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## Configuring the present for the future: personal narratives of the Arab spring

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### ABSTRACT

My research highlights the complex relationship between narrative and temporality whilst exploring the narrative configuration of the Arab revolution. My paper situates the memoirs of Libyan novelist Hisham Matar's *The Return* and Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, and their first-hand experience of the revolution in Libya and Egypt within the genre of memory and writing. The stated work is investigated to emphasize how both writers configure the immediate, historical, social, and political dimensions of the revolution. By transcribing the time of revolution into narratives, both writers attempt to preserve a watershed moment of the Arab history and portray collective as well as individual memory. I argue that through their acts of witnessing/writing/remembering, not only do these writers historicize the present but also produce narrative memory by articulating collective utterances.

### Introduction

Ten years have passed since the Arab Spring shakes the Arab world. Yet, to take stock of the Arab Spring's outcomes is quite a daunting task. The Arab world is still far from being satisfied as widespread political instability demonstrates. Upon seeing the worsening scenarios of their countries, many writers felt compelled to express their view point and their personal experiences during—right after—the uprisings, and admit difficulty in writing about such dramatic changes and culturally intense events. As in *Occupation Diaries*, Raja Shehadeh says that 'the Egyptians are writing the history of their liberation, with each Friday given a slogan like the title of a new chapter in the unfolding story'.<sup>1</sup> There is already a vast amount of material on the Arab Spring although it only dates from Dec, 2010. Writers around the Arab world have written about corruption, detention, cronyism, poverty, unemployment, sexual and gender oppressions and financial scandals in the regime in which they live or they are exiled from. Despite the existence of severe censorship, Arab writers remain socially and politically engaged. As the renowned writer Naguib Mahfouz

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<sup>1</sup>Raja Shehadeh, *Occupational Dairies* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 118.

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proclaims, 'in all my writings, you will find politics. You may find a story which ignores love, or some other subject, but not politics; it is the very axis of our thinking'.<sup>2</sup>

Arab writers and intellectuals have struggled for change through their work and have brought about a cultural revolution by confronting the oppressive structures of their governments through their stories, which have helped as catalysts for change. They are experimenting with a range of genres and styles to transcribe uncertainty in their narratives. For example, Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* represents a new wave of dystopian and surrealist fiction from Middle Eastern writers who are grappling with the chaotic aftermath of the Arab Spring. Likewise, Nael Eltoukhy creates a dark satirical futuristic Egyptian Society in *Women of Karantina*. The Arab Spring also ushers the emergence and the prevailing of a new literary genre in the Arab World, diaries. For example, *Days of Tahrir* by Abdel Meguid and *Diaries of Cactus Revolution* by Abdul-Rahman Yusuf. Not surprisingly, a number of previous texts are also re-published. Many texts are also translated into English. I am referring to Khaled Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* Which is originally published in Arabic in 2006 but translated into English in 2012 and Manal Alsarraj's *As the River Must* first published in Arabic in 2002. It is worth mentioning that both these texts were originally banned by the regime. The Arab Spring provides an element of opportunism to publishing industries as many texts are re-published as the novel of the Arab Spring or the novel that predicted the Arab Spring, Khalid Khamissi's *Taxi* (2007), for example. Therefore, I argue that the Arab Spring opens up spaces and time for narrative and restores and empowers the cultural forms.

Since the Arab revolution is an evolving phenomenon, writers face difficulties in articulating disrupted present, incoherent, non-hegemonic relations of space and time and envisioning the future of the revolution. The unpredictability of what revolution could bring is clearly reflected in diverse forms of the narratives of revolution. The two memoirs, *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* by Ahdaf Soueif and *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* by Hisham Matar that I discuss here represent an on-ground scenario of the Arab revolution. Both writers participate in the revolution and their narratives offer a unique perspective on the Arab revolution and what it means to be caught up in a moment of change. I highlight how both writers configure the immediate historical, social and political dimensions of the revolution. Emerging from the ground, these stories reflect all the characteristics of the Arab revolution and are narrated through the use of place and time—naming of particular dates and places—to mark what Roger Bromley calls 'stages in the struggle', and hence can be categorized as personal narratives.<sup>3</sup>

Soueif's *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* is a minute-by-minute account of the initial days of the Egyptian revolution. The title clearly illustrates that it is about the geographical space of Cairo with its resonant history. The word memoir in the title shows that this book is a composite of the past and the present of Cairo. Soueif blends her own frontline involvement in the revolution with her past and childhood memories of Cairo. *The Return* is the journal of Matar's trip to Libya. Not knowing the date of his father's death

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Hosam Aboul-Ela, 'The writer Becomes Text: Naguib Mahfouz and State Nationalism in Egypt', *Biography* 27, no. 2 (2004): 339–356.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Bromley, 'Giving Memory a Future': Women, Writing, Revolution', *Journal for Cultural Research* 19, no. 2 (2015): 221–232.

complicates the boundary between life and death for him. The sense of living with an 'absent-present' burdens him to the extent that he decides to return to Libya with the hope of releasing the uncertainties that constrain his life.<sup>4</sup> Although apparently this trip is arranged to find out the whereabouts of his father, Jaballa Matar, the story of the pursuit of his father turns out to be a tale of the nation. He goes back to Libya when 'justice, democracy and the rule of law [a]re within reach' during the 2011 revolution.<sup>5</sup> Both books are a rich historical tapestry that merges the past with the present. Soueif and Matar record the real events of the Arab uprisings by casting themselves as the witness and narrator of their narratives. They honour their responsibility as citizens to their countries and fulfil their duty as writers by preserving the present for the future in the form of their memoirs. Along with writings, they accept the role of political activists which have huge impact on their writings as well. While the context and content are important aspects of their work, the fascinating aspect of their work is their experimentation with the form to bring the collective utterances. Both writers subvert the available range of meanings and build a new reflexive analysis of the revolution to create a future history. Perspective, language, tense and tone: all these factors together contribute to what Bromley terms 'we-narrative' for 'collective refiguration'.<sup>6</sup>

### The reconfiguration of the revolution

Soueif and Matar select, examine, reflect and assign meaning to a complex series of events by writing memoirs of the Arab Spring. In the act of writing, their narratives testify to their presence on the ground. They try to preserve human temporality (living history), to record the present and thus produce narrative memory. Their narratives witness the time in which ordinary people take a 'country's affairs in hand' and depose the decades-long authoritarian regime.<sup>7</sup> By transcribing this time into memoirs, these stories become part of a unique narrative configuration, which conflate time with iconic and mnemonic properties because both works attempt to preserve a watershed moment of the Arab history. By coding this particular moment of history in aesthetic forms, I believe that Soueif's and Matar's narratives portray collective as well as individual memory. Ernst Van Alphen claims that memory and experience are 'shaped and structured according to the parameters of available discourses'.<sup>8</sup> The main challenge for a writer is to respond to today's needs and to create a new form, what Alison Landsberg calls 'prosthetic' texts which 'emphasize the bodily experiential, sensuous and affective' dimension of testimonial writing.<sup>9</sup> In this way, a writer could testify his presence in the revolutionary ground and at the same time make their texts receptive too for their readers.

Given this context, a writer is a linking juncture between event and recording, temporal and spatial and through his/her writings he/she 'sutures himself or herself into a larger history'.<sup>10</sup> Since these larger historical narratives are not available at the time of writing;

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<sup>4</sup>Hisham Matar, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2016), 39.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>6</sup>Bromley, 'Giving Memory a future', 224.

<sup>7</sup>Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History* (New York: Verso, 2012), 109.

<sup>8</sup>Ernst Van Alphen, *Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 96.

<sup>9</sup>Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 133.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 133.

both writers thus depend upon their experiences and imaginations to give intelligibility to the action. For example, many of the recorded events or incidents in both memoirs do not happen in the distant past and there is a possibility that many readers may have witnessed that situation which eventually put pressure on the literariness of the narratives and this suggests that memoirs are capable of filling the gap in our memory from the point of view of the author. To maintain a balance between different past incidents/events and the current incidents/events, these authors aim to employ the flashback technique which shows that the present circumstances of the country are the aftermath of the past scenarios. They frequently revisit the past to identify its triggers to show that revolution does not occur out of the vacuum. There is no singular sequence or beginning, middle and end in their memoirs, which ultimately creates a temporal imbalance in their narratives. Corresponding to the narrative organization, it shows that the present moment and the current attitudes of people is an appropriate response to the course of the events.

By transcribing the present and encoding the future, both texts emerge as the personal testimony of place, time and experience of revolution. With this, the question of the relationship of narrative with the socio-cultural contexts of remembering arises. In his treatise on *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur claims that 'time becomes human time' when it is organized in a 'narrative' pattern and narrative becomes meaningful when 'it portrays the features of temporal experience'.<sup>11</sup> Human time is defined as the tension between the 'horizon of expectations and the space of experiences' which means that keeping in view the experiences, human beings expect the future accordingly.<sup>12</sup> In the course of the time, they are either disappointed or fulfilled by new experiences, 'which in turn not only forms the background for new expectations but also retroactively transforms the memory of previous expectations and experiences' (Grethlein 316).<sup>13</sup>

This definition of human time provides the grounds for the exploration of narrative configuration of time because the tension between experience and expectation is found in the narratives as well. With respect to the narratives of the Arab uprisings, this tension exists at the level of action. People in both memoirs have some expectations regarding revolution that are either fulfilled or disappointed during the course of the narratives. In the narratives of revolution, the revolutionary perception is embedded in a field of what Edmund Husserl terms, 're- and pro-tensions, in which previous perceptions continue to resonate and coming perceptions are anticipated'.<sup>14</sup> The pro-tension either is mostly likely to be unknown and thus is foreshadowed or remains open to revision. For example, after the successful toppling of the Egyptian regime, Soueif expects the positive outcomes of the revolution as in the first version of her book, she anticipates the future of revolution in words: 'No More Torture!', 'we have entered the new phase',<sup>15</sup> 'We'll get married/We'll have kids—Lift your head up high, you're Egyptian'.<sup>16</sup> However, in the second version of her memoir, the added part of Revolution II and III reveals the disappointment of her initial expectation about the future.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>12</sup>Jonas Grethlein, 'The Narrative Reconfiguration of Time beyond Ricoeur', *Poetics Today* 31 no. 2 (2010): 313–329.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 316.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>15</sup>Ahdaf Soueif, *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014), 150.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 152.

According to Ricoeur, literary world-making depends on the interaction among the 'prefiguration' of any text, a reference to the existing extra textual world; the 'textual configuration', the narrative operation which creates literature; and the 'refiguration' which refers to the reader interpretation. Keeping in view this approach, literature 'appears as an active, constructive process, in which cultural system of meaning, narrative operations, and reception participate equally, and in which reality is not merely reflected, but in fact, poetically refigured and iconically augmented'.<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur's emphasis on the literary text as tied to the external literary world suggests that the composition of a literary text—narrative construction—is grounded in the external world of action, its structures, its resources, and its temporal character. Therefore, he argues that the extra-textual reality and the narrative enter into a mutual relationship of change and influence. In general, the threefold mimesis of Ricoeur is a hermeneutic operation which brings together the textual world, the real world and the reader.<sup>18</sup> Soueif and Matar transform 'fabula' into 'sjuzhet' in a way, which recapitulates the past of their countries on the one hand and also shapes our (readers) expectation on the other hand—the third mimesis of Ricoeur's model.<sup>19</sup> Both writers use diverse devices like signposts, images, sensory language, metaphor and proverbs, etc., which I shall illustrate shortly, to make their readers to experience what protestors experienced in the revolutionary field.

Moreover, the Arab revolution does not have any prominent figure or head who can lead a group of people; in fact, a group of people together march and anticipate that they would be successful. This is illustrated in their narratives where collective heroism replaces the individual leadership. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson talks about a new type of subjectivity in which individuality is completed by collectivity. He claims that collectivity neither means that individual lost his/her distinctive individuality nor lost in a communal individuality but all of us are 'indeed a single experiencing individual, yet at the same time, we [are] in a very important and delightful manner distinct from one another'.<sup>20</sup> A pioneer of cultural memory, Jan Assman, also speaks of collective memory, that writing 'social groups constitute a cultural memory, from which they derive their collective identity'.<sup>21</sup> Soueif and Matar both write in relation to the alterity to the official narratives of the totalitarian regime. In comparison to all those decisions, identities and meanings that make a reservoir of the authoritarian regime, in the writings of Soueif and Matar: a new political subjectivity emerges that holds the potential to reflect the social group's life world and its own self-image. They are in the words of Bromley 'proleptic and prefigurative: scripting a socially shared, and shareable, future through mnemonic potential and iconic augmentation'.<sup>22</sup> They incorporate many voices in their narratives of revolution. All the protestors equally participate and play a significant role in shaping the course of the revolution and both writers are seen to engage all of these voices when transcribing it. I believe that this polyphony of voices makes the narrative more plausible and representative of the revolution as they incorporate the collective utterances of all

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<sup>17</sup>Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 152.

<sup>18</sup>Mimesis 1 (Prefiguration), Mimesis 2 (Configuration) and mimesis 3 (Refiguration).

<sup>19</sup>In a classical narratology, Russian Formalists give the distinction between fabula and sjuzhet. Fabula refers to the chronological sequence of events and sjuzhet is the representation of those events.

<sup>20</sup>Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 8.

<sup>21</sup>Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 29.

<sup>22</sup>Bromley, 'Giving Memory a Future', 223.

those who participate in the revolution. To speak on behalf of the whole community, both authors themselves become the narrator—the voice of the common people—of their narratives. They use various documents like journalistic reports, images of martyrs, human rights reports and testimonies of prisoners to incorporate divergent experiences and collective utterances.

Conscious of the historical significance of the events, both writers incorporate the temporal dimension of everyday life of the Arab Spring and the post-Arab Spring, integrate plurivocality and focalize information. To achieve this goal, these writers use diverse literary strategies, for example, the use of plural personal pronoun, the use of metaphor, cinematic narratives, the transcription of photos and videos, sensory language, proverbial expressions, and foreshadowing. They do not reduce their narratives to mere ornamented linguistic structures; rather, they use direct language and observation in their narratives. As an observer, Soueif's narrative slightly differs from the narratives of Matar who arrives on the revolutionary ground rather late, which I try to conceptualize in the subsequent pages.

### **The Egyptian revolution remains alive in *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed***

Soueif always wants to write a book about her city, Cairo—but her attempt to write anything about her city 'reads like an elegy'.<sup>23</sup> However, at the time revolution breaks out, she decides to write 'the story of her revolution'<sup>24</sup> and she produces a self-reflexive narrative of revolution which is a eulogy for her city, a story of her revolution and an attempt, in Bromley's words, 'to give memory a future'.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike other contemporary memoirs, Soueif's memoir reads like an activist diary. The whole story of the revolution is recorded in calendrical form and a narrator is an activist, protestor, TV and radio commentator, organizer, international figure and of course writer as well. Her everyday activity is separated from the next day and each day is a recording of her experience and activity of revolution. It is true that the events/incidents take place in her narrative chronologically on a specific day, and she records every event with date and time; yet, her narrative is disrupted temporally because of her use of flashback technique. Secondly, the forward momentum in her narrative is interrupted by a long section she calls 'An Interruption' which is critical, reflective, less euphoric, less optimistic.

The second version of Soueif's book is written after the occurrence of the real events regardless of the fact that she depends on her first version and documents she records whilst participating in the revolution. Time is a crucial part of the updated version of the book as Soueif particularly marks some days in terms of revolution as 'after 100 days of Morsi presidency' and 'the Friday of accounting'.<sup>26</sup> For instance, she highlights the Maspero massacre (9 October 2011) in which 28 people were killed and 212 injured. Although massive events take place throughout 2011 and more than thousands of people are killed, this event is considered the turning point in the Egyptian revolution as it categorically demonstrates 'the tactical marriage of police and army'.<sup>27</sup> This day achieves

<sup>23</sup>Soueif, *Cairo*, xiii.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>25</sup>Bromley, 'Giving Memory a Future', 221.

<sup>26</sup>Soueif, *Cairo*, 212.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 60.

the immediate symbolic resonance and becomes a memory-figure in Soueif's memoir and at this juncture, she pinpoints the failure of the revolution. The military, who were meant to be the people's guardian and who 'guarantee[d] peace and safety' in the initial days of the revolution, turned their weapons on the people.<sup>28</sup> For example, the Midan (Tahrir square) where people were gathered against their government was 'razed to the ground' by military.<sup>29</sup> The textual evidences suggest that Soueif synthesizes and condenses a whole series of events by transcribing the time and the site of memory.

In the second edition of her book, she is far less euphoric but she still ends section II with a positive note, suggesting that although the military tries to crush the revolutionaries, the revolutionaries 'so far have beaten it back'.<sup>30</sup> She ends this section with a positive note by referring to four instances of people's resistance all over the world. She claims that not only in Egypt do people come out to the streets but marches have been seen in Spain, Greece, and Palestine. By referring to the uprisings in different parts of the world, Soueif probably wants to consolidate the protestors of the world in her memoir. The textual evidences suggest that even though revolution has failed, Soueif still holds onto the hope that it will eventually achieve its desired aims. This may be one of the reasons that she acknowledges the creativity of the first 18 days of revolution—graffiti, art, poetry, and songs—and its continuing presence throughout the narratives testifies to her hope, despite the recurring violence from the state and the military. She plays her role in the revolution until the parliamentary elections and then leaves the revolutionary field. During this time, she tries to develop a potential archive of the Arab revolution and also articulates the possibility of a hopeful future. She scripts and imprints publicly available signs, scenes and symbols to keep the discourse of the revolution alive.

The next section, 'Revolution III: Postscript' in which Soueif attempts to summarize Morsi's government role in Egypt, is an addition written after she left the site of struggle. In this section, she describes the litany of human rights violations during the Morsi period, which once again brings people out to street against their newly elected president. Soueif does not comment on her position anywhere in this section although she describes the performance of Morsi as dismal. She speculates that: 'Revolution III is in grave danger of being co-opted by the enemies of Revolution I.— Revolution III is not against Morsi and the MB as such, but against the continuation of the policies that marked the Mubarak era'.<sup>31</sup> Yet she tries to conclude her book with a note of optimism:

There is a core, a resolute core, that does not lose sight of the aims of the revolution – bread, freedom, social justice – and what these bring of human dignity; that knows that what the people will finally demand is the administration that will put them on the road to achieving these aims. And that the people – even if they digress onto a side street – will return to insist on their original path and their essential aims.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 225.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 226.



She finishes her account of all three revolutions on a positive note, which suggests that even after so many losses she is hopeful about the future of Egypt as she argues that 'meanwhile, it does no harm to repeat, now and always: Down, down with military rule'.<sup>33</sup> Such an open ending of the book reveals the determination of Egyptians who are ready to risk their lives against the old corrupted system.

All revolutions call for changes, which influence the structure of narratives or form when transcribing it in literature and its ability to convey the vision of the revolution. In this regard, many authors use the technique of foreshadowing. Foreshadowing in the narration means anticipating future events with some sort of certainty rather than suspense. In the narratives of revolution, foreshadowing is closely related to the author's prediction, which is based on past events as well as the present situation. Consequently, this narrative technique is not only concerned with the author's point of view but also consolidates the present, past and future by witnessing the past that produces the present and heralds the future. For example, Soueif's mother is concerned about her country and before dying she keeps on repeating 'I'm worried about el-belad; the country, Egypt'.<sup>34</sup> Upon seeing the failing condition of her country, she already anticipates the revolution in words that she 'sees a massive storm rolling towards el-belad'.<sup>35</sup> Foreshadowed in the narratives of revolution is an anticipation of the event of paramount importance. It is more than an imaginative prophecy; instead, it is yearning for an extraordinary dream, which may materialize during the course of narratives.

Soueif keeps the narrative of revolution alive by binding together the history and archives, space and time, her public and private self in a processual text that contains pauses and interruptions and holds the conversations about the eighteen days of revolution always in Tahrir Square—its excitement, anxieties, smells and sounds. It is not a populist text, nor does she construct herself as a heroic figure. Rather, she strives with form and structure to produce historicity of the moment as she herself says that 'I am part of the surge of happy humanity flowing across the bride' (Soueif 151).<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates that Soueif considers herself as a part of the large demonstrations. As soon as she becomes a part of the protest, she shifts from the personal singular pronoun—I stumble, and a hand under my elbow steadies me' to 'the way ahead of us is invisible behind the smoke'<sup>37</sup>—followed by the plural personal pronoun

**We** stand. That is our job, the people at the back: **we** stand and **we** chant our declaration of peace: Selmeyya! Selmeyya!. While our comrades at the front, unarmed, fight with the security forces. From time to time, a great cry goes up, and **we** surge forward: our friends have won us another couple of meters, and **we** follow them and hold our ground. **We** sing the national anthem.<sup>38</sup>

Here Soueif constructs a new language to incorporate collective utterances. A narrator in the narratives of the revolution appears to be part of a large demonstration, which is in line with the stream of revolution and conscious of the story he/she narrates is a part of the collective consciousness of the people, hence use the pronoun 'we' for the collective voice. In such narratives, the narrator thus acts as a link between the author and the

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 18.

outside world he/she presents. The peculiarity of Soueif's memoir lies in the fact that 'narrator and the intradiegetic narrator are the same' as Michael Butor notes.<sup>39</sup> The narrator is not an echo of the author but the author herself plays the role of narrator and also appears as a public character. From the above example, the sense of mass theatre emerges from the Tahrir Square and a section concludes with the enunciative sentence like 'we stand our ground and sing and chant and place our lives, with all trust and confidence, in each other's hand' (Soueif 18).<sup>40</sup> Her use of personal plural pronoun indicates that she owns her city, her people and considers herself as a part of them.

All the recorded events in *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* is based on facts. Soueif uses direct language and avoids any tinge of imagination. To give the real sense of the revolution, she uses cinematic narrative. She incorporates the sounds and colours of Tahrir Square to create a visual picture of the revolution as readers could hear protestors chanting while reading many scenes. Just as movies showcase a setting in detail, Soueif also adds textures to her written script by infusing it with sensual details of the surrounding area and weather. In order to convey the gravity and unthinkable scenario of revolution, Soueif relies on senses and uses the sensory language. She draws upon the excessive references to the sensory experiences of smell represented in flames, burning and tear gas. Thanks to her cinematic narrative coupled with the sensory language, one could literally feel oneself in the revolutionary ground whilst reading her memoir. For example, the book starts with the 'coughing and choking' of Soueif and other protestors due to heavy 'tear gas'.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the narrative, there are scenes of burning cars, smells of burning tires, vinegar that is used against the protection from tear gas, smoke, gas and surgical masks. In so doing, Soueif helps readers to understand readily the scenario of protest.

Along with sensory language, images and signposts are also used throughout the book. Images are utilized to a great extent in the narrative of revolution to propagate the people and to defend the revolutionary actions. For example, by displaying the picture of Abu Muhab's son (martyr), activists try to incite people to revolution; as Abu Mahab himself says 'he dies for the revolution, and I will live for the revolution'.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Soueif's narrative is also marked with signposts to counter the state's discourse. Since 'Egyptian state TV is lying so shamefully',<sup>43</sup> therefore Soueif's son, Omar Robert Hamilton along with his two friends 'have established Tahrir Cinema' and 'every night they show footage, clips' to counter the state's discourse.<sup>44</sup> By articulating all available signs and symbols supplemented by the subjective category, Soueif produces narrative memory of the revolution for the future generation.

## **Narrating the personal saga and the Libyan uprisings**

Libyan history is full of massacres and Hisham Matar tries to record some of these in his memoir *The Return: Father, Sons and the Land in between*. The title captures Matar's journey to Libya. The sub-title, 'Father, Sons and the Land in between' shows that this is

<sup>39</sup>Michael Butor, *Studies in the New Novels* (Beirut: Owaidat Publications, 1986), 64.

<sup>40</sup>Soueif, *Cairo*, 18.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

a family saga, but in fact, it is also chronicling a siege and provides insights into the political upheaval in Libya. Hisham Matar examines those conditions that make Libya ripe for revolution. He sets the story of the nation's past and present against the family to show state interference at the domestic level and to reveal that everything, even personal lives, is political in the Arab countries. His father's absence overshadows his whole life that he attempts to show in this memoir. Unlike the memoir of Soueif, there is no celebratory or plot twist in Matar's memoir, instead, it is a portrait of loss and pain. He delivers these two human emotions beautifully by quiet sentences and through metaphorical language. For example, he is travelling in an ill-fitting suit to Libya conveys his discomfort. A conversation about the presence of Jaballa Matar always ends with 'I am sorry', and the elderly prisoner who lost his sight and memory is found with the picture of Jaballa Matar tell about the mysterious absence and unknown death of Matar's father. Such evidences about Jaballa Matar ushers an illusionary hope in Hisham Matar that falls back into the abyss as soon as Hisham Matar starts believing it.

Matar's challenge is not only to craft a language to counter the regime's narrative with his emergent narrative of the uprising but also to include the inaudible collective voices. Although he was unable to write at the time of revolution because of the enormity of events, nevertheless this gave him enough time to reflect upon the situation. To present the silenced reality, he puts together a range of interviews, documents, photos, archives and the testimonies of protestors and prisoners with the personal testimony as an oppositional narrative in the form of his memoir. Like Soueif, he is also storying the present, recalling the past, and encoding the future. For example in February 2011 when the revolution first broke out in Libya, Matar was not there but he started 'efforts to supply international journalists with information about what was happening in Libya'.<sup>45</sup> Until he could join the revolution directly, his 'flat in London had become a makeshift newsroom' where he made 'fifty calls a day' to different protestors to know about revolution and asked, 'questions about when and how and what, the exact time, the number of those involved, the casualties, how many dead'.<sup>46</sup> He wanted 'to document the 17 February revolution at the political, economic, social, cultural and judicial levels'.<sup>47</sup> Along with him, many other local journalists who had always been 'censored, imprisoned and sometimes killed' under Qaddafi's regime also 'sensed the urgency not only to monitor the evolving present but also to engage in the past, publishing accounts and personal testimonies of life under the dictatorship'.<sup>48</sup> It represents Matar's preoccupation with Libya and Libyans even though he lives far away.

Matar seems to utilize different literary devices, for example, metaphor, proverbial expression, scripting of photos and videos etc. to articulate collectivity. For instance, unable to witness the time when revolution breaks out, he reflects on the early days of revolution by using the technique of visual memories, which include photos and videos. This attempt by Matar can be seen as his effort to highlight the silenced reality. In his narratives, he transcribes photos and videos which are captured and made by his nephew, Izzo and his friend Marwan who participate in the revolution. He reveals the whole story of the initial days of revolution through photography in which the country youth is shown as

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<sup>45</sup>Matar, *The Return*, 93.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

tired and carrying heavy 'machine-gun' to fight as an 'armed rebellion against the dictatorship'.<sup>49</sup> In some pictures, youth is also shown as 'carrying a Kalashnikov, an RPG' and their 'chest crossed with bullet belts'.<sup>50</sup> A series of pictures shows the wounded bodies of youth as 'a face freckled by shrapnel, white cotton in the ears, pupils as red as plums'.<sup>51</sup> These examples demonstrate the silent reality of Libya where the youth has been robbed of their futures by involving them in war.

Matar has also incorporated the telephonic conversation he holds with rebels during the revolution who provide him with accurate details of what is happening in Libya. For example, in one conversation, he was informed that the regime 'dug up the graves and burnt the bodies' of rebels.<sup>52</sup> He also articulates a video film made by Izzo and Marwan who go up to the roof of the media building to take down 'the rags of the tyrant' and raise the flag of Libya.<sup>53</sup> Matar's attempt at articulating the video scripts, telephone calls and visual imagery in his narratives not only reveals the missing account of the revolution—those days when Matar was not the direct observer of the revolution, but also instances of visual memories and scripts help readers to make sense of the Libyan revolution. Upon returning, he also witnesses images of martyrs in different court squares: 'images of these recently deceased young fighters [a]re everywhere'.<sup>54</sup> By imprinting all these available symbols and scenes in the form of memoirs, Matar is trying to present the disrupted present and envisioning a hopeful future that 'like pictures of saints, the images of these young men had replaced those of the dictators' which is 'a new development' on the way to a free Libya.<sup>55</sup> This example indicates Matar's hope of a democratic Libya when its people not a dictator would rule Libya.

Matar does not only describe revolutionary activities, but also gives equal space to events in the pre-Arab Spring period: from colonial Libya till the revolution. In comparison to Soueif whose focus is on the near past, Matar articulates the ancient past and post-revolutionary uncertainty of Libya in his narrative too. Bringing colonial discourse of Libya, Matar does not only show that such practices of dehumanization and tortures continue in postcolonial Libya but also highlights those forgotten people who struggle for the independence of Libya. He skilfully traces past events and links them with the uncertain present to show that the past of his country is inextricably linked with the current situation. The text details the story of violent colonial repression and Libyan's history of resistance against Italian colonization in which Matar's grandfather was a strong opponent, fighter and witness. Instances of torture, illness, starvation, depopulation, genocide become common scenes of that period. For example, at the time of Italian colonialism, 'the policy was depopulation' and 'destruction and slaughter took on a massive scale'.<sup>56</sup> Matar highlights the fact that before Libyan independence, a member of the Libyan resistance was carried to Italy either 'to be tortured for information and then killed'<sup>57</sup> or for 'execution and the bodies of the deceased are never returned to the families'.<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 86–87.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 242.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 161.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 160.

same policy is continued after independence and during Qaddafi's reign 'opponents of the regime were hanged in public squares and sport arenas'.<sup>59</sup> By bringing stories from the witnesses into the present time, Matar does not only reveal a history of trauma in which Libyans find themselves embedded in the past even at the present time but also produce a testimonial narrative.

Matar reveals the atrocities of the regime and injustice through first-hand witnessing of stories that are provided by family members and other prisoners who spend decades in 'the mouth of hell'.<sup>60</sup> For example, Israeli manufactured and designed handcuffed is used: 'a thin plastic wire that drew tighter with the slightest resistance. You fe[el] the pain not so much around the wrists but inside the head'<sup>61</sup>; loudspeakers are purposely fixed inside each cell on which 'speeches of Qaddafi, propaganda songs and slogans expanding the virtues of the regime' are played every day 'from 6 a.m. to midnight' at full volume 'so loud' that the prisoners can feel their 'muscle vibrate'<sup>62</sup>; on numerous occasions prisoners are physically and verbally beaten and tortured, deprived of the medical care, sleep and being 'fed and watered'<sup>63</sup> and occasionally 'a bucket full of cockroaches' is spilled over their chests.<sup>64</sup> These torture practices enable the regime to construct 'Foucauldian heterotopias' to justify the incarceration and 'target the citizens of the nation as enemies within its borders'.<sup>65</sup> With these horrible tactics, prisoners 'become as thin as a ghost'.<sup>66</sup> Instead of protecting its people and ensuring equal rights to everyone, the Libyan regime itself is involved in the 'ghostification and anonymization of people',<sup>67</sup> worsening their condition and rendering them powerless to the extent that they 'don't even have animal rights'.<sup>68</sup> By bringing the first-hand accounts of prisoners in his narratives, he attempts to highlight the voices of prisoners who have never been given voices. These examples suggest that in a country like Libya—ravaged by despotism—if anyone dares to oppose the regime is liable to beating, torture and detention by state security.

Matar cites countless examples that show those who oppose Qaddafi's regime have always been detained, tortured and faced the horror of the regime. Many young men in Libya are abducted and assassinated by the regime. For example, one of Matar's cousins, Maher Bushrayda 'was arrested and spent the years from 1977 to 1986 in prison' because of 'criticizing the dictatorship'.<sup>69</sup> Matar combines all these episodes of pre and post-colonial Libya and produce a narrative memory of his country, Libya. Taken together, these episodes tell that the regime itself destroys its intellects and the future of its own people. By recalling these past atrocities in the present account, Matar shows that these conditions in Libya make the country ripe for revolution. Therefore, upon seeing a revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, people in Libya also gather courage and decide to take the street against the ruthless totalitarian regime. Like their Tunisian and Egyptian fellows, a million Libyans took the streets and called for the downfall of the regime.

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 267.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 256.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 266.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 260.

<sup>65</sup>Pramod K. Nayyar, *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 23.

<sup>66</sup>Matar, *The Return*, 264.

<sup>67</sup>Nayyar, *Human Rights and Literature*, 118.

<sup>68</sup>Matar, *The Return*, 266.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 126.

Unlike Soueif's memoir where some days become memory-figures, in Matar's memoir, some sites or places achieve symbolic resonance. This is perhaps the reason that Matar roams around different cities of Libya and gives an eyewitness account of the uprising in the different parts of Libya. For example, Benghazi is Libya's second big city where the revolution was 'quickly and ruthlessly quashed'.<sup>70</sup> By passing through the ruins of Benghazi, Matar claims that this 'city had always been unenthusiastic about Qaddafi regime, and it paid the price'.<sup>71</sup> The whole city was desolate, there were some 'trucks and tanks packed with green flags and placards that read: BENGHAZI USED TO BE HERE'.<sup>72</sup> The despotic regime targets Benghazi and ruthlessly destroys the city to erase its rebellious identity to stop the Arab revolution. To exterminate its dissents, the regime does not even hesitate to exercise the necro power—the force that subjugates life. For instance, whilst delivering a speech on TV during uprisings, Seif el Islam (son of Qaddafi) threatens Libyans that if the revolution is not stopped, 'a nightmare would follow: civil war, destruction and mass emigration'.<sup>73</sup> He even tries to terrorize people by saying that 'you will be crying over hundreds of thousands of deaths. There will be rivers of blood'.<sup>74</sup> However, revolutionaries, on the other hand, believe that 'this country belongs to'<sup>75</sup> them, 'people and not the dictatorship are the true custodians of Libya', therefore, they continue their 'march until the country is cleansed of the rats'.<sup>76</sup> This evidence tells of the strong determination of Libyans who do not retreat and continue fighting for freedom regardless of the difficulties and sacrifices. Throughout his narratives, he discusses many past events. By bringing past stories into the present time, Matar reveals a history of trauma in which Libyans find themselves still living, and thus produces a testimonial narrative

## Conclusion

Ricoeur's tripartite model asserts that there is a direct relation between narrative and time, as a narrative is a mode of engaging with temporality and both entities give each other meaning and existence. In this regard, both writers attempt to preserve the continuity of the unfinished revolution. By configuring revolution in narratives, they reconfigure that particular moment or time and thereby create historical time, which mediates between time as experienced by them and the present time. Soueif and Matar's narratives, therefore, perform the act of memory-making along with witnessing the moment of change. They do not create characters in their narratives but refer to real people in the real world. Real names of those people and places are used. The presence of a writer is also a contributing factor that 'guarantees the validity of that event' because they represent their lives as representative of collective identity.<sup>77</sup> Dates, facts, and figures are also inserted throughout both texts that show that narratives of Matar and Soueif are

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>77</sup>Bernard Vallette, *Narrative Texts* (Cairo: Higher Council for Culture, 1999), 46–47.

inextricably linked with the external world and the real event but also distinct from it as a literary representation. Being a reflection as well as a construction of temporality, narrative thus links with the temporal character of human experience.

Soueif and Matar keep the memory of the Arab revolution alive and give it meaning through new forms of narrativization in which they do not only articulate their living memory but an ancient past—the detailed past accounts of their countries. This capacity for taking into account the past along with the present may suggest that the past and the present coalesce. According to Astrid Erll, this capacity of memory construction takes ‘into account the insight that every memory is related to the present situation which shows that the present scenarios are the outcome of the past circumstances.’<sup>78</sup> Dealing with the diachronic dimension of the revolution, I argue that both texts re-present and re-stage grand historical movements and make them observable through the medium of narratives. For instance, whilst describing the revolutionary activities in Tahrir square, Soueif goes back in retrospective narrative and gets distracted from revolution for some time to describe the history of Tahrir Square, a place for which she ‘prefers the Arabic word *midan*’ and which she calls the ‘Holy Grail’.<sup>79</sup> She skilfully traces the history of Tahrir Square from pre-colonial Cairo to revolutionary Cairo and thus offers Tahrir as a ‘home to the civic spirit of Egypt’.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, Matar goes back in history to link the present devastating scenario of Libya with its causes in the past. For instance, the day he reaches to Libya unexpectedly ‘mark[s] the twenty-second anniversary of [his] father’s first week in captivity’ at Abu-Salim.<sup>81</sup> Instead of progressing the story, Matar here pauses and reveals the cruel history of Abu-Salim prison. These examples of retrospective narratives although create complexity in the organization of the whole text, also help writers to reveal true historical accounts through retrospective narratives.

To sum up, I argue that Soueif and Matar, both fiction writers, dare to step out of their fictitious world into the real world, fight for freedom and try to articulate the moment of change with the help of narratives. By transcribing the revolution in narratives, they produce the legacy writing in which they construct a present to commemorate. Instead of distancing themselves from the moment of change, both writers prefer to be a part of the change, participate in it, witness it by reconfiguring the story of their revolution in narratives and thus situate their resistance against the despotic regime passively through their writings and actively as well. In their narratives, they construct the revolutionary moment, record the present for the future and bring the collective utterances to fabricate we-memory.

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<sup>78</sup>Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 20.

<sup>79</sup>Soueif, *Cairo*, 7.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>81</sup>Matar, *The Return*, 41.