

**Alternative Histories: Renegotiating Colonial Modernity  
and the Novel Form in Radwa Ashour's *A Part of Europe*  
(*Qit'a min Urubba*, 2003)"<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to show how Radwa Ashour's *A Part of Europe* is an attempt at re-inscribing the ambivalence and conflict that characterized the history of colonial modernity in Egypt and the novel form that came in its tandem in the second half of the nineteenth century, the period that has come to be known as the Arab Nahda. The novel countervails the official history, offering a version that links Khedive Ismael's project of European modernity to the colonial enterprise that leads in the end to the British occupation of Egypt, the establishment of the Zionist state of Israel as the only piece of Europe in the Arab world, and to a series of defeats that culminate in the American invasion of Iraq that looms over the end of the novel. The novel takes the form of a fictional autobiography of the narrator who introduces himself under the sobriquet of "Al-Nazer" ("The Seer" or "The Onlooker"). He figures as the common man-cum-historian, providing an alternative history from below, or from the margin, in which the public and the private intertwine and crisscross in a narrative patchwork/pastiche that dismantles the polarity between traditional narrative forms and the imported form of the European novel.

**Keywords:** Colonial modernity, Novel, History, Radwa Ashour, *A Part of Europe*

"I am sick with history. I can see it clinging on to me and eroding me. All others live it, have fun with it, fight through it. Only I observe history and watch them, and realize eventually that it is my disablement that I see."

"أنا مريض بالتاريخ، أراه يتعلق بي وينهشني، الكل يعيشون، يمرحون فيه، ويتقاتلون، وأنا وحدي أرقب التاريخ وأرقبهم، وأعرف في النهاية أنني أرقب عجزتي." (Ghanem 362)

*"O folks, read histories, you are the eyes of justice, you are justice itself, how can you be so negligent...How?"*

اقرأوا "التواريخ يا ناس، أنتم عيون العدل، أنتم العدل نفسه، كيف تهملون، كيف؟" (Al-Ghitani 52)

*"This man [Gamal Abdul-Nasser] has killed me [...] To hell with history".*

"هذا الرجل قتلني [...] طظ في التاريخ" (Al-Sheety 26, 27)

*"O historian, you have killed me"*

"قتلتني يا مؤرخ" (Ashour, *PoE* 32)

The above quotations come from modern Egyptian novels written over the last half-century. They signal, obliquely or directly, a tangibly poignant engagement with history on the part of Arab writers. An acute consciousness of history, almost amounting to a literary phenomenon, has so much marked Arabic literary production over that period that a large number of modern Arabic novels have been categorized as historical, or at least marked by the utilization of historical material in various degrees. This engagement with history or historiography is due to "the tribulation caused by June 5, 1967 defeat," as Louis Awad and other Egyptian and Arab intellectuals maintain. It was a shock that led "many writers and intellectuals to research the causes and the consequences of that defeat". Awad attributes the 1967 defeat to Egypt's lack of the constituents of a successful modern state and its backward status in relation to European modernity (8)<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to explore how Radwa Ashour's novel *A Part of Europe* opts for a different perspective in its engagement with the history that led to the 1967 defeat and its detrimental consequences up to the eve of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ashour does not acquiesce to the European master narrative about modernity and progress that Awad adopts. Her novel attempts to re-inscribe the ambivalence and fissures that characterized the project of European modernity in Egypt and its consequential reflections on the present. It countervails the ruling elite's official history and re-examines its methods of telling the story of the masses. At the same time, *A Part of Europe* provides a novelistic experiment that echoes the tensions of the early Arabic novel and renegotiates its linear realist structure as a reflection of a colonial worldview of progress commonly affiliated with the European civilizing/modernizing mission. In other words, *A Part of Europe* "writes back", to use Bill Ashcroft's phrase<sup>3</sup>, to the project of colonial modernity and the realist novel that is commonly said to have come in tandem during the *Nahda* period (the so-called Arab awakening or the social and cultural reformation movement that emerged with Muhammad Ali's project of modernizing Egypt in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>. century).<sup>4</sup>

Ashour's fascination and engagement with history is a major element in the entire body of her works, whether it be creative or critical. In her *Reflections on the Novel*, she strongly maintains that "the fact that there is no novel outside history is indisputable" (8). This fact has to do not only with the content of her novels but also with the history of the novel itself as a genre. Ashour shows an astute perception of the colonial expansive nature of modernity, for "modernity", as Peter Childs maintains, "is also associated with the period of European global expansion, such that its universalizing thrust has been concomitant with and dependent upon near-global systems of subjugation and navigation despite its Eurocentric focus" (18). Hence, along the lines of the post-colonial re-vision of the canonical history of the European novel<sup>5</sup>, Ashour maintains that it is difficult to examine the emergence of the Arabic novel in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century apart from the coterminous colonial context. The experience of that early novel, despite its urge towards decolonization, manifests a complicated, almost schizophrenic, consciousness of European colonial modernity that bafflingly intertwined a desire for complete liberation with servile fascination. It was also an experience that reflected the division between the glorification of a pre-modern past and the gravitation towards the prospective European modernity, (9) a division that has yielded the notoriously chronic polarity between a pre-colonial "authenticity" and a colonial "modernity" in Arabic thought and culture.<sup>6</sup>

Ashour seems quite aware of the progressive linear perspective of history, which justifies every colonialist project as a historical necessity. So, she calls for new approaches in the study of the pioneering Arabic novels that overwrite the European theoretical frameworks and stop measuring them up against European novels. This Eurocentric stance, as she argues, "presupposes that the history of human societies must necessarily pass through the same stages of European society. It renders European history a referential authority and a measuring unit of progress or failure; and by the same token, it also renders the European novel, along with the historical conditions that produced it, a prototype". Ashour comes to the conclusion that this perspective ignores both "the historicity of reality" and the nature of the colonial relation that has widened the gap of difference between the colonized and the colonizer (9-10).

A few years later, in her *Viable Modernity* (2009) Ashour puts her speculations about the novel into critical practice. She traces an alternative literary modernity and re-inscribes the canonical history of the Arabic novel by installing Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq's *Leg over Leg* (published 1855) not only as the first Arabic novel but also the first example of Arabic metafiction. Ashour's argument is based on the fact that Al-Shidyaq's book does not break up with the rich Arabic narrative tradition nor submissively mimics the European form of the novel widely adopted and later on canonized by the literary establishment with the publication of Muhammad Hussein Heikel's *Zainab* (1913) (44). Al-Shidyaq's text, rather, provides a potentially alternative modernity that is able to appropriate the dominant foreign technologies of writing and transform them through a deep and learned engagement with Arabic language and culture into a new hybrid form that foreshadows the multifarious transgeneric and interdisciplinary techniques now commonly associated with "postmodern" writing.

Ashour (1946-2014) was an heir to the dismaying experience of post-colonial societies. She belonged to that Egyptian generation known as "the generation of the revolution (*jil al-thawra*)", the generation that came of age and gained its nationalist and political consciousness after the 1952 Revolution. It is the generation that saw the dream of national independence after the overthrow of the royal dynasty that reigned since the time of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849), and the end of British occupation of Egypt. Traumatically enough, it is also the generation that witnessed the collapse of the national dream with the country's defeat in the 1967 war against Israel, and whose surviving members are

still witnessing this defeat amplified and reincarnated in military colonial forays, as well as in all the syndromes of neo-colonialism.

In the majority of post-independence countries of the 'Third World', the legacy of the colonial encounter is one of a deep crisis. For though the direct military/political occupation has been eliminated, the relationship between European/Western culture and the rest is still, as Aníbal Quijano maintains, "one of colonial domination". It is a relationship that "consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is part of it" ("Coloniality and Modernity" 169). It primarily involves the "colonization of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and giving meaning, the results of material existence, the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world: in short, the culture" ("Coloniality of Power" 541). This crisis is also aggravated by the fact that the post-independence indigenous elites embraced the colonial structures and were themselves incorporated in the new globalized world order, which consigned many of the national projects of independence and modernity to the orbit of the new forms of colonialism. Consequently, as Ashcroft argues, "the central idea of resistance rhetoric – that 'independence' would be the same thing as 'national liberation' – was inevitably doomed to disappointment" (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 2). One common strategy of post-colonial self-assertion is that resistance rhetoric depends on the attempt to redeem some aspect of a supposedly pure pre-colonial culture in order to redress the impact of European imperialism. To Ashcroft, this kind of strategy is misleading, for it implies a static view of culture (2). Ashour's return to the past is not an act of withdrawal to some pre-colonial sanctuary, for this would be a form of identification with the colonial linear perspective of history that installs the West's colonized others to a marginal cultural backwater. Therefore, though she utilizes the fall of Granada - one of the common tropes in Arabic culture - in her realist *Granada Trilogy* (published in Arabic between 1994 and 1995), she is quite conscious of the notorious association of the subject with "glorifying the past and/or lamenting its loss" (Ashour "Eyewitness" 90-91). Ashour's Granada is not another episode in the Arab Andalusian lachrimosity; rather, it is "a metaphorical image of loss and resistance" (91) inspired by the Gulf War and the American invasive Operation Desert Storm of 1991 which foreboded the fall of Baghdad in 2003.

Contemplating her novels, even before the publication of *A Part of Europe*, Ashour testifies to the traumatic history that continues to haunt the present and render any attempt at escapism into a golden past preposterous:

In retrospect, I now realize that all my novels are attempts to cope with defeat. [...] The events which preceded the June defeat and those which succeeded it made us particularly conscious that history was not only out there in books and records of the past, but it was a living experience of our everyday life: consecutive wars: 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1978, 1982, 1991; massacres too numerous to be cited here, heavy losses, traumatic changes, fractures and disjunctions, and the constant insecurity of a human will negated, and of subjects acted upon rather than acting. Our present was lived as history, an oppressive and haunting historical reality with which we wrestled and which we laboured to grasp (88).

The keyword in Ashour's testimony is the labour to grasp history, the endeavor to liberate the imagination and the cognitive perspectives of producing signification and meanings, as Quijano argues.

In a similar vein, Ashcroft reminds us that the word 'history' derives from the Greek *historia*, meaning "to investigate", and that historical investigation understandably attempts to answer the question "What happened?" However, he maintains that "many societies, perhaps most non-Western societies, do not ask this question, simply because 'What happened' is inseparable from what is still happening and will happen (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 82). In fact, this is the question at the heart of Ashour's *A Part of Europe* posed through Scheherazade, the granddaughter of Al-Nazer, the narrator and main character of the novel. Scheherazade addresses him in the plural, meaning him and his generation: "What did you do, grandfather? How did you get us to where we are? (84) Later on in the text, he repeats the question to himself and ponders the answer:

Is there no way to answer except by this exhausting leaping between histories, newspapers' clips and books? Do I delve deep and far to grasp what happened or do I wink at a present moment besieged by defeat on all sides? Why did we fail that much; what happened and who was responsible?" (167).

To find an answer, Al-Nazer engages in a rereading of the historical archive and his annals-like diary; he perambulates the streets of Khedive Ismail's Cairo to

reexamine the buildings that were meant to make Cairo "the Paris of the Nile" (AlSayyad 209).

Al-Nazer is Ashour's fictional device to renegotiate the history/project of modernity in Egypt, which was initiated on a great scale during Ismail's rule and which incurred the immense debts that proved to be the Trojan horse for the European colonial interests and the eventual British occupation of Egypt in 1882. Though *A Part of Europe* takes the form of a fictional autobiography, its title immediately invokes that project and its disastrous corollaries. The title appropriates Khedive Ismail's statement to Mr. Rivers Wilson the vice-president of the superior commission, which investigated the financial crisis of Egypt in 1879. On receiving the report of the commission, which limited his authority, divested him of his private property and put Egypt under the control of the European creditors, Ismail obsequiously tells Mr. Wilson: "My country is no longer African; we now form part of Europe. It is proper, therefore, to abandon our old ways and to adopt a new system more in accordance with our social progress" (*Appletons' Annual Cyclopaedia* 1882. 266). At this juncture in the Egyptian history, it seems as if Ismail sets the pace for the post-independence nationalist elites and intellectuals in terms of internalizing the discourse of decadence and invalidity of national histories by internalizing the teleological progressive vision of modernity at the heart of colonial capitalism. This vision falls in the dilemma of the temporal anachronism of accepting the state of backwardness while attempting to catch up with the train of progress. It also involves a geopolitical deformation of national cultural identity by swallowing the Orientalist imaginary spaces that would paradoxically suggest the migration of the whole nation to Europe while simultaneously endeavoring to clone Paris on the Nile (Said *Orientalism* 1-13, 95-97; Quijano "Coloniality of Power" 540; Fieni ix-x, 3).

In addition, through Al-Nazer she puts the post-independence bourgeois intellectuals (historians/novelists) to trial, suggesting that they are not mere producers of textual constructs but also guardians of the national memory and agents in historical transformations. In a "Preface/Prologue" that precedes the body of the narrative proper, the first-person narrator introduces himself under the sobriquet of "Al-Nazer" (an approximate translation of the name can be "The Observer" or "the Watcher"). He alerts the readers that this is not his real name, but rather the name he finds appropriate for his task in the novel. He also cautions the readers not to mistake his name for the common Egyptian word for "a school

principal" or the outdated word for a "minister in government". Ashour's ironic take on Al-Nazer's name, as not a minister, harks back to the exhumed character of Ahmad Pasha Al-Minikly, the Egyptian Minister of War, in the opening chapter of Muhammad Al-Muwaylihi's *Hadith Isa Ibn Hisham* (1907 16; English translation by Roger Allen *A Period of Time* 1992 108). Thus, early on, Al-Nazer informs us that he does not have the power or authority affiliated with governmental institutions or influential statesmen. On the contrary, he introduces himself as an anti-hero, a common lonely old man almost without a family. He chooses this name as he finds it appropriate for his role in the novel: "I am the watcher because my task is watching; I convey through my tale what I perceive through the eyes and the heart, i.e. through eyesight and insight" (*PoE* 8). One of the other meanings to which the name refers is "a leader of one's people"; but the narrator does not claim this status for himself either.

However, the juxtaposition of this lexical explanation of his adopted name and the preceding image of Sphinx (the awesome watcher and guardian of the land as the quotation from the Egyptian historian Al-Maqrizi (1364-1442) describes it) highlights what Ashour suggests as the potential role of the narrator/novelist, i.e., as a committed 'organic' intellectual. This role has been invested in many Arab novelists, "the role of national recorder, half story teller and half historian." To Ashour, this endeavor is "a kind of cultural resistance which partly implies the protection of collective memory, a kind of cultural conservation in the face of the double threat of cultural imposition and cultural disintegration. To challenge the dominant discourse[,] .... to attempt to give history visibility and coherence, to conjure up unaccounted for, marginalized and silenced areas of the past and the present" ("Eyewitness" 89). In the prologue, Al-Nazer suggests that his narrative is an attempt at reading through the exteriority of archives and the cityscape of Ismail's Cairo, at redeeming buried or erased histories. The "eyesight and insight" cognitive perspective implies a departure from the mummified official histories; it opens the field for centrifugal voices, for the mundane individual experience that registers their memories, observations and testimony about the lived experience in a certain locality. As Andreas Hussyen maintains in his significantly entitled *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, because of the postcolonial critique of the history/modernity linkage and the disturbances and upheavals suffered by national traditions and historical pasts as a result of their loss of geopolitical groundings in a global culture, "the form in which we think of the past is increasingly memory without borders rather than national history with borders"

(4). Huyssen also maintains that the boom of the cultural memory discourse since the 1990's allows the reading of cities and buildings as "palimpsests of space ....The strong marks of the present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias" (6). Al-Nazer early on perceives the shifting significance of the buildings and monuments of the city in terms of his developing consciousness. He tells us:

The names of Rommel and Montgomery, like those of Churchill and Rosevelt, would remain mere words; I never knew if they denoted places, persons or kinds of food.... In the course of time, the names – and the years too -- would gradually take on their meanings and wherewith get filled, like the city itself with its streets, buildings and the monuments in the middle of its squares. In my childhood, the places had no tales to tell about them. I only knew them through a cursory glance; they were mere figures in the background of a family photograph (*PoE* 7).

Ismail's Cairo in Ashour's/Al-Nazer's narrative is not the mute panoramic tableau we see in the first chapter of Jurji Zaydan's *Al-Mahdi's Prisoner (Aseer Al-Mutamahdi* 1892). Rather, the names and the buildings figure forth as signs in a shifting semiotic configuration that acquire new meanings with the historical vicissitudes and the probing critical readings. They are not a mere backdrop or décor, but they reflect on the present. Al-Nazer's elaborate explanation of his epithet and his emphasis on his in-depth careful "seeing"/reading are intended to guarantee the reader "the precision and honesty" (*PoE* 9) of his historical account.

With the opening line of the first chapter, we discover that Al-Nazer is not an overtly controlling narrator. His narrative is reported by an omniscient narrator who later on proves to be none other than the author herself, with her name explicitly mentioned in the text. Ashour lays bare her narrative device to provide an image of the defeated, armchair (wheelchair in Al-Nazer's case) intellectual isolated from the grassroots. Al-Nazer, in a wheelchair, as he is handicapped tells us that he cannot stroll the streets: "Radwa connives with you .... You don't walk. Why do you hide the truth? Why don't you say that you are defeated, with a white flag hoisted above your head?" (*PoE* 84). Like the characters quoted in the epigraphs, Al-Nazer's trauma is the outcome of the 1967 defeat against Israel and the death of his younger brother (who was almost like a son to him) in war. His physical disability and mental disturbance act as reverberations of that defeat and the following depressive years, which Albert Hourani characterizes as a period of

"disturbance of spirits," pervaded by "that sense of a world gone wrong" (442). No wonder that Al-Nazer's hallucinatory meeting with his dead brother is intertextualised with Hamlet's meeting with the specter of his father. He repeats Hamlet's self-imposed task, "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (*Hamlet* 1. 5. 188; *PoE* 93). It seems also that Al-Nazer's concomitant obsession with re-visioning history (the task he implicitly sets himself in the preface) emerges with his desire to talk about his dead brother, which he does not do until the eighth chapter. If he cannot straighten a world gone wrong or set the disjointed time right, at least he can set the historical record straight as a redemptive act for both his brother and his disturbed soul.

Al-Nazer establishes the historical reference of the novel's title from the very beginning. His own private tale begins with the story of Khedive Isma'il who was so fascinated by the modern design and the great architectures of Haussman's Paris that he commissioned his ministers to make of Cairo a clone of Paris, or rather a part of Europe, on the Nile. He comes back from Europe with his "wild dreams of demolition and construction" (*PoE* 12) and there rises "Al-Isma'iliya" which is downtown Cairo now where the narrator is born and brought up:

This new neighborhood, the "*Rumi* Cairo" [European Cairo], as some historians would call it, leaving Islamic Cairo behind, firmly settled in its past, content with it or overwhelmed by it, looked ahead towards a new world. It dragged the entire city with its government institutions, royal palaces, and trade centers to the west. I mean the geographical west -- no metaphor intended here -- where Isma'il's Cairo extends from 'Abdeen Square and Ataba Square to the Nile and the island westwards (*PoE* 13).

Ironically, Al-Nazer's remark about the metaphorical sense of "the west" as opposed to the geographical sense suggests the opposite. The new city stands for the geopolitical embroilment of Egypt in the network of the emerging global capitalism via the booming exports of the Egyptian cotton, the increased European debts for modernization projects, the digging of the Suez Canal and the extravagant expenditures in celebration of its opening. The specious architectural and cultural prosperity, which came at the expense of the declining old city and overtaxing the poor Egyptian peasants, eventually ended in the British occupation of Egypt and Isma'il's deposition and exile. The irony is all the more intensified when Al-Nazer's narrative informs us that Isma'il's Cairo continued to expand the way he dreamt but became the seat of power for the British colonizers:

At the edges of the square that carried his name: to the north, Qasr El-Nil (Nile Palace) became the barracks of colonizing troops; and to the south, Qasr Al-Dobara (Al-Dobara Palace) became the headquarters of the actual ruler of the country, the British consul-general Evelyn Baring, also known as Lord Cromer" (*PoE* 14).

In contrast, the Khedive was not allowed to return to Egypt until after his death and he was not even buried in his own city, but in the old one next to his mother. Moreover, to set off the Khedive's fate, the narrative points to another layer of the cityscape palimpsest by invoking the cultural and urban achievements of Al-Nasser Muhammad Ibn Qalawun (1285–1341) and his victories in the wars against earlier colonial waves incarnated in the Crusades five centuries earlier.

The contrastive pattern of the conflictual geopolitical orientations of the city is repeated throughout Al-Nazer's narrative. For instance, in chapter seven, he reiterates that "The *Rumi* Cairo, also known as Downtown Cairo, walked in the direction of another time .... It travelled to another time or that other time, along with its people, language, symbols and demands, came to it. No difference" (*PoE* 80). However, as he ruminates on the funeral of General Abdul Muni'm Riyadh, the martyred chief of staff in the War of Attrition against Israel in 1969, he remarks that the city was not " *Rumi* " (European) on that day: The funeral "walked in a different direction as if it were the imaginary Nile in the ancient Egyptian mythology, a subterranean river that carries the deceased's boat on its way back from the west to the east; as if the deceased sinks back to his predecessors to collect their bones from the dust, add his death to theirs and get up together to do their work" (*PoE* 81). Significantly, Riyadh's funeral has a therapeutic impact on Al-Nazer's traumatized self as he identifies it with his brother's funeral, which he did not attend. It enables him to reach a kind of self-reconciliation after the defeat and returns him to the public sphere or "the street" as he puts it, which he has abandoned since the Cairo Fire on January 26, 1952.

From this point on, Al-Nazer peregrinates through the city, delving into the political and cultural archaeology of its buildings. He also surfs in a free-floating manner through the historical archive about modern Egypt as well as through his own diaries and scrapbooks. With the flux of the historical details and documents he provides, we move back and forth over an extensive period of history in an almost scenic, non-linear narrative. The various strands the narrator traces converge on a defining event in Egyptian history, i.e. the January 26 1952 Cairo Fire, when the city's foreign establishments, businesses and recreational places

were burned to the ground in popular protest against the massacre of Egyptian policemen by British occupation troops the day before in the city of Ismaileya. Many subsequent events are recalled in association with this fire: the 1967 defeat; the invasion of Beirut 1982; the various Israeli massacres of the Palestinians; the American Desert Storm 1991; the Palestinian Intifadas, and the attacks of 9/11/2001 with the picture of the fire blazing from New York's World Trade Center.

The historical events are interspersed with recollections of the narrator's private life: his marriage to a woman called Scheherazade; his three daughters and their marriages; his physical and mental disability that were triggered by his younger brother's death in the 1967 war; his wife's accusation concerning his insanity and subsequent divorce, which leaves him all alone on a wheelchair; humorous situations with his sisters who grew superstitiously religious; his interactions with the new generation through his granddaughter, also named Scheherazade, and a university-student friend, Mahmoud. All these elements intersect and mix in a narrative pastiche that moves on through digression, repetition and circulation, recalling the structure of *The Arabian Nights*.

The Cairo Fire is the focal event that holds the novel's staccato historical archive together, for it marks the narrator's emergent national consciousness at the age of sixteen. Moreover, it represents the moment that shakes his confidence in the street's protest movements and later the moment that triggers his doubts about the official history version of the fire. Al-Nazer's father, the Wafdist government and the majority of the liberal parties and their organs viewed the fire as a conspiracy carried out by the British and the Royal Palace. Though Al-Nazer, as an adolescent, is an eyewitness to the events of that day, the dominant conspiratorial perspective of people's demonstrations blurs his vision. He interrogates himself: "Have I participated in a conspiracy?" (*PoE* 30). And later as a university student, to soothe his misgivings, he repeatedly has recourse to the authorized nationalist historian, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Rafi'i, upon whose books his generation is raised. Al-Nazer quotes Al-Rafi'i's account in *Premonitions of the July 23 Revolution*, which views the conflagration of downtown Cairo as "emitting from sick souls among the citizens," and perpetrated by "the evil elements of the people," when "the mob haphazardly and indifferently set fire to the department stores" (*PoE* 31). This account, which has been canonized by most Egyptian and foreign historians, is questioned and dismantled by Ahsour's narrative recording of many historical documents and oral testimonies derived

from Gamal Al-Sharqawy's *Cairo Fire* (1976), which is referenced after the end of the novel's text proper. Moreover, in his *Benign Nationalism*, Tamim Al-Barghouthi maintains that most of the 700 establishments and businesses that were burned down represented European colonial interests or local collaboration with the occupation. Al-Barghouthi's conclusion is that the Cairo Fire was an expression of the public anger that had been accumulating over the preceding years against the British occupation and the politics of the national ruling elite that thwarted effective popular armed struggle in the canal district (176-186; Anis 7; Marsot 124-125).

Marsot points out that the Cairo Fire was a landmark in the Egyptian history, for it foreshadowed the end of the liberal experiment (125) of what Al-Barghouthi dubs the "benign nationalism" that ironically played the double role of representative (of the people to the British occupier) and the substitute or the comprador (who replaces the colonizer in relation to the people). In other words, as Joel Beinen maintains, the nationalist movement embodied in the organized political parties recruited a popular constituency from among peasants, students and urban working people and made use of them in its nationalist discourse and public politics as the noble citizens of the emerging nation state. However, the successive national governments would not allow the components of this constituency to go beyond the delineated official politics or participate in any actual exercise of power. Therefore, in the wake of the Second World War and the Palestine war in 1948, large sectors of the Egyptian society were radicalized, which added a socioeconomic dimension to the national movement of liberation that expressed itself in a series of strikes and demonstrations that reached its apex in Cairo Fire 1952 (329).

Like many colonies and semi-colonies, Beinen argues, Egypt moved in the orbit of "colonial capitalism" which encompassed "both British colonial rule and Egypt's subordinate integration into the world capitalist market" (319). Economic development in the form of industrial businesses and banks was promoted as a nationalist epic (325). Ashour's narrative ironically records the contradictions of this modernization project and its nationalist discourse. In chapter two, Al-Nazer tells us that his father, a representative of the educated elite and a follower of the Wafdist party, worked in the National Bank and was very enthusiastic about the guerrilla operations against the British forces in the Suez Canal Zone and the end of British occupation. However, he used to pride himself on his command of the English language and memorizing many English poems

and on a visit to London as a member of the Bank delegation in 1937 (*PoE* 23). The irony is that the National Bank of Egypt (like many other economic institutions and businesses) was controlled by foreigners residing in Europe (Beinen 319). Later, in chapter five, Al-Nazer's narrative dismantles the national claim of the name of the bank (and by implication the father's nationalist discourse, for Al-Nazer points out that the word "Bank" was almost synonymous with "my father" (*PoE* 56)). Al-Nazer's search reveals how a German-English financier, Ernest Cassel, owned half the capital of the bank, along with many other investments in Egypt. Cassel was connected to a vast network of European businessmen and financiers, most prominent amongst whom was the Jewish millionaire Maurice de Hirsch who established the Jewish Colonization Association in 1891, just six years before the convening of the first Zionist Congress. After the death of Hirsch in 1896, Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, one of the five Rothschilds recalled in Al-Nazer's account, transferred the title to his colonies in Palestine and established the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association in 1924 (*PoE* 54; Halbrook 360-362). The interlocked threads of colonial investments in Egypt and the Zionist projects in Palestine are an ironic commentary on the picture of the Pharaonic statue on the banknotes that were printed in England, which makes the National Bank and other similar institutions a parody of nationalist liberation.

The novel's intricate "micro-histories" and personal memories<sup>7</sup> of the buildings and figures informing the landscape of Khedivial Cairo represent what Andreas Huyssen views as the reading of cities and urban space as palimpsests in which "the strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasure, losses, and heterotopias" (7) In this perspective, Al-Nazer's palimpsestic reading of urban space and archives maps the routes of the Zionist project of establishing "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine as the Balfour Declaration 1917 stipulated, rather than an independently liberated Egyptian nation-state. In the ultimate analysis, the narrative's historical reconfiguration foregrounds the fact that the only piece of Europe that has been transplanted in the region is the state of Israel, a new arm of Western settlement colonialism. This renders Ashour's novel similar to what Tess Closset designates "time-slip narratives" where the protagonist navigates back in time or characters from the past come back to the present. Such narratives, Closset maintains, present "an openness to "other" histories, rather than the potentially nationalistic search for roots; it problematizes the simple access to the past promised by the heritage site; it critiques empty reconstructions of the past; and because of the

way it constructs childhood, it evades the dangers of nostalgia" They renegotiate the national past and offer new historical consciousness, reflecting the ideas of what has come to be known as "'the living history' or 'the history from below' movement" (244).

As has been noted above, Al-Nazer's memories of his father do not muddle his testimony of what he witnessed during the Cairo Fire. Even after the 1952 Revolution and the fall of monarchy, he takes the national historian to task for using the same argument of the riotous rabble, seditious elements and conspiracies in justifying the new regime's violent suppression of the labour movement and the execution of two workers in August 1952 (*PoE* 30-32). The 1952 "Revolution" of the Free Officers is not romanticized; the novel insinuates that a military junta was a better choice for the colonial powers to deal with than a potential popular movement fermenting within the radical sectors of the Egyptian society, dubbed by the ruling elite as "the rabble الغوغاء" (*PoE* 87). In her autobiographical *Athqal min Radwa (Heavier than Radwa, 2013)*, on the eve of January 25, 2011, another moment of popular revolution in the contemporary history of Egypt, the Cairo Fire 1952 is evoked again. Ashour asserts in no uncertain terms:

I never believed that the fire was planned by the British and the Palace, as several historians and the officially common narrative of the incident claimed. I was certain that the Fire was a real popular revolution quickly contained by several means, one of which was the advancement of the timing of the Free Officers Movement that has later come to be known as July 1952 Revolution" (60).

The danger of nostalgia that might threaten Al-Nazer's reconstruction of his memories seems to be particularly associated with Gamal Abdel Nasser to whom Al-Nazer appears to be favorably inclined: "Sometimes I remember him and think of him .... and a nostalgic feeling comes over me; I do not know whether it is a longing for his time, my childhood or to something else" (91). However, Nasser is another father-figure and the narrative account of him in chapter eight is intertextualised with the ghost of Hamlet's father. Al-Nazer writes, "I avow that I have never forgiven him. I was overtaken by his sudden death while I was grappling with him, questioning him ruthlessly. What would you do if it befell that your father suddenly dropped dead while you were arguing with him .... ?" (90-91). Despite the nostalgic feelings, Al-Nazer does not exempt him from

criticism for the defeat of the 1967 war and implicitly for the death of his younger brother.

Moreover, under his rule and the Free Officers, the city kept moving "westward" across the Nile in the quarter known as "Al-Muhandseen", which became "the new commercial center of the new Cairo that moved westward as it had done before. It was the Free Officers who had pushed it there at the beginning before they eventually handed it to McDonald's and other stores of that ilk" (205). The streets that were given the names of Arab cities and Arab martyrs in the wars against Israel would be emptied of the meaning and memories associated with them only to accommodate the names and branches of multinational corporations. Once again, in his capacity as quasi narrator/historian/memorialist, Al-Nazer shows an urge to be the guardian of collective memory. Critic Georg G. Iggers draws attention to the fact that "a main function of historical writing, whether professional or literary, has been the creation of collective memory which in turn has been a key element in the formation of collective identity.... History is memory; the task of the honest historian must be to prevent it from becoming distorted memory" (32) Therefore, Al-Nazer deplores the fact that the newborn in the buildings of Al-Muhandseen neighborhood will not recognize the names of the Arab heroes after whom the streets have been named nor will they develop any kind of collective Arab identity. When they grow up into young women and men, they will haunt McDonald's, KFC, Mister Donut, and Baskin Robbins. The Arab League Street will show no signs of Arab unity; on the contrary, Al-Nazer records how the Kuwaiti young men celebrated the bombardment of Baghdad in January 1991 (*PoE* 203-204). Moreover, the multinational franchises that represent the neocolonial global capitalism will also have another place called "World Trade Center" on the Nile side in Bulaq. Ironically, the namesake of the New York centre targeted in the attacks of September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center, appears to Al-Nazer like "a small part of America which, in its own turn, is a part of Europe (205).

It has been noted that the contemporary memory discourse, with its focus on the personal and the lived experience, is "haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism" (Huyssen 7). The burgeoning of the memory discourse was concurrent with trauma studies, which came to prominence in the mid-1990s and had its roots in postmodernist approaches to history and culture. Such approaches were criticized for their textualism and often accused of "irrelevance or indifference to "real-world" issues such as history,

politics, and ethics". However, what distinguishes the field of trauma studies is its "explicit commitment to ethics" (Craps 1). Cathy Caruth, a prominent exponent of trauma studies, attempts to redeem textualism from "political and ethical paralysis" (10). She argues that a textualist approach can enable us to access history differently: "Through the notion of trauma<sup>8</sup> [...] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not". (11) Craps and Buelens remark that trauma studies stand the risk of being Eurocentric in perspective and ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic experiences. Hence, for trauma studies to guarantee its ethical credibility, the traumatic histories of the West must be interrelated to the colonial traumatic histories. In the field of postcolonial studies, some critics have suggested this interrelation in the form of "theorizing colonization in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation" (2). Similarly, what Craps and Buelens call "postcolonial trauma novels" can emancipate trauma studies from the parochial Eurocentric perspective by providing testimonies to the traumatic experiences and violent atrocities triggered by colonial incursions in other countries.

Ashour's preoccupation with Arab history, with the massive trauma of "the 1948 Calamity", the Israeli colonization of Palestine and the dispossession and massacring of its people, at its heart, renders the majority of her body of works postcolonial trauma novels par excellence. They provide narratives of colonial traumas and Israeli crimes that write back to the master narrative of the Holocaust, which overshadows the sufferings of the Palestinian people. The whole history of the twentieth century, as Huyssen maintains, seems to be often examined "under the sign of trauma, with the Holocaust increasingly functioning as the ultimate cipher of traumatic unspeakability or unrepresentability" (8). Ashour's novels almost represent a popular archive of the Palestinian threatened memory. Her *Specters (Atyaf)* 1998 and *The Woman from Tantoura (Al-Tantouriya)* 2008 detail the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian villages of Der Yassin and Al-Tantura respectively at the hands of the Israeli forces during the 1948 war. *A Part of Europe* stands out among Ashour's novels as it depicts the Zionist project in Palestine in its intricate connection with colonial capitalism from the late nineteenth century until the massacre of Jenin in 2002 during the Second Palestinian Intifada. The Israeli inhumanly brutal violence is documented in the novel through reproducing an interview published in *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's

most widely circulated tabloid paper, on May 31, 2002 with Moshe Nissim Beitar, nicknamed Kurdi Bear. He acquired this nickname because he drove a gigantic bulldozer that participated in eradicating the Jenin Refugee Camp – "wiping out the buildings....shaving them" just to clear a tract of land to set up a stadium for his favorite football team, Beitar (*PoE* 137)<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, the novel combines the manifestations of colonial traumas with what the psychotherapist Laura S. Brown calls "insidious trauma," by which she means "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (qtd. in Craps and Buelens 3). The classic example of the insidious trauma is the sense of inferiority and self-hatred associated with racial prejudice. Al-Nazer's personal trauma goes beyond the moment of the loss of his brother and the therapeutic reconciliation achieved during the funeral of Abdul Muni'm Riyad as mentioned earlier. It rather insidiously afflicts his soul, and implicitly the souls of his whole generation in the form a sense of permanent despair and fateful defeat. Ashour even obfuscates the state of his physical disability— a wheel-chaired old man walking the streets of Cairo. To underline the metaphorical significance of his disability as deep-seated sense of powerlessness and defeat, Al-Nazer, in a gesture of an imagined self-defense before his granddaughter and his neighbor Mahmoud, exclaims, "Yes, here I am, standing steadfast on the ground of truth; I can stand; I can walk, you girl! You boy, I have not become crippled yet, not yet!" (*PoE* 85). Actually, the character of Al-Nazer shows that the insidious trauma is the subtle chronic manifestation of other communal traumas, the colonial in this case. The younger generation, represented by Al-Nazer's student neighbor, Mahmoud, are afflicted in spirit and soul. They are desperate, frustrated, non-belonging and indifferent to the so-called grand narratives of the homeland or the Arab nation (*PoE* 107). Al-Nazer's sisters and daughters, likewise, reflect the values of the new global market and consumer society; they lack the spiritual power of empathy and deal with him as a mere lunatic.

One of the pitfalls of the prevalence of the concern with trauma, as Huyssen warns, is conflating it with the discourse of memory, which "would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition. Memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past" (8). It is the job of collective memory to help individuals surmount the walls of the personal trauma and break out of the vicious circle of self-repetition. Al-

Nazer's absorption in his own past memories, his archives, newspapers clippings, scrapbooks and his daily tours around the town seems to isolate him from his surroundings. Um Abdullah, the housekeeper, complains of his books and paper clippings and mocks his daily trips around the city, pushing him on his wheelchair around the city with her "wheel-less feet". She wonders about what he scrutinizes like an inspector in the buildings and streets, to the negligence of the reality around him: "If I had been to school, I would have understood what you are inspecting! Wouldn't it be better to write about unemployment, shadow education, and sky-high prices? As long as you are writing and reading anyway, write about what concerns us (*PoE* 179). Moreover, Mahmoud confronts him with his ostrich-like behavior that keeps him locked in his obsession with the past:

This is a reality you won't admit; you won't like to see! You live in some other world, preoccupied with the downtown buildings and the part of Europe project. This was an old project that came to naught. We're done with it. America is a part of Europe; it carries its seed and perpetuates its vision. Israel is the daughter born from their womb. The three of them open fire on us. I do agree with you, but what have we done to ourselves? What are we doing? (*PoE* 107).

Both the housekeeper's and Mahmoud's criticisms of Al-Nazer seem to be addressed at a kind of ivory tower textualism that overlooks human agency.

Mahmoud opens Al-Nazer's eyes to the shifting meaning of "a part of Europe" and to the protean face of the global projects of dehumanized domination, oppression and exploitation. Mahmoud points out to him the wide gaps between classes as reflected in the university community. The kind of shoes one wears at the university defines one's place in the social hierarchy; to wear sports shoes flaunting one of the multinational brands like Adidas, Nike or Reebok amounts to "wearing a part of America and Europe on one's feet" (*PoE* 106). Like Al-Nazer's journey of research in which "the faces, names and events acquire significances that they did not possess before." (*PoE* 19), "a part of Europe" becomes a signifier that is to be perpetually filled with new meanings. It is no longer a mere national project of modernity embedded in colonial capitalism, nor a geopolitical entity of settlement colonialism (Israel) transplanted in Palestine. It expands to stand for the postmodern global economy, conceptualized by Hardt and Negri as "Empire": "In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule

that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open expanding frontiers" (xii). No wonder that the authors of *Empire* view the Gulf War (the Operation Desert Storm 1991), which leads to the invasion of Iraq, the closing moment of Ashour's narrative, as an initial signal event in the construction of *Empire* (xvii). Such confrontations with the other characters contribute to shaking Al-Nazer out of the prison house of the traumatic past and enlarging his perspective.

The Operation Desert Storm figures as a crucial moment in Al-Nazer's emancipation from the oppressive sense of disability and inevitable defeat. He invokes Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the scene of the storm serves as the objective correlative of Lear's disturbed mind, "The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else / Save what beats there" (*Lear* 3. 4. 1814-1816). Al-Nazer admits to the fact that he does not have the rank of a king nor possess the moving power of anger that drives Lear to scream to heaven to "touch [him] with noble anger," (*Lear* 2. 4. 276; *PoE* 141). Unlike Lear, Al-Nazer knows only too well the ignominy of his situation, for he has gone through more than one storm at various stages of his life: "Was Lear at his fifty-four of age? When the storm broke out, I was fifty-four. No, I am not precise; it was not just one storm! [...] And now at the age of sixty-five, I have to face the storm." (*PoE* 142). The Desert Storm comes first on the list of disasters, for it might be, as he contemplates, the cruelest among them all. The pattern of "the often delayed uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations" that seems to be the defining response syndrome of trauma (Caruth 11) becomes in the narrative's logic and within Al-Nazer's temporal perspective an instrument of interpretation of events or traumas that seem fragmented and disconnected.

Al-Nazer asks himself, "Did my life appear to me like a sin or did my failure to inflict harm on those who harmed me boomeranged and became a desire for self-harm [...]?" (143). He comes out of the dizzying storm that baffles his mind with more perception and tolerance to open up to the other on ethical grounds of commitment to the principles of righteousness and justice. This is reflected in his changing attitude to Eddie, the Jewish neighbour of Al-Nazer's family and the child playmate of his younger brother. Al-Nazer refuses to receive him when he comes to extend condolences for the death of the younger brother because Eddie's family emigrated to France then to Israel in 1966. Eddie left Israel for good in 1989 in protest against its Zionist politics. Afterwards, Al-Nazer welcomes his correspondences, which carry his articles in the French newspapers

decrying the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the translation of the interview with Kurdi Bear about the massacre of Jenin Camp, and a book about his childhood in Cairo. Al-Nazzer finds in Eddie another fellow researcher/historian of the Zionist movement and the Jewish state, the part of Europe, which Eddie describes as "the diabolic machine invented by big European men [...] which dispossessed the Palestinian of their land and uprooted the Jews from their homelands." (*PoE* 127). Moreover, the trauma that claws at Al-Nazzer in the form of fitful insanity gains a new meaning in the context of resistance. As the storm makes him doubt his sanity and the value of what he records, he compares himself to a mischievous child throwing stones at the passerby. But this "silly" image is offset by another image of an ethically positive insanity, i.e., the stories and news of Palestinian children throwing stones at the armed Israeli soldiers. His granddaughter Scheherazade, who helps him in his historical research by getting him material from the internet, tells him in detail the story of Faris Ouda, the Palestinian child who died facing an Israeli tank in 2000. In his tired mind, Scheherazade and Faris are merged in one vision of martyrdom that makes him describe his granddaughter's identification with the young martyr as "total madness". (*PoE* 152).

Al-Nazzer is further confounded about the meaning of madness as Mahmoud confronts him over the imminent American invasion of Iraq:

America will strike Iraq, what shall we do? [...] Nothing! They say we will strike you, we will do; and then, they strike. We take the strike as if we were watching a movie and then go to bed. Tell me what is your definition of sanity and insanity [...] The children who confront the Israeli tank in Palestine act insanely; they choose an absolute moment of meaning and power, a condensed moment of freedom followed by death; they pay their whole life for one moment; This is insane, but beautifully insane, for the moment is more valuable than a long life in the swamp of disability and indignity.

(*PoE* 163-164)

A few pages later after this confrontation, when he goes back to his sources on the Cairo Fire, he confirms that it was not a random act on the part of "the rabble," but a revolution that discerns the true enemy. He quotes Polonius, the chief counselor of the King in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "though this be madness, yet there is method in it." (*Ham.* 2. 2. 1307; *PoE* 175). Near the end of the novel, he adopts madness as an outlet for the sense of defeat and disability. He is no longer

satisfied with the mere role of the spectator/observer. Though the idea of participating in a demonstration on a wheelchair seems to him at first "rash and insane" (*PoE* 187), he does not hesitate to join Scheherazade in the demonstrations at the Cairo University and at Al-Azhar mosque against the American invasion of Iraq.

The repetitive fragments of Al-Nazer's memories are misread by a critic like Amina Ghusn as examples of postmodernist historical relativism and obscure vision of history that "inculcate desperation of the concepts of right or certitude" (14). In contrast, Gaber Asfour grasps their interpretative function; as he maintains, tracing the traumatic moments by jumping between dates, books and clippings enables us to "unveil the connections between what often seems disconnected in our dominant historical consciousness" (13). The storm becomes a moment of epiphany that provides a diagnostic insight and gestures towards acts of resistance as potential therapy. What appears to be an obscure vision of history is debunked in the last chapter of the novel that serves as a coda. The novel, which starts as serious engagement with the brutal facts of history, ends in the manner of fairy tales, like *The Arabian Nights*. The deeper understanding of the historical process, which the narrator is supposed to acquire from his historical research, is abstracted in terms of the conflict between good and evil, justice and injustice, and oppression and resistance. He invokes the myth of Isis, whose gigantic statue is referred to in the first chapter as the Sphinx's woman, as a symbol of revival and resistance of evil. The story of Al-Sayyeda Zaynab bint Ali, the fourth Muslim Caliph, and her heroic feats in help of her martyr brother, Al-Hussain is juxtaposed to the news of the birth of a new baby to the family of the Palestinian child martyr Mohmmad El-Durra with the same name. Moreover, his own story is left open-ended. He imagines two ends for his story: one in which he hands his granddaughter the manuscript of his book which she prepares for publication after his death, and the second in which he wakes up the following day to continue writing.

The form Ashour adopts for her novel is not dissociable from the historical issues it tackles. Considering Ashour's novel within the context of postmodernism overlooks the critique it presents of colonial modernity and its Westocentric cultural implications. For in spite of the unmistakable "postcolonial" context of the novel, critics, as Wail Hassan contends in connection with Arabic literature in general, "have tended hastily and unquestioningly to use Western periodization to describe the development of modern Arabic literature, thus reducing it [...] to

an inexorable sequencing not of its own making" (58).<sup>10</sup> However, Ashour recognizes the specificity of the history she deals with and the shifting nature of literary categorization. History is not a mere context for the fictional or literary material; it is rather part and parcel of the structure and form of the text. Historical accounts, or "the tale" in her own phrase, are "incomplete at least from the novelist's viewpoint." To her, the novel genre is mainly characterized by its special relation to social reality as a changing historical process, for its subject is human beings within a specific context. As she argues, this context, which is usually viewed as extra-textual, enters the text unabashedly and becomes a dominant presence in the text (*Reflections* 6-8). Al-Nazer's weary attempts to tell his "tale" intimates Ashour's awareness of the linguistic (also referred to as the postmodern) turn in historiography elaborately theorized and debated by Hayden White, among others. Scholarship in the field of history and postmodernist theory has shaken the long-established hierarchy in which history, unlike the novel, has a higher claim to truth. It has been argued that history writing depends on the same process of "narrativization" or "emplotment" (Cobley 19-20) of events used in fictional writing. In postmodernist terms, both history and the novel become two modes of representation of reality in which truth is relative and governed by ideology.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Ashour seems to show no hesitation in giving her text the subtitle "Novel/Riwaya," for she is certainly aware that the title "A Part of Europe" would refer the averagely educated reader to the history of Khedive Ismael's project of a new Cairo as a clone of Paris on the Nile.

Ashour's narrative certainly shows various aspects that are usually attributed to postmodern fiction or historiographic metafiction.<sup>12</sup> However, Patricia Waugh reminds us that though the 'meta' narrative practices have its contemporary emergence since 1960s, "the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself [...] metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels" (5). That is why it is not doing Ashour's novel enough justice by merely attaching ready-made labels to it, which is reflected in the critical reception of it as a modernist meta-text (Barrada 8; El-Eid 21 ). Writing from the postcolonial periphery, Ashour was one of the political astute writers to whom Jerome de Groot assigns the power of exploring "the fault lines opened by the postmodern and post-structuralist interrogation of truth, history and realism" (136). However, Al-Nazer's narrative is anchored in historical realism substantiated by dates and intensive documentation. Ashour's re-reading of the modern history of Egypt remains faithful to the Lukacsian spirit in representing history:

Without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible. But this relationship, in the case of really great historical art, does not consist in alluding to contemporary events, [...] but in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical, social and human forces which in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it (Lukacs 53).

Moreover, the alternative historical narrative is carried out through formal devices that belong to both European and Arabic narrative traditions. Conniving with Al-Nazer in her capacity as the author or the central intelligence behind the narrative, Ashour adds another dimension to the device of the double narrative perspective that is used in metafiction to problematize the notion of the tyrannical authoring subject or the accessibility of the past. In the case of Al-Nazer's account, this device serves his purpose of "precision and probity" and harks back to the narrative tradition of *al-maqama* where the chain of authors/authority is a guarantee of authenticity (Brocklemann 109). Al-Nazer also partakes of the *maqama* hero, who is a great traveler engaged in a constant search for knowledge (Kilito 15), the mid-nineteenth-century figure of the flaneur who was a mixture of an idle stroller or a passive consumer of the urban spectacle and also a meticulous observer and recorder of experience in the city (Gluck 747-764), and Michel de Certeau's street walkers (156-163).

The self-representation of the author at work in the text, i.e. the auto-representation of the narrative process in the novel reflects an awareness of the limited and limiting vision of the realist novel and narrative history. Both genres, as Roland Barthes argues, construct a "closed narrative world that would be representational but still separate from changing experience and historical process" (Huchon 109). This abandonment of the realist form marks a clear break in Ashour's work since her earlier novels, particularly her *Granada Trilogy* (1995). Hence, the dissatisfaction with the realist form of fiction is reflected in Ashour's/Al-Nazer's uncertainty about the suitable form that can catch up with "the rushing train" of history. Early on in the preface, the narrator contemplates his strange urge to write his life within the context of Egypt's history while he is not a professional writer or historian. He wonders about the generic "umbrella that he could raise above his head" as he lands on the act of writing like "an untrained parachutist" (*PoE* p.7). He alternates in describing his text between the words "تأليف" "حكاية" "tale" "رواية" "novel" and "مقال" "discourse or speech, essay". As he

proceeds with writing history, he recognizes the fragmentary nature of his textual structure. He doubts that the realist chronological order can convey the truth or the answer to the question of defeat: "Should I resign myself to narrating the events? The events are recorded and preserved in history books, by numbers and dates [...] what use is narrating the events? [...]. Why don't I tell a tale that takes me on over the road of my life, safely guided by the sequence of months and years [...] What kind of preposterous motive makes me think I can collect all these shreds in one logbook?" (*PoE* 83-84). Likewise, he finds himself confined by the chronicle form and narrative history, the narrator repudiates the familiar literary forms and aesthetic rules as incapable of containing all the historical events that stormed his life and still storms it over the TV. Associating his derangement with King Lear in the storm, Al-Nazer declares: "Art outlines; art condenses; and any drama is confined by the assigned three hours on the stage and by Aristotle's rules for the unity of action, and probably the unities of time and space [...]. I don't write a drama à la Shakespeare; I want to tell my story and I don't know how to report on all these unintermittent storms" (*PoE* 162). In his rage, he also feels that writing a polemical essay is not out of order, as he wants a kind of writing that rids him of the nightmarish history that burdens his chest.

Al-Nazer's dissatisfaction with all the restricting generic boundaries, as well as his anticipation of the readers' response, enables the novelistic form to transcend the limits of history and fiction, the private and the public, the imaginary and the factual, making it a democratic form with its plurality of voices and modes. Besides the modern and postmodern techniques, Ashour makes subtle use of Arabic narrative forms. Narrative devices of the *Arabian Nights* abound in the form of the micro narratives, the tale within a tale, the repetitive designation and *leitwortstil* (Pinault 16-25), as in the repetition of the names of Scheherazade and Muhammad El-Durra or the members of the Rothschild family. Echoes of Arabic books of *adab*, news, anecdotes and epistles can be felt in the preface and the conclusion too.

From the above analysis, we can see that the perspective *A Part of Europe* opens up new horizons and possibilities in Arabic novel writing. It also avoids the polarity of tradition vs. modernity which often characterizes traditional critical work on the rise of the Arabic novel during the *Nahda* period and the traditional narrative forms imported from of the European novel. Moreover, if we have to assign the novel, with its exploration of European modernity as a colonial project, to a specific formal category, I would suggest using the Argentine-

Mexican philosopher Enrique D. Dussel's concept of transmodernity. As he elaborates it:

If one aims at overcoming modernity, it becomes necessary to deny the denial of the myth of modernity from an ethics of responsibility. Thus, the other denied and victimized side of modernity must first be unveiled as "innocent"; it is the "innocent victims" of ritual sacrifice that in the self-realization of their innocence cast modernity as guilty of a sacrificial and conquering violence – that is, of a constitutive, originary, essential violence. [...] What is at stake here is what I have called "transmodernity," a worldwide ethical liberation project in which alterity, which was part and parcel of modernity, would be able to fulfill itself" (473).

Thus, in her re-vision of the history of modernity in Egypt, Ashour dismantles the official history canonized by the nationalist elite and enshrined in realist narratives that consolidate the illusions of a national independence and a façade of progress. Al-Nazer's journey into the archives of history yields more than self-knowledge and self-healing; it fosters the ethical insight of the human agency in history and the continuous possibility of transcending traumatic defeats. Ashour's achievement of a "transmodern" narrative that incorporates the denied cultural self and the different other is an ethical message of resistance and optimism. In one of his epigrams, Oscar Wilde writes, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (201). Ashour had been up to this duty in her novels, acting like Isis in restoring and reviving a dismembered threatened memory. As she puts it in her autobiography, "all my narrative writings have been an attempt to deal with defeat. [...] Writing is an attempt at restoring an exiled will (*Heavier than Radwa* 280).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to in citations as *PoE* and all translations from this edition are mine.

<sup>2</sup> See also Abdel-Malek.

<sup>3</sup> *The Empire Writes Back*

<sup>4</sup> See Tomiche 900-903.

<sup>5</sup> Significantly enough, the canonical history of the English novel has come to be rewritten a "post-colonial" perspective as a byproduct of colonialism; see Said, Azim, and Perrera.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of this issue see Selim 111-115.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Huyssen argues that while nineteenth-century nation-states used history to "mobilize and monumentalize national and universal past," this pattern is no longer valid for the late twentieth century: "The form in which we think of the past is increasingly memory without borders rather than national history with borders" (4). The contemporary memory discourse most often revolves around the personal testimonies and traumatic memories, which haunted the cultural discourse of the 1990s as "the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism" (8).

<sup>8</sup> In its Greek origin, "trauma" refers to "a wound" inflicted on the body; however, in the current usage, as Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma studies, points out, "the term *trauma* is understood as a wound not inflicted upon the body but upon the mind" (3). In its most general definition, "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11).

<sup>9</sup> An English translation of the interview published in Hebrew in *Yediot Aharonot* can be accessed on the site of the Israeli Peace Bloc,

[http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/archive/archives\\_kurdi\\_eng](http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/archive/archives_kurdi_eng).

<sup>10</sup> See also Allen 248-251.

<sup>11</sup> The problem that White is concerned with is the status of the historical narrative as "a verbal artifact"; historical narratives, as he contends, are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (*Tropics of Discourse* 82). Moreover, White maintains that narrativization is epistemologically instrumental in the historical discourse, for "narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific" ("The Value of Narrativity" 5). See also chapter five entitled "Postmodernism and the Historical Novel" (Groot 109-138)

<sup>12</sup> See Hutcheon 105-123.

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## تواريخ بديلة: إعادة النظر في الحداثة الاستعمارية والشكل الروائي في رواية رضوى عاشور 'قطعة من أوروبا'

### المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة رواية قطعة من أوروبا باعتبارها محاولة لإعادة النظر في تاريخ الحداثة الاستعمارية في مصر، وشكل الرواية العربية الحديثة الذي ظهر في أعقابها في النصف الثاني من القرن التاسع عشر، وهي الفترة التي عرفت بعصر النهضة العربية. حيث تقوم الرواية بمساءلة التاريخ الرسمي وتقدم رؤيتها التاريخية التي تربط بين مشروع الخديوي إسماعيل في استنساخ الحداثة الأوروبية بالمشروع الاستعماري الذي أفضى في نهاية المطاف إلى الاحتلال البريطاني لمصر، وإقامة الكيان الصهيوني الإسرائيلي باعتباره القطعة الوحيدة من أوروبا في العالم العربي، وإلى سلسلة من الهزائم بلغت ذروتها في الغزو الأمريكي للعراق الذي تخيم نذره على نهاية الرواية. تأخذ قطعة من أوروبا شكل السيرة الذاتية المتخيلة للراوي الذي يقدم نفسه تحت اسم "الناظر" في صورة رجل الشارع العادي باعتباره مؤرخاً يقدم تاريخاً بديلاً من أسفل أو من الهامش، تاريخاً تتداخل فيه التفاصيل العامة والخاصة، وتتقاطع في "باستيش" سردي يتسم بالتكرار والاستطراد والحركة الدائرية، يذكرنا ببنية ألف ليلة وليلة. بنفس القدر الذي يرى به الراوي/الناظر أن شكل التاريخ الحولي أو السردي مقيداً وقاصراً في نقل رؤيته، كذلك يرفض الشكل الأدبي المألوف للرواية لذا نجد سرديته تكسر حدود الأجناس الأدبية وتتوقع ردود فعل القراء، وهو ما يجعل شكل الرواية يتجاوز ثنائيات الروائي والتاريخي، والخاص والعام، والمتخيل والواقعي، وينفتح على أصوات وأنماط كتابية متعددة.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الحداثة الاستعمارية، الرواية، التاريخ، رضوى عاشور، قطعة من أوروبا