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TRANSLATING INTERTEXTUALITY AS INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION  
A CASE STUDY

BY

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BA, Yarmouk University, 1990

MA, Yarmouk University, 1997

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Translation Studies

in the Graduate School of  
Binghamton University  
State University of New York

2018

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Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Translation Studies  
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Binghamton University  
State University of New York  
2018

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## Abstract

Intertextuality refers to the textual space where texts intersect and new (hyper)texts emerge. It is the shaping of a text's meaning by other (inter)texts present in it. As a literary device taking forms like allusion, quotation, pastiche, translation, etc., it depends on the presupposition of the presence of intertexts (or hypotexts) in (hyper)texts and on the reader's recognition of such presence. For the recognition of intertexts, authors usually rely on shared cultural knowledge with the reader. The presence of intertexts in a text can either open it to interpretations or direct the reader towards a one in particular. If such recognition can possibly be missed intraculturally, the possibility is doubled when the reading is intercultural, as in translation. To minimize the loss of the intertextual context of the source text (ST), translators adopt certain translation strategies (such as analogous intertexts, paratextual devices, and exegetical translation) that ensure such context is relayed into the target text (TT) and recognized by the target reader. While the semantic equivalence can neutralize the linguistic difference, relaying the intertextual relations in the ST remains the daunting problem encountered by the translator.

I argue in this dissertation that intertexts, particularly Quranic references, in the Arabic novel are a source of semantic density and pose a considerable challenge to the translator. Since semantic equivalence alone does not guarantee that the ST intertextual relations are maintained in the TT, a synthesis of other translation strategies is required to relay the ST intertextual relation into the TT. Drawing on Kristeva's (1986) 'vertical intertextuality,' Fairclough's 'manifest intertextuality' (Momani et al., 2010), Derrida's 'iterability' and 'citationality' (Alfaro, 1996), Bakhtin's 'reaccentuation' or 'double-voicing' (Kristeva, 1986), I opted for paratextual devices to ensure that the TT reader will capture those relations. Bracketed explanations were used extremely economically to avoid producing an enlarged translation.

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

TO MY BELOVED MOTHER AND FAMILY

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## INTERODUCTION

Despite the traditional view of translation as a pure linguistic activity, contemporary theorizing of translation perceives it as an act that has consequences and seeks to achieve goals in its receiving cultural context. Douglas Robison (1997) notes that translation still operates under old assumptions exemplified by scholars' prescriptive approaches which are held by many readers and translators alike, favoring fluent translations. These approaches limit translation to a pure linguistic and impersonal process. This view of translation that renders the translator's role to a mechanical and neutral activity has been increasingly contested in the recent and expanding field of translation studies. The last three decades of the twentieth century are marked by a shift from prescriptive to descriptive approaches to the study of translation. Recent scholarship (e.g. postcolonial studies, gender studies, and cultural studies) perceive it as a very subjective enterprise whereby translators act consciously through their textual choices and interventions to produce texts that serve their purposes and agendas.

I agree with the latter view, that the translator's neutrality is a mere myth, and that translators must account for their subjective agency and take responsibility for their work. Such agency becomes immediately self-evident from the translator's selection of texts for translation and continues through a long process of decision-making and interventions until the target text is produced, edited, and published.

I will show in this dissertation how I employ my translator's agency on two levels through my translation of the Jordanian novelist Ayman al-ʿUtum's novel *يا صاحبي السجن* "Ya Sahibai al-Sijin"<sup>1</sup> *O! My Prison Companions*<sup>2</sup> (2012) from Arabic into English. On the first level, my agency accounts for necessary interventions during the process of translation, which are justified, not only by the linguistic differences between the two languages involved, but from the fact that this novel is laden with intertexts and cultural references, whose interpretation and implications may be obscured or significantly limited in a non-interventionalist translation. This will be illustrated through my analysis of and justification for my translation of the novel. On the second level, my

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<sup>1</sup> I used IJMES Transliteration system for Arabic for transliterating Arabic sounds available at <https://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/docs/TransChart.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> All the titles of al-ʿUtum's poem collections and novels, in addition to all Arabic texts, mentioned in this dissertation are my translation from Arabic, unless otherwise stated.

agency accounts for using this translation as a tool of resistance against a culture of silence and oppression, and for advocating human rights and freedom of speech. It also aims at promoting this emerging writer and helping him and his work break out of their geographical and linguistic confines by providing them with a different and wider readership in the English-speaking world.

The study consists of five parts which are followed by my translation of the novel. Part one discusses translation as a form of writing which can be and has been employed as a tool of resistance and activism. I begin by introducing the traditional view of translation as ‘transfer,’ in which the translator is neutral and warned against any unwarranted interference in the translated text. Then, I examine factors that have introduced the recent shift in the translator’s status in translation studies and cite examples that show how translators employ their subjective agency by manipulating and intervening in texts using specific translation strategies to serve their agendas and goals at certain historical moments. This discussion incorporates the views of several translation theorists including Vicente Rafael, Douglas Robinson, and Maria Tymoczko, who advocate this conception of translation and who promote the activism and visibility of the translator.

Part two introduces to the English reader the Jordanian writer Ayman al-ʿUtum as an emerging novelist who has made his name stand out in the Jordanian literary arena with his rich literary production, captivating narrative style, human-values centered themes, and large lexical reservoir. It also surveys his literary works, published and unpublished, including plays, poetry-collections, and novels, highlighting the recurrent and dominant themes in these works.

Part three contextualizes al-ʿUtum’s novel “*Ya Sahibai al-Sijin*” (*O! My Prison Companions*) and stresses the importance of this novel as the one that launched his career as a novelist. It also describes the political events in Jordan, particularly in the 1990s, that led up to the writer’s arrest in September 1996, which motivated the belated appearance of the novel in 2012. In this section, I also highlight the documentative value of the novel in chronicling a decade’s political and economic developments in Jordan’s history.

Part four surveys prison writing as a literary genre within larger literary systems, citing examples from world literature with an emphasis on American prison writing, and finally situates the novel within the subgenre of Arabic prison literature. It also shows where this novel meets with and departs from other works in these literary systems, in addition to discussing the impact al-

ʿUtum might have on the genre through his distinctive writing style and different view of detention.

Part five is devoted to discussing intertextuality as a phenomenon, its relationship with translation, and translation strategies that are used to ensure that the source-text intertextual relations are maintained in the target text. It focusses, with cited examples from the novel, on how intertexts and cultural nuances call for the translator's intervention to ensure that intertextual relations and cultural references are not lost or obscured but are re-established in the translation. For example, in the title of the novel, which is part of a Quranic verse, al-ʿUtum cleverly associates himself with Prophet Yousef son of Yaʿqub. Not only were they both unjustly imprisoned and strove for social reforms in their contexts, but they also enjoyed similar happy endings. Explaining this association using a paratextual device for example, is essential for the target readers, who are most likely unfamiliar with the Quranic reference, to discern this intertextual relation. This part is followed by my translation of the novel *O! My Prison Companions* from Arabic into English.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Translation as intervention and activism:**

The notion of translation as ‘transfer’ of a stable meaning, particularly when dealing with sacred texts such as the Bible, has dominated Western study and theorizing of translation for centuries. This notion is focused on ‘essentialist’ ideas of a ‘fixed meaning,’ ‘equivalence,’ and ‘fidelity.’ In contemporary Anglo-American culture, translation has also been associated with what Lawrence Venuti calls in his book *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995) ‘domesticated translation,’ which aims at producing an ideal, ‘fluent’ translation (adhering to target language syntax and current usage) so transparent that it generates an illusory effect of not being a translation. A translated text Venuti (p.1) states, “is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes seem transparent, giving the appearance that ... the translation is not in fact a translation, but the original.” Norman Shapiro puts it more clearly:

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections – scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It shouldn't call attention to itself (qtd. in Venti, 1995, p. 1).

Fluency in the target text, then, leads to the transparency of the translation, which in turn leads to the invisibility of the translator. Reviewers almost always praise fluent translations while damning any deviation from it, and they often ignore the translator's role (Ibid, pp. 2-4).

These notions imply that translators are neutral as they perform their work, and that they have no subjective agency or personal investment in their translations. Over the centuries, this eventually led to establishing a prescriptive approach to translation that holds translation to illusive ideals of both fidelity and fluency and that seeks to limit or hide the translator's intervention in the text. Complying translators therefore tend to avoid deviating from this approach and painstakingly try to keep their meddling (changes in the target text such as addition, deletion, substitution, etc.) at a minimum, and only out of the necessity of linguistic difference. They try to produce an exact equivalence of the source text, no less and no more. Centuries of Western translation practices testify to translators catering to

such target culture preferences. They exert great efforts to produce texts that eventually render them ‘invisible’ to ensure positive reception of their work in the receiving culture, and to avoid potentially undesired consequences.

Jeremy Munday, in his book *Introducing Translation Studies* (2002), cites examples that show the fate of translators not conforming to such mainstream practices by deploying manipulative strategies in their translations. Addition, deletion, and textual choices were among the strategies they used to produce translations that reflected their own interpretation of the source text and challenged dominant theological, political, and social powers. Such translators are usually heavily criticized, and their work was met with a bad reception by their contemporary scholars. For example, the German Martin Luther (1522), who produced a non-authorized Bible translation into a German vernacular, was highly condemned by translation critics of his time for reflecting his own interpretation of the Bible rather than "neutrally" reproducing then-dominant readings of the text. They deemed this method of translation as deviating from the source text (e.g., when he added the word *allein* ‘alone’ in the Book of Romans). He therefore produced a circulatory letter to other scholars to justify his translational choices. An even worse fate befell some translators whose ideologies shined in their translation. The French Etienne Dolet (1546), who was burned at the stake, was accused of

heresy detected in his translations as when he added “nothing at all” in a text he was translating that asked, “What comes after death?”

To challenge traditional prescriptive approaches favoring neutrality, equivalence and fluency, theorists like Andre Lefevere and Suzan Basnet advocate notions of manipulation (or deliberate changes) in the translated text and visibility of the translator. They belong to what came to be known as the ‘manipulation school.’ (Ibid; also, in Venuti, 2004). As Theo Hermans (1985) puts it, “all translation implies a degree of manipulation of a source text for a certain purpose” (p. 11). There is no such thing as a neutral translator and the “invisible translator” is nothing but an illusion. No translator can produce a translation that is void of his/her own subjective beliefs, opinions, or agendas. What appears to be “neutrality” is only conformity to dominant norms, which by itself is a choice.

Venuti (1995) suggests ‘foreignization’ as a strategy for combating invisibility. I believe, however, that translators’ interventions are not limited to only one strategy but are continuous during all stages of the translating process, and translators, therefore, are visible to reviewers and scholars, if not to readers. In fact, their intervention, and by extension, their visibility, is not only manifested in their textual interventions, or by providing metatexts, but initially starts with their inclusion and exclusion of texts for translation, in

addition to other translation strategies they employ. Such textual preferences, in addition to other strategies, reveal the politics of translation and the ideology of translators. They also reveal that translators have agency which they employ in the service of certain agendas and goals. Activist translators are strongly present in the recorded history of translation, but they have not always been acknowledged in mainstream prescriptive theorizing of translation because of their non-conformity with the above-mentioned dominant views.

The view of translators as active and subjective agents has been gaining more ground in modern theorizing of translation, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. This is the result of introducing new approaches to translation (Baker, 1998), such as the functionalist school, the manipulation school, the feminist translation movement, and postcolonial translation studies. These approaches can be attributed to several philosophical and historical developments, as explained by Tymoczko (2010). For example, World War II revealed interest in culture, ideology, and power in translation. The war highlighted the important role of translators, as mediators between cultures, in breaking codes, creating propaganda, and engineering ideologies, of both friends and enemies. In addition, philosophical paradigms such as post-structuralism, deconstruction, and post-positivism facilitated the

emergence of translation studies as a field of study and of descriptive translation studies thereof, which underscored the achievements of activist translators. It also contributed to the recognition of the translators' agency and role in ideological dialogue and power struggle, and in effecting change in their societies. Moreover, postcolonial translation studies underlined the association between translation and empire. It foregrounded the translator's subjective agency in translation based on their role in colonization and decolonization. These developments show translators operating away from prescriptive approaches in their practices, revealing a rift between traditional theorizing and actual practices of translation.

In this section of the dissertation, I focus on two factors to show how translators have been active cultural agents: the emergence of translation studies as a field of study, particularly, Descriptive Translation Studies; and the contribution of postcolonial studies to the theorizing of translation. Both factors foreground the translator's subjective agency in translation and shift focus of theorizing on translation from source text (ST) and culture to target text (TT) and culture.

During the 1960s and 1970s, translation studies was emerging as an independent and interdisciplinary field of study, and approaches towards translation significantly expanded. Its focus shifted from technical questions

on the process of translating to ethical views of translation as an activity, its impact on receiving cultures, and its nature and function in relation to its ideology and representational aspect. This shift is not the result of research only, but also of actual translation practices by activist translators involved in power struggles and resistance movements in their respective contexts, which were instrumental in changing their societies (Baker, 1998).

However, the consolidation of translation studies as an independent discipline was only achieved with James Holmes' founding statement on the topic in his essay "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" in 1972. In this work, Holmes proposed a comprehensive framework of the branches covered by translation studies. It included pure and practical areas of research. The pure area covers Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) which examines the product, the function, and the process of translation (Munday, 2008). It aims to describe actual translation practices and products as they happen in their respective contexts.

DTS revealed not only artistic and ideological constraints on translators, but also initiatives taken by them, shifting focus away from linguistic fidelity and the communicative value of translation to how translations work within cultural systems. This area of research shifted the focus from the source text and culture to the target text and culture, which

highlights the impact of translations on the receiving cultures and the critical role of translators in the process. This shift foregrounded the role of translators as active agents through their textual choices and interventions in the translated text. Such interventions are evident in their inclusion and exclusion of texts for translation, as well as in the shifts they introduce regarding context, genres, and ideology. DTS analysis shows how translations shape and are shaped by social systems in which they operate (Toury, 2012) These recent approaches to translation demonstrate how translation is no longer viewed as a linguistic transfer, but as a tool of activism, resistance, and ideological expression.

The number of activist translation movements, and of activist translators, in the recorded history of translation is too large to dismiss translation as a mere linguistic process and to ignore the translator's ideology, agency, and subjective involvement in the translated text. Delisle and Woodsworth (1995) recount many cases of influential translators whose agency effected significant change in the sociocultural systems where they operated. These include translators who invented alphabets like James Evans and the language of the Cree in Canada, developed national languages like Martin Luther and Modern German, constructed national literatures like Jorge



Borges and Argentine literature, in addition to many others who helped disseminate knowledge, religions, and cultural values.

Tymoczko's edited volume *Translation, Resistance, Activism* (2010) also encompasses similar case studies, demonstrating how significant translators worked as agents of social, political, and cultural change. She cites two notable examples from Canada. The first is Michael Tremblay who contributed through translation to cultural nationalism and promoted separatist efforts in Quebec. And the second is the feminist translation group, including Nicole Brossard and Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood, who deployed certain translation strategies (e.g., woman handling, appropriation, etc. that allow them to manipulate the text) to advance feminist critiques and cultural projects that had implications on literary and political domains.

Some translators use their agency negatively to produce translations that promote hatred or that manufacture bias. The British-Egyptian translation scholar and theorist Mona Baker is a great example of an activist who strives through her publications (e.g. Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation, 1998) and website ([www.monabaker.org](http://www.monabaker.org)) to counter publications and translations that promote stereotyping and misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims. For example, in her article "Narratives of terrorism and security: 'accurate' translations, suspicious frames," Baker (2010) draws attention to paratextual

devices employed by some allegedly ‘non-partisan’ organizations in their translation of Arab and Muslim media materials. While their translations are mostly semantically correct, these translations are surrounded by devices like irrelevant titles, photographs, video links, and annotations that are not part of the source texts but aim at framing their Western audiences’ perception and reception of the translated materials. Such organizations exploit those devices to direct the reader towards one possible interpretation, i.e., one that contributes to stereotyping. She therefore calls for collective work that seeks to expose the work of such organizations by providing translations of these materials that create a more just and accurate representation of Arabs and Muslims and by making them available to Western audiences.

Another important shift in translation studies is the introduction of postcolonial approaches to translation. These approaches helped uncover the long-term embedded relationship between empire and translation. They also shed positive light on activist translators who, individually and within collective movements, work as active agents and employ their translation as a means of resistance in asymmetrical power relations. Three prominent postcolonial scholars explore and demonstrate the important role of translation and translators, and the dual utilization of translation by the colonizer and the colonized. For example, in his *The Poetics of Imperialism*

(1991), Eric Cheyfitz shows how the European colonizers of the Americas used language and translation as tools for building a hierarchy of languages that would justify their subjugation of Native Americans. Drawing for instance on the meaning of the word ‘property,’ for which Native American languages had no equivalence, the colonizers appropriated lands which the natives did not legally ‘own.’

Also, in his book *Contracting Colonialism* (1999), Vicente Raphael also shows how translation was used by the Spaniards as a powerful tool for subjugation and religious conversion of the Tagalogs in the Philippine. They relied heavily on translators, not only for communication with the colonized, but for turning them into docile subjects by instilling in their minds the superiority of the colonizers’ culture, language, and religion. For example, when translating religious texts into Tagalog language, some expressions like ‘Dios’ (God), ‘Espiritu Santo’ (Holy Spirit), and ‘Doctrina Christiana’ (Christian Doctrine) were left untranslated to preserve their ‘purity’, considering Tagalog unsuitable to convey God’s word, and therefore, derivative to the language of the colonizer. The aim was to create a hierarchy of languages, with Latin on top, Castilian next, and Tagalog on the bottom, instilling in the minds of the Tagalogs a multi-faceted superiority of the colonizer.

Finally, Tejaswini Niranjana discusses in her book *Siting Translation* (1992) how the British colonizers of India used translation as a tool for cultural interpellation and representation. Through a ‘purifying’ translation of the Indian laws and literature, the British created a representation of the Indian people as savage and unfit for Western democracy. The critical role of the translator in this context is obvious through the comment of a British scholar at the time suggesting training British translators who they can trust, because Indians are unreliable translators. Or to train trustworthy Indian translators who can have “Indian color but British taste.”

Furthermore, the importance of these works manifests not only in their demonstration of how translation works as a channel of power and domination, but also in their exploration of how translation can and should be used as a tool of resistance against colonial and postcolonial power. Rafael for example, explains how the Tagalogs in the Philippines employed strategies such as mistranslation and no-translation to resist linguistic and religious conversion. And Niranjana suggests re-translation as a strategy for decolonization. She declares: “I institute here a practice of translation that is speculative, provisional, and interventionist” (p. 173). This strategy, she speculates, would create a representation of the Indian people that would

counter the misrepresentation created by the British colonizers through their translation of Indian law and literature.

Strategies available to activist translators are numerous. These include text selection, manipulating or changing genres, amplifying or simplifying translated texts (or parts of them), inserting or refusal of foreign elements, foreignization or domestication, etc. These strategies were variably employed, for example, by activist translators promoting the independence of Spain's American colonies and by Irish translators in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. None of these choices is inherently privileged over the others. They can be selected, invented, or improvised, depending on their spatial-temporal context and specific situation (Tymoczko, 2010).

Similar to the above-mentioned activist translators, I am employing my agency on two levels. The first is the text selection, which usually reflects a translator's ideology as evident in the numerous cases in the history of translation: in my case, it is choosing Ayman al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's novel *O! My Prison Companions*. My aim is to promote this emerging Jordanian writer as a human-rights activist in the English-speaking world, and by extension and through this work of his, promote Jordanian literature which is noticeably limited in the number of publications, compared to other Arab literatures, such as Egyptian.

My translation then, is politically motivated and ideologically driven. I believe al-ʿUtum is worth translating because of the positive change he tries to effect in Jordanian society regarding freedom of speech and human rights, the wide readership he enjoys locally, and the significant impact he has on his readers. The novel itself is an act of resistance against oppression and injustice. The author wrote in defiance of silence. He said what was on his mind, which was already on the minds of the majority of the people – blaming poverty on rich and high-ranking officials. He did not carry a weapon, nor did he ask his audience to do so. His only crime was vocalizing these thoughts. He gave voice to the poor through his poetry, and he did so in public. The fact that one risks imprisonment for the mere expression of their thoughts, the mere denunciation of corruption and suppression, is by itself appalling. Translating this novel is therefore an act of support of freedom of speech and an act of resistance against oppression.

Although the norm is to translate into one's own language and culture in attempts to effect positive change in the receiving society, going against this norm can also achieve similar goals. Translators can bring awareness and attention to a cause or effect change by translating from their cultures, thus expanding the scope of awareness and shifting it from a national to an international level. So, although translation has been used for dominating

others, Delisle and Woodsworth (1995) point out that “translators have helped many alternative movements seek recognition beyond their frontiers. In such cases, translators operate as explorers who bring their own values to foreign cultures” (p. 209). For example, the Czechs, between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, translated religious and historical texts into Latin in order to promote awareness of the Hussite religious reformation movement and its consequences. Estonian protestors (April 2007) also used English banners that targeted outside audiences, similar to multilingual advertising campaigns that are aimed at attracting tourists (Ibid). Daoud Hari, through his job as interpreter for news agencies, also brought international attention and gave voice to victims of the atrocities that were committed in Darfur in Western Sudan between 2003 and 2009 (Kelly and Zetzsche, 2012).

In addition, increasing discourse on a certain cause in writing and in translation, nationally and internationally, can also contribute to effect social or political change. In April 2004, King Mohammad VI of Morocco established the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to investigate (and compensate victims for) the atrocities committed in secret prisons during his late father’s reign which extended over the last four decades of the twentieth century. The committee investigated 20.000 cases. It led to a modification of the constitution, distributed \$85 million USD, provided health services to the

victims, among other forms of compensation. This was the result of increasing discourses on unjust, inhumane detention and absention of many Moroccans. Many of these discourses were produced by prisoners or members of their families, or those who knew about their cases. Some of them are in novel form that started to appear in Morocco and elsewhere in the 1990s. As a result, compensations, financial and medical, were advanced to the victims and their families.

Similarly, I intend my translation of al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's novel to contribute to the discourse on oppression and injustices in Jordan that run incommensurate with the King's continuous international efforts to reflect a bright image of Jordan as a democratic country. Such injustices, in addition to incompetent economic and political policies, only lead to more protests and instability in Jordan. Therefore, I aim through this translation, not to stir the public or induce violence, but to push decision makers towards adopting more balanced economic, political, and social policies that guarantee human rights and freedom of speech. This will hopefully help the country avoid more protests and potential violence and will foster stability and prosperity.

The second level on which I employ my agency is relevant to the textual interventions I made during the translating process, including the translating strategies I deployed. These interventions are necessary in such an



intercultural translation, not only because of linguistic differences between English and Arabic, but mainly because of the cultural nuances, particularly intertexts that are abundant in the novel, which might go unnoticed in a non-interventionist translation. The importance of these intertexts transcend their semantic meaning to their intertextual relations with other previous texts, which are specific to the source culture. The connotations of the Quranic verses for example, which must be rendered in the translation, such as chapter titles, are crucial for introducing and understanding the events of each chapter. In chapter eleven, for example, al-°Utum talks about the long prison nights and how they added to the agony of imprisonment and how he used to cry secretly during his first months of imprisonment. The chapter title “And by the night when it is still,” refers to the long stressful nights Prophet Mohammad spent when the heavenly revelation stopped for a few weeks. Drawing on these Quranic verses, al-°Utum is appealing to readers’ support based on shared religious values.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Ayman al-°Utum: A novelist's metamorphosis**

Ayman al-°Utum (b. 1972) is a highly prolific contemporary Jordanian poet and novelist. During his university study as a civil engineering student, and later as a PhD student of Arabic, he was a founding member of several literary societies and book clubs, and an active participant in poetry events, not only in Jordan, but also in other Arab countries, including Iraq, UAE, Sudan, Qatar, and Egypt. He worked for a construction company as an engineer in the years 1997 and 1998 but has turned to teaching Arabic in Jordanian schools since 1999 (Ayman al-°Utum "أيمن العتوم").

His early literary production introduced al-°Utum as a poet rather than a novelist. Since 1996, he produced several collections of poems which remained unpublished until the end of 2012. The most famous among them is the poem collection called “*Nabu'āt al-Ja'īn*” (*The Prophecies of the Starved*), which was the first to be published in 2012, right after the publication of his first novel, *O! My Prison Companions*. The poems included in this collection were written in prison (Ayman al-°Utum "أيمن العتوم"). Al-

al-Utum mentions in *O! My Prison Companions* (2012) that, although writing was prohibited in prison, he managed to write those poems and smuggled them out of prison with his father's help during visitation. After his release, he collected the poems and published them in one collection.

Al-Utum's second poem collection, *Qalbi 'Alikī ḥabibati (My Heart Goes out for You, My Beloved)*, was published in 2013. He describes it as a combination of philosophical mysticism, love, and freedom; a mixture of soul and body in poetic articulation; and a pro-feminist's attitude towards women. It includes 25 poems, written between 1994 and 2004, as documented by the poet. Al-Utum wrote several other works that also remain unpublished. These include two plays, *al-Mosharradūn (The Homeless)* (1989) and *Mamlakat al-Shi'r (The Kingdom of Poetry)* (2002), and the novel *ya Wajha Maysūn (O! Maysoun's Face)* (1999) (Ayman al-Utum "أيمن العتوم"). However, al-Utum's career as a novelist was tied up in an incident that marked a turning point in his life.

In August 1996, al-Utum, a third-year university student, recited one of his poems during a public literary event at Ajlun Castle. A few days later, he was arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to one-year imprisonment. He was charged with 'crossing red lines,' as described by the authorities, by implicitly

criticizing the King of Jordan and other high-ranking state officials. (Ayman al-°Utum "أيمن العتوم").

After his release from prison in 1997, al-°Utum remained silent about his incarceration for fourteen years (for reasons to be discussed below). It was in 2011, however, that he detailed his prison experience in his first novel “*Ya Sahibai al-Sijin*” (*O! My Prison Companions*). The novel was published in Beirut in 2012 but was banned from entering Jordan for a few months. Later that year, when the ban was annulled following legal procedures, the novel became a best-seller, and its success led to other subsequent publications (Ayman al-°Utum "أيمن العتوم"). Al-°Utum became one more witness to the reciprocal relationship between writing and prison: writing leads to prison and prison leads to writing, and so on.

In 2014, al-°Utum found himself again on a collision course with the Jordanian authorities with the publication of another novel, *Hadith al-Jonood* (*Speech of the Soldiers*). This was also banned in Jordan and he was arrested and prosecuted in 2016 for crossing the same ‘red lines’ (Ayman al-°Utum). These works introduced al-°Utum as an influential and controversial writer in the country. Instead of achieving the intended purpose, the ban only pointed public attention at his works. Consequently, when the ban was lifted, complete editions of his novels usually run out within a few months.

Speaking of his transformation from poet to novelist, al-<sup>◌</sup>Utum states in an interview with the TV Channel Dar El-Iman on July 19, 2015, that “one is born a poet, but becomes a novelist,” and that his “birth as a novelist materialized with the writing of *O! My Prison Companion*.” It was this work that introduced him to the Jordanian reader, as well as the Arab (Interview with Ayman al-<sup>◌</sup>Utum).

This novel also paved the way for other novels exploring themes of human suffering, torture, freedom, death, love, and solidarity among prisoners. Such universal themes that appeal to a broad readership and the impact al-<sup>◌</sup>Utum’s works have on his audience make them worth translating. The messages he is transmitting to his audience in these works are worth telling. Between 2012 and 2016, he produced several novels, including *Yasma‘ūn Ḥasisaha* (*They Hear Its Whispering*, 2012), *Dha’iqat al-Maut* (*Taste of Death*, 2013), *Ḥadith al-Jonūd* (*Speech of the Soldiers*) (2014), *Kalimat Allah* (*The Word of Allah*, 2015), and *Khawiyah* (*Hollow*, 2016).

The above-mentioned themes are central in all al-<sup>◌</sup>Utum’s literary production, albeit in varying degrees. Torture in *O! My Prison Companions* (2012) is portrayed as an institutionalized corrective means employed for subjugating non-complying or disobedient detainees. In one scene that exposes illegal measures in prison, several types of physical and verbal abuse

are inflicted on a prisoner, merely because he refused to be unjustly and unjustifiably beaten by a prison guard:

كل شرطي من هؤلاء كان يحمل في يده كراباجا من الاسلاك المعدنية، كان يهوي به على جسد السجين، بكل ما أوتي من قوة، وهو يصرخ:

- خذ يا ابن الش...

- آآآآآآآآآآ... (كان صياح السجين يبلغ عنان السماء، أحسست أنه يخترق كل الحجب والاستار، وظننت أن كل من في المشرق والمغرب قد سمعه) ...

... ومع كل ضربة كراباج، كنت أشعر أن قطعة من اللحم تتطاير، وأنه كان يأخذ معه جزءا من ذلك اللحم في كل مرة ... استمر أفراد الشرطة في حفلتهم التعذيبية حتى شعروا هم بالاعياء، عندها أشار عليهم المدير بالتوقف.

Every prison guard had a whip of metal wire in his hand and would strike down with it on the prisoner's body ... shouting:

- Take, you son of a bi...
- Ahhhhhh.... (The prisoner's cries reached the sky. I felt they infiltrated all veils, and I thought all people, east and west, heard them)

... with every swishing sound, I felt pieces of flesh fly around, and that the whip would take some of the flesh away with it each

time ... the guards continued their torment party until they felt exhausted; only then, the warden told them to stop ... (p. 115).

The guards in this scene are described as a herd of wolves set free by the warden. They relished the opportunity to embark on their bloody festivity. This show of power by the guards did not only deter the victim, but all the prisoners who were forced to watch, and who were threatened by the warden that such would be the cost of disobedience. The incident paid off, and the prisoners were intimidated. It had a lingering effect that accompanied the narrator for weeks to come, depriving him of sleep at night.

While torture scenes are very limited in number in *O! My Prison Companions*, they abound in *Yasma 'ūn Ḥasisaha (They Hear Its Whispering, 2012)*, which documents a Syrian physician's prison experience from 1980 to 1990 in the Syrian al-Khatīb and Tadmor prisons. Torture is a daily practice in the Syrian prisons. It is portrayed not as corrective, but as revenge and retaliation against those who refuse to submit to the ruling regime. Guards jubilantly subject prisoners to several sessions of torment every day. The protagonist describes many of these sessions in excruciating details. One of the most agonizing scenes of torture (pp. 161-166) is when a sergeant orders the detainees out to the prison yard for a routine torture session. He picks an old man in his seventies and his three sons and tells them to take off their

clothes. Then, he orders the old man to lie face down on the ground, which is covered with gravels and smashed glass. And he tells the heaviest son to sit on his father's back. The son reluctantly complies. The father lets out a loud scream when pieces of glass penetrate his flesh. The other two sons are ordered to drag their father to the end of the yard by his legs. They hesitate, but with death threats, they too comply. They drag him a couple of meters, but with the continuous cries and moaning of their father, they stop. They let go of his legs and stand aside weeping. Their brother joins them.

As the three sons are taken away for a three-hour torture session, the sergeant orders a prison guard to sit on the old man's back. He complies happily. Another two guards drag the old man with his heavy load to the end of the yard. The old man continuously cries and screams of pain, moving his head pointlessly to avoid the brutalizing floor. Half way to the end, he becomes silent and the head freely bounces up and down. It took the protagonist, Dr. Iyad, four hours to remove countless pieces of glass from the old man's tongue, mouth, face, and body, and to clean his wounds. A few days later, the three sons are executed, and the father dies of anguish.

Death in the context of this novel is feared at first. But with the continuous torment, it becomes a most welcome desire, representing salvation, and granting liberation, not only from the prison walls and the fists



of torturers, but also from the rule of the despotic regime that commissions the torture of dissident, non-conforming, and disobedient citizens. The narrator calls those who are summoned for execution on Saturdays and Wednesdays 'Moons' ascending to Heaven, who can no longer be touched by the torturers. On one occasion, three hundred prisoners are called out. They all leave with a smile on their faces. They find solace in the belief that death is only the doorway to an eternal life where justice prevails (pp. 172-175).

The torture scenes in these novels effectively achieve multiple purposes. On one hand, they create an awareness among the public of the atrocities happening behind prison walls; and on the other, they fuel the reader's sympathetic feelings towards the victims and anger at their victimizers. Readers cannot but agonize with the victims, and they are left with bitterness in their hearts and tears in their eyes. This is skillfully achieved through the detailed descriptions of the torture sessions: the tools, methods, places, the torturers, and the tortured bodies, accompanied by cries, moaning, and cursing.

Inhumane conditions of prisoners and, the alienation they experience as a result of isolation, in addition to physical and verbal abuse jointly generate a kind of solidarity among inmates. In *O! My Prison Companions*, it takes the form of collaboration among the inmates in doing routine tasks that facilitate

their life in prison, going on hunger strike together to reclaim forfeited rights, and even taking risks for each other as when an inmate smuggles a bit of date paste to al-ʿUtum when he was in solitary confinement on a hunger strike (p. 269). In *They Hear Its Whispering*, solidarity leads to receiving torture on behalf of other inmates. In one scene, two detainees volunteer for an extra torture session on behalf of their cellmates, twice on the same day. In another scene, the protagonist throws himself on another inmate’s worn body to receive more whipping on his behalf (p. 327).

These novels, in addition to his earlier poetry, in which he condemns corruption and criticizes state officials, mark al-ʿUtum as a political activist, which is established by the success of his first novel. In 2014, as mentioned above, al-ʿUtum took his activism one step further with the publication of *Ḥadith al-Jonūd (Speech of the Soldiers)* which documents a catastrophic government crackdown on peaceful protestors. This novel brought under a spotlight the forceful, violent suppression of Yarmouk University students who protested a substantial increase in fees and credit hours in 1986. This show of power resulted in five mortalities and dozens of casualties among the students. In an effort against a culture of silence, the publication of this novel led to al-ʿUtum’s prosecution for the second time in his life (*Speech of the Soldiers*).

Despite the graphic content of some of his novels, and lengthy descriptions, al-ʿUtum’s captivating narrative style compels the reader to keep on reading. His narratives continuously engage the readers and offer them a taste of his protagonists’ pain and suffering. He does so through detailed reflections on feelings as well as descriptive accounts of characters and places. To this effect, he employs techniques like flashbacks, personification, simile, and metaphors, thus enabling readers to see the world through the eyes of his characters and to invoke their empathy towards them. He also employs an immense lexical reservoir, and a smooth incorporation of Quranic verses, and classical and modern Arabic poetry, which endow his text with an interesting textual variety, in addition to layers of meaning and allusive associations. And he uses a mixture of registers and language varieties, preferring Modern Standard Arabic for most of the narrative and Colloquial (Jordanian) Arabic for the dialogues between the characters.

In addition to the prolific nature of his production, the controversy surrounding al-ʿUtum’s work and his powerful writing style introduced him as a prominent Arab literary figure and allowed him to stand out in the center of the Jordanian literary arena. For example, the ban on his first novel “*Ya Sahibai al-Sijin*” (*O! My Prison Companions*) in 2012 brought attention to al-ʿUtum as a potentially influential writer. Such influence is reflected by the

wide readership he enjoys in Jordan, particularly among young people. His book-signing events extend for hours, oftentimes exceeding the time allotted for the event, and the first editions of his novels usually run out very quickly, locally and in the Arab region, and several editions usually appear in their first year of publication. *O! My Prison Companions* was reprinted three times in 2012 and 7 times by the end of 2016. He is also frequently interviewed on Arab TV channels, such as Aljazeera, for extensive discussions of his works, and he is a panel member of several Arab literary awards (Ayman al-<sup>o</sup>Utum).

## CHAPTER THREE

### *O! My Prison Companions: Context and History*

*O! My Prison Companions* creates a representation of a troubled period of Jordan's history, the 1990s, through a detailed autobiographical account of the author's own, as well as other inmates', experiences in prison. The events in this period facilitate understanding the novel, and vice versa. The events of the novel, which extend over 344 medium-cut pages, take place in three Jordanian prisons: the prison of the Jordanian Intelligence, al-Jwaidah prison in Amman, and Swaqa prison in the south of the country, between August 1996 and August 1997.

This period of Jordan's history was marked by political and socio-economic tension between the government and pro-government 'nationalists' on one side, and opposition political groups and activists on the other. The two sides distinctively held incommensurable views regarding economic procedures and foreign policy. This tension, however, was not part of the 1990s only, but something that accompanied Jordan since its founding as a

political entity in 1921.<sup>3</sup> (For more details on key events in Jordan's history, see Appendix A).

Many factors, including challenges that threatened the very existence of Jordan as an independent political entity, fueled this tension. For example, Jordan's annexation of the West Bank in 1950 provoked Palestinian anger and led to the assassination of King Abdullah I of Jordan during his visit to Jerusalem in 1951. In addition, the Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967 severely impacted Jordan, which received two major waves of Palestinian refugees and lost part of its land (known as the West Bank) in 1967. Those waves increased political and social tensions in the country. Furthermore, Palestinian armed militias moved into Jordan after the 1967 war and started launching attacks against Israeli forces across Jordanian borders. In retaliation, Israelis bombed Jordanian cities and villages. As a result, a conflict arose between Jordanian authorities who wanted the attacks to stop and the Palestinian militias who refused to be controlled. This conflict developed into

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan was founded as the Emirate of Trans Jordan in 1921 in response to the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement between the United Kingdom and France in 1916. In that year, revolted and drove the Ottoman forces out of the Levant. According to this agreement, the region was divided into areas of influence between the two countries. Trans Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq fell in Britain's share. Prince Abdullah, son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca, became the first Emir of the newly founded state (George, 2005).

a civil war in September 1970 and caused many losses on both sides. Finally, in December that year, some Arab leaders intervened, and the problem was resolved by deporting those militias to Lebanon. Another contributor to the tension are the attempts made at King Hussein's life during his almost half-century rule, some of which were commissioned by Arab leaders who opposed the King's Western alliances (Abdallah II, 2011).

Successive governments utilized these events for a long period of Jordan's history to justify procedures that limited freedoms and civil rights, eventually suspending parliamentary elections and prohibiting gatherings and protests for the sake of the public good. Because of these factors and the continuous state of war with Israel, political parties were prohibited in 1958 and martial law was declared after the 1967 war, deactivating democracy (i.e., the Parliament was dissolved) and hindering freedoms. In 1989, the government reinstated parliamentary life (the first Parliament was elected) and lifted martial law.

Furthermore, in 1989, rocketing prices led to what came to be known as the 'bread revolution.' Protests swept the country, and many were arrested. In 1991, Jordan suffered severe economic problems following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War. The return of half a million Jordanian citizens from Kuwait and Iraq heavily burdened the already staggering

economy. In 1996, once again, riots broke out following another rise in food prices. Many activists were arrested for protesting government economic procedures that severely impacted the middle and lower classes only.

The tension generated by these and many other events led to the state's imposition of some constraints on certain topics, or 'red lines' not to be crossed in public, orally or in writing, thus prioritizing security and national unity (considering the varied ethnic components of the Jordanian people, with Palestinians comprising 50% of the total) over democracy and freedom of speech. Crossing these lines risked prosecution. In this atmosphere, and in response to the government economic procedures and their counter protests, al-<sup>o</sup>Utum wrote and publicly recited poems in which he implicitly criticized the King and other state officials. He was prosecuted and imprisoned because government officials (such as the Intelligence) feared that his poetry would instigate this tension and would harm the general good.

The purpose of this brief account is to show the country's long history of political tension, which is a consequence of local and regional instability. Dissidence and opposition movements were not usually tolerated, as they were perceived as threats to national security. This, however, noticeably changed in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' in 2010, when the government's strict policy shifted to a more relaxed one. Therefore, we must distinguish



between the time when al-°Utum recited the poem in response (1997) to people's dissatisfaction with the government's political decisions (e.g., Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in 1994) and economic procedures (e.g., raising food prices in 1996) on one hand, and the time when he decided to write *O! My Prison Companions* (2011) in response to changes in government policies, on the other.

As mentioned earlier, al-°Utum recited his poem in August 1996, a period of political tension caused by high prices and economic problems, in addition to local and regional threats and dissident movements. The 'red lines' set by the government were still sensitive and strongly enforced, and not to be crossed by anyone, at least not openly. Al-°Utum violated this constraint when he recited the poem in a public event in which he implicitly criticized the king, the royal family, and high-ranking officials. At this point, the government was hard against protestors and violators.

Al-°Utum remained hesitant for fourteen years before he decided to write the novel in 2011. He explains in the first chapter that fear of bad reception impeded his decision, but his pressing desire to restore his humanity through the recollection of his memories finally triggered his urge to write the novel. In addition, I believe that the changes in the political circumstances in the Arab World, and in Jordan, had a major role in his decision to write.

Stressful events kept sweeping Jordan from its founding, up to the end of the 1990s, and all through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The government maintained an iron fist policy against protestors. This was only relaxed after the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010 when the government started practicing a softer policy as a precautionary action against skidding into situations like those in Tunisia and Egypt, where protests eventually led to regime change. Until the time of the novel's publication in 2012, regime change was by no means desired in Jordan, and until recently, not even by the most tenacious opposition activists who, together with the vast majority of the Jordanian people, perceive the Royal family as an indispensable unifying source of political stability in the country. Activists mainly demanded more freedoms, and protested corruption, incompetence of state officials, and economic procedures (such as tax increase).

In the years following his release from prison, al-<sup>o</sup>Utum risked not only prosecution, but also physical harm, if he published his novel too soon. His concerns were probably reinforced by the assault on his father, Ali al-<sup>o</sup>Utum, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a former PM and activist, who was abducted and beaten in 2007 because of his political views and activism. However, the ostensibly relaxed government policy regarding activists must have played a significant role in his writing decision. The novel was published

in Beirut in 2012, but it was banned in Jordan. When the ban was lifted in the same year, the novel was met with an unprecedented positive reception in the country. Three editions appeared in the same year and many more followed in succeeding years (Abdel-Rahman, n.d.).

The events described in the novel foreground the documentative value of *O! My Prison Companions*, transcending its aesthetics and fictional aspect to its non-fictional or realistic aspect. Its detailing of key events in Jordan prior to the author's detention, along with the descriptions of detainees and their indictments, provide the reader with a clear representation of the Jordanian political and socio-economic landscape in the 1990s. Through categorization of prisoners, the novel acquaints the reader with dissident individuals such as the well-known Laith Shbailat and opposition groups like the Arab Afghanis and Salafists, in addition to major events like the attempt on King Hussain's life in 1993, the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in 1994, and the food uprising in 1996.

*O! My Prison Companions*, being an account of a prison experience, fulfills purposes and explores themes that are recurrent in many works in Arab, as well as world, prison literature. It unveils the unjust exertion of power on detainees behind walls, which renders prison a place of humiliation and subjugation, rather than a facility for rehabilitation, as it is assumed to be. As

such, it is a cry against a culture of silence that continuously tries to limit freedom of speech inside and outside of prison. It ultimately aims at initiating a positive social change towards more freedoms and human rights. And by sharing recollected memories with an audience, the novel also grants its author the redemption and solace he craved for so long.

Moreover, al-°Utum claims that his work is different from other works in prison writing. In an interview with Dar El-Iman Channel committed to discussing his work, al-°Utum states that:

*O! My Prison Companions* has no match in Prison Literature, not in terms of literary value, as many are probably much more valuable, but in terms of style; that is, I turned prison into a green garden which was not done by other writers who headed towards misery and depression, and even suicide, as in the case of *al-Qawqa'ah (The Shell)* by Mustafa Khalifa, while I planted the desert with roses and occupied myself with what I should [do] to ascend one more step in offering knowledge to people ("Interview with Ayman al-°Utum").

Al-°Utum presents his reader with a different kind of prison experience - optimistic rather than frustrating, resulting in a reading experience that concludes with satisfaction and hope, rather than bitterness and pain. So, instead of counting the depressing days of incarceration like most prisoners, and consequently suffering the heavy burden of time, the detainee's worst enemy, he busied himself with reading and with other positive activities, such as exercise, as much as he could. Reading was his savior. Not only did it help him pass time and avoid depression, but also to acquire as much knowledge as he could, and to pass it on to his readers through his works. During interviews, he repeatedly advocates reading and encourages people to make it a daily practice. For this purpose, and to elude censorship, he made all his books available online for free. This gives an idea about the kind of influence he tries to exert on his reader and the change he hopes for in his society.

Describing the prison experience, this novel falls under the subgenre of Arabic prison literature. While it shares similar purposes and themes with other works in this genre, it sets itself apart in two distinctive ways. First, with its unique narrative style that employs Quranic verses (including the novel title and all the chapter titles) which, through their implications, extend meaning beyond their limited words. That is, these easily recognizable references usually invoke wider prior contexts and multiple interpretations.

And second, with the narrator's portrayal of his prison experience as educating and transforming, rather than destructive or debilitating.

Further, translating *O! My Prison Companions* derives part of its importance from the presence of those Quranic intertexts. Such pithy references engage the target reader with Islamic culture. Recurrently encountering them in the novel gives the reader an idea about their importance in an Arab person's daily life, being frequently, formally and informally, quoted to endow discourses with authenticity and linguistic elevation. Those references are also informative to the target reader regarding Arab prison culture. Being the only reading materials available to prisoners in Jordanian prisons, the Quran and its interpretive books naturally had a great impact on al-ʿUtum's narrative style and provided him with linguistic and religious tools for addressing his readers. This distinctive narrative style and educational aspect make *O! My Prison Companions* a significant contribution, not to Arab literature, but to world literature as well.

Although it falls within Arabic prison literature, the work occasionally crosses the borders of its genre into the domains of other genres. For example, it incorporates elements from the 'autobiography' with the inclusion of real life events, real names, and real local figures. It also employs elements from the memoir with the inclusion of dated entries, in addition to the author's

signature and date at the end of the novel. Generally speaking, *O! My Prison Companions* perfectly fits Ellen Glasgow's conception of the novel as encompassing "the entire range of human experience and the vast area of moral destiny" (qtd in Haines, 1946, p. 3). Haines notes that modern fiction has become open to experiences, states of consciousness, and themes and emotions that were never dealt with in the novel before (Ibid). *O! My Prison Companions* fits this view of the novel as it covers a wide range of experiences, themes, and moral questions that appeal to a wide audience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Prison Literature

#### 4.1. Introduction

Prison Literature is a literary genre that refers to fictional and non-fictional writing during or after incarceration by prisoners or others who knew about them. This literary production can be about prison, informed by a prison experience, or simply written while in prison. It could be a memoir or autobiography, fiction or nonfiction. In the Western tradition, it dates as far back as 524 AD. when Boethius wrote his *Consolation of Philosophy* and set a model for autobiographical writers who pen works inspired by prison experiences (Summers, 2004). In the Arab tradition, it also goes back centuries to classical and medieval Arabic poets who describe their suffering or show repentance in their poetry, such as ‘Uday bin Zaid (590 AD) and al-Ḥutay’ a (d. 665 AD). Although prison experiences differ across time and place, they share the agony of being confined which usually serves as the impetus for writing.



The practice of the genre has continued through the middle ages until modern times, and it has developed alongside the development of the prison as an institution and concept. Prison developed from a simple punitive facility operated by the state (or powerful individuals) into part of what Michel Foucault (1975) calls a larger “carceral system.” This includes schools, military institutions, hospitals, and factories, which build a panoptic society for its members. Prison became a corrective facility and the spectacle punishment subsided in the West as of the beginning of the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, prison writing also developed in terms of themes, purposes, and modes of expression. Further, contemporary mass incarceration brought with it a substantial increase in prisoners’ literary production, demonstrated by the large number of publications, particularly in the United States. In the Arab tradition for example, the novel replaced poetry as the principal mode of expression, and the themes and purposes of the genre span a wide range.

Different terms, including autobiography, memoirs, and diary, have been assigned to written works that describe prison experiences, regardless of the cause and duration of incarceration. They all fall under the umbrella terms ‘prison writing’ or ‘prison literature.’ While scholars propose slightly varying definitions of the genre, I agree with Taleghani (2010) who distinguishes between ‘prison writing’ as “those texts, regardless of content, fictional and

non-fictional, poetic and political, produced by prisoners while incarcerated; and ‘prison literature’ as “texts by both prisoners and non-prisoners that represent the prison experience, both briefly and in depth, in any number of forms – memoirs, autobiographies, novels, poetry, short stories, and plays” (2010, pp. 18-19). I believe this is a convenient distinction that generally assigns ‘prison writing’ to all types of writing during and after incarceration, and limits ‘prison literature’ to literary works that deal with the prison experience. Therefore, *O! My Prison Companions*, as a literary work about imprisonment produced after the author’s release, falls under the latter. This distinction will be maintained hereafter when discussing Arabic prison literature.

Prison writers are either activist writers who are imprisoned because of their pre-detention written works, and later write about their prison experience; or ordinary prisoners who only turn to writing during or after detention (as in the case of one-book writers). Al-<sup>o</sup>Utum belongs to the first group. And while he shares some characteristics with other prison writers, he sets himself apart from most of them with his distinct writing style, in addition to his positive attitude towards his experience.

Like other examples from world literature, *O! My Prison Companions* witnesses to the significant impact of prison on writing. The body of prison

literature generally shows that the two have been joined together by a long tradition of cyclical causality in which subversive writing leads to imprisonment, which in turn inspires more subversive writing. Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's earlier written work (poetry in his case) led to his detention, which triggered the production of novels, one of which, in turn, led to his arrest once more. This reciprocal relationship between the two can similarly be recognized through the works of sixteenth century authors who were imprisoned in the Tower of London, such as Sir Thomas More, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and Henry Howard Earl of Surrey. They produced different texts but their works share being an "autobiographical representation of the figure of the writer in prison" (Summers, 2004, p.2). Many of them enjoyed certain privileges, such as receiving visitors and wandering around town.

However, even if physical confinement and suffering may not have been always experienced, those writers shared a sense of alienation since they were subject to the will of others (Ibid). Similarly, this sense of alienation experienced by al-<sup>c</sup>Utum, and by other prison writers, often combined with the agony of incarceration, and sometimes with torture and humiliation, serves as a trigger that compels authors to write. Temple (2012) lists some famous writers whose prison experience made the creation of some master works possible. These include, but are not limited to, Miguel de Cervantes who

conceived his *Don Quixote* in debtor's prison; E. E. Cummings who wrote *The Enormous Room* inspired by his prison experience in France during WWI; and Malcolm X, whose transformative prison experience gave him a new life goal and a new last name to go with (X signified his original, lost tribal name and replaced his family name 'Little' which according to him, was imposed on his ancestors by white slave owners) (Malcolm X, n.d.).

Another characteristic that al-<sup>o</sup>Utum shares with other prison writers is that of self-representation: as a steadfast political dissident, or a repentant, rehabilitated subject, depending on the writer's targeted audience. According to Summers (2004), those writers aim through their writings to create a self-representation through a persuasive fictionalized autobiographical narration of their prison experience: as repentant and changed by prison when directed at their captors, as done by those medieval writers, and as an intransigent fighter when directed at their sympathizing prospective readers (as done by al-<sup>o</sup>Utum, who turns down offers of pardon in return for changing his political stance). Summers argues that the author's political motivation for either mode of representation, therefore, is either to appeal to his captors to win a pardon and gain back his liberty, or to oppose them further and address readers with whom he shares certain beliefs, and possibly thereupon turn into a hero or a martyr (Ibid).

Contemporary prison writing, however, exceeds this binary division by audience. It is more complex regarding purpose, self-representation, and mode of expression. It acquires more importance as a representation of a more encompassing human, rather than individual, experience. It allows writers to resist oppression and silence, expose unjust procedures against prisoners, document atrocities, and liberate the writer from the lingering effect of imprisonment. Over the past century and in many parts of the world, including Jordan and many Arab countries, prison has become the main venue for oppression exerted by the state against freedom of speech, and for fashioning a dominant culture of silence that exceeds the prison walls. But it is also the venue where writing becomes the only means of resistance.

Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's work combats silence in multiple ways: exposing, documenting, and liberating. His use of writing for resisting oppression places him in the same tradition as other authors who have written about their experiences as political prisoners, such as Italian Antonio Gramsci (Joll, 1977) and Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (Wilkinson, 1983). It exposes the atrocities behind prison walls and documents a period of Jordan's history. It also helps al-<sup>c</sup>Utum redeem his humanity by sharing his experience with a preconceived empathizing audience. Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum, whose imprisonment aimed to deter him from employing writing as a tool for political activism, is only

more determined to do so: to defy such culture of silence. Although he was imprisoned because of his writing, he never succumbs to the reins of state power, but continues to write, nonetheless.

Such shared purposes and themes of prison literature, in addition to at least two more reasons, make American prison writing worthy of a brief overview here. For one, it is a thriving genre, representing a substantial portion of contemporary American literature, based on the increasing number of publications. Five anthologies of contemporary prison literature were published between 1995 and 2005, in addition to the flourishing work of the PEN association which sponsored the publication of two stories (Miller, 2005). And for the other, it shares values and functions with Arab prison literature, including al-‘Utum’s work. Because prison literature is a familiar and popular genre in American literature, a novel such as *O! My Prison Companions* will appeal to English-language fans of the genre. Meanwhile, its setting in Jordan will introduce those readers to an unfamiliar culture not widely represented in American literature and media. These reasons, I believe, will endow this work with a good reception in the receiving American culture.

According to Miller (2005, pp.1-3), this genre has significantly gained a wider audience since the 1970s, as evidenced by the increasing number of publications. Its most significant function is enabling Americans to see the

inside of prisons and to become aware of prisoners' suffering and the injustices of the American justice system that have been kept away from them. Writing in this context serves, not only as social and political activism, but also as therapeutic, rehabilitative, and redemptive to the writer, more than the prison experience itself.

The nature of this genre is multifaceted. The exposing nature of prison writing for example, is echoed in Wicker's "Foreword" to H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (1998). He thinks that readers of American prison writing can get a glimpse of a world that would otherwise remain unknown. Franklin (1998) also emphasizes the importance of this literature in documenting the contemporary culture and in transforming many ordinary criminals into literary artists through their prison experience. Further, writing becomes a tool of resistance against oblivion. Once those criminals are isolated, the public rarely hears from them. Writing is almost the only way through which they can make their voices heard.

However, this rich written production in the 1960s and 1970s was met by a 'tsunami of repression.' Franklin (2015) laments the government's efforts to stop the flow of written works from prisons by employing several strategies including enacting laws that prohibit convict authors from making money

from their writing.<sup>4</sup> This is justifiable in the case of murderers and rapists but might be oppressive in the case of milder offenses or tortured prisoners. Franklin insists that this literature, nevertheless, keeps pouring from the inside to the outside audience and seeks to educate the free-citizen readers, and probably mobilize them against the brutality of mass incarceration. Franklin neglects, however, that not all this literature is designed for this purpose, but for profit.

American prison writing shares with its Arabic counterpart the objectives of exposing and defying, and *O! My Prison Companions* does a good job at achieving these goals. The novel details daily life in prison and unveils hardships that detainees endure within the prison walls. It provides vibrant depictions of torture scenes in addition to verbal abuse. Such hardships and abuse would never reach the outside public if it weren't for those narratives written during or after incarceration by victims or witnesses from the inside of prison. Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's testimony, like that of other prison writers, is

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<sup>4</sup> Title 28 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Section 540.20 (b) States that: The inmate may not receive compensation or anything of value for correspondence with news media. The inmate may not act as a reporter or publish under a byline (Franklin, 2015). This is reminiscent of institutionalized censorship which monitors publications and circulation of provocative writings in many Arab countries



a memory against oblivion. Without it, what happened to him and to other inmates would have been forgotten.

#### **4.2. Arabic Prison Literature:**

Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum, as well as many other Arab prison writers whose literary works fall within Arabic prison literature, share many functions with American prison writers. Arab prison writers too aim to make prison walls transparent to the public eye. However, Arabic prison literature is different since Arab prison writers are usually political activists who are imprisoned for their pre-detention writings, or who write about their prison experience after their release. They hope to effect positive social changes in their relevant societies on one hand, and to save future victims on the other. They also explore themes like freedom, torture, death, and the ever-lasting physical and psychological impact of incarceration. These themes are more frequent in Arab prison literature than in Western or American prison writing. This may be so because state-sanctioned torture and resulting deaths in prison are much more common in Arab prisons than in the West.

Historically, Arabic prison literature is not a new genre, but it was, until the first half of the twentieth century, limited to poetry as the main mode of expression before the novel came to the fore. Examples abound of detained

poets (such as Abo Firas al-Hamadani, 932-968 AD; and ibn Zaydún, 1003-1071 AD) who narrate their sufferings in their poems in early Islamic and pre-Islamic eras, for crimes such as political disobedience, tribal conflicts, and offensive satire and ghazal (love) poetry (El Guabli, 2012). Compared to poetry, the principal mode of literary expression in classical Arabic literature, the novel is a modern literary genre.<sup>5</sup> Although poetry is still used by Arab prison poets (like Ahmed Fouad Negm and Samih al-Qasim), most contemporary Arab prison writers, like al-<sup>c</sup>Utum, resort to this literary form for detailing their prison experience, and thus make up what came to be known as Arabic prison literature, a sub-genre of Arabic literature.

Elimelekh (2014, p.1) defines Arabic prison writing as a subgenre of a wider Arabic political literature that focuses on political crises and aspirations in the Arab world. This literature, she argues, should be read not only for its

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted here that the origin of the Arabic novel is still debated among scholars. Some consider the genre a modern literary product associated with the Arabic Renaissance and the translation movement from French and English in the second half of the nineteenth century. Writers at that time translated novels into Arabic and then produced original novels by emulating the translated works (Allen, 1995, p.6; Sakkut, 2000, Vol. 1, p.29). Other scholars, however, insist that the genre has existed in the Arabic literary tradition for centuries. They trace its origins to other literary forms such as *maqama* that appeared in the tenth century in the works of al-Hamadani and al-Hariri (Omri, 2088; Hasan, 1974). Still, a third group acknowledges the influence of both, the local literary tradition and the Western product through translation on the rise of the modern Arabic novel (Abdel-Tawwab, 2017).

documentative value, but also for its literary and philosophical contributions. It appeared in the 1930s and 1940s and focused first on Western colonial powers, with Egypt pioneering this literary genre. Examples of early Egyptian prison novels documenting colonial abuses are Ahmad Hussein's *Khalf al-Qudban* (*Behind Bars*, 1949) and Sherif Hatata's *al-ʿAin Dhat al-Jafn al-Maʿdani* (*The Eye with the Metal Eyelid*, 1974) (*Prison Literature Series in the Arab World*).

During the second half of the twentieth century, the genre shifted its focus to prison experiences of political writers, who in turn shifted their criticism towards the despotic regimes that replaced the colonizing powers following the Arab countries' independence. Spearheading in this regard is the Saudi Abdel Rahman Munif with his novels *Sharq al-Muṭawassṭ* (*East of the Mediterranean*, 1980) and *Huna Alān Aw Sharq al-Muṭawassṭ Thaniyatan* (*Here Now or East of the Mediterranean Again*, 1991) in which he creates a generalized picture of fictional political prisons in all Arab countries (*Prison Literature Series in the Arab World*).

Elimelekh (2012) notes that, like prison writers from other nations and periods, Munif's goal is 'to combat ideological and mental oppression,' to bring the torturing of political prisoners to the public's attention, and to promote a model for activism that aims at political change in the Arab world.

His novels also reflect the struggle of writers against tyrannical regimes, their aspiration for justice and equality in their societies, and their preoccupation with issues like freedom, silence, and fear. To Munif, freedom is an all-encompassing God-given right from birth. It is not only political, but also social, ideological, and economic, and it's not only physical, but also spiritual. His works reflect the social, political, and economic realities of modern Arab society where freedom, or this state of being, is lacking. To raise awareness to freedom issues, he includes several items of the Universal Declaration of Human rights at the beginning of *East of the Mediterranean*, the first being "All people are born free and equal." He is probably also being sarcastic, implying that none of these items is respected in countries east of the Mediterranean. He echoes Michel Foucault (1975) who sees prison as the only place where excessive power is manifested naked and morally justified as a readily utilized punitive and deterrent mechanism against whoever emphasizes freedom as a right, orally or in writing.

A more recent example from Egypt is Nawal el Sa'dawi who was dismissed from her job in 1972 because of her political activities and writings. In 1981, she was arrested and imprisoned with other activists because of her anti-government opinions and writings. She was released a few months later following the assassination of President Sadat. Sa'adawi documented her

experience, as well as that of other women prisoners, in her novel *Mudhakarāt fī Sijīn al-Nisā'* (*Memoirs from the Women's Prison*). She also describes the sense of alienation she experienced when she was taken from her home, the terrible incarceration conditions, and the solidarity among prisoners (Sa'dawi, 1983).

Ashour (2008) also discusses more examples of Arabic prison literature chosen geographically: from Egypt where the (sub)genre is plentiful; from Morocco where they have the longest incarceration sentences; and from Palestine and Lebanon as representatives of political detainees in Israel-operated prisons. She analyses *Tilka al-Rā'iha* (*That Smell*, 1966) by the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim who describes his five-year imprisonment as “an overwhelming feeling ... difficult to identify.” She adds that despite the daily torture of prisoners, the novel focusses on the lasting psychological effects that linger with the protagonist after his release. And because of such effects, it took the Palestinian Aisha 'Audih twenty-five years, after her release from al-Khiam, the Israeli prison in the south of Lebanon, to document her ten-year prison experience in her book *Aḥlam al-Ḥurriyah* (*Dreams of Freedom*, 2004). Further, Ashour states that novels which appeared in Morocco, such as Ahmad Marzouki's (2010) *Tazmamart: Zinzānah Raqm 'Ashrah* (*Tazmamart: Cell No. 10*), do not only hold literary value, but scholars

consider them a medium through which the voices of ex-detainees can be heard, and the psychology of the victim and victimizer can be studied, and as historical documents that keep track of forty years of Moroccan history.

These narratives represent an invitation as expressed by the protagonist in al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's *They Hear Its Whispering* (p. 7) to those who survived similar conditions and remained silent, to rise up to their duty and write about their ordeals, in loyal memory of those who passed away in detention, and those who are still absented in the darkness of dungeons, to contribute to the push against injustice, victimization, oppression, and persecution exerted by their captors, in the hope of bringing change that would prevent what happened to them from befalling potential future victims. The Iraqi Mohammad Saeed, author of *Saddam City*, says he wants it to be a record for future generations (Pierpont, 2010); and el Guabli (2012) also notes that demolishing prisons like Tazmamart and al-Khiam, at once symbols of power and shame, has not, thanks to prison literature, erased the memories of the individuals who suffered within their walls.

In addition to shared themes, like fear, torture, alienation, freedom, and solidarity among prisoners, these narratives also highlight the psychological change that takes place in the protagonist as a result of the prison experience, positively transformative on occasions, but psychologically damaging in most

cases. They all stress the fact that, regardless of the incarceration period, a prisoner never leaves prison unchanged. The physical and psychological damage caused by unjust incarceration is not only inevitable, but also irreversible.

While Arabic prison writing shares some characteristics with that in world literature, such as being exposing, documentative, and redemptive, it departs from it on several levels. Arabic prison writers, for example, are mostly political and intellectual activists, i.e. there are no examples of ordinary criminals who have written about being transformed by their prison experience. Also, because writing materials are prohibited in Arab prisons, almost none of them write during incarceration. Works are usually conceived during imprisonment and penned later after release from prison based on memory, except for el-Sa‘dawi who wrote her *Memoirs* on toilet paper during her detention. *O! My Prison Companions* was written fourteen years after the author’s release. It represents a significant contribution to the wider Arab prison literature, conforming as well as adding to its norms.

#### **4.2.1. *O! My Prison Companions***

Although al-‘Utum’s *O! My Prison Companions* is in many ways similar to other works in Arabic prison literature, it sets itself apart in other

respects. For example, like some prison writers, al-°Utum creates a representation of himself as a persistent freedom activist who sacrifices for the sake of fellow citizens (al-°Utum, 2012, p.100) and never succumbs to temptations of surrender, nor breaks under pressure. In addition, *O! My Prison Companions* derives part of its importance from its documentative value; it provides the reader with a realistic representation of the Jordanian socio-political atmosphere as it unfolded in the 1990s: describing key events, describing political activists and dissidents, and detailing prison life.

Another function the novel shares with other works in prison writing is its exposing nature which for example, reveals one more characteristic about the political situation in Jordan: that it hasn't changed much since the 1990s, particularly regarding freedom of speech. Al-°Utum was imprisoned in 1997 because of his poetry which crossed the government's 'red lines.' In 2012, expression of one's opinion still incurred harsh and disproportionate punishment. This is evidenced by the ban on *O! My Prison Companions* in 2012 and al-°Utum's trial because of another work, *Speech of the Soldiers*, in 2017. The Arab Spring in 2010 onward, which raised hopes for political change in the region, apparently brought a temporary, perhaps illusory, softer policy in the country. At this point, police forces tolerated street protestors who only shouted against government corruption. This may have tempted al-



°Utum to break his self-imposed silence to detail his prison experience fourteen years after his release. Nevertheless, the tight grip was soon restored with the unfortunate turn of events in some Arab countries in 2012 (i.e., the civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria). Police forces now clashed with protestors (who consequently shouted against the King himself) using tear gas and live ammunition. These procedures show that the government in 2012 was still operating under the same tensions of the 1990s and before.

On the other hand, al-°Utum diverges from other prison writers regarding his attitude towards his prison experience, deeming it constructive rather than destructive. That is, he considers this experience a substantial, positive addition to his broader life experience, with all its sides: negative (e.g., abuse and solitary confinement) and positive (e.g., making friendships with other inmates). While prisoners usually suffer irreversible post detention physical and psychological consequences, al-°Utum declares that he came out victorious. Except for the first few weeks of prison, when he laments his destiny for being taken away from the warmth of his parents' home, for the mere idea of being imprisoned in one's own country, and for being deliberately thrown in the collective cell of murderers, rapists, and drug dealers, al-°Utum, on many occasions, celebrates prison as a place of sacrifice for a worthy cause, of practicing defiance, of bonding with other humans, and

for learning true life. On the very last page, he puts it in poetry he borrows from the Yemeni Mohammad Zubairi<sup>6</sup>:

خرجنا من السجن شم الانوف      كما تخرج الاسد من غابها  
نمر على شفرات السيوف      ونأتي المنية من بابها  
لتعلم أممتنا أننا      ركبنا المنايا حنانا بها

We came out of prison with high noses

Lions coming out of their jungle

Treading on the very blades of swords

Delving into death through its doors

Let our nation therefore know

We mount death for their sake

In an interview, he states that not only did he come out unbroken, but he turned the tragedy into a bliss, hell into heaven, and planted the road with roses. He came out a changed person, but in a positive way. This is where *O! My Prison Companions* deviates from the norms of Arabic prison literature. It shifts focus for the most part from torture and suffering to how al-<sup>c</sup>Utum manipulates his subconscious in such a way that enables him to overcome the very notion of imprisonment by transcending its physical confines to more open spaces of thought and contemplation. He admits at the same time that his prison experience is nothing compared to that of prisoners in other Arab

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<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Zubairi (1910-1965) is a Yemeni activist who was imprisoned for nine months for giving a Friday speech, and was also assassinated while he was giving a speech in April 1, 1965 (Mohammad Zubairi (محمد الزبيري)).

prisons, but the alienation induced by isolation, particularly solitary confinement, remains unbearable (Interview with Ayman al-<sup>o</sup>Utum).

I hope, therefore, that the translation of this novel will raise awareness of injustices and oppression in Jordan. By contributing to the discourse on such cases, I hope decision makers will be prompted to act towards more positive socio-economic and political changes, similar to the case in Morocco. Such narratives that appeared inside and outside Morocco about atrocities and unjust incarceration led to the recognition of the committed injustices and to the reconciliation between the state and the wronged citizens, consequently effecting social and political change (e.g., compensations and constitutional amendments). In addition, the literary merits of *O! My Prison Companions* should earn it a wider readership too. The novel stands out with the writer's distinctive and poetic narrative style that incorporates different types of intertexts, such as Quranic verses, classical and modern Arabic poetry, and local Arabic proverbs. It is an artistic work that is definitely worth reading and translating.

The intertexts in the novel, particularly Quranic references, endow the text with rhetorical enhancement and conceptual density. Their intertextual relationships with prior contexts allow for multiple layers of interpretation in their new contexts. Therefore, the overall understanding of the novel is

dependent on the reader's recognition of those relations and knowledge of the original contexts they invoke. Such knowledge facilitates understanding of the new meaning of the intertexts in their new habitat. While this is an easy task to the source text reader, it is not as easy to the reader of the translation, particularly, one who is not seasoned enough in the source text culture. Consequently, it becomes incumbent on the translator to make those intertextual relations discernible and decipherable by the target reader by going beyond the semantic equivalence, as will be shown in the next section.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Translating Intertextuality**

This section of the dissertation is dedicated to introducing the theory of intertextuality as a paradigm for viewing texts and their interrelationships, the impact of this theory on translation theory and practice, and ways scholars and translators propose for approaching intertexts in translation. In translation studies, scholarly research focusses on two aspects when addressing the concept of intertextuality: translation as intertextuality and translation of intertextuality.

From an intertextual perspective, I am mainly concerned here with the way I view my translation: not simply a reproduction of a text, but an intertext that is intertextually related to the source text. Such view informs my approach to translation and the translation strategies I adopted to maintain the intertextual relationships of the source text in the target text. Those strategies involve a lot of intervention on my part justified by my agency as a translator.

## 5.1. Introduction

Although ‘intertextuality’ is a contemporary concept, some theorists trace the phenomenon to the oldest recorded human history, i.e., whenever there were discourses about texts (Alfaro, 1996; also, Hanna and Smith, 2000). However, it is the Bulgarian-French theorist Julia Kristeva who is openly credited for coining the term in her 1966 essay “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (Orr, 2003, p. 1). Working in 1960s France, a time and place inclined for the concept, Kristeva combined Saussure’s semiotics (relational non-referential signs), and Bakhtin’s dialogism (social word) to propose the first theory of intertextuality (Allen, 2011). She proposes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. Thus, the notion of ‘*intertextuality*’ replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (her emphasis) (Kristeva, 1986, P. 37). So, while Bakhtin’s dialogism emphasizes the human subjects using language in social contexts, (hence, intersubjectivity), Kristeva centers on texts and textuality (hence, intertextuality).

The notion of relational texts originates in Saussure’s linguistics (semiotics). Saussure defines the linguistic sign as combining a signifier (sound image) and a signified (concept). Its meaning is not stable, nor is it

referential to some object in the real world; rather it is constructed through its relation to other signs in the linguistic system at a certain moment of time. Understanding this relational sign leads to a vast system of relations that make up the synchronic system of signs (language). Speakers choose their signs from this already existing system. This is also true of literary signs. Literary authors also select words, plots, aspects of character, images, narrative styles from anterior literary texts and traditions which make up the synchronic literary system. The literary author is thus working between two systems, the linguistic and the literary (Allen, 2001).

Bakhtin on the other hand, is more concerned with the social context in which utterances are exchanged. To him, Saussurian linguistics is ‘abstract objectivism’ that neglects the social aspect of language. An utterance is ‘dialogic.’ It responds to a previous utterance and provokes other responses. Interpretation thus, is never complete. Further, the meaning of an utterance derives from already established patterns of meaning employed by the addresser and recognizable by the addressee. Bakhtin also stresses notions of double-voicing, heteroglossia, and dialogism in texts to assert that language is never our own. As the Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov states: “after Adam, there are no nameless objects, nor any unused words”

(qtd. in Allen, 2011, p. 27). These Bakhtinian notions are central to the theory of intertextuality.

In her discussion of Bakhtin's work, Julia Kristeva (1986) notes that he views the 'literary word' as "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural content" (p.36). Quoting Bakhtin, she states that "Each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (Ibid, p.37). Kristeva inserts the word 'text' in Bakhtin's previous sentence and changes his ideas in a way that makes it possible for the concept of intertextuality to be developed. The text according to Kristeva and Bakhtin is an inseparable part of the larger social or cultural text from which it's constructed.

Furthermore, the literary word, to Kristeva, has a horizontal axis, subject-addressee, as well as a vertical axis, text-context. To her, a text not only absorbs and transforms anterior texts, it also triggers posterior ones. It only has life through this dialogic contact with other texts. Bakhtin calls those axes 'dialogue' and 'ambivalence.' To him, a narrative includes the word of the 'other,' which has a new meaning while it retains the one it already had. It therefore becomes ambivalent (Kristeva, 1986). These notions emphasize



the ‘plurality’ or the ‘polyphonic’ nature of the novel, and that meaning is constructed through the interaction of, not one, but several consciousnesses: those of the author, the text (or its characters), and the reader. Intertextuality thus is based on notions of multivoicedness in texts, dialogue in and among texts, and the continuous process of meaning construction whenever a text crosses the intertextual space from one context into another.

Ever since, other theorists and literary critics critiqued and further developed the theory of intertextuality and brought it to its present-time interdisciplinary nature, thus making it possible to talk about the phenomena, but laboriously difficult to provide an overarching definition. Although it originated in twentieth century linguistics, intertextuality has been adopted by a wide range of fields of study. The term intertextuality is even used both by structuralists to locate and fix literary meaning and by post-structuralists to disrupt this very notion. Therefore, Allen (2011) warns that “intertextuality is one of the most commonly used and misused terms in contemporary critical vocabulary”. It is “in danger of meaning nothing more than whatever each particular critic wishes it to mean” (p. 2).

Theorists and critics like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Gérard Genette, and Michael Riffaterre (among others) introduced their own versions of intertextuality. While their views converge on some aspects, they diverge

on others. Barthes and Derrida share a more abstract theorizing of Intertextuality. They view the intertextual space as infinitely expanding. The intertexts (i.e., other literary works or types of texts) in a text are themselves intertextual constructs composed of a mosaic of quotations which themselves are intertextual, and so on. Meaning, therefore, is never stable, but is continuously constructed in every individual reading. Genette and Riffaterre on the other hand, apply intertextuality for literary and semiotic analysis by categorizing ways in which texts intersect. They believe in delimiting the intertextual scope of the text. Meaning to them is constructed through interpretation of explicitly stated intertexts in the text, such as quotations and allusions. All theorists, however, converge on the plurality in texts, the impact of texts on other texts, and on dismissing notions of originality, unity, and wholeness of a text.

In his 1967 essay, 'The Death of the Author,' Roland Barthes links 'the author's death' with the birth of the reader, thus asserting the reader's productive role in reading (Barthes, 1977). A text, he asserts, is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash ... a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (Ibid, p. 146). He views the intertextuality of the text as endlessly

expanding. The intertext to him, whose sources are anonymous, cannot exist outside the infinite text. A text is not a unified authorial consciousness, but a plurality of voices, utterances, and texts: “the already read and the already written,” and its meaning resides in its relations to other texts, and in our recognition of those relations. Asserting the reader’s role in producing meaning, Barthes distinguishes between two types of readers, ‘consumers’ (who read for stable meaning) and ‘productive readers’ (who do textual analysis). Textual analysis is ‘pluralist’ as readers become writers of the text (Ibid).

Jacques Derrida too believes in the limitless intertextual scope of the text and asserts that interrelationships in the hypertext (i.e., word or text that is linked to other words or texts) exist as long as the reader perceives them, thereby emphasizing the reader’s productive role in constructing meaning. He introduces the notion of iterability or citationality, which views texts as quoting and quotable (Alfaro, 1996), rejecting textual boundaries and originality, and allowing for multiple readings and meanings each time a hypertext (i.e., an earlier text which serves as the source of a hypertext) travels through the intertextual space.

G rard Genette (1997) also rejects the originality and wholeness of literary works. However, unlike Barthes and Derrida, he delimits the scope of

intertextuality to the co-presence of two or more texts in a text in the form of quotation, allusion, and plagiarism. Meaning thus is limited to the relations between those texts. He views intertextuality as one of five elements comprising what he styles 'trans-textuality', by which he means "all that sets the text in a relation, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (p. 5). Trans-textuality includes Intertextuality (the co-presence of two or more texts in a text); Hypertextuality (a relationship uniting text B (the hypertext) and an earlier text A (the hypotext) upon which it's grafted; Architextuality (discourse types and genres); Metatextuality (a text that speaks of another text: commentary, reviews, etc.); and Paratextuality (the relation between a text and other texts within the physical space of a work: titles, prefaces, endnotes, and glosses) (Ibid).

Michael Riffaterre opposes the dispersing of meaning presupposed by the unbounded intertextual scope of the text, and shares with Genette the notion of a limited textual scope. Further, he emphasizes that the literary reading, as opposed to naïve reading, depends on the reader's recognition of the text's presupposition of intertexts, which gives the text its structural and semantic unity (Ibid). He argues that texts have meaning because of the semiotic structures that link their elements, and not because they are mimetic

or referential according to what he calls the ‘referential fallacy’ (Allen, 2011, p. 115).

As a literary device, writers produce intertextuality by employing a variety of figures or functions, such as allusion, quotation, and parody (Venuti, 2009); Cancogni (1985) adds calque, translation, and pastiche. Furthermore, many theorists propose more or less similar types of intertextuality, depending on the importance of the intertext and the intention of the writer. These include horizontal vs. vertical (Kristeva, 1986), implicit vs. explicit, intentional vs. accidental, marked vs. unmarked (Juvan, 2008), manifest vs. constitutive (Fairclough in Momani et al., 2010), and John Fitzsimmons distinguishes obligatory, optional, and accidental (Pagliwan, 2017).

From these perspectives, the literary text is no longer perceived as a product of an author’s original thought, or as a container of meaning, but as a space where a vast number of potential relations and meanings compete. Texts are built from codes and traditions based on previous texts. Therefore, they lack independent meaning. To interpret a text and discover its meaning(s) is to trace and recognize its network of textual relations by moving between texts that comprise it. Meaning thus exists between a text and other texts to which it refers and relates. The text in this sense becomes an intertext (Allen, 2011).

Recognition of these relations is therefore, a precondition for the reader's construction of meaning. In translation, as Venuti (2009) notes, not all readers recognize the intertextual relations, partly because of limited knowledge (of source text culture) and partly because of reading for meaning that is supposedly inherent in the ST, which aims at arousing a certain response on the part of the target reader. If communicating intertextual relations in the ST, in addition to its content, is the goal of the translation, it becomes incumbent on the translator to deploy translation strategies that, beyond semantic equivalence, ensure that such relations are relayed. Therefore, since Quranic discourse is commonly viewed as a source of linguistic enhancement and empowerment to MSA (Modern Standard Arabic), the impetus behind this paper is the premise that Quranic intertexts in al-<sup>o</sup>Utum 's novel *O! My Prison Companions* (2012), a source of linguistic and conceptual enrichment to the novel, pose considerable challenges in translation. Thus, failing to communicate their intertextual relations will result in a great contextual loss.

## **5.2. Intertextuality and Translation**

As mentioned earlier, scholars approach the relation between translation and intertextuality from two perspectives. The first is translation as intertextuality or as an intertextual practice, and the second is translation of

intertextuality. Although scholars address different aspects of this relationship, such as the nature of meaning, and the status of the translator and of the TT, they converge on the notion that translation is an intertextual event. They focus on two main points: the impact of the theory of intertextuality on translation theory and practice, and the translational approaches they propose for handling intertexts in ways that ensure that the foreign text's intertextual relations are communicated into the translated text.

To this end, Sakellariou (2015) speaks of the appropriation of the concept of intertextuality for translation-theoretic purposes which serves to disrupt established views of translation, and to redefine translation through a reconceptualization of the relation between the ST (source text) and the TT (target text). From an intertextual view of texts, translation now is viewed as mediating between potentially compatible texts rather than incompatible linguistic systems. Such a conception of translation rejects the primacy of the 'original' over the translated text and dispels the idea of the translator as imitator (Also, Kershaw, 2014).

Similarly, Khanjan and Mirza (2008) stress the insights which intertextuality brings into translation theory and practice regarding the uncertainty or indeterminacy of meaning, in addition to the non-originality of the source text. Such view raises the translator's position and places him/her

on equal footing with the author, considering the target text, as a form of writing, equal and not derivative to the source text.

Furthermore, from an intertextual perspective, some scholars view translation as a ‘mediated intertextuality,’ considering it a ‘text-induced text production’ (Neubert and Shreve, 1992). Others regard it ‘an intertextual practice,’ arguing that the relationship that links a ‘prototext’ (source text) and its ‘metatext(s)’ (target texts) is no more seen in terms of equivalence. Rather, it should be explained in terms of intertextuality, which views a prototext as related intra-lingually to all other texts, and interlingually to all its metatext(s), which are in turn interrelated (Farahzad, 2009). Hermans (2007, pp. 35-37) calls this latter type of interrelations ‘translation-specific intertextuality,’ which he divides into ‘friendly filiations’ in the case of accepted translational norms at a particular time, and ‘hostile stand-offs’ in the case of critical new translations, comprising a self-referential system of translated texts.

From these perspectives then, the impact of the theory of intertextuality on my translation of *O! My Prison Companions* is twofold. The first is that it allows it to be viewed, not in terms of equivalence or imitation, but in terms of being intertextually related to a prior text. That is, it will not have a derivative status to the source text, but the two will be perceived as two equal, original texts and the results of two forms of writing. And once this translation



enters the literary system of the receiving culture, it will also have intertextual relations with other translated texts in that system. Additionally, and since intertextuality stresses the indeterminacy of meaning, other readings or interpretations of the ST will be provided by potential, future translations of the ST, to which my translation will also be intertextually related. Intertextuality places me, the translator, and my TT at equal footing with the author and his text.

As for approaching intertexts or cultural references in translation, translation theorists and scholars propose a variety of strategies. Prioritizing one over the other depends on the way they perceive translation (i.e., transfer or transformation) and the purpose or *skopos*<sup>7</sup> (i.e., purpose) of the translation, in addition to the importance of the intertextual relationships in the source text, which are to be maintained in the target text. Such strategies, as explained by Mona Baker (1992, pp. 71-77), include literal translation, cultural substitution, elaboration and explication, and omission.

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<sup>7</sup> Skopos theory is a concept from the field of translation studies. It provides an insight into the nature of translation as a purposeful activity, which is directly applicable to every translation project. It was established by the German linguists Hans Vermeer and Katharina Reiss and comprises the idea that translating and interpreting should primarily take into account the purpose and function of the target text (Vermeer, 2004. Also, Vermeer, 1998; Nord, 2001; Lefevere, 1992).

Lowrance Venuti (2009) views translation as a unique case of intertextuality which is central to the production and the reception of the target text. He argues that translating foreign intertexts with any completeness and precision is almost impossible because relaying the words and phrases that make up foreign intertextual relations, while it achieves semantic equivalence, does not maintain those relations, nor does it capture the cultural significance of the foreign intertext. Therefore, the intertextual context is lost in the translating process. To compensate, translators usually employ paratextual devices, such as introductory essays or annotations. He adds that, while this can be useful in maintaining the foreign intertextual relations and capturing their significance, it makes the translator's work more of a commentary than of translation and restricts its audience to academic settings, consequently losing the impact the ST had on its readers.

Therefore, Venuti insists that translation is a transformative process which decontextualizes and re-contextualizes the ST. In the process, another receiving intertextual context is created in the translation as translators replace the foreign intertexts with analogous, but ultimately different, intertextual relations that are specific to the translating language and culture (which I believe runs counter to his proposed foreignization strategy). Such a translation, viewed as not instrumental, but hermeneutic, provides one

particular interpretation of the ST. This interpretation is communicated by employing a category of translation strategies that mediates between the source language and culture and the target language and culture. It consists of ‘interpretants’ that can be formal (which include the concept of equivalence), or thematic (which include codes such as ideas or beliefs). Creating receiving intertexts, therefore, makes translation readable with comprehension. It also increases linguistic and cultural differences between the ST and the TT and opens the latter to interpretive possibilities (Ibid).

In the same vein, Hatim and Mason (1990) adopt a semiotic functional approach to translating intertexts. They distinguish two types of intertextuality: active when it activates a belief system beyond the text itself, and passive when it only serves the basic requirements of the text’s internal coherence. To them, intertextuality is “not some static property of texts,” rather it is “best viewed in terms of semiotic system of signification” (p. 123); and it is not random, but functional: intertexts are brought into a text for a reason. In translation, translators first encounter ‘intertextual signals’ which trigger the process of intertextual search and semiotic processing. As to which aspect of the intertext should the translator prioritize: form, content, or both, they answer that normally, intentionality is prioritized over content.

Other scholars call for employing translation strategies that respect intercultural differences. Schaffner (2012) views translation as ‘intercultural intertextuality.’ She analyses translations of political speeches between English and German to highlight translation strategies employed by translators for handling intercultural references in those speeches. She concludes that, while intertextuality refers to the plurality of voices on which authors draw in their cultures, translation adds an intertextual (intercultural) dimension to this plurality. Similarly, and because of their sensitivity in political discourses, Sanatifar (2015) calls for more attention to the translation of intertextual references. Being socio-culturally constructed, such references pose potential difficulties to translators and may give rise to mistranslation, which may in turn lead to negative political or diplomatic consequences. He concludes by suggesting some concrete guidelines for a more efficient and effective translation of such references, such as literal translation which he deems safer and which excludes a translator’s mis-interpretations that might be imposed on the audience.

Similarly, Kharabsheh (2017) proposes two translation strategies for translating a specific type of intertexts. He discusses Quran-related intertextuality in news headlines as an enriching communicative act, both monolingually and interlingually, and therefore represents semantic and

conceptual complexities. Quranic references can pose semantic difficulty to the Arabic reader with their classical Arabic lexicon. Further, their conceptual density stems from the multiple Quranic contexts they invoke. Such references pose considerable challenges to translators with an added intercultural dimension. Echoing Venuti, he agrees that achieving lexicographical equivalence alone fails to establish intertextual relations of the foreign text in the translated text. He therefore suggests two strategies for dealing with those references: the gist-paratextual (i.e., using paratextual devices such as footnotes) and the gist-exegetical (inserting intertextual parenthetical explanations). He concludes that it's the Skopos (i.e., the purpose) of the translation that is central as to which strategy to operationalize.

In a different vein, Alawi (2010) stresses training for enhancing efficiency in translating intertexts. To produce better translations, he calls for incorporating more training courses that introduce translation and intertextuality practices in translation programs at Arab universities alongside translation theory courses. He emphasizes the citationality and double-voicing of intertexts, and the importance of their recognition by the translator and the target reader. He examines intertextuality in relation to literary translation between Arabic and English and discusses allusion as an intertextual figure, citing examples from poetry to show how an allusion acquires a new meaning

every time it travels from one sign system to another. Such recurrence creates textual patterns with which translators should acquaint themselves in both the SL and the TL to produce a more efficient and timely translation. That is, to engage with the translation process with the assumption that “every stretch of language is likely to recur” (p. 2455).

### **5.3. Translating Intertexts in *O! My Prison Companions***

This dissertation subscribes to the notion of intertextuality as a precondition for understanding texts and as a linguistic mechanism whereby a text makes reference, explicitly or implicitly, to a previous text(s), henceforth triggering meanings and implications expressed by such a text(s) which are added to the meaning expressed in the hypertext or transformed by it. I draw on Kristeva’s (1986) ‘vertical intertextuality’ (integrated prior texts in new texts), Fairclough’s ‘manifest intertextuality’ (explicitly demarcated intertexts) (Momani et al., 2010), Derrida’s ‘iterability’ and ‘citationality’ (repetition of a text in a new text or context), Bakhtin’s ‘reaccentuation’ or ‘double-voicing’ (reusing a text in a new context that gives it a new meaning), and Kristeva’s ‘absorption’ (referring to a text’s absorption of another text).

I argue that translating intertexts, such as Quranic references, Classical and contemporary Arabic poetry, proverbs, and other cultural references, pose

a considerable difficulty to translators. While their intertextual relations are accessible by and familiar to most Arabic readers, they remain inaccessible to the English target readers who will not get their implications. Therefore, they require employing translation strategies that, in addition to achieving semantic equivalence, ensure that the intertextual relations in the source text are captured and relayed into the target text. In dealing with them in translation, there are three options: (a) produce a semantic equivalence only, (b) provide analogous intertexts specific to the target culture, or (c) employ paratextual devices. I chose semantic equivalence combined with paratextual devices. I mainly opted for footnotes (marked with Arabic numerals) rather than endnotes (marked with Roman numerals) and bracketed explanations because footnotes are not interruptive like endnotes, nor expansive like bracketed explanations, when used economically. Still, I resorted to endnotes when the explanation is long and not so immediately critical to the novelistic context, and less frequently to bracketed explanations when the explanation is very short.

Each, however, has its own shortcoming. Semantic equivalence risk losing the intertextual relations embedded in the intertexts, analogous intertexts risk depriving the target reader of the opportunity of exposure to a foreign culture, and paratextual devices relegate those relations to a place

outside the text. Since this is an instrumental and communicative translation, and because writers usually rely on readers' recognition of intertextual relations for the construction of meaning, I opt for the third, (following Appiah's 'Thick Translation', (2012), but not going as far as Nabokov (2012) and his skyscraper notes), being the least compromising, to ensure the target reader's recognition of those relations and to capture their cultural significance. Therefore, translating these intertexts requires, in addition to achieving a certain level of semantic equivalence based on linguistic acceptability in the target language, compensating for the intertextual relations of the source text, which are otherwise lost.

To illustrate the challenges presented by such Quranic and non-Quranic references, and my approaches to translating them, I have drawn examples from the novel *O! My Prison Companions* which provides two types of intertextuality: manifest and vertical.

### **5.3.1. Translating Quranic Intertexts**

Quranic phrases are commonly used in MSA formally and informally for different purposes. Speakers for example, employ them to add authenticity to their discourses and politicians use them to establish common grounds with their constituencies. Ayman al-<sup>c</sup>Utum, in addition to these two ends,



efficiently employs them in his novel *O! My Prison Companions* (2012) to achieve rhetorical enhancement and linguistic elevation. More importantly, the implications triggered by the few words of a Quranic reference endow al-‘Utum’s text with an immense amount of conceptual density. These intertexts also add authenticity to his discourse as an observing Muslim to establish common grounds with his mostly Muslims readers. Each Quranic intertext, no matter how short, triggers implications that send messages and add extended discourses beyond the hypertext. Like other writers, al-‘Utum relies on his readers’ recognition of these intertexts to link his text to the Quranic contexts from which the intertexts are taken, thus opening his text to a host of interpretations.

As for translating the Quranic verses or phrases in the novel, Pickthall’s (1922) translation of the Quran is used because of its authentic status, being part of the Quran Corpus ([www.corpus.quran.com](http://www.corpus.quran.com)). This translation utilizes a register that is moderately sophisticated to the contemporary English reader. At the same time, it includes elements (e.g., morphemes like *-eth* and *-est* and pronouns like *ye* and *thou*) that signal features of a sacred text, such as the King James translation of the Bible, with which the English-language reader is most likely familiar.

To show how al-°Utum employs these references and the intricacy of translating them, let’s consider the following examples from his novel. The first example is the novel title itself: يا صاحبي السجن “*ya sahibai al sijin*” (*O! My Prison Companions*). This Quranic phrase invokes a rich vertical intertextual relation between the novel and the Quranic text where it originates and presents the translator with a challenging task. This relation cannot be understood without considering its context. The Quranic reference under discussion (underlined below) introduces verse 41 of Chapter 12 (Surah Yousef) in the Quran:

يَا صَاحِبِي السِّجْنِ أَمَّا أَحَدُكُمَا فَيَسْقِي رَبَّهُ خَمْرًا ۗ وَأَمَّا الْآخَرُ فَيُصَلَّبُ فَتَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْ رَأْسِهِ ۗ قُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ  
الَّذِي فِيهِ تَسْتَفْتَيْنِ (يوسف 41/12)

“O my two fellow prisoners! As for one of you, he will pour out wine for his lord to drink; and as for the other, he will be crucified so that the birds will eat from his head. Thus is the case judged concerning which ye did inquire” (Pickthall).

The above verse<sup>8</sup> refers to the well-known story of Prophet Yousef (Joseph) son of Jacob who was favored by his father to the point that, out of

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<sup>8</sup> The story is also narrated in the Book of Genesis (Chapters 30-50) in the Bible with slight differences from the Quranic narrative.

jealousy, his brothers plotted to get rid of him. So, they threw him in a deserted well where he was picked up by a caravan and sold as a slave into the Royal court of Egypt. There, he was falsely accused of sexual harassment by the Queen and thereupon unjustly imprisoned for a few years. The story reaches a happy ending when Yousef's wisdom is proven to the king, who thereby makes him vizier, and is eventually reunited with his family.

By importing this phrase for the title of the novel, al-<sup>c</sup>Utum associates himself with Yousef as a pious man, or a controversial secular prophet, who is falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. Their stories are reminiscent of most prophets and reformists who are often punished by people in power for raising their voices about uncomfortable truths. The phrase also implies a happy ending for al-<sup>c</sup>Utum who emerges from prison a better, experienced, and above all, unbroken man. This rich context, while obvious to the ST reader, is lost if the phrase is only translated semantically. Therefore, I propose, in addition to the lexicographical equivalence, to use a paratextual device, such as footnoting, to provide a summary of Yousef's story and compensate for the intertextual context of the ST. Although this relegates the intertextual relation to an inferior position, outside the text, it prevents producing an expanded translation. I'd also deviate from Pickthall's translation by using 'companions' instead of 'fellows,' and by omitting the

word ‘two,’ being irrelevant to the novelistic context, to render the title shorter. I therefore use: *O! My Prison Companions!*

Examples of Quran-related intertextuality also come from all the chapter titles. These are all cases of manifest intertextuality as they are marked by the Uthmani Quranic script which is easily recognized by the Arab reader. They succinctly introduce the themes of the chapters. Chapter one for example is entitled يَقُصُّ الْحَقَّ *yaqusu al- Haq* (He tells the truth) which is also a case of Quranic-related manifest intertextuality. This phrase, underlined below, is picked out from the following Quranic context (Chapter 6, Verse 57):

قُلْ إِنِّي عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّي وَكَذَّبْتُمْ بِهِ ۚ مَا عِندِي مَا تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ بِهِ ۚ إِنَّ الْحُكْمَ لِلَّهِ يَقُصُّ الْحَقَّ ۖ وَهُوَ خَيْرُ  
الْقَاصِلِينَ (الانعام 57/6).

“Say: I am (relying) on clear proof from my Lord, while ye deny Him. I have not that for which ye are impatient. The decision is for Allah only. He telleth the truth and He is the Best of Deciders” (Pickthall).

Semantically speaking, the phrase means ‘Allah tells the truth’, and the two Arabic words enjoy a collocational relationship and a degree of iterability in MSA. The significance of their intertextual relation is best discerned if their citationality is considered. The broader context of the phrase is detailed in the above Quranic verse which describes an argument between Prophet

Mohammad (PBUH) and some disbelievers. The Prophet tells them that the source of his message is God who tells only the truth, and therefore, he also tells the truth. Al-ʿUtum’s use of this phrase as a chapter title is tantamount to a pledge that what he is about to narrate is the truth and nothing but the truth.

This phrase is culled out of its original context and recontextualized in the novel to refer to the writer. Pickthall’s rendering does a good job at producing the semantic equivalence of such an apparently simple phrase, and at signaling the gravity of a sacred text by adding the suffix -eth to the end of the verb ‘tell’. Still, while the semantic aspect is preserved, the intertextual relation is lost. Thus, another translational intervention is required to draw the reader’s attention to this relation. For this one, I believe a footnote citing the original verse and explaining the intertextual context is enough for maintaining the intertextual relation of the source text.

Similarly, chapter two has for its title the underlined portion which figures in the following verse:

أَوْ كَظُلُمَاتٍ فِي بَحْرٍ لُجِّيٍّ يَغْشَاهُ مَوْجٌ مِنْ فَوْقِهِ مَوْجٌ مِنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ۚ ظُلُمَاتٌ بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ لَمْ يَكِدْ يَرَاهَا ۗ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ نُورٍ (النور 40/24).

“Or as darkness on a vast, abysmal sea. There covereth him a wave, above which is a wave, above which is a cloud. Layer upon layer of darkness. When

he holdeth out his hand he scarce can see it. And he for whom Allah hath not appointed light, for him there is no light: (Pickthall).

Again, the significance of the intertextual relation here cannot be captured without examining the context from which the phrase is taken. The verse describes the bad deeds of the infidels as a sea of darkness or layer upon layer of darkness which are piled upon them. Indeed, it is their sins that put them in this utter darkness. The phrase enjoys a considerable degree of iterability in Arabic. It's used to describe situations when extreme darkness, literal or figurative, is experienced. Al-ʿUtum uses this reference to introduce the chapter theme which describes his first nights in prison, particularly the double darkness of the nights and the dungeons. He also implies that he is being treated like an infidel or a traitor by his own people. This double voicing of the phrase also invokes al-ʿUtum's doubt articulated in his introductory chapter: what put him in this darkness (of dungeons) is his '*sin*' (reciting the poem that caused his incarceration).

Since this is a title, exegetical translation is unthinkable. Therefore, I believe the semantic equivalence in addition to a footnote citing the verse is enough for the target reader to grasp the intertextual relation. The target reader by now, knows what kind of darkness al-ʿUtum is referring to. Therefore, I opt for Pickthall's above translation for this title, but I limit it to "Layer upon

layer of darkness” which I believe is enough to get the picture and keep the chapter title at a reasonable length.

Page ten in al-‘Utum’s text provides an example of a vertical intertextual relation. The intertext is the underlined stretch in the following sentence:

وحين غادرتها تركت ظلي هناك وجعلت القمر عليه دليلاً...

“when I left it, I left my shadow there and I made the moon an indication of it.”

This is an example of textual appropriation, absorption, and recontextualization. It is a case of optional intertextuality which if recognized by the reader, can link al-‘Utum’s text to the following original Quranic context:

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَيْفَ مَدَّ الظِّلَّ وَلَوْ شَاءَ لَجَعَلَهُ سَاكِنًا ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا الشَّمْسَ عَلَيْهِ دَلِيلًا (الفرقان 45/25).

“Hast thou not seen how thy Lord hath spread the shade. And if He willed He could have made it still, then We have made the sun its pilot” (Pickthall).

The underlined part, the intertext which al-‘Utum appropriates, refers to how God made the sun an indicator/pilot/guide to the shade/shadow. Al-‘Utum re-contextualizes the phrase, replacing ‘the sun’ with ‘the moon’ and

referring to himself. This phrase does not invoke any narratives inherent in the original context, but in addition to achieving a degree of linguistic enhancement, it has a deeper interpretation under its surface. Al-°Utum is associating the temporality of the shadow created by the moon with his presence in the castle. The spatially changing nature of the sun and the moon, and the shadows they create demonstrates the futility of al-°Utum's attempt to make the moon an indicator to his presence in the castle. He realizes that he is doomed to bid the castle farewell soon. This accentuation or double-voicing of the phrase is not even easy for the Arabic reader to capture, but al-°Utum, like all writers, relies on well-versed readers to discern his intentions.

This is further complicated in translation. While Pickthall's translation (then We have made the sun its pilot) as well as other suggestions (its guide/ an indication of it) do achieve a semantic equivalence, they miss the intertextual context. This makes it incumbent on the translator to compensate for the inevitable loss. Therefore, I suggest pointing the target reader to the intertextual relation by only adding a footnote citing the original habitat of the phrase with no additional explanation, thus opening the text to possible interpretations. This I believe puts the target reader at equal footing with the source text reader.



Another example of a rich vertical intertextuality appears on page 68.

Describing his new cell inmates, al-°Utum says:

كانوا خمسة وكنت سادسهم الذي علمهم الدهشة

“They were five and I was their sixth *who taught them astonishment.*”

Both the underlined and italicized parts enjoy a good degree of iterability in formal and informal MSA that is linked to their citationality. The sentence triggers intertextual relations with two different contexts provided in the Quran: the underlined part invokes verse 22 of Chapter 18 and the italicized part invokes verse 71 of Chapter 20, respectively:

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَاثَةً رَابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةً سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ ۗ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةً وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ ۗ ... (الكهف 22/18).

“(Some) will say: They were three, their dog the fourth, and (some) say: Five, their dog the sixth, guessing at random; and (some) say: Seven, and their dog the eighth ...” (Pickthall).

قَالَ آمَنْتُمْ لَهُ قَبْلَ أَنْ آذَنَ لَكُمْ إِنَّهُ لَكَبِيرِكُمْ الَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ السِّحْرَ (طه 71/20).

“(Pharaoh) said: Ye put faith in him before I give you leave. Lo! he is your chief who taught you magic” (Pickthall).

The first context refers to a well-known story detailed in Chapter 18 (al-Kahf: The Cave) about a group of monotheists who fled from the prosecution of their king. They took refuge in a cave where God put them to sleep for 309 years. Later, when they woke up from their hibernation, people wondered about their number, guessing between three and eight. The second context refers to the encounter between Moses and the sorcerers of the Pharaoh of Egypt, after which the sorcerers bowed to Moses and believed in him. Then, Pharaoh accused Moses of being their master who taught them sorcery.

This double-layer intertext represents another case of textual appropriation and re-contextualization. Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum associates himself and his cell inmates with the pious people of the cave in the first part, and with Moses in the other. Again, a translation that achieves semantic equivalence only will risk the loss of a compound intertextual context. Such a context can be relayed by employing a paratextual device such as footnotes or endnotes which guarantees that the intertextual relations are recognized by the target reader. I usually opt for footnoting when the explanation is short, and for endnotes when expanded, such as in this case.

### **5.3.2. Translating Non-Quranic Intertexts**

Non-Quranic intertexts incorporated in the novel reflect a variety of types. They include classical and modern Arabic poetry, Hadiths (speeches) from Prophet Mohammad's tradition, local proverbs and sayings, segments of Arabic songs, and many words, phrases, and names that are easily recognized by Jordanian, and most likely Arab, readers. These intertexts or cultural references are frequently used, formally and informally, by Arabic speakers and writers to endow their discourses with authenticity, evidence, or even religious sanctity. Fulfilling the purposes for which they are imported into the novel is dependent on the reader's recognition of their presence.

Like the Quranic intertexts discussed above, non-Quranic intertexts in the novel posed a considerable challenge in translation. In dealing with them, I had to choose from the three options mentioned above. As in the case of Quranic references, I employed a combination of the first and the third strategies (semantic equivalence and paratextual devices) to ensure that intertextual relations are maintained and that the target reader can grasp their cultural significance.

To demonstrate the complexity of translating those non-Quranic intertexts, let's consider the following examples from the novel.

Page 23 presents us with an example of manifest intertextuality. Al-<sup>o</sup>Utum quotes the following verse by the seventh-century poet Kuthayyir <sup>o</sup>Azzah:

لقد زعمت أنني تغيرت بعدها                      ومن ذا الذي يا عز لا يتغير؟!!

“She claimed I changed after she was gone

O! <sup>o</sup>Azzah, who is he that doesn’t change?!”

In order to grasp the significance of the intertextual relation between this verse and the novel, one needs to consider the context from which it is culled out. This verse is part of a poem by Kuthayyir who loved <sup>o</sup>Azzah so much that most of his poetry was about her and his name was associated with hers. He was known as ‘Kuthayyir <sup>o</sup>Azzah.’ In the poem where this verse comes from, he describes how <sup>o</sup>Azzah’s death affected him physically and psychologically, turning him into a feeble man who is no longer interested in life. After her death, he stopped composing poetry because nothing appealed to him anymore.

The intertextual relation created here is not so easy to grasp even by the average Arabic reader. This verse triggers an intertextual relation with a prior context that only highbrow readers can establish. Al-<sup>o</sup>Utum relies on this kind of readers to discern the association he is making with this poet. Longing, to

his beloved in Kuthayyir's case and to freedom in al-°Utum's case, made both of them frail and vulnerable.

From a translational perspective, achieving a semantic equivalence only risks the loss of the relation between the two contexts. Therefore, another procedure or strategy is required. In this case, and since this intertextual relation is not so immediately important to the events of the novel, I opted for a literal translation of the verse, in addition to an endnote that introduces the poet and his love story, thereby giving the reader the option of following the thread, should they be interested, and simultaneously establishing a reasonable intertextual relationship between the two contexts.

Page fifty-six offers another example of manifest intertextuality. It's a case of appropriation, absorption, and re-contextualization. During interrogation, al-°Utum recites the following verse in response to a question:

ما تببت عن شعري ولا استغفرته      ما اسخف الشعراء لو هم تابوا

I never repented of my poetry or asked forgiveness

how silly poets would be if they did

Al-°Utum explains to the interrogator that this verse is from Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani's poetry, and that he replaced the word °eshqi (عشقي, my love) with

shi<sup>ri</sup> (شعري, my poetry), and the word al-<sup>o</sup>shaqu (العشاق, lovers) with al-sho<sup>a</sup>ara' (الشعراء, poets).

To determine the significance of this intertext, we have to link it with its original context. The verse comes from the poem 'ya Tunis al-khadra'' (O! Green Tunisia) by Nizar Qabbani, the Syrian poet who is well-known to Arab readers as a love poet and a staunch feminist. In this poem, Qabbani celebrates his love of women. The verse is re-accentuated or double-voiced which is accomplished through the said lexical change. It is recontextualized in the novel, thus acquiring a new meaning that pertains to unwavering poets, instead of lovers.

The Arabic reader can easily spot the intertextual relation between al-<sup>o</sup>Utum's text and Qabbani's poem. But this is more complicated in translation. As a first step, I opted for literal translation to convey the content rather than the form because, as declared earlier, this is an instrumental or educational translation. Nevertheless, achieving semantic, or near semantic, equivalence only, does not relay the intertextual relation intended by the author. Therefore, another step is needed for that purpose. Employing a similar strategy to that in the previous example, I used a footnote introducing the poet and explaining this association between poets and lovers, i.e., that they are both steadfast.

Another example of a conceptually rich vertical intertextuality is the following extract on page (36):

يولد الناس أحراراً، هكذا صرخ ابن الخطاب في وجه ابن العاص ...

People are born free, so ibn al-Khattab shouted in the face of ibn al-‘As

...

The importance of this cultural reference cannot be understood without linking it to its prior context. The extract invokes an incident that happened during the rule of Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second Khalif in the seventh century Islamic state. The son of the Governor of Egypt, Amr ibn al-‘As, whipped an Egyptian Copt because this Copt beat him in a horse race, boasting: I am the son of the ‘dignified.’ The Copt then travelled to Madinah, the Islamic capital, and complained to the Khalif. The Caliph summoned the Governor and his son and told the Copt to take his revenge, saying: beat the son of the ‘dignified.’ Then the Caliph shouted the famous question in the face of the Governor: “When did you enslave people although they are born free?”

Like other cultural references, the Arabic reader can easily grasp the intertextual relation here and what it means to mention ibn al-Khattab in the context of the novel, i.e., just rulers like him are missed. In translation however, this relation and the implications of the Caliph’s name will not be maintained without utilizing another translational procedure. Because it is a

comparatively long explanation, I added an endnote explaining the incident to establish an intertextual relation between the above-mentioned reference and its prior context.

The novel is replete with such intertexts and cultural references. Their significance and their relationship with prior texts and contexts, while discernible by the source text reader, will go unnoticed in a non-interventionist translation. A term like ‘black September’ (p. 11) is culturally specific to Jordan and refers to the civil war that broke in September 1970 between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian militias that were stationed in the country. Because of the losses on both sides, the month was so labeled. The term will remain puzzling to the target reader unless it is explained using a paratextual device. The same goes for ‘Mohammad Rasūl’s Hotel’ (p. 32). This phrase refers to the old Jordanian Intelligence Headquarters in the 1960s and 1970s when Rasūl was its Director. The term is used sarcastically to imply that the place was a venue for torturing opposition leaders and dissidents. These terms are used informally and enjoy a considerable degree of iterability. A mere semantic equivalence hardly reflects the intertextual relations between those intertexts and their prior contexts, and their significance will be missed by the target reader (except for readers who are seasoned in both the source and target cultures). This makes it incumbent on the translator to compensate



for this loss by utilizing another translational procedure such as those discussed above.

### **5.3.3. Conclusions**

As discussed above, intertextuality refers to the space where texts intersect and new (hyper)texts emerge. As a literary device, it depends on the presupposition of the presence of intertexts (or hypotexts) in texts and on the reader's recognition of such presence. For the recognition of intertexts, authors usually rely on shared cultural knowledge with the reader. The presence of intertexts in a text can either open it to interpretations or direct the reader towards a particular one. If such recognition can possibly be missed intraculturally, the possibility is doubled when the reading is intercultural, as in translation. To minimize the loss of the intertextual context, translators adopt certain translation strategies that ensure such context is relayed and recognized by the target reader. While the semantic equivalence can solve the linguistic difference, relaying the intertextual relations in the ST remains the daunting problem to the translator.

Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's novel abounds with Quranic and non-Quranic intertexts that present the translator with considerable challenges. Quran-related intertexts, for example, are among such cultural references that prove that

semantic rendering alone results in contextual loss. This dissertation shows how Quranic discourse provides significant textual potentiation and conceptual density when Quranic elements are imported into an Arabic text, such as al-ʿUtum’s novel. Drawing on notions of vertical and manifest intertextuality, double-voicing, and iterability/citatoriality, I argue that translating these elements demands translational interventions such as paratextual devices, in addition to achieving the semantic equivalence. The aim of these devices is to ensure that the intertextual relations linking them to their prior Quranic contexts are relayed and recognized by the target reader. This is essential for a communicative translation such as the one I carried out when producing al-ʿUtum’s novel. Nevertheless, I only went beyond lexicographical equivalence when an intertext carried a cultural significance and was critical to the novel’s context. On occasions, I left it to the target reader’s curiosity and individual interpretation.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Translating this text was anything but an easy task. Challenges that it posed were numerous, linguistic and non-linguistic. To begin with, choosing this text for translation was daunting, and rightly so. It provoked considerable hesitation on my side. This is a writer who is disfavored by the authorities in my country, Jordan. He was deprived of his liberty for the mere public expression of his solidarity with the poor among his fellow citizens. Translating his text can therefore inflict personally undesired consequences, the least of which would be getting a job. Nevertheless, the nobleness of the cause I believe, overcomes the risk of the task.

Also challenging is translating from one's mother tongue into one's second language: English in my case. Still, I think it is worth going for it, not only as a chance for practice, but as a modest contribution against the disproportionate translation ratios between English and other languages, i.e., a push against the hegemony of English in the US which is leading to the creation of a culture that is monolingual and unreceptive to the other (Venuti, 1995, p. 15). Therefore, I hope my translation can serve as a window through

which the American reader can peek into Arab culture or be exposed to the difference it exhibits.

Semantically speaking, most of the challenges were posed by the intertexts and cultural references as discussed above. Although the discussion centered on using paratextual devices in dealing with them, I believe no translator can settle with one or two translation strategies, particularly with long texts such as novels. So, in addition to the paratextual devices, I employed a variety of strategies for other such references. These include substitution, omission, transliteration, in-text explication, etc.

One of the terms I encountered and made me pause and think about how to translate them is الله 'Allah,' among many others. There are numerous debates on whether this term should be transliterated as 'Allah' or translated as 'God.' I chose transliteration because the term is actually a proper noun, and proper nouns such as John, George, or Ali are not usually translated, but used as they are. In addition, the term 'God,' unlike 'Allah,' can be singular or plural which is not acceptable in my monotheistic faith, Islam. I also transliterated words like 'Hajji' (male pilgrim) and Hajjeh (female pilgrim). These are used in Arabic as honorifics and have no equivalents in English that carry the same cultural weight. 'Halal,' on the other hand, is already in use in English.

Another term I chose to substitute is اليهود ‘Jews’ in the following sentence (p. 49):

لا للتطبيع مع اليهود

“No to normalization with the Jews.”

Instead of ‘Jews,’ I initially considered using the term ‘Israelis’ because I thought that a distinction should be made between the two. Using the word ‘Jews’ in this context, particularly with the Arab-Israeli conflict in mind, might imply an ideological conflict between Arabs and Jews, which is far from the truth. Most Jordanians, as evident in banners held in street protests, oppose the 1994 peace treaty and normalization with Israel because of its occupation of Palestinian land, not because of religion-related differences (or anti-Semitic sentiments which is counterintuitive since Arabs are themselves Semites). After consulting with the author, I took his suggestion to translate the term ‘Jews’ as ‘Zionists’ to more accurately convey the political motivation of the statement. In fact, many Jews are also against Zionists and Israeli aggressive policies and occupation of Palestinian land.<sup>9</sup>

It’s also worth mentioning here that the punctuation system used by the author also posed a difficulty in translation. It violates MSA punctuation system with excessive use of commas, semicolons, parentheses, and ellipses.

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<sup>9</sup> Personal correspondence with the author.

I tried as possible to remain loyal to the source text in this regard by striking a balance between this system and the English punctuation system, adhering to the latter when the ST punctuation confused the meaning. It should be noted therefore that the ellipses that abound in the text do not represent missing texts but demand that the text be read as reflections, i.e., as if you are talking to yourself.

Despite the attempted textual loyalty, I remain loyal to my goals in the first place. I believe that judging this translation, or any translation, as good or bad should rest on how much it serves the goals for which it is created. I hope therefore that, as far as solidarity with the author and resistance against silence are concerned, in addition to successfully dealing with intertexts, these goals are effectively fulfilled.

## **Appendix A:**

The following dates represent key events in the history of the Jordan (George, 2005; see also Jordan Profile; Robins, 2004):

1922 - The Council of the League of Nations recognizes Transjordan as a state under British supervision and exempt from the pro-Zionist promise of the Palestine mandate.

1946 – Anglo-Trans-Jordanian Treaty is signed granting the state formal independence, and Trans-Jordan is renamed the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Prince Abdullah becomes King.

1948 - State of Israel is announced as independent state. By the end of the first Arab-Israeli war, thousands of Palestinians flee the fighting to the West Bank, which was kept by Jordan.

1950 - Jordan annexes West Bank (which is condemned by many Arabs, some Palestinians included).

1951 July - King Abdullah assassinated in Jerusalem and Prince Talal ascends the throne, but he abdicates a year later because of ill-health. Hussein is proclaimed king.

1957 – Martial law is declared, and political parties are dissolved following a coup attempt by the free officers' movement.

1958 – Jordan and Iraq unite in response to the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria. A few months later, King Faisal of Iraq, King Hussein's cousin is dethroned.

1960 – Jordanian prime Minister is assassinated by Syrian agents.

1967 – Jordan suffers a great military loss, in addition to losing the West Bank in the war with Israel. It is followed by a second wave of Palestinian refugees fleeing the war into Jordan.

1970 – Civil war breaks out between government forces and Palestinian guerrillas resulting in thousands of casualties and the defeat of the Palestinian forces in what came to be known as Black September.

1989 – Jordanian Dinar value drops to half. Rioting follows in several cities over price increases.

1990 - Jordan suffers severe economic problems as a result of the Gulf crisis following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

1996 – Riots break out in southern towns over increase of food prices.

(Following this, the writer recited his poem 'The Prophecies of the



Hungry' for which he was put on trial and sentenced to one-year imprisonment).

1997 - Parliamentary elections boycotted by several parties, associations and leading figures.

2002 - Riots erupt in the southern town of Ma'an, the worst public disturbances in more than three years, following the death of a young man in the city during the attempts to apprehend the Islamist leader Abu Sayyaf.

2004 - Authorities seize cars filled with explosives and arrest several suspects said to be linked to al-Qaeda and planning chemical bomb attack on intelligence services HQ in Amman.

2005 August - Three missiles are fired from the port of Aqaba. Two of them miss a US naval vessel; a third one lands in Israel. A Jordanian soldier is killed.

2005 November - Sixty people are killed in suicide bombings by Al-Qaeda members at three international hotels in Amman.

2007 July - First local elections since 1999. The main opposition party, the Islamic Action Front, withdraws after accusing the government of vote-rigging.

2010 November - Parliamentary elections are boycotted by the opposition Islamic Action Front. Riots break out after it is announced that pro-government candidates have won a sweeping victory.

2011 January - Street protests and demonstrations in Tunisia encourage similar protests in other countries, including Jordan. Jordan experiences its own Arab Spring protests.

2011 February - Against a background of large-scale street protests, King Abdullah appoints a new prime minister and charges him with carrying out political reforms.

2011 October - Protests continue through the summer, albeit on a smaller scale.

2012 November – Protests break out against the lifting of fuel subsidies during which calls for the end of the monarchy are heard. Three people are killed.

2013 March - New government sworn in, with incumbent Abdullah Ensour reinstalled as prime minister following unprecedented consultation between the king and parliament.

2014 May - Jordan expels Syrian ambassador over accusations that Jordan harbors Syrian rebels.

2014 September - Jordan joins Arab states and the US in air strikes against Islamic State (ISIS) militants in Syria.

2014 November - Jordanian authorities arrest the deputy head of the country's Muslim Brotherhood organization in the first arrest of a major opposition figure in Jordan for several years.

2015 February - Islamic State (ISIS) publishes a video showing captured Jordanian pilot Muath Kasasbeh being burned alive. Jordan responds by stepping up its anti-IS air campaign and executing prisoners.

2016 February - King Abdullah says Jordan has reached saturation point in its ability to take in more Syrian refugees.

2017 July - Israel withdraws staff from its embassy in Amman after an incident in which a security guard shot dead two Jordanians.

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*O! My Prison Companions*

A novel by

Ayman al-<sup>c</sup>Utum

Translated from Arabic

By

Bassam Al Saideen

2018

## *O! My Prison Companions*<sup>10</sup>

### TABLE OF CONTENTS<sup>11</sup>

- (0) ﴿ Before we bring it into being ﴾
- (1) ﴿ He relates the truth ﴾
- (2) ﴿ Darkness upon layer of darkness ﴾
- (3) ﴿ For every announcement there is a term, and ye will come to know ﴾
- (4) ﴿ O my people! Work according to your power. Lo! I too am working ﴾
- (5) ﴿ We testify only to that which we know ﴾
- (6) ﴿ And We defer it only to a term already reckoned ﴾
- (7) ﴿ O ants! Enter your dwellings ﴾

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase comes from verse 39, chapter 12 in the Quran (Surah Yusuf) which narrates the story of Prophet Yusuf son of Ya'qub: he was thrown by his brothers in a well where he received his first revelation, was sold in Egypt as a slave, imprisoned, and finally appointed treasurer of Egypt. The author associates himself with Yusuf in the way hardship worked as a catalyst that changed their lives to the better.

<sup>11</sup> For the purpose of this dissertation, translation of the first four chapters is included below.

- (8) {No soul knoweth what it will earn to-morrow}
- (9) {There is not one of us but hath his known position}
- (10) {asking for the news of you}
- (11) {And by the night when it is stillest}
- (12) {bodies that would not eat food}
- (13) {Read thy Book}
- (14) {while you concealed within yourself that which Allah is to disclose}
- (15) {He saith: Lo! here ye must remain}
- (16) {Is there any way to go out}



## Chapter {0}

{Before we bring it into being} <sup>12</sup>

How often we lose ourselves in the tangles of life .... but we meet them again, by chance or by fate, as we dig into our memories ... We are what we forget, and thus doze into ourselves, or what we remember, and then wake up to our calamities and disappointments ... Man has never – ever – been that what eats and drinks; the like is done by animals and beasts ... We are what we try to remember, so we can live again; and because memories are a restoration of humanity when it passes through the spiral path of years, I came out of my deep self to narrate to you a chapter of my life, after a long voluntary absence ...

I wondered so often about the value of what I am doing now ... for I shouted in the face of my existence in reproach: who was willing to listen to

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<sup>12</sup> This phrase comes from verse 22, chapter 57 in the Quran (Surah al- Ḥadīd). It means that everything had been decreed before people were created. The writer is implying that all that happened to him had already been destined before he was born. The author could also be hinting at how the novel crystalized in his mind over the years before he wrote down.

the echo of your voice when you screamed in the well; only him the dweller in the bottom of that well was calling but to no answer, screaming and the echo of his voice going in vain ... alone, enjoying the sides of the well that were painted with the dust of the years, and in every grain of the dust dispersed around him and between his hands, he saw a story or a tale worth telling ... but he wakes up from his dreams to shout at his existence again: worth telling whom? And for what? Is anyone, when you call, going to lend you their ears?!

How difficult it is for one to gather from the dust scattered in the air, the threads of the tale! To reweave it, and bring it out a new gown that has just been woven, not as if fourteen years have passed ... the colors, however, might seem different if one does not patiently make his choices, and calmly dive into the past in order to be honest ... honest because history is a witness that won't have mercy on hypocrites, nor will it forgive liars ... There he is trying, as much as he can, to be the one at whom time has stopped outside life and inside the prison in that period of his life...

In the horrible moments of silence, he would stare at the horizon, and what horizon would the poor well offer? But with a vision that came from heaven, this horizon revealed a wide perspective ... that penetrated the tiny distance at first collision with this senseless wall, to make from it his own

horizon, a horizon that extended far, far away ... where he created tales and tales ...

In the well he found a lot of buried treasures ... They threw him there and said: some travelers will pick him up. They didn't know that the onset of prophecy lies in being thrown in the well. Poor are they who thought that death or deep absence would rid them of the well-dweller; it never crossed their minds that open spaces start from narrow holes ... It is there where life is made, and its components are rearranged ... Man, there, spells the letters of his rebirth again...

And without any pretense or arrogance ... I have – really – been there ...!!

Memories, however, are a random bullet; it might kill you while you are unprepared for a big pool of blood surrounding you, lying on the bed of nostalgia ... or it might make nothing but a noise that passes close by an ear, craving to hear news, deluding itself that it is good news, but is not at all ...

Between two intervals of time, one catches his breaths, to listen to their rhythm as they spin again; between two bullets the victim picks up his body to become witness to the time of injustice, and between two words the poet

styles his glory when he masters the art of manipulating the letter and goes deep into interpretation and contemplation ...

It is not easy for me to stop me, and greet me, after I denied me ... I do not know why we sometimes deny ourselves, betray the angel that lives in us ... it was not an angel, for I am not a Greek trying to glorify his Gods ... I am a human in the well, full to the brim with the water of feelings. ... I am a humble poet trying to swallow the time machine to go a little back in his memory to write what has been absented by the prisons of days and years ... but a thousand screamers in the way are wailing and howling, not because they are bereaved, but doing so in order not to grant me the peace and security with which I can choose the purest stream of the spring of my imagination, so I can write with honesty, or let's say, with reasonable accuracy ...

Here I am blocking my ears – as I walk with confidence– against all the screamers in the way; I used the cotton of reality in order to succeed in this daunting effort ... will I succeed? Maybe. Will I fail? Maybe ... But it is enough for me that I'll have tried ...!!!

## Chapter (1)

### (He telleth the truth)<sup>13</sup>

The city of Ajlun, which rises high and proud in the sky of history, a mother who honors her children ... and I am one of her children ... invited me one evening to her castle, and when a mother like her invites you, you cannot linger or make lame excuses ... This mother knows that the poet dwelling inside me is more obedient to her than me, and so, she misses no opportunity for such a gathering without luring him with a poem which he scatters like gems at her feet, asking her to pray for him ...

I obeyed, with a feeling of intimacy overwhelming my existence, and rushed to where Saladin<sup>14</sup> inscribed on its rocks the history of freedom and

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase comes from chapter 6, verse 57 in the Quran. The verse describes an argument between Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and some disbelievers. The Prophet tells them that the source of his message is God who tells only the truth, and therefore, he also tells the truth. Al-<sup>c</sup>Utum's use of this phrase as a chapter title is tantamount to a pledge that what he is about to narrate is the truth and nothing but the truth.

<sup>14</sup> Saladin is a famous Muslim leader who fought the crusaders and restored Jerusalem in 1187.

martyrdom, with blood not shed in vain, saving our world in the eternal, Holy Lands, eternal as a verse in the Holy Book of Allah.

I was not registered in the engineers' association yet when the dental association invited me to that lively poetic evening. Ascending to the hilltop where the castle is, then another ascent to the top of the castle, I stood in the face of the wind, reciting my rhyme, or let's say, my cry; since I professed poetry, and burned in its holy flames, the sound of my cry accompanied me more than the rhythm of my singing. And you can call my singing – if it existed that day – crying tinged with heartbreak ... Like any citizen, I stood reciting my diary in the castle, and the beat started on the melody of hunger and poverty in the poem (Diary of a Citizen); perhaps the feeling of hunger invites indignation in some excessively rich people, or maybe you commit a crime, when you open the wasteful elite's eyes to the reality of hunger, poverty, and marginalization. And maybe a poet like me did not have the right – according to government standards of course – to side with the poor ... Indeed, the government is used to a special type of poets; those who gasp after the glitter of positions, fame, and money, selling everything to get some of that glitter ... I confess today that it is the glitter of the deceived, that deceives bewildered and short-sighted people ... the government is accustomed to poet laureates, and rarely does a poet rise in Jordan outside this circle, and because

I drew my own circle away from the commotion and drums and trumpets, I was targeted by their arrows, and I was an easy target to their hunting guns – perhaps – while I flew away from the flock ... but birds have an instinct of freedom before anything else, which urges them to sing, even preserves their sounds ... oh, if it weren't for our longing for freedom, we would have lost our voices a long time ago ...

After reciting the poem, I felt the castle of Ajlun pulling me by my hand to one of its distant corners. The castle then took the form of a lady at that time and started interrogating me for a while; I was – for the sake of her eyes – willing to stay up late with her until Saladin emerges again, or until Osama bin Monqiz<sup>15</sup> appears riding his horse, crossing the tangled pathways, coming up to us there, where history marks an exceptional encounter between two lovers ...!!

The castle let out a long sigh. I pitied her on that day, and she started to mumble incomprehensible phrases that I couldn't make out; I thought I heard whimpering, but it was not. I mean I heard a sad symphony, which she sang with an enchanting soft voice, and I felt – like I never felt before – an ancient love sweeping all my senses together; her voice pulled me further towards her,

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<sup>15</sup> One of Saladin's army leaders.

and made me bend down to place a kiss on her musk-mixed soil ... I didn't say a single word; I remained until sunset listening to her melodious music, and later, when the moon loomed in the horizon, it was half-lit, it started to approach us, ascending to overlook us aloft ... My shadow was thrown between the hands of the castle, and when I left her, I left my shadow there, and I let the moon be its pilot ...

At least a week passed since the middle of August 1996, the date when I recited my tragedy and met my darling; my senses were still scented with that meeting with the castle. That meeting escorts me wherever I go; I leave the house and it leaves with me, I get on the bus and it does the same, I go to university and it never abandons me. And when I am about to read a book, its shadow comes out from between the lines ... never vanishes, or say, never moves aside except when I meet some old friends or colleagues ... then it appears again once I leave them. A colleague looked at me with amusement and he said:

- I didn't expect to see you here!!
- When do you mean? (I spoke to him in the lab while holding a soil sample in my hands for analysis ...)?!
- Didn't the night visitors pay you a visit ...?!



- Night visitors ... Only my poems visit me at night!!
- Don't be a wise guy ...!!
- Man ... what do you mean by night visitors ...?!
- I learned from a relative of mine in the Intelligence that they are waiting for an opportunity to arrest you ...?!
- What for (I asked indifferently)?! For what charge?
- They want to arrest you, that's all I learned ... and don't tell anyone I told you ...
- Let them do what they want ...!!
- You are not afraid!!
- Why should I be afraid .... I did nothing wrong but poetry ... is that a sin ...?!
- .....!!!!

Another week or a little more passed after this fleeting conversation, and I forgot what we said or pretended to. I don't know anymore, but I surrendered again to the routine of life.

A scorching summer. August has not completely left us; it left behind part of it with the start of September, and September is always black, even in

Turkey and Morocco, it is called so<sup>16</sup> ... and a swollen-bellied man gasping as he climbs the slope just before the corner towards his house, a permanent hunger, an ancient thirst, a whole bucket of water has to be poured inside (so I told myself). monarchy

Moments to swing by the bakery where they have a loveable kind of sweets, and some delicious cakes; this is part of the fattening diet before having the usual fatty dinner. The bread bag in my hand, a growing feeling of thirst, and the few meters that separate me from home alleviate the torrent of perspiration that never leaves me with every journey. Oh father ... one semester stands between me and the door of certainty, and all that's left is one semester for me to become (Pash Muhandis).<sup>17</sup> I wonder, I should carry this heart to him with no questions asked? Don't questions stir worries in a fool like me? Why am I here for heaven's sake? I will hate the chemistry teacher because he taught me that every reaction has a catalyst, where can I control a catalyst for the reaction of all these obsessions that prick my memory, to face them and arrive at a conclusion instead of this hallucination?! What a memory

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<sup>16</sup> Black September in Jordan refers to the civil war that broke in September 1970 between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian militias that had military bases in Jordan.

<sup>17</sup> Pash is a Turkish honorific that is informally used in Arabic, particularly Egyptian, for addressing engineers, meaning Mr. Engineer.

that can endure all those old stabs, and absorb all this bleeding, and keep the details, without leaking anything!!!

Oh! if man knew what the days hold for him, he would at least control his amazement, and would never be surprised again, except in dead corners which have nothing to hide!! Until that moment, I never knew how beautiful the days were, how surprising they were, and how ignorant we are of them.

A few more steps and my mother will be waiting for me on the porch, knowing in advance how thirsty, hungry, and sad I am!!

Good evening ... I saw you in my heart this evening, your face was pale, I didn't know why. I tried to wipe off your eyes, a cold tear that settled on your sore eyelids for a long time. I don't know why at that time I felt a fatal longing! How could this feeling attack me when you occupy this deep shaft in my heart?! You suddenly turned your face away from me. The encounter was very poignant. I see this sorrow for the first time in my life, and your tears were adding to my agony. Were they my tears or yours that were pouring like springs of pain?!! You looked frail. I didn't know what to do or say; should I ask you about a painful past that is still eating into my guts ... or should I ask you about me, or about you, about what the days have done to you ... about the stealthy time ... or about the dream life ... or about the slaughtered heart?!!

I couldn't even be sure if I was asking you or myself!! What part of the past formed you before me?!! Where can I trust my power to distinguish between what was yesterday, what is now, and what is to be tomorrow?! Will I be able to perceive the worth of questions at the wrong time?!

O! Omaymo, on which side goes he

a lover, between the ribs a soul he owns

He watches travelers cross deserts and love obey

and so, he sits with heaviness, and mourns

You were not a ghost ... I am not yet drowned in the abyss of delusion. It was you, but a totally different you; the paleness that frightened me ... the eyes that sank in their cavities ... the frailty that almost killed you ... the body that is on the verge of a breakdown ... the eyelids that shiver like a petrified bird ... the cheeks that look like dry leaves ... the lost smile ... the choked look ... and the voice that vanished ... I came up to you to make sure that I still see you, and I whispered in your ears, shivering:

- This cannot go on like this!! We are willingly walking towards our death ... I ... (She interrupted me, taking two steps away from the center of the heart):

- Not yet. I am standing in my place ... you are the one who is walking, it's not the cloud's nature to settle above still land. I choose death standing, but you search for it. You have no reasons, but I do. You have no excuse, while excuses are made for me ... Roses cannot leave their grounds; some pick on their weakness with a blatant move. You did not make the right move. And roses have their habits for dealing with those approaching them ... Haven't you learned yet?!!

- But I am not those clouds you speak of; I am your sky that overshadows this sterile desert. Doesn't this arid desert long for a rainstorm, and if the rainstorm smites it not, then a shower?!! And I am your land that will grow its most beautiful flowers for you ...

- This is no time for whining!!

- What cruelty you surprise my memory with. I am more solid than rocks in the depths of valleys ... didn't ...

She interrupted me once more:

- At night, there was a convoy waiting for its guide; he didn't come. In the morning, it left without a guide; it is not necessary for the convoy to have someone who ignites the ember of an overwhelming longing in the hearts of those poor camels. The weariness of the long journey, and the thirst of the

exhausting nights, and that who is bound to be their leader, are more than enough for them!!

- But I entered the home of love, to memorize the ode I will recite to her ears. It is not fair that she leaves without me!! Isn't there anyone who can wait a few more minutes!!

- Sunrise waits not for sleepers.

- It was not up to me. They told me: The convoy cannot be enchanted without a guide memorizing his songs ...

- You are delusional!!

- Believe me. I entered in order to memorize the contours of my country; I entered so that I could draw the map of my country on the walls of dead hearts. I only had the letter; it was red, and the hearts were red; it was my first experience, otherwise, what do red hearts need red letters like them for ... what a pity; those hearts did not memorize anything!!

- Didn't I tell you that you were delusional? These are not contours of a home country, but a home country made for contours. They are drawing for you the limits of your house and measure the circle of your life with their chalk. Can you draw with chalk other than theirs?!! Your love for me has only driven you more astray!!

- But people who know love best are the most ignorant. I have relied on the compass of spontaneous love. Can stars change their course as they spin their eternal cycle around their center?! I was only a star in your sky; I can't imagine that I could ever miss my orbit around your center!!

It was 10 pm, on the sixth day of September, four years until the end of the twentieth century...10 pm of the time of murdered dreams, and I'm sitting on the rug of pain, waiting for dawn time in order to practice my rituals for fermenting concentrated love... -sometimes – minutes pass heavier than the mountains of delusions, while struggling against the sea tides coming from the time of Allah. How much strength do clock hands need to overcome the gravity of heavy time!!!

I look at my mother's heart before entering my room... I remember (Maksim Gorky): "the mother's heart is a flower that never withers." She's with me now to witness with my father how much we love, and how much we adore!!

Wolves don't attack you except if you were scented with the blood of love; wolves follow the smell of the blood, and women follow the blood of smell, and on that very night, I was saturated with the blood of love, and was on a splendid date with the wolves... as if Allah prepared my mother – whose heart is extremely sensational – for a first real scene.

We heard intermittent knocks on the door. I knew from their rhythm that they were strange and dry. I delved through the long hallway out of the house towards the main door, to meet my father who was coming out of his room near that door... Together we opened it and faced a new copy of a portrait that never before stood in full colors in front of us ... three men in civilian clothes, and the fourth in military clothes, decorated with hollow wireless devices in their hands, producing continuous screaming, sometimes more like a wounded tigress's purring.

The military man – a first lieutenant - pushed the paper in his hands to my father, and my father read it... until this moment I know it meant me, but my father, whose features did not change said in a confident, but somewhat low tone: "Wait a minute." And he intended to close the door in their faces. I know that he wanted to do so to give me a chance to see the paper's content, and to discuss with me what to do about it... but the officer and the others suddenly became suspicious, and considered that as rejection or evasion; my father hardly closed the door when the officer put his hand in the remaining space before the door closed completely, and when the door opened again, I saw on the poor officer's face signs of desperate hope that his orders be carried out immediately. I imagined his face was black at that moment, perhaps fearing for himself to fail in such a simple mission, to which three intelligence officers



who stood alert behind him would bear witness... My father and I didn't resist the opening of the door in front of them... My father gave way, and pointed to my room without speaking...

The paper, from the Attorney General of the State Security Court, gave the chorus, who imposed themselves on us like an unexpected guest that evening, the right to search the room, and to confiscate all that could threaten the security and the stability of the country...!! The uniformed officer occupied a corner in the room and crouched without moving an inch...The other three are the ones who began to practice their favorite hobby of digging into everything their hands could reach... The first one looked tall, bulky, and chubby, with his belly overflowing over his belt, and had colored eyes, in which goodness sunk and hatred prevailed ...The other two were of medium build; one of them was too skinny and I hadn't seen him before; the other one's appearance looked familiar to me because I had often seen in the demonstrations, protests, and seminars organized by the students' Union of the University of Science and Technology... He always listened to me while I recited my poems and seemed most excited about my poetry!!

My room had modest furniture, devoid of anything except for my desk, on which some books and papers were scattered, and my library which contained more pieces of my poems than books ... and a closet with some cassette tapes

and awards ... With these simple qualifications, my room seemed like a precious treasure for the night visitors (I remembered the term ‘night visitors’ my colleague said while we were in the Soil Lab at the University). They attacked every written-on piece of paper and took them, and the video tape was the substantial evidence against me. It was the tape of the poetic evening at Ajlun Castle, and this party is now thrown because of it. My passport was in the hands of one of them. He browsed it, then he gave it to my father, making him feel grateful that he didn’t confiscate it. My father said to him: “of course, you’re not going to take it.” He replied with arrogance: do you want me to?! My father accosted him and said: “You don’t have the right to do that! There is no law that allows you to do this.” Because the intelligence officer remembered that his mission was to confiscate all that put the security of the country at stake, he stopped arguing with my father, and perhaps he thought to himself and said, “How stupid I am. This passport is issued by the government, so how can the government issue a threat to its security?”

There were two others outside stationed next to the house in case I thought of running away, and because the house had one floor, they were moving around close to the windows, which made my father angry, so he shouted at them with reproach, and shamed the officers for what they did, so the first one was forced to send them away to hide in their secluded car. *Escape*, I said to

myself!! How far it is from me and I am from it in this shape and my heavy weight. But they didn't know that they were inscribing this term in my mind, to jump back to the surface on one cold prison night.

The chorus continued their detailed search; not a single sheet of paper with a printed poem or a few verses, or a manuscript in my handwriting, was left uncollected and thrown in a big (box); it seemed like they were collecting gems and pearls ... so they were in our eyes as well!!

In the midst of this detailed search, the familiar officer took me to a corner in the room and spoke to me with a low voice: I read one of your poems a few days ago: "Your Hijab," and it's the greatest poem I have read by you ... how beautiful you are, Poet... I didn't know why he did that with me. Uttering this declaration away from the others' eyes and ears, was he speaking the truth about his feelings towards my poetry?! Or did he say that in a way to soften the atmosphere after seeing clouds of tension prevail in the room then, so he wanted to disperse it with sweet talk?! I don't know ... but, indeed, he succeeded in moving me – *me* in particular – to other levels that cleared some suspicions in my mind. I cheered him: "Really?!" He answered, "You don't need praise from me; your poetry is well-known." He ended with that and joined his other colleagues in tearing the body of my room in the middle of which the box became like a center attracting papers from every direction ...

The room search took more than an hour, and when the chorus felt they had enough, one of them said to me, “You can have all these papers back after a few days, they are yours and you have the right to claim them, anytime you want ... and now you must accompany us, for some routine procedures; it won’t take more than two hours; some investigation regarding little things and you can go back to your family ...”

At that time, I reached a great degree of carelessness, or let’s say, challenge; the paper that was decorated with the signature of the Attorney General of the State Security Court required them, in addition to searching my room, to arrest me, and it authorized the officer in the military uniform to do that. I said to them: I want to put on my clothes to go with you, and they agreed after some hesitation, thinking I might run away in the meantime, but I asked for this to go inside to my mother. I said goodbye to her – although I felt my absence would be long – and I talked to her to reassure her: “I will come back in two hours, Ḥajjeh<sup>18</sup>... don’t worry...” She looked at me with eyes full of kindness and suspicion... I almost grew weak in front of them, but I reassured

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<sup>18</sup> Ḥaj and Ḥajjeh (meaning pilgrim) are Arabic terms used for respectfully addressing old men and women (respectively) who performed their pilgrimage to Mecca. The use of the term is usually generalized as an honorific to address all old people in the Arabic vernaculars.

her again: “Don’t worry, I will come back soon... no more than two hours, Insha’Allah<sup>19</sup>...” I went out feeling as if a knife of sympathy for my mother was stuck in my back; I didn’t mean to cause her heartache... but fortunes proceed not by our choices...

Two of them surrounded me and took me to the intelligence car, which chose the dark area of the land that lies on the western side of the house, accompanied by the police car. They sat me between two of the policemen in the back seat; the guns settled on the side of each policeman, and I was sitting between two guns.

The armed car was carrying me through the night road to the Department.<sup>20</sup> For the first time, I feel me; a great blessing granted to you by others, when they make you feel how great you are. The swishing of their devices interrupted my dreams that stretched for years, which I made in a moment. The prospects of life start to jump now; for the first time, my life routine is changed; I feel something new in my monotonous way of life. I must be on the verge of a new love epoch, as breaking the stagnation and monotony

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<sup>19</sup> Insha’Allah is frequently used in formal and informal Arabic to mean if God will, which is usually said in a hopeful sense.

<sup>20</sup> In Jordan, the ‘Department’ usually refers to the Intelligence Department in Amman.

happens with me only in cases of love!! Could it be that I am now practicing one of its rituals?!

My eyes were kissing the land, and the pillars of the soul were lighting the way. The sky was smiling to the soil, and the land, the road, and the soil are all together forming the new body of my old beloved... I look at the sidewalks and roads; before this day, I used to know them by heart, but now I draw them; I am almost certain that the police car was going along the road that I had drawn in my imagination, although it wasn't strange to any of us, but it was of my creation!

O! homeland; a proem to a beginning: good evening! This is the first time I know you this way, can you believe this?!! It is the first time I feel how much I love you, and how latent you are in me. O! bird that wakes up again: here I am preparing my depths for you, so that you permeate into it... you came as ordained ... O! ... homeland!!

## Chapter (2)

### ﴿Layer upon layer of darkness﴾<sup>21</sup>

Close to midnight, the car stopped in the courtyard of the Intelligence Department in Irbid... Throughout this short trip from our house to the Department, the police car was in front of us, and I thought that there was another police car following us, and I was in the middle one... although I was besieged on both sides, and someone like me ought to be taken by worry, and fear ought to sneak into my heart, but I actually felt like an important and dangerous man, I didn't realize that they needed three cars to accompany me on such a short journey... Danger was displayed in what looked like another theatrical scene. The siren light on top of the police car in front of us was revolving, and when it touched my face – in its rotation – my eyes glimmered between the policemen behind the glass, so I looked like a dangerous political leader... you won't believe that this feeling filled me with delight and bestowed upon me a new experience.

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<sup>21</sup> This is part of Verse 40, Chapter 24 of the Quran.

At the entrance of the Intelligence Department in my home city, the cars stopped for a moment, and before they continued going in, I saw the guard at the gate walk slowly from his cabin and get closer to the car, and after he examined the men in it, and checked their identity cards, he pulled up his body in a thoughtful way, and saluted us, and once again I felt that I was an important man. I didn't doubt for a moment that the salutation was for me!!

The police car that preceded us waited outside, while our honorable car went in, then it circled half way to the left of the building. The two guards gracefully got out before me, and signaled to me to get out, and as soon as I lumbered out, they surrounded me, and the officer who was sitting in the front seat ordered them to escort me inside... we entered an empty room with only a few damaged chairs with worn wood and crooked iron legs, where I sat with the two faithful guards, and the officer went down a hallway, where they led I didn't know. The two guards did not say a single word all the way... When I settled into one of these chairs, I accidentally turned to the face of the one sitting on my right, but he didn't turn to me and remained still in his place like a statue, and I did the same with the one on my left, and he did the same, like his companion... I felt, or thought, sorry for them, as they froze inside their statues, but I dismissed thinking of such a feeling, and I started looking around the room... It seems that the officer who went in was checking for an empty



prison cell to put me in ... and that's exactly what happened... Only a few minutes passed when the officer came back and signaled to us to follow him. We barely got to the door of the room when the faithful guards left us, and I found myself alone with the officer. The door of the room led us to a dark hallway. I don't know if it was originally dark, or it was made dark when I arrived here... The officer walked in front of me, and I followed him... Darkness encompassed the hallway except for a glimmer of light that I thought came from one of the staircases on the second floor... The officer leaned to the right, walked through another darker hallway, and opened a low door. I thought I would settle here, but he went ahead. I lowered my head to avoid hitting this door frame while I was following him, then he walked a few meters, and we faced a lower door than the previous ones. I wondered: why do the doors get shorter as we moved forward, and the hallways get darker as we walked?! I - of course - did not find an answer for my question. The third door seemed the door to my cell, and it actually was. The officer opened it and invited me in. My cell door was of heavy iron. When the officer wanted to open it, he gathered all his strength to undo the latch that was in the middle of the door, and the darkness didn't prevent me from distinguishing its gray color. The door squeaked in the officer's hand while pushing it inside and gesturing to me with his hand to get in ... I entered ... he closed the door and

said to me through an aperture in the top third of the door, “Would you like to have the Quran?!” “Yes,” I shouted. He disappeared for a moment and came back: he gave me the Quran through the aperture and said to me in a clear mocking tone, “Take it, you can now sing: *prison is either Paradise or Hell... and I am the adventurer and the adventures*<sup>22</sup> ... then he put on a fake smile and said: I am sure that you know it by heart! This is the right time to sing it here!! I was amazed by his great ability to mock, and at the same time I liked his shrewdness at this difficult moment ... and I mumbled to myself: this mocker knows everything, it wouldn’t be surprising if he was reciting it with us – as one of us – when we were spending summer nights in Dibbin camps, or winter nights in al-Yabis valley camps!!

He closed the aperture at the top of the door tightly, and I heard the squeak of the latch, and I realized that locks were back to doing the work for which they were made ... and darkness dominated the place.

He left me alone in the darkness, and for the first time in my life I find myself in a solitary cell, I don’t know how to recall that life-changing moment in order to evoke my real feeling then... it was a mixture of astonishment, fear, anxiety, anticipation, and disbelief... all this was contradictory at the same time ... I fumbled the Quran with my hand to comprehend that I was

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<sup>22</sup> A song by the Palestinian activist Dr. Yousef Natsheh.

here facing the reality of my arrest. I repeated that twice and I made sure of this reality ... I tried to redefine myself at that moment ... “Who am I?” I asked the one perching in the depth of myself, and I yelled: “I am a political prisoner, in the Intelligence Department, in a solitary cell, in the middle of the night, on a piece of my beloved country ...” I didn’t like this definition, so I repeated it as follows: “I am a poet who loves his country and this love brought me here!!” I liked this definition more than the previous one, so I repeated it to convince myself ... I was still standing up until that moment facing the door’s aperture where I heard the officer’ last sermon, then I fell back into myself. I turned to face the walls of the cell... Darkness was prevailing, and I couldn’t see anything. I imagined I was swimming in the waves of the night. I don’t know how Imru’ al-Qays’<sup>23</sup> verse jumped into my confused mind:

And like sea waves, night loosened its rules

On me, with all sorts of worries

to test

In the beginning, I couldn’t see anything, but darkness slowly turned into a time-sharing friend, and so my pupils widened and adapted to the darkness, and I started to distinguish things in the cell ... It was a unique cell; it had only a metal bed occupying half its area, and it was almost two meters wide

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<sup>23</sup> A well-known sixth century Arab poet (501-540 AD).

and three meters long. The metal bed was the same one that is used by military personnel in their quarters, and the same type that was commonly used in the First World War ... It seems that armies go by the same habits ... On this bed, one blanket was thrown, which I had to use as my cover or my mattress; the spongy mattress did not protect me from the pokes of the bed springs ... Through the crack under the door, a small amount of light leaked in to lighten the sharpness of the wounding darkness ... I held the Quran, then I muttered: “it seems the officer was making fun of me, how can I read in this atmosphere?!!” Then, out of good will, I said: “Maybe he meant to read it tomorrow when morning dawns ...” I felt the bed. I blamed myself for thinking that it wasn’t good. I sat on its side, then I thought: man makes his own world in difficult circumstances; the bed and its suitability for sleep is not important; what matters is that I was psychologically prepared to face the worst!! It is not the comfortable bed that gives you a quiet sleep; many people are captured by insomnia while turning on the most luxurious beds, and many people fall asleep through the long night while sleeping on the side of the street, or on wood panels ... Isn’t a worn rug on which sleepy self-reconciled people sleep better than beds of gold and satin on which sick and ailing people sleep ...?! I decided that day to start taming myself and breaking its hard nature, and I proclaimed: “I will not sleep on the bed. I will pull the blanket

down and sleep on half of it, and cover myself with the other half,” but when I examined the blanket, I doubted that it could accommodate both things, so I moved to the next idea: I will sleep on it without covering myself ... Suddenly, I heard heavy knocking that got me out of my thoughts ... I kept silent and listened carefully, but the sound stopped. I thought I started to imagine things, but the voice returned shortly after, then I leaned my neck towards the sound and held my breath in anticipation of what was happening. At first, I thought it was the officer ... I thought: maybe he felt lonely and came to join me, but if the officer came, he would open the door or its aperture, and would not knock anyway, and this sound doesn't sound like knocking on doors, it sounds like knocking on walls ... After a few moments of silence, my guess was right. Someone was knocking on the opposite wall with his hand, and following it with a low voice, trying to keep the sound within our circle. At the beginning, amazement held my tongue, so I did not move from my place and did not make a sound ... but the knocking guy came back to doing it again, whispering words whose meaning I couldn't make out. And I very cautiously approached the wall, waited steadily nearby, and he did it again. I heard him saying:

- Who are you?

The question sounded silly to me, and it seemed like he expected me to answer immediately ... but I disappointed him, and the place drowned in silence again ...

The knocking guy did not lose hope, so he started knocking again, but I was still wary that he might be one of the prison guards who wanted to extract certain information from me, or to lure me to his place, and trap me... My sense of self-preservation compelled me - in that situation - to keep calm, and to watch things around me without making any noise...

I liked the knocking guy's persistence, as his charge of hope had not faded out yet. This time he knocked on the wall harder than before, and talked louder:

- Man, don't be afraid... I am ... a detainee like you ... I heard your steps when you came in here, and heard the damned officer talking to you ...

I had not yet been reassured that he was not one of the prison officers or informants, but I was a bit encouraged, and answered:

- And what do you want from me?
- Nothing ... I just felt lonely and wanted to break the boredom.
- So, ... who are you?
- I am saa ...arrested here because I am from the Islamic groups.
- The Islamic groups?!!

- The Salafi Jihadists... Excommunication and Exodus... Monotheists...

we have many names. You name us.

- And what did you do that made you my neighbor here in prison?!
- Just a sermon in a mosque!!

I had started to feel a bit comfortable, and felt reassured, or say, I convinced myself that I did, because I found a great pleasure in this conversation, so I decided to go deeper into it no matter what it cost ... I picked up from his last sentence and I said in a sarcastic tone:

- Man ... a sermon ... who are you fooling ...
- A sermon, I swear ...
- And then.
- The intelligence cut our way, so we gave them what they deserved.
- What did they deserve?
- The hell of a beat up... (He said it proudly).

I felt more suspicious than before, and I imagined that I fell into a swamp full of mud and rot, so I decided to stop talking ... It was as if my neighbor read my mind when he noticed that I stopped talking for a while, so he yelled:

- Hey, don't be afraid... We are used to this (he kept silent, then continued): but you didn't tell me why they brought you here?

- Because of some poems!!

As if my neighbor had the right opportunity to get back at my previous sarcasm, so he said in the same tone with which I spoke to him a while ago:

- Man ... poems ... who are you fooling ...?!!

I felt that the conversation had to stop then; I left him burning as he awaited an answer from me, and I went back to fumbling my way to bed ... I heard him knocking again later, and talking, but I didn't reply ... he yelled:

- Answer me man... don't go away... it's too early to sleep... please...  
just say something ...

I turned deaf ears to all his repeated calls ... This was one of my first drills, to control my senses and feelings when the wolf of desire attacks the flock of lust. I used to fire arrows of will at it, injuring it or killing it.

At the moment when I needed a human being to stay up late with, in order to lighten the darkness that surrounds everything, I gave up this idea, imposing silence on myself, so that I would not be humiliated or defeated in front of it, and so lose its respect for me ... It was a somewhat successful drill ... In the future – so I muttered – I will control myself more ...

I looked at the watch, its phosphoric hands pointed at one after midnight ... My first night passed like a turtle on a racetrack ... I pulled the blanket and threw it on the ground, and secretly swore to sleep on the floor ...



The cell was suffocating; no air, even hot, drifted in. My breaths, which were like intermittent gasping because of my heavy weight, increased my suffocation ... I tried to sleep to forget what I was in ... All my attempts went in vain ... I turned on the floor, and I was attacked by a torrent of questions that only wake you up when you want to sleep ...

Why I am here? What brought me here? How long will I stay in this cell? Will I see light tomorrow, or will I remain drowned in the darkness? And what is my mother doing now? And how does my father spend his time after seeing me getting shockingly arrested right in front of his eyes?

My line of questions was only interrupted by the sound of snoring from my neighbor, who surrendered to sleep after he gave up on my answers. For a moment, I envied him for sleeping, and there I was unable to do just that .... I turned again and again ... I covered my eyes with my left arm, and made a sleeping pillow of my right arm ... and did not succeed; I stayed awake ...

I sat crossed-legged and stared into the darkness. I wanted to see into it, or through it, what I wanted. It did not let me down that night ... I summoned the whole family ... my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, they sat around me, their shadows looked angelic, oozing with light. I realized that my darkness is nothing but a fleeting symptom; here I am dispelling it with this beautiful presence ... everybody looked at me as if they were waiting for me

to speak. I said to them: “Yes, you want to hear the last of my poems.” None of them spoke then, they just nodded their heads with approval. So, I proceeded:

“My flags are still flying ... You can see them above this prison when you leave for our home ... and I will stay here to guard them!! Don’t fear for me. Winds blow on prisons and wheat fields alike ... When my grandfather used to plant wheat in our land, I used to see the high wheat spikes wave like flags ... Today, when I entered here, I saw my grandfather at the prison gate holding those spikes, and he presented them to me ...”

“You know that I used to be quiet in my childhood” – I said this as I turned to my mother – “but the crescent must turn into a full moon” – I said this as I turned to my father – “and when the crescent turns into a full moon, its light must cover vast areas that it didn’t reach when it was a crescent ... Today, I am not a child anymore. The titan of poetry has woken inside me ... and if this titan scares them, so be it. And if it causes me such pokes, so be it ...”

My voice suddenly changed ... it became louder, carried a tone of challenge and confrontation ... My father disappeared in the darkness, then my brothers, and my sisters after that ... My mother remained next to me. I lowered my voice in her presence, and I talked to her kindly: “Don’t leave me here alone ...” then her angelic shadow began to disappear little by little until

my head fell onto my chest ... then I felt myself leaning on my side and falling on the floor ...

When the guard woke me up the next morning, I couldn't tell if what happened last night was a dream or a hallucination?!

{3}

**{For every announcement there is a term, and ye will come to know<sup>24</sup>}**

The sound of the door's lock from outside, and its squeaks, woke me up. The guard who entered walked two heavy steps, put a small tray in front of me, and went out without uttering a word. He closed the door behind him and left me with my breakfast: a small piece of bread, a boiled egg, and nothing else ... and because I was not used to hunger, and did not intend to adapt to it yet, and because a long night full of concerns and dreams had passed, and I had digested everything in my stomach, I thought that such food looked very fancy. It came at the right time, and I was ready to swallow all of it into my deepness ... all of it!! It was one egg. I peeled it with pleasure and started to nibble it and add a bite of bread. The bread was dry, and the egg needed something to be push down as it held to the wall of my esophagus, refusing to land in my stomach ... This food was hard to swallow, but I had to convince myself that there would be nothing hard from now on ...

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<sup>24</sup> This is verse 67 from Chapter 6 (The Cattle) in the Holy Quran.

I hardly finished my breakfast when the officer from yesterday entered my cell, smiled at me as a friend, and gestured to me, come on. I said to myself: where to? And because hopes are the space of life as the poet says, “So hard life can be without a space of hope,”<sup>25</sup> I hoped that they were going to release me, or at least they were going to do a simple interrogation, then I would see myself outside these dead walls going back to my family and my home ... The officer interrupted my train of hopes as he pulled my hand, and we went out together to where he delivered me to other policemen. He communicated with them in his own way and said: “Everything is ok. You can go.”

Once the other two men received me, they tied me up and tightened the handcuffs on my wrists. For the first time, chains are placed on my hands in such a harsh way, and I honestly felt greatly insulted. Tears almost gushed out of my eyes, but I quickly concealed them ... The two men pushed me from the back and walked a few meters with me to where a car (a Volvo) was parked, and another one (a Mercedes) was next to it. They pushed me into the Volvo and one of them sat on my right and the other on my left. The driver

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<sup>25</sup> This is part of a verse for which a long poem by the Arab poet al-Tughra’li (d. 1120 AD.) is famous. The verse says:

I indulge myself in hopes and watch    So hard life can be without a space of hope

was already inside. Nobody sat in the front seat. It remained vacant. Our vehicle did not roll until the Mercedes set off in front. Inside, there were a driver and a police officer, both in police uniforms. Those who were sitting next to me, however, were in civilian clothes ...

Tightening the handcuffs on my hands in a humiliating manner wasn't a shock in the full sense. What actually shocked me were the two men who escorted me. They were holding machine guns and escorting me like a dangerous criminal, sitting on my sides in anticipation of any move on my part. They remained silent most of the way.

It is Saturday, Sep. 7, 1996 AD, and the clock points to 10 am. The car drove out on its way. All the places in Irbid<sup>26</sup> where I live look familiar to me. That's al-Tal<sup>27</sup>. We descended towards Wasfi al-Tal's<sup>28</sup> circuit. Life is normal; people are walking normally in the streets. There are the roaming vendors; there are the stores; some are open, and others are just opening their doors; the vegetable stands spread everywhere in the central market; the shouting of their owners promoting their goods fills the air every now and then ... The car

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<sup>26</sup> City in the north of Jordan.

<sup>27</sup> A big hill in Irbid where the Police Department, the prison, and other government offices are located.

<sup>28</sup> The late Jordanian Prime Minister who was assassinated in 1971 by the Black September Unit of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

turned towards al-Huson street and didn't stop at the traffic light, and kept going ... I know these places very well, but I felt like I was in a world, and people were in another ... No one among the passers-by took the slightest notice of me. Is it reasonable that my freedom is taken away like this and no one takes notice of it?! Isn't there anyone who can feel this flood of emotions sweeping me right now? It seemed like I was with the people and was not with them at the same time ... Their images are moving in front of me like ghosts, and it looked like I saw them, but they did not see me ... Is it reasonable that they leave me in the hands of these strangers, taking me in this humiliating way? I stopped thinking in this way for a moment, then I said to myself: you are stupid. Do you think that anyone notices you passing by? People are busy from head to toe with their own worries ... Poverty is consuming people, and hunger is crushing their souls. Fathers are working hard so they can provide a bite of bread for their children ... What do they have to do with you, poet? Who even knew that there was a poet in Irbid? And if they knew, would they believe that he is arrested for his poetry?!! In front of hunger's ghost, and gasping after bread crumbs, who will listen to poetry these days ... I remembered a friend who was a poet and then he quit; his father said to him once: go look for a respectable job for you, son; poetry doesn't put food on the table. And the poet listened to his father's advice and he quit poetry forever

... A similar thought crossed my mind: is it possible that my father would - one day – say something like this to me?!! I shook my head to banish the ghost of this question and muttered secretly: Impossible!!

The car continued on its way in al-Huson street; the sight of people tortured me. I felt like someone inside me wanted to get out and yell: “I am here ... I am here ... tell my family that I am heading to...” I stopped ... really, where are we heading ...

We left Irbid behind us and arrived at Jerash, and my village Souf, loomed from afar; when I saw it settled on the slopes of the mountains, a storm of feelings roared inside me, and I felt an overwhelming passion for her. Love swept me, and longing planted its banner on my heart ...

I wish I could recall those feelings that possessed me on that day ... It was a busy day, and exceptional ...

Trees on both sides of the road accompanied us for a good while. For the first time in my life, I wanted to embrace them in my fantasies, and touch their leaves one by one ... Their shadows cast comfort on me. The two machine guns surrounding me couldn't break these shadows. I thought: Could the shadow of the tree be more effective than the machine gun? I answered: Yes. Doesn't a rose often beat a knife?!!



We left Jerash behind us and went towards Amman ... I felt the cuffs slitting my hands and hurting me a lot. I looked at the policeman sitting on my right, with the mashed military suit, so he got it and loosened the cuffs around my wrists, and the mark of the cuffs appeared. It cut my hands and left a deep mark mixed with some blood. We moved forward. The car was heading to the new Amman Intelligence building. They didn't take us to Mohammad Rasūl's hotel<sup>29</sup>; That's the old building. Walls may change, but hearts never do ...

We passed some check points and entered a yard. We all got out and the poet was escorted into the building. We went through a long hallway with offices of intelligence officers and privates lined up on its sides. I didn't know that peeking through the offices was taboo. I was still looking at every office when a hand landed on my head from behind and abruptly pushed it to the other side of the long hallway where you just face the wall ... But – before the officer landed his heavy hand on my head – I recognized some of those sitting in those offices ... and truly, a thunderstorm with cloudy numbness landed on my head when I saw two of my colleagues in the Department of Engineering at the University of Science and Technology sitting in full attire in some of these offices ... It seems that naïveté is the title of my previous life

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<sup>29</sup> Ironically referring to the Jordanian Intelligence Headquarters. Rasūl was a former Intelligence Director in the 1960s and 1970s.

... I turned the torrent of ideas to the other side and erased the effects of the shock and counted it as normal. It is normal for a country's guardians to be students in engineering departments?!!! Why not?! And by combining studentship and joining the Intelligence staff, they are confirming the brightness of their talents, and their potential power ... Some of my guards were still shouting while pushing me from behind: "Keep your head towards the wall, you... Your head towards the wall, you ..."

At the end of a hallway, they took my things away, or I should say, they looted my things. They were the following: a wristwatch, a wallet with some papers in it, the key to my room, and a red piaster ... They emptied the wallet including all the papers in it, read all the names, and took their own notes ...

I was pushed towards one of the cells. It had the number 67 ... The time, according to my estimate, passed one o'clock in the afternoon ... which means time for the afternoon prayer ...

Cells are the homes of detainees, their compulsory shelters, and their wheat fields. When a cell receives you, it instinctively extends its arms to you, telling you: either you love or hate me. Love and hate are individual matters ... but you have to get used to living with me ... A cell is a woman; if you dislike her, she'll dislike you, and if you befriend her, she'll befriend you ... The difference between them is that a cell does not speak, and when you

disappear inside her, you wish she would speak. Her silence kills you ... I wonder: Isn't it a woman's nature to overflow with words!!!

Cells occupied both sides of the long corridor where we walked to almost its end, and at the end of this corridor, right before it takes you at a right angle to the right, there was an open cell at the corner on the left, and it had a door as wide as the cell itself, which was about six meters, and its steel bars that formed the door extended to the ceiling. I saw more than ten prisoners in it strolling from wall to wall, and I didn't know why. Most of them were wearing white, black, and gray caps, and the length of their beards went down to the middle of their chests, and they were whispering amongst themselves... I guessed they were the prisoners from the Islamic groups... Later, more than one of them would become permanent companions of mine once we are distributed to prisons...

The two security guards delivered me to al-Hajji's hand. They talked to each other. Al-Hajji means the guard in charge of the cells in the Intelligence Department ... Each corridor contains about ten cells. One or two Hajjis are in charge of them...

I entered my home; I mean my cell ... and what a cell... It is a palace compared to the one I spent my first night in yesterday in Irbid Intelligence Department ...

The cell is two and a half meters long and the same in width, wow ... It is smaller than the cell in Irbid ... but it is not about the size, nor area ... There are services here that are not comparable to what is there... There is a toilet seat on my right, and next to it a sink that is so small that barely fits a foot... and on the bare floor, one sleeping mattress, and my clothes are the same... There is a copy of the Quran next to the mattress, and also a Quran Interpretation. I found out -later – that Quran Interpretations are optionally available to prisoners here... You can read the Interpretation in your room, and when you are finished, or want another one, all you have to do is knock lightly on the door, then al-Hajji comes to you, opens the cell's aperture, and frowns at your face – by the way, the frown is not fake on this guard's face, it is natural... They say about Jordanians that they are grumpy and always frowning ... here, this judgment seems sincere in its most accurate dialect to us as Jordanians – the guard opens the aperture and asks you with a voice that is tinged with the heat of complaint for calling him:

- What do you want?!
- Another Quran Interpretation ...!!
- Why ... you don't like the one you have ...
- Forgive me oh! Allah ... of course I like it ... but I finished it ...
- Ok, give me the one you have so I can bring you another one ...

I have no doubt that this guard who was in charge of the cell block, including my cell, hated me ... because I asked him to change Interpretations so many times ...

I threw my body on the mattress and lay down for a long time ... I felt a great physical comfort ... after all these exhausting trips. Here I found a place to throw my heaviness on ... but I stood up quickly ... I remembered the prayer ... Oh! I need to go to the bathroom ... The toilet seat was facing the aperture ... I felt so shy ... the aperture was open, and Al-Hajji might plan to snoop on me ... I hesitated hundreds of times before I did it, and every time, I imagined Al-Hajji or one of the officers staring at me through the aperture ... the first lesson I felt they wanted me to learn by force is: you have to break your modesty barrier!! Or, you have to understand that you are never out of our sight, even at those moments when you, yourself, are out of your own sight ... I thought to myself: what a group of bastards!!

I read and read ... until the night fell ... The cell was lit when I arrived here in the afternoon and stayed lit all night ... and I didn't have a switch inside, so I could turn off this annoying, very bright light. I knocked on the door, and Al-Hajji came and said complainingly:

- What do you want? I brought you all the Interpretations!!!
- No, I want to sleep ...

- So, sleep, you ... What does that have to do with me!!

- The light, Hajji ...

- Do you think you are at home? Lights cannot be turned off here ... you will sleep with the lights on ...

- .....

I came back disappointed ... I decided to read more ... In the Intelligence cells, there was al-Jalalain's Interpretation, in addition to ibn Katheer's Interpretation. I am not sure if al-Qurtobi's Interpretation was there or not. You can't have a complete Interpretation at once ... you have to read it in parts ...so you may have the second volume of ibn Katheer's Interpretation, and when get a new volume, you discover it is the fourth volume, or another Interpretation ...

At midnight, I wished they would turn off the light, so I could sleep, and enjoy a quiet hour, and to sit with myself ... I couldn't sleep, and just as I decided – while I was at my first dark night in the Intelligence Department of Irbid – to summon the light, I decided here in the midst of this bright light to summon darkness... I closed my eyes and started my contemplations ...

People are born free, ibn al-Khattab<sup>30</sup> shouted in the face of ibn al-ʿAssī ... An intuitive fact, but as man was able to distort the Earth’s natural face and its green meadows by drenching them with industrial pollutants, he was also able to distort the truth about freedom when he decided that it’s owned by power, and that people are slaves of authority ... and people colluded in that over the ages, so they lived like slaves when they bent their heads in front of the sword and the leather mat used for executions, and when the instinct of freedom that is inherent in their depths is invoked, they keep silent, and they lower their eyes and say: (We found our fathers following a religion and we are guided by their footprints)<sup>31</sup> ... To hell with this kind of guidance; it is not guidance, but true delusion ...

Uh, how hard it is to be free!! How harsh the consequences of that are ...!! Freedom is crying of “No” in the face of a flood of “Yes,” when “Yes” is the song of the herd, who know nothing but nodding their heads and wagging their tails ...

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<sup>30</sup> Omar ibn al-Khattab was the second Khalif in Islam and Amr ibn al-ʿAss was his Governor in Egypt.

<sup>31</sup> This is part of verse 22, Chapter 43 Sūrat al-Zukh'ruf (The Gold Adornment) in the Holy Quran.

Freedom... Religion... Faith... Ethics... people are tired of trying to find definitions for them ... but I couldn't find a definition for the freedom among these concepts that is more obvious than the situation I am living in now in this cell... I am free in the very sense of the word despite these bars; because I was able not to curse myself until this moment for doing like the rest, and for being submissive like the rest... Freedom does not manifeste itself in any place more than the prison. It surprises you with its aromatic smell. The fragrant smell says: you are free because you were able to shout: "No!!" How many people wish to do what you did, but the "Yes" sentenced them to despicable slavery... I knock on the walls of the cell, reaching the maximum degrees of intonation:

The sea sand is watered by the trustworthy<sup>32</sup>

No, no, no, ... No, no, no, ... No, no, no, ...

What a pleasure poets feel when they refuse to kiss leaders' asses with "Yes" ...

Man's hunger for food has never been more pressing than his hunger for feeling his humanity. You pick a flower and give it to those you love, so that

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<sup>32</sup> This is the key of the Raml (meaning sand) meter in classical Arabic poetry, but the writer replaced the second line with a celebrated repetition of the rebellion word 'no' as opposed to a submissive 'yes'.



they say to you: “Thank you! It is so beautiful” ... and though they praise the flower and not you, still you feel your humanity when the other respects it and says to you: “Thank you” ... It is hunger for humanity, for self-respect ...!! You do the same when you submit a distinguished paper to your professor at the university ... or kiss your father’s hand when you meet him ... or answer a question that the other students in class couldn’t answer... or get a gift for your friend and give it to him in front of all those who are present, and unconsciously say: “It’s just a simple thing ... Nothing worth the thanks ...” and you mean exactly the opposite ... you mean that all eyes are centered on you, and focus on you from all sides ... Aren’t all these actions stirred by hunger for the words: “Thank you” ... out of hunger for others’ respect for your ... So, how does a man accept to humiliate himself and ask others to respect him...?! So, why would man accept to insult and humiliate himself and then ask others to respect him ...?! For your humanity to be all-inclusive, you need to start respecting yourself before asking others to do so...

The night was long in the cell... The astonishment that dominated my mind on the first night made it pass faster than this second night... This is where the mind began to wake up from its coma... I started feeling things around... I toured with my eyes the walls of the cell ... Its roof is four meters high, and in the last half meter there is a window through which sunlight enters

... I would discover later that this window, though so small, is the prisoner's window to life, and the link between him and the outside world, and it's the isthmus that draws you away from the path of death to the living space ...

In the ceiling, this damned light ... I wondered: how weird is Man..!! Yesterday, and just yesterday, I wished I could find a glimmer of light in my cell, and today, in this cell, I am cursing this light ... Among contradictions, man can make his own world, and think about it in his own way ... It doesn't matter whether others approve of his way, nor even if he likes it himself. The one who created it may give up on it at any moment without warning, and without any feeling of regret ...that is the human!!!

I turned my eyes to the wall behind me... Unless you get close to it, and look carefully, you would not find out that some prisoners who preceded me in this cell have passed through here, and have written some of their thoughts on the wall... I tried to make out some of the writings... I still remember some of them:

- ﴿My course is comely patience and Allah's help only is to be sought﴾.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This is part of verse 18 of Chapter 12, Sūrat Yūsef (Joseph) in the Holy Quran.

- (Deem not that Allah is unaware of what the wicked do)<sup>34</sup> ...
- I will not kneel ...
- I am tired of ... I'm not strong enough for ... I wish I were now at ...
- This is the path of prophets ... You are not better than Yousef ... and not more noble to Allah than Younes ...
- You are here to understand the truth of monotheism...

And a lot of sentences and signs in which the words of humans were mixed with the words of Allah ... I found some entertainment in them ... Some writings were not legible, but I enjoyed spending a lot of time deciphering them ... Not all the reflections were in writing, there were signs, crossed lines, and geometric forms ... What they had in common though, was that they were barely visible, even at a closer look, because their writers used their nails, and they carved here what they wanted with great difficulty ... None of the prisoners were allowed to have a pen, nor paper ... nor a watch ... or anything that helps to pass time ... except those who love reading, and they are limited to one type of it ...

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<sup>34</sup> This is part of verse 42 of Chapter 14, Sūrat Ib'rāhīm (Abraham).

Ah, the pen... It was dearly missed... It was the greatest awaited absentee... I only realized the importance of the pen and its value when it was difficult to get... I didn't understand that the pen was the secret of the first life and the oath of Allah the almighty except when I was repeating with amazement: {Nūn. By the pen and that which they write therewith}<sup>35</sup> ...

The pen remained an unfulfilled dream until a late stage of imprisonment ...

I held al-Qortubi's Interpretation. It was a great conquest to have it in my hands. I have loved this book for a long time ... It was my companion before I came here. I read from it whenever I was attracted by a verse of God's book to find out the secret behind using one word and not another ... This book and al-Zamkshri's Interpretation "al-Kashaf" satisfied my craving for understanding the linguistic miracle of the Quran ...

I read before I succumbed to sleep: {Had it been a near adventure and an easy journey they would have followed thee ...}.<sup>36</sup> I slept, not knowing whether I finished it or not ...

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<sup>35</sup> This is verse 1 of Chapter (68) Sūrat al-Qalam (The Pen) in the Holy Quran. Allah swears by the pen to emphasize its importance.

<sup>36</sup> This is verse 42 of Chapter (9) Sūrat al-Tawbah (The Repentance) in the Holy Quran.

You are not free here to know what time it is ... You have to guess it ... At first, my time pendulum was out of order, swinging according to the waves of my mind. At times, it does it very slowly, and sometimes it sways violently as if it would break out of its place ... times used to be blurry ... Later, I learned how to control the rhythm of the pendulum and to be able to be very precise ...

The morning sun sneaked gently onto my face through life's window... I thought... we are like plants; the sun wakes us up as it caresses our leaves after the night leaves us as prisoners of its silence...

I hadn't talked to anyone except myself since I got into this cell... I would be grateful to any human being who would like to talk to me on any subject... My hope didn't last long... when a new face showed up from the door's aperture, and shouted rudely:

- Are you fasting or not...

- The question surprised me... but I discovered later that this suite is reserved for detainees of Islamist groups, and they spend most of their days fasting here in these cells... so the guard wanted to count the fasting people among the others... in order to bring breakfast trays to the non-fasting only...

I hadn't intended to fast or declared it until I answered al-Hajji's question saying:

- Fasting...!!

And he went without saying another word ...

I felt that I had fallen into the trap of a surprising question... and I did that unconsciously ... The Prophet's Hadith<sup>37</sup> (peace and prayers be upon him): "A man is rewarded despite himself" came true...

But time is passing like a ninety-year-old man climbing up high mountains... I decided to do something useful... I started to put down options:

- Write a poem... (but where is the pen and paper...?!!)

- Read Interpretations... (but I already finished what I have, and I don't wish for more)

- Carve some sentences on the wall like those who preceded me to this cell (but my nails are not long enough yet).

- Adjust the time pendulum in order to distinguish prayer times (but how?!)

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<sup>37</sup> Hadith means speech in Arabic. This term refers to anything said or done by Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) during his life and is narrated later by his companions who witnessed him saying or doing it.

The last question remained open, and that is what encouraged me ...let me create my own way of knowing the time ... I will start by watching things around me accurately...

First, I will stay awake all night to know when the sun rises, just before its rise, I can tell that the time is between five and five thirty in the morning, the sun rises at about six o'clock...

I will assume that al-Hajji who brings the breakfast, brings it at eight o'clock in the morning... I might be right in this or not, but I can make sure tomorrow morning, I will try to count the time interval between the sunrise and the arrival of the breakfast ...

They will take away the breakfast dishes an hour later, because it takes half an hour to distribute to the cells, and they give the detainees half an hour to eat it... So, I will see al-Hajji's face at nine again asking for the tray...

Before al-Hajji came this morning, I heard the sound of a truck and the roar of its engine. It sounded like it settled in the yard next to the cells, unloading boxes of food which came from the kitchen (that's what I thought and imagined). If my intuition was right, I could hear the roar of its engine at about seven o'clock in the morning...

I remained silent for a little while ... but all these calculations are for the pre-noon period... What about figuring time after that...

After I settled down here yesterday, I heard some of the cells' doors next to me opening and closing... and some prisoners' voices and guards shouting ... and about an hour after these voices, I heard the same voices and the same cells' doors... I thought: what could that be?

I said to myself: it must be interrogation time, and that these detainees are taken to the interrogators... I convinced myself with that, and imagined that it happened last night at nine o'clock... It is still a hypothesis so far... Today or tomorrow when they take me to the interrogation, I will prove it, or I will look for another explanation ...

I counted the pages of the Interpretation books I read yesterday ... and when I returned to the figures in my mind: I estimated they were two hundred and fifty pages, and since I read about 30-35 pages per hour, this means that I spent at least eight hours reading, and since I entered this cell yesterday at 1 p.m., for I still had my watch then, which wasn't taken from me until I entered the cell... It means that I finished reading at about nine o'clock ... and it was the time that coincided with my hearing the sounds of cell doors and the voices of detainees ... So, the hypothesis that the time of interrogation with the detainees is at nine o'clock is a strong one and this is an initial proof of it... more will unfold this evening or tomorrow ...



Time passed while I was putting forward a new hypothesis for calculating time, which helped me to get rid of the boredom... I forgot to set the sunset time in my pendulum... It is not hard to determine; it is the time of knocking on the cell doors for the fasting meal...

As the days went by, my pendulum became more precise... and I am not exaggerating if I say that I could expect the event before it happened...!!

I overcame the cloud of the day, and the sunset time came to me with a spiritual ascension... al-Hajji looked through the door aperture and shouted: breakfast!! I reached out to take the tray which got through the aperture and reached me... I cheered while putting it on the ground: “Wow ... What is this luxury...?!!” Breakfast was delicious; it seemed that hunger had an obvious effect on that... Even though none of us detainees in the cells of the Intelligence, and who would be leaving to prisons within days or months, can deny that food was the best thing in the episodes we lived here... and it was way better than the food that would be served in the other prisons where we were taken. And that’s due to many reasons; first of all: it’s delicious; it seems that some skilled chefs prepare it. Secondly: it’s varied; it seems like they are luring us into their ambush. And thirdly: it comes to you hot as if it had been prepared a few minutes ago, i.e., *directly from the pot to the throat*<sup>38</sup> ...!!

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<sup>38</sup> A Jordanian proverb said when food is served and eaten very hot.

Anyway, I grabbed my share of food; it was a hot vegetable soup; it went down through the esophagus to my stomach, hot and peaceful. And a dish of rice so perfectly cooked that seemed as if each grain was cooked separately. And a piece of roasted chicken occupying the top of the dish. And two pieces of fresh bread that were so soft when you took a bite into them... I ate my breakfast with an immeasurable appetite to the point I forgot that I was in a solitary cell... It seems that hunger pushes humans to hallucination and drags them into a maze of imagination ...!!!

I hardly finished when I remembered I had to go back to adjusting the pendulum... My previous hypothesis says: the commotion will begin, and the voices will be loud at nine, when the detainees are taken to the interrogation... and since the call for the evening prayer is at seven, and by counting the prayer time, and the fasting meal time, al-Hajji will be back, shouting to take the food tray at eight o'clock... and indeed, al-Hajji's voice woke me up from my wave of expectations. I shouted like a winner in a wrestling arena: yes...it's eight o'clock... al-Hajji didn't understand why I was shouting; he gave me an angry look, took the tray and went on... I rushed to one of the Interpretation books I had, and I would start counting: it will be nine o'clock after reading between 30-35 pages. If I heard the voices of the detainees and the guards, then I would prove my hypothesis ...

My heart started beating fast when I finished thirty pages of al-Qurtobi's Interpretation... A few minutes later, I heard the sound of my cell door opening, and two of the guards entered... They took me by my hands, put a blindfold on my eyes, and walked me I didn't know where ...?! Although the situation surprised me, for it was the first time I got out this way. I leaned my head a little to the right and asked my guard on that side: "Is it nine o'clock?!" He remained silent and pushed me harder...

A sound of an elevator opening, and closing... ascending or descending, I didn't know... more stairs, and hallways where I started counting my footsteps to know their length, but sudden turns interrupted me, so my count got mixed... Finally, it seemed like we reached the interrogation room...

We entered the room, they removed the blindfold off my eyes, and waited outside. The room swallowed a desk with an officer sitting at it, whose age I estimated at sixty, and whose black hair was mixed with grey. He was wearing a military uniform (field suit), and its dark green color stirred a little bit of carelessness inside me ... He looked at me; he had a brown face... that had been seasoned by the years and days, but deadly calmness was his prevalent trait ... He began flipping papers in his hands, then he shouted:

- A Citizen's Diary... Peace for Generations... Thirst of History... man, do you ever repent!!

- .....

-Your name?

- Ayman al-<sup>c</sup>Utum!!

- This poetry that I just read to you the titles of some of its poems... Are you its writer?

- Yes, proudly!!

- The poetry that brings you trouble, why do you write it? *Close the door from which the wind blows and relax*<sup>39</sup>

- And how would I know from which door the wind will blow in order to close it and relax ...?!

- Didn't you get expelled from university because of the poem: Peace for Generations?

-Yes!!

- So, why didn't you repent reciting such poetry?

- Does the bird repent singing ...!!

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<sup>39</sup> A Jordanian proverb said as an advice to people whose actions get them in trouble, meaning they should stop doing it.

- Save us your philosophies ... and don't try to appear courageous here...
- I ...
- This poetry will bring you to ruin...
- And how should I know...
- Isn't your presence here enough evidence...
- The river must flow... but it doesn't know where to pour... It flows by instinct and goes free... even if it meets an obstacle, it hurriedly gets on with it...
- (With a louder voice ... and an intimidating tone): I told you don't be a wise guy ... no one here lies to me ...
- And what do you want from me...
- (In another intimidation voice): Shut up, I am the one who is asking questions, and you have to answer... do you think we don't know everything about you?!
- Of course, you know everything... you are paid a salary for such knowledge... I hope it is halal ...!!

The officer sprang from his place, and with a clear nervousness, raised the papers and threw them back on the desk... and sat down again, after he calmed down... perhaps he felt that his position was weak...

- One question and one-word answer ... is this poetry yours?

- I told you: Yes, and I am proud of it...

(He pressed long on the bell ... The guards came... They pulled me and took me back to the cell) ...

It seems that I stirred the officer's anger in that interrogation, then plights began to pour in ...

I sat down thinking about the half past hour, and I had mixed feelings. Pride, on the one hand, that I confronted the interrogator with my own answers, not letting myself be coerced into specific answers, and that I had the courage to be a wise guy in front of him, like he said... and on the other hand, I said to myself: why am I doing this? Why do I bring trouble to myself? Why don't I choose the least evil?!

These concerns lasted only a few minutes... returned to the interrogation... I walked blindfolded... but this time lightly and vigorously. It seems now that my feet know the way... I wonder if feet have eyes ...?!!

I entered... the same room... the same desk... but a different interrogator... younger than the previous one, probably no more than forty years old... He was wearing civilian clothes... I don't know how the tone will be with this new interrogator... The previous one could have been called quiet except for some nervousness at the end I pushed him into, and perhaps work boredom drove him to the edge, so he acted like that... but this one's face looked dry... it was shameless. He wore eyeglasses that made his eyes look like two hollow spots. His voice – when he invited me to sit down – was sharp, more like screeching than whistling ... The first one seemed more agreeable than this one...

He remained silent for a time that I thought lasted for ten years, then he adjusted his glasses with his index finger, and exclaimed:

- We are not asking much from you.

- .....

- Just a simple confession...

- .....

- We want you to have a good impression about us...

- .....

- We are not as you think...

- .....

- We are a national institution that protects the security of the country, and you are a noble Jordanian citizen...

- .....

He seemed like he was throwing a bucket of information, and wanted it delivered to me... I got used to questions pouring on me during the interrogation, and hitting my head with their sharpened ends...

He continued with his sharp voice, which caught my attention more than his words:

- Sign on this paper, that with these poems, you don't mean anything with... and...

- And ...?!!

- Maybe you'll get out of here...

- Let me think about it...

- Another small request...

- .....

- Write a poem on ..... 's birthday... and a big celebration will be held for it, and it will be broadcast on television all radio stations and newspapers... and you will be famous...

I jumped from my place, like someone stung by a scorpion ... and I felt that an iron hand slapped my left ear after the sting... and a buzzing sound



started to prevail over my hearing and to lower a curtain of mist over my eyes... I exclaimed to myself:

- Apparently, I was so lenient that he dared to ask me such a rude request...

I shouted:

- No...!! I am not good at this type of poetry...

As if he felt the difference between my previous calmness and my current nervousness, which caused astonishment to pass through all his body, so he answered my rejection with a loud shout:

-We can reach you... You are not patriotic... you are against the country...

- Is the country dwarfed to a person?!

This precipitated his fury, so he said:

- I swear ... we do... and we undo... and don't think that you're a hero... and smarter than us... and he threatened and intimidated ...

He rang the bell and the two guards rushed in... This nervousness of the officer added to the pace of events... They pulled me away. And faster than before, my feet started to devour the way to my cell...

No sleep... A drop is the beginning of rain, then it pours down...

I wanted to fall asleep... the preceding psychological exhaustion doubled my hunger to sleep, so I lay down... I hardly did when al-Hajji shouted:

- Stand up, you ... no sleep ...

I sat down on the bed, but he shouted...

- On the wall.

I obeyed... I stood up and leaned my body on the wall... I remained like this for a while, I don't know for how long, and al-Hajji never left the cell aperture... I was continuously under his watch... Fatigue and drowsiness started to lock their grip over me... My body suddenly slackened, and I fell down to the ground... The guard rushed to knock harder on the door, and screamed louder than before:

- Stand up, you..... I said stand up..... now.....

I dragged myself to the wall... I resisted the collapse of cells in my body, tingling like ants began invading the soles of my feet. I moved them while standing, and the swarm of ants stopped for a while and then resumed... I jumped up. I felt it jumping with me and its string hanging from under my feet... I landed on the ground. I expected to crush it under my feet and get rid of it forever... but I realized that the swarm of ants was inside my feet, not outside them ...

I passed the fatigue point, and entered the stage of hallucination: *from... to ... about... on ... prepositions*<sup>40</sup> ... *raise your voice while singing... songs are still allowed*<sup>41</sup>...

I looked with half-closed eyes to the cell aperture... I saw al-Hajji's ghost still haunting it, only his face was covering the whole visible area... I saw his face protruding like a mercury flask inside and out... I felt his eyes curving inward and outward alternately ...

I had the courage at the wrong time, as I wanted to scream but I fell back... I kept swinging like the pendulum of the clock between protesting loudly, not knowing what calamity would follow, or to protest in secret, so I chose the second one. I shouted at this wave of hallucination: who gave them the right to confiscate my freedom in this way...?! What did I do to be chained and arrested here in this forgotten room ...? I was expecting to be respected by the state instead of slapping me... What did I do in my poetry except for raising my voice with: "No" for peace and normalization with the Zionists?? Is it

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<sup>40</sup> An Arabic prepositions song recited in a politically charged play revolving around freedoms by the Syrian actor Duraid Lahham.

<sup>41</sup> A song by the Egyptian Singer Mohammad Muneer sung in the movie al-Maseer (Destiny, 1997) which revolves around freedom of thought in Cordoba in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

reasonable that they were expecting me to praise the negotiations, and line up next to those who are surrendering?!!!

All these obsessions seemed to me like an elephant's scream at the bottom of an ocean... I turned to myself. I looked into my heart. I watched its pounding fading slowly... I felt it was like an engine whose rotation was slowing down, and at the last cycle of this rotation, I fell on the ground... al-Hajji quickly opened the cell door, and shook me violently... and threw water on my face... I woke up again like someone who slept for centuries during this delicious fall...

He pushed me towards the wall... and repeated the sermon: No sleep...

I tried to say: sleep is not necessary... How easy it is to say, and how difficult it is to do ...!! Next step: self-persuasion to give up sleep as a human need... what if Allah helps me with that?! I said to myself: Isn't He the one who decreed sleep an instinctive and a purely human act?! So, may He help me to get rid of it now... For if it doesn't happen, the consequences will be brutal...

Hallucinations came back to me again... Human weakness began to seep into me. What if I signed the paper they want?! What if I denied my connection with all my poetry? What if I ask them for forgiveness for all my past?!

What... and what...and what...

I spat on all the questions, and slapped my forehead with both my hands, and cursed my obsessions, and shouted: “Do you give up so easily? Do you become chained with the shackles of your dreams within a few hours? What is this early defeat? At least: hold on for a few days so you don’t whip yourself when you retreat to it!!”

The last looks at the door’s aperture embodied hallucination in its most beautiful manifestations... I saw al-Hajji becoming as thin as a cloth, and sneaking through the aperture, like a current of air... and sitting in front of me like a frog... his head is spiral, and his arms standing like a pillar in front of his legs, and then crouched on his buttocks... He suddenly melted down right before me and flowed on the floor of the room... and I felt I flowed with him...

I woke up in the middle of the night... I stood on my feet terrified ... I looked at the aperture, I saw nothing, I rubbed my eyes and looked carefully ... it looked empty except for the deep emptiness... I realized that al-Hajji let me fall asleep, maybe out of pity, or so were his orders... but what time is it... did dawn break and is it prayer time or not?! My pendulum broke after the night hallucination trip... I assumed that it was prayer time... I performed my ablution and prayed ... and slept... I slept like never before in my life... How

enjoyable it is to sleep when your feeling invites you to do so, without the bird of caution poking your slumber and waking you up every time...

How beautiful the sunshine is when it enters your cell through the high, iron-bar window, announcing the cycle of life to you, as it goes down its eternal path... The sun did not caress our faces directly ... Its light reached us through windows and cracks... coming in through a corner that was designed to be stingy when sharing it... (And thou mightest have seen the sun when it rose move away from their cave to the right, and when it set go past them on the left)<sup>42</sup>...

Didn't I tell you that the food was special here... Breakfast was announced by al-Hajji's voice calling us to take the tray from the door's aperture... I reached out with my hands with an exaggerated pride, as if there was a naughty child inside me saying to him: I beat you yesterday...

Two boiled eggs, a dish of hummus, one tomato, two pieces of bread, and a cup of tea... I couldn't ask for a better breakfast if I were at home... Is good treatment restricted to food here... I wondered!! Maybe...

Al-Hajji knocked on the door again, and automatically, I handed him the tray; so, I had become used to the system here...

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<sup>42</sup> This is part of Chapter (18) Sūrat al-Kahf (The Cave) in the Holy Quran which narrates the story of several young monotheists who fled from their infidel people and slept 309 years in a cave.

Half an hour later, al-Hajji opens the cell door, leans into the door, and addresses me:

- Would you like to enjoy the sun!!

I lowered my head and raised my eyes not understanding, then I worriedly tightened. As if he understood that I didn't get it, he repeated:

- Would you like to enjoy the sun!!

I thought for a while that it was a torture party, and that enjoying the sun meant exposure to the sun and getting beaten up at noon ... Fear jumped like a mouse inside my clothes ... and my heart started pounding like a fish's mouth when thrown out of the water, and I shouted with a husky voice, and with hesitation:

- No ... No ...

My answer surprised him ... He thought that exposure to the sun for the detainee here is the greatest wish and utmost dream, and that prisoners wait impatiently for this word. So, he explained:

- I mean go out to see the sun!!

I shouted like someone repeating an answer that was imprisoned inside his mouth and blurted out suddenly:

- Yes ... Yes ...

- Follow me.

I followed him ... and he took me to a spacious yard ... triangular in shape. Two sides are longer than the third ... Each side is topped by a five or six-story building, and each floor appears to be a row of cells ... I can't remember whether the windows I saw lining up straight like match boxes were the windows of cells, the interrogation room, or the officers' offices?! I don't know ... All I cared about then was that I felt an amazing space of freedom ... Any blue piece of the sky equals half a freedom and three quarters of dignity ... I started walking and running in the wide triangle like a wild horse that had been released from its reins in the lush green plains ...

Surely many before me were attacked by the idea of escape when they were first released in this yard... but it must have quickly proven to be a naive idea, because the sunny triangle does not open on any door, except for the door the guard lets you through and stands in front. The rest of the corners are walls over twenty meters high that are attached together... and the door from which you enter, leads to the inside of the Intelligence building; so, how can you escape?!



I started running like a wild horse, and jumping like a deer under the warm sunshine... Whoever misses the sun for two nights discovers that the pleasure of being exposed to its warmth is like no other joy... warmth that surrounds the heart's wall and creates a feeling of reassurance and quietness in it...

Enjoying the sun lasts for about twenty minutes, I estimated it this long... After that you go back to your cell, and when you settle inside its silenced walls, you live on dreaming of hearing that question: "Do you want to enjoy the sun?!", but a question like that requires that you bleed a lot from the blood of time to compensate you with some light...

The third night fell... Boredom and monotony of time started to nibble into my skin ... I stood with my face towards the wall; I held my finger as a pen... and began to write some verses... no pen... no paper... if I had a pen, I would have written on my hand... This kind of prohibition makes me angry... My passion for poetry was aroused... I remembered the university days and the wonderful winter nights... I was in a unique emotional state... And finally, the Muse of poetry visited me... She said to me: but where are you going to write your poem here in cell 67?! On my mind's page, I answered myself. And how would you memorize it?! Let us think of an effective way... What if I write two verses in my mind, and repeat them twice to memorize them... Then, I move on to write another two verses on my mind's page, then I repeat

them to memorize them with the previous verses, now they are four verses ... I wrote the first poem and memorized it this way, two or three verses in every mental interval. I stopped at the end when I made sure that I memorized them and started writing imaginary lines on the cell wall. My mother was strongly present then, I never stopped thinking about her for a moment. I imagined her feeling so depressed that I was arrested in that way. I contacted her via telepathy, I wanted to strengthen her steadfastness with these verses which were my first poetry writing in the cell:

O! Mother, no shameful complaint we make

Except to Allah, for Allah's all-protecting

We die so that our faith can live

Submitting not to tyrants or despots

We have worthily come upon guidance spring

Neither prison, nor torture, impedes our aims

The poem continued in this way for eighteen (18) verses ... A deep feeling of comfort overwhelmed me when I finished writing and reviewing it in my mind to get it settled and fixed, and I said: no need to worry about it as long as it is in the closet of my memory, and I am endowed with a good one, and if pen and paper become available later, I will quickly write it down as a first draft... I classify this feeling of comfort after writing within the top sensual

pleasures, as if the emotional state is a hidden disease that tears apart the senses of the creative, and writing is the cure for this condition. Isn't writing a cure?!! As if the writer bears the pains of heavy thoughts in his senses and emotions, and they keep stirring and worrying him. If he gives birth to it, he gets the greatest comfort... Is not writing like giving birth?!!

I remembered Jarir, who, whenever he wanted to satirize al-Farazdaq,<sup>43</sup> would turn off the light, and lie down on the ground, and start rubbing his body on the dirt of the ground with a painful circular motion, as if he were torturing himself to get rid of the pain of giving birth to verses... and then he would suddenly snap out of this sadistic ritual and stand up to turn on the light, and shout: now I got you, you... This was only because the poem, with its thoughts and images had brewed in his mind, and it was time to announce it, so he would calm down from his painful rotation... Isn't an idea pain... and expressing it a cure?! Yes, it is.

In this third night, the books varied a little bit... Not only Interpretations would come to me now from the cell aperture, but other Hadith books such as Riyadh al-Saliheen, and it developed to the extent that I received the Biography of ibn Ishaq, edited by ibn Hisham... O! How hungry I am for

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<sup>43</sup> Jarir and Al-Farazdaq are two seventh-century satire poets.

reading!! It is the utmost effective act in this turbulent sea of slow time... but I missed reading some poetic collections, and fiction novels... I said: this is a wish that seems impossible to come true and shouted: it looks like I exaggerated with my wishful thinking... Suddenly, a question came to my mind that I had overlooked during the previous three nights: but why is it only Interpretation books, or religious books, and the Prophet's biographies that leak in to us?! Is it reasonable that the government's agencies think that we are out of the circle of Islam, or astray, and want to get us back to Islam's circle and guide us?! Yes ... yes; why is this kind of books the only one here...?!!

At nine, or so I was told by my own pendulum of time, the cell door was opened, and two guards came in. So, I knew it was interrogation time... I imagined for a while that it was torturing time, so my heart seemed to jump out of my chest in fear... but it soon returned to its place, as I reassured myself that I was just a poet carrying papers and pens, not bombs and explosives... I had heard that some of my inmates in neighboring cells had been arrested on explosives charges... but terror came back to dominate me: What if they connect the charge to me with them? The government security agencies might do it if it serves their interest!! But this concern soon dispelled. Nothing dispelled this time except feeling confident that they would never do that to

me, because I am... (I stopped before finishing the sentence, then I said it): I am the son of a well-known tribe, I mean, known for its loyalty to the regime.

The offices are different... and so are the people, but the questions are the same. Some are naïve, so much that the poet who dwells in my depths laughs, or even giggles when he hears them. And some are repetitive about name, study, and residence. And others require wits to answer and to pick words... For this third type, I did my best to show my rhetorical language, linguistic competency, and lucidity, in order to camouflage the answer, and distract the recipient's mind. Most of this third type focused on my poetry. The interrogator settled in front of me, and the stenographer on his right.

- Why do you write this type of poetry?
- Because I can't remain silent.
- Isn't silence a way to escape punishment?!
- Not always. It can cause a big disaster.
- What did you mean by saying: .....
- As you understood exactly!
- I didn't. I want to hear from you, everything you say will be recorded here in the briefing sheet!!
- .....
- Do you confess that this poetry before me belongs to you?

- I never repented my poetry or asked forgiveness                      how silly poets  
are if they did Apologies to Nizar Qabbani.<sup>ii</sup>

- What has Nizar Qabbani got to do with this?!

- Nothing. I changed the word “my love” in his verse into “my poetry,”  
and the word “lovers” into “poets” ... but there’s no difference, because  
poets are the biggest lovers.

- What would you like?! Coffee or tea?!

- .....

- Didn’t you hear me?!

It seems that intimacy has raised its banner between us, and time for  
leaving this place has come. He repeated while lighting a cigarette and  
inhaling a deep breath from it:

- Coffee or tea?

- Coffee without sugar. (I haven’t tasted it for a long time... a golden  
opportunity that doesn’t happen often).

- O! Ayman... Pash Muhandis... (he said it with a lot of friendliness) What  
do you want with things that bring you a headache. Isn’t it better if you were  
in your house now, studying?!

- (Say: Naught befalleth us save that which Allah hath decreed for us).<sup>44</sup>

- We don't disagree on that, man. Do you think that we are infidels? ...

But also, in religion, you have to watch out for causes.

- And who said I don't?

- Doesn't it mean not to put yourself in this position?!

- I didn't put myself in this place, you put me here.

- You are a such a Soufani [Referring to the town of Souf in the north of Jordan]. You have a hard head.

- Better than a mortgaged one!!

- Come here. Sign on the report.

- I want to read it first.

- What do you mean?! (he smiled). Do you mean that you don't trust what we have recorded?

- .....

- You are right. Read it as you wish.

There was nothing there but what I really said. I signed it. And went out.

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<sup>44</sup> This is part of Chapter (9) Sūrat al-Tawbah (The Repentance) in the Holy Quran.

I came back from the interrogation to the cell... A storm of thoughts swept me... this time about my family... The interrogators' temptations began to clash in my mind. I got a fever because of thinking, and I resorted to *The Pleasures of Soul*, by Sayyid Qutb, in order to cool some of this heat. And I repeated with its author: "Evil is not as deep in the human soul as we sometimes imagine. It's in that hard shell, with which they face the struggles of life to survive... For when they feel safe, this hard shell will reveal a sweet, delicious fruit".

The sun of the fourth day has risen... almost passing slowly and heavily, except for a sudden change that took place... I was moved to cell number 95 at noon... I said to myself as I entered it: if I am moved because of groups of new detainees, then half of the Jordanian people must be hosted here!!"

There was nothing new about this cell that was different from the previous one with the number 67, except for two things: the first was that I got rid of the number 67 with the reference to an-Naksah [referring to the 1967 war against Israel] that toppled the worn-out Arab armies and let the Israelis into our countries. And it was revealed that day and later that the Arab rulers who excel in maintaining their thrones, were the main cause of losing the Holy Land. And the second thing was a slight change in the type of books here,



which saved me thinking about how to spend this day's cloud, and its heavy night.

Al-Hajji came to me on an unusual time. Coming just before noon was not recorded on my pendulum time schedule... he shouted:

- Do you want to take a shower!!

- Is there a shower here?!!

- Yes... come on, if you want.

- Yes... yes...

I stopped as I was getting out of the cell, but where? And how? I don't have any other clothes... nor underwear, except for those I have been wearing for five days... Assuming that this could be fixed by washing my old clothes, where are the new ones... and where is the towel that I was going to use... All these obstacles melted away quickly when I imagined myself (slithering) under water that hadn't touched my body throughout this previous period... Let God's will prevail... Let us try it... What is life but try and error, followed by attempts to avoid those errors?!

I came out running with al-Hajji...

He turned with me at the end of the corridor to the corner on the right... where the shower stalls were. There was a row of more than five, lining up next to each other, each stall separated from the next by a two-meter tiled wall, and there was a shower on each wall inside. As for the entrance to the stall, it was open to the spectators... There was nothing inside to veil a man's body... Although embarrassment might overcome some of the guests here, it would soon disappear because options are completely lacking... I took off all my clothes, except for the underwear to hide my privates from the curious and the peeking guards here... I opened the shower on full power... Water leaked on my body and filled me with ecstasy... Why all this pleasure merely because water pours on the body... Is it because the body longs for its origin... was not the human water... {Did We not create you from a base fluid} <sup>45</sup>... Water kept splashing on my craving body, as if I was drinking it, not bathing with it... I turned myself around... I stomped the ground with my feet like a child... I brought the water shower down to... desire moved in me, I thought to... but I stopped myself from going too far... Fifteen minutes under water in the Intelligence cells equals the pleasure of a full day in a swimming pool. Common things become precious if they join the line of things missed...

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<sup>45</sup> This is verse 20 of Chapter (77) Sūrat al-Mur'salāt (Those Sent Forth) stating that humans were created from water.

There is no towel here... I rushed to wear my clothes that got wet because of my wet body... and inside the cell, I hung the shirt on the sink first. I took off my underwear, and hurriedly put on the pants without them. I started squeezing them – with all my strength – in order to reduce the weight of water as much as possible. Then, I placed them on the sink and the toilet seat alternately... This way, I managed to dry my clothes and put them on again...

The bird of memory landed on my heart that night... I saw it like a dove singing on the cell bars from the outside... Even birds have their habits of exercising freedom... and when poets are captured, they come to alleviate their loneliness, and to share their suffering. Isn't the poet a singing bird?! My training for writing poems on my mind's page has come to fruition after the first attempt... This time it became faster and more effective... I stuck my face on the cell's wall following my habit when writing poems here, and started to write the first verses of the second poem:

On prison wall I wrote I love you

at night my heart missed whispering to you

Naughty and torturer you still are

slaughtering my soul when missing you

I bled the poem over two consecutive nights... If only this bleeding kept some blood flowing in my veins... I felt like I became another man at the end.

Memory inflicts more pain on the self than does the knife on the body. It seems that if memories settle in the bottom of the heart, keeping them, without recalling them, is better than arousing them, because they only rise when they drag behind them fragments and blood...!!

I have been here for almost a week... I transformed during this time into another man... No one stays the same between two moments, what would these unusual nights that I spent here do?! I remembered Kuthayyir<sup>iii</sup> Azzah's verse:

She claimed I changed after she was gone

O! Azzah, who is he that doesn't change?!

Yes, I have changed... Is there a human who goes through what we have gone through and remains unchanged? The space of longing broadened to fill every throbbing vein in me... Moments of recollection made me cry... A Quranic verse, which I came across thousands of times before and was never moved by, made me burst into tears... Just uttering it now, my tears flow on my cheeks like rivers... I cried for the simplest reasons. I felt that crying was a joy... I did not need the slightest effort to invoke a tear rolling on my cheek... How easy it is to cry... How beautiful it is to cry... How wonderful it is to cry in order to get released ...!! Released ...!! Released from what?

From my memories... from my poems... from the course of my life... from the banners of my longing... from the sources of my longing...!!

They sent me to the doctor one night... I didn't know why they did it. There was nothing wrong with me... If the spears of reminiscence and the knives of longing spared me, I would really be well... No doctor can claim he can cure them!! I entered into his all-white room... the bed was white... the sheets were white... the scrubs were white... even the curtains were glowing with whiteness... Amal Donqol's<sup>46</sup> verses jumped into my brimming-with-love head

The doctors' scrubs were white  
The color of the coats was white  
The crown of the sages is white  
The sheets... the color of the beds...  
The bandages and the cotton  
The sleeping pill, the intravenous canister  
The glass of milk  
All this fills my heart with weakness  
All this recalls the coffin

Oh ... if whiteness of the heart governed human relations, no two would dispute before a judge. The doctor conducted his own tests... It seemed that

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<sup>46</sup> An Egyptian poet (1943-1983).

they were preparing to move me from here, and they wanted to hand me over (in one piece) to the other side.

On Thursday morning, Sept. 12, 1996... I was fasting... They woke me up at almost ten... The distance I traversed with the guards immediately confirmed to me that we were not going to the interrogation office. Also, the pendulum time always pointed to 9 p.m., not 10 a.m. when they took me to the interrogation...

Distances and many floors... Before getting out into the sunlight, an officer came and offensively chained my hands, and this time he chained them to the back. I felt deeply insulted, in addition to a terrible pain in my hands, and I felt that blood was dripping from them... Twisting my hands doubled this painful feeling. He pushed me carelessly towards the door, where two cars were waiting outside... I was thrown in the back seat of the civilian car, and two armed men rushed to sit next to me... and two jumped into the military car... and we left the place...

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Reference is made here to an incident that happened during the Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab's rule. The son of Amr ibn al-'As, Governor of Egypt, whipped an Egyptian Copt after this Copt beat him in a horse race. The Governor's son said, "I am the son of the 'honorable'." The Copt then travelled to Madinah, the Islamic capital, and complained to Khalif Omar. The Caliph immediately summoned the Governor and his son and told the Copt to take his revenge, and said, "Beat the son of the 'honorable'." Then the Caliph shouted the famous question in the face of the Governor, "When did you enslave people although they are born free?"

<sup>ii</sup> This verse is originally by the Syrian poet Nizār Qabbānī (1932-1998) who is known for his love poetry and unwavering feminism. It is part of the poem 'ya Tunis al-khadra' (O! Green Tunisia) in which he celebrates his love for women and Tunisia.

<sup>iii</sup> Kuthayyir ibn 'Abd al-Rahman (c. 660 – c. 723) is a seven century Arab 'Udhri (love) poet who's known for his love of a woman named 'Azzah to the point that he was dubbed 'Kuthayyir 'Azzah.' Although 'Azzah married another man, Kuthayyir never stopped loving her, and continued reciting love poetry praising her virtues. He was so changed by her death that he stopped making saying poetry and did not find any pleasures in life anymore ("حافظ الشمري" Haviz al-Shamari, 2014).