensable factor in shaping dystopia in Arabic modern literature and then transposing it back to the West in a transformed matrix. Abdel Aziz and Rabie have coded Western forms and decoded the status quo to reveal their intellectual roles by protesting current affairs and foreign interventions. They demonstrate great versatility in encoding some aspects of real-life and depicting national characters in Western forms to convey their dystopian narratives. This is in resonance with Said's exposition:

> Characters and societies so represented grow and move in the novel because they mirror a process of engenderment or beginning and growth possible and permissible for the mind to imagine. Novels, therefore, are aesthetic objects that fill gaps in an incomplete world: they satisfy a human urge to add to reality by portraying (fictional) characters in which one can believe. (*Beginnings* 82)

Abdel Aziz and Rabie depict national characters in rendering local circumstances to navigate in Western maps to perform their roles in the global theater. Specifically, both writers have carefully chosen their characters in their respective works; it is as if those writers plucked the characters straight from the street using names, occupations, roles, and interactions. They portray a fictional map of reality using national characters and a native narrative voice to perform locally and globally by drawing on "West European patterns and local reality" (Moretti 64). In doing so, they consciously insert a national frame of reference to transform local experiences into the Anglophone. Namely, reading these characters in translation gives readers signposts of local experiences and different social and cultural backgrounds through their names, customs, social interactions, and daily struggles against the spectacle lens of Arab Spring. Therefore, translation crystalizes the multifaceted matrix of Arabic dystopia to eclipse the genre in the global space. It simultaneously reflects the narrative of national characters of the host culture through an artistic, yet elliptic lens of local scenes.

  Abdel Aziz chooses Arabic names for her characters, such as Yehya, Doctor Tarek, Nagy, Ehab, Amani, Um Mabrouk, Ines, etc., along with integrating Egyptian dialects into the dialogues to render everyday circumstances. She introduces an interesting mix of the characters in the queue on equal ground, regardless of their professions, gender, or social class to represent the entire community in a linear structure. The narrator recounts, "There were women and men, young and old people, professionals and the working class. No section of society was missing, even the poorest of the poor were there, not separated from the rich by any means. Everyone was on equal ground" (Abdel Aziz 90). Yehya, the main character, is among the people who are standing in the queue. English readers can follow the protagonist's journey and his struggle against the political authority of the Gate, who happens upon a protest against "the Gate's injustice and tyranny" and is shot (7). He has to stand in line and get permission from the Gate. "When he had arrived at Zephyr Hospital on the night of June 18, there had been dozens of people like him, maybe even hundreds. There were some with three or four bullets lodged in their bodies and others with less-serious injuries" (51). However, the Gate released a statement claiming that "no bullets had been fired at the place and time at which he had been injured" (52). Because of the Gate's unfairness and bureaucracy, Yehya never received authorization for surgery to remove the bullet, and eventually, he lost his last breath while waiting in the queue. "*Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed spent one hundred and forty nights of his life in the queue*" (215). Yehya's fate echoes Erika Gottlieb's proposition: "As in a nightmare, the individual has become a victim, experiencing loss of control over his or her destiny in the face of a monstrous, superhuman force that can no longer be overcome or, in many cases, even comprehended by reason" (11). This embodies Yahya's destiny as a powerless citizen without any rights in his society, and he eventually becomes a victim of a monstrous government even though he does not break any rules. Such a silent death to the main character utterly impacts the experience of reading. Under the realm of dystopia, Abdel Aziz redeems her hero to underscore the monstrosity of dictatorship and its atrocity against citizens even those who comply with its rule (Alhashmi 4). Abdel Aziz portrays national characters in a dystopian narrative to transport their daily experiences in living under a dictatorial regime to global readerships in their forms to protest revolutionary conditions by invoking the Arab uprisings. In doing so, she refracted local conditions globally. This somehow bespeaks Damrosch's argument: "When we read in the elliptical space of world literature, we don't exactly understand the foreign work 'on its own terms,' and a leap of the imagination is still needed" (297). Accordingly, world literature occupies a double refraction space

since it is always about both the host culture's values and the works of the source culture (283). Through refracted lenses, the dynamics of Arabic dystopia revere local status quo globally.

By the same token, Rabie chooses various characters from different social classes to represent modern Egypt, including the protagonist, Colonel Ahmed Otared, Insal, a schoolteacher and his wife Leila, and children, Samir, Zahra, etc. In portraying these national characters in his novel, Rabie marks realistic and artistic touches to reflect the post-colonial and post-revolution-ary experiences of his society. For instance, Colonel Otared is a former police officer who joins a resistant group to free the half-occupied region of Cairo from the occupiers. He states, "The Egyptian resistance was our paradise: a perfect instance of the Egyptian police service's acumen, its members' devotion to the service of their homeland, and their wary reluctance to outsiders into their circle" (Rabie 34). Initially, as a talented sniper, he is a patriotic citizen who starts his quest by killing high officials of the occupied force: "The resistance carried out assassinations of occupation soldiers, blew up their armored cars and tanks, mortared their bases, and launched missiles at their jets. In the space of a week, more than one hundred Maltese officers and soldiers lay dead" (33). However, he eventually becomes a terrorist by murdering his fellow citizens after the occupation. He stresses, "My primary mission: to deliver people by killing them. I'd done it as a cop, and I'd done it in the resistance, and now I was doing it full of zeal" (306). Through the quest of Otared against foreign occupation and then his radical shift from being a national hero to a terrorist under the authoritarian government, Rabie reflects a dystopian mood in the backdrop of occupation and revolutionary changes to shatter the reading experiences of his audiences at home and abroad. Marcia Lynx Qualey comments on the corruption of Otared and his killing of civilians, observing that his murders are a nefarious echo of the sniper killings in which more than 800 people were killed in Cairo in January and February 2011. Through the transformation of Otared, Rabie denounces both colonialism and dictatorships rendering critical political commentary against the background of political upheavals.

Overall, Abdel Aziz and Rabie consciously use national characters to establish a compass of the original language and convey lived experiences of their society even in Western forms to navigate their characters home and abroad. This resonates with Damrosch's statement: "char-acters in peripheral societies and minority cultures have regularly found themselves on foreign territory even when they are at home" (90). Remarkably, the national characters of Arabic dystopia play a critical role in performing local experiences on what ultimately becomes a gran-diose Western stage. Thus, by reading their novels in translation, Anglophone readers can pronounce the names of the national characters in their terms, and more importantly, fathom their development and interact with their daily experiences to gain more insights. Ergo, reading Arabic dystopian novels in translation can be viewed as "windows into foreign worlds" (Dam-rosch, *What Is World Literature?* 15).

Conclusion

The influence of Western dystopian literature on the production of Arabic dystopian novels is evidenced by the travel of genres, the role of translation, and the impact of coloniality.[6] The ongoing dramatic transformations across various parts of the Middle East and North Africa have been profoundly impacted by the revolutionary waves of the Arab Spring and the far-reaching impact of colonialism. In turn, these chains of events have implicated the production of modern Arabic literature. Under these circumstances, writing a new era of independence requires a deep understanding of the course of events that triggered and accentuated transformative changes in the sociopolitical arenas in some regions of the Arab-speaking world. The emergence of Ara-bic dystopian novels is timely, inasmuch as it reflects these understandings and complications through the influence of Western forms and local narrative voices to engage with multi-lay-ered, complicated realities. It goes without saying that Abdel Aziz and Rabie have adopted

the dystopian narrative, insofar as it offers them a creative, dynamic space to write on crucial societal issues, including criticizing repressive political regimes, denouncing violence, and protesting hegemonic powers. While the political-literary dynamics of dystopia are complicated, translation serves as a mutual channel in facilitating the genre's mobility, thereby influencing its development in Arabic literature while successively transporting it back to the West, albeit with localized contents. In this way, the dynamics of Arabic dystopia have been shaped from within and without due to internal and external factors before it metamorphoses into a matrix model. Hence, the double-edged aspect of Arabic dystopian novels is not merely an index of Western genres but also it engages with ongoing experiences to protest local circumstances and foreign influence. Essentially, the genre explores familiar settings that are already known to the local readers with the purpose of uplifting their societies from the abyss, thereby protecting them from being consumed by the whirlpool of the dystopian and tangible waves. Ultimately, Abdel Aziz and Rabie are calling for freedom, social justice, and a better future.

The future of this newly established genre, in question, is unpredictable since it is still early to anticipate if it will continue to develop or shift its course according to the circumstances. Nevertheless, the significance of recognizing dystopia as a new development in Arabic literature is paramount. For that reason, I hoped to establish a coherent (yet ongoing) body of dystopian novels in contemporary Arabic literature by using Abdel Aziz and Rabie as a core example of this literary movement. Indeed, both writers construct their narratives in the heart of history, participating in real unfolding events on the ground, thereby conveying their efforts via dystopian narratives. To their credit, they succeeded in constituting a new genre locally and transforming it internationally. Overall, Arabic dystopia reflects the disappointment of recent political and historical events by confronting horrific realities instead of anticipating potential dark outcomes in the near future. *However, the story does not end here—it is a call for utopia.*

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Notes

[1] It is also known as the Arab uprisings, which refer to the revolutionary waves against authoritarian regimes that hit several countries in the Arab world, started in December 2010 in Tunisia and then, spread elsewhere.

[2] Expounding on the role of translation in influencing the development of modern Arabic literature, Moosa cites Mahmud Timur's explicit statement: "Arabic fiction has been substantially influenced by translations of Western literature, but notes also that it has deep roots in the Arabs' past" (203).

[3] "A particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose" (OED).

[4] Abdallah Laroui argues that the Nahda is "a vast political and cultural movement that dominate[d] the period of 1850 to1914. Originating in Syria and flowering in Egypt, the Nahda sought through translation and vulgarization to assimilate the great achievements of modern European civilization, while reviving the classical Arab culture that antedates the centuries of decadence and foreign domination" (vii).

[5] The novel has been "published six times in the Arab world by six different publishers. Other novels that were translated were those of Arthur C. Clarke, Karel Čapek, Aldous Huxley, etc." (1446).

[6] It refers to the colonial impacts of external domination over marginalized countries, which continue to prevail.

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