HOPE IN THE MOST UNLIKELY SPACES:

_Thawra_ and the Contemporary Arabic Novel

By

Roula Salam

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Abstract

In the early to mid-twentieth century, many novelists in the Arab world championed Arab nationalism in their literary reflections on the social and political struggles of their countries, depicting these struggles primarily in terms of spatial binaries that pitted the Arab world against the West, even as they imported Western literary models of progress and modernity into their own work. The intense experience of national awakening that infused their writing often placed these authors at a literary disadvantage, for in their literature, all too often the depth and diversity of Arabic cultures and the complexity of socio-political struggles across the Arab world were undermined by restrictive spatial discourses that tended to focus only on particular versions of Arab history and on a seemingly unifying national predicament. Between the Arab defeat of 1967 and the present day, however, an increasing number of Arab authors have turned to less restrictive forms of spatial discourse in search of a language that might offer alternative narratives of hope beyond the predictable, and seemingly thwarted, trajectories of nationalism. This study traces the ways in which contemporary Arab authors from Egypt and the Sudan have endeavoured to re-think and re-define the Arab identity in ever-changing spaces where elements of the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, interact both competitively and harmoniously. I examine the spatial language and the tropes used in three Arabic novels, viewing them through the lens of thawra (revolution) in both its socio-political and artistic manifestations. Linking the manifestations of thawra in each text to different scenes of revolution in the Arab world today, in Chapter Two, I consider how, at a stage when the Sudan of the sixties was both still dealing with colonial withdrawal and struggling to establish itself as a nation-state, the geographical and textual landscapes of Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North depict the ongoing dilemma of the Sudanese identity. In Chapter Three, I examine Alaa
al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* in the context of a socially diseased and politically corrupt Egypt of the nineties: social, political, modern, historical, local, and global elements intertwine in a dizzyingly complex spatial network of associations that sheds light on the complicated reasons behind today’s Egyptian *thawra*. In Chapter Four, the final chapter, Gamal al-Ghitani’s approach to his Egypt in *Pyramid Texts* drifts far away from Salih’s anguished Sudan and al-Aswany’s chaotic Cairo to a realm where *thawra* manifests itself artistically in a sophisticated spatial language that challenges all forms of spatial hegemony and, consequently, old and new forms of social, political, and cultural oppression in the Arab world.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Part 1. Between reality and metaphor: Thawra in the Arab world

Through the streets and like a virus across the internet and media channels, major socio-political changes are taking place in many parts of the Arab world today. Even as Arab intellectuals are scrambling, as a recent article in the Egyptian newspaper Al-Masry al-Youm puts it, to “rearrange their brains for a new stage of cultural production” that would be in keeping with the enormity and speed of the unfolding socio-political events (Serajead 18), the Arab people’s revolts are toppling governments, and despots who have oppressed and looted their countries for years are fleeing their havens to watch or intervene from a distance as the people struggle for regime changes, regardless of how these changes will turn out. While Arab intellectuals have been participating in these demonstrations by the hundreds, some sceptics have wondered, as the same article states, whether these “intellectuals [are] vanguards of change or parasites upon it” (17). Nonetheless, people from all walks of life are uniting across Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Algeria, Qatar, Oman and perhaps more countries to come; a steady tsunami of protest has engulfed the Arab socio-political and cultural arenas, and while the voices are not always on the same wave length, they have in common a deep frustration with situations that have been allowed to remain unchanged for far too long.

We must be vigilant in following these developments across the Arab world, for the metaphors used to communicate the news about the Middle East region are often misleading, especially as the West struggles to locate a new vantage point from which to redefine and reassess its relationships with different Arab countries. My aim in presenting several of these Western metaphors here at the outset of my dissertation is to pave the way for a more complex
discussion about revolution and spatial metaphors in contemporary Arabic novels hailing from Egypt and the Sudan. On numerous occasions, experts on the Middle East have criticized the condescending tone used by Western intellectuals in describing revolutionary uprisings in the Arab world, the work of Edward Said serving as perhaps the most prominent example of this critique. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said challenges Bernard Lewis’s definition of the term *thawra* (Arabic for revolution) as the latter, a bona fide Orientalist, presents it in his 1972 essay “Islamic Concepts of Revolution.” According to Said, Lewis purports that in Arab countries the term *thawra* comes from the classical Arabic root “th-w-r,” meaning “to rise up (e.g. of a camel), to be stirred or excited, and hence, especially in Maghribi usage, to rebel” (qtd. 314). For Said, Lewis’s glossing of the definition of *thawra* is condescending at best and insulting at worst. Said questions Lewis’s use of the “camel rising as an etymological root for modern Arab revolution,” deeming it “a clever way of discrediting the modern.” For Said, Lewis’s intention was to isolate the Arab revolution from any “contemporary valuation,” degrading it to “nothing more noble (or beautiful) than a camel about to raise itself from the ground.” Lewis’s definition demonstrates scholarly sneakiness at its best (or worst) in the way it dismisses the “innumerable people [who] have an active commitment to [thawra], in ways too complex” for Lewis to understand. In this sense, such Orientalist discourse fails in explaining to the reader, or preparing him for, “the confirming revolutionary upheaval in the Arab world in the twentieth century” (314). Lewis missed out on another opportunity to describe *thawra* in bovine terms, for in Arabic, th-w-r also means bull, which could have served as the basis for another stab at stereotyping Arab revolutions. Said does not make this connection to the definition of th-w-r in his criticism of Lewis, but it certainly highlights his point that in Orientalist discourse, there is no real Arab
revolution, only a sexually-charged “sedition,” the “setting up [of] a petty sovereignty, and more excitement” (314-15).

The etymological approach Lewis deployed in his study of the word *thawra* is comparable here to an archaeological study, one Orientalist technique of studying Arabic culture. In *Colonising Egypt* (1988), Timothy Mitchell refers to the nineteenth-century French Orientalist Ernest Renan to describe how Orientalism studied “contemporary non-European languages … [as] survivals, [as] remnants from the past of the human (that is, the European) mind, [and as] preserved at various stages of ‘backwardness’” (Mitchell 139). Orientalism’s language theories “considered individual words to be plenitudes of meaning in themselves,” thus serving to perpetuate fixed representations of Arab backwardness in the “Oriental mentality” (140). In this sense, Orientalists tended to study language as an “exhibition” or the Arabic word as an “organism” (139). This Orientalist approach to language was both contested and expanded upon in 1897 by the French grammarian Michel Bréal, who argued for using a structural approach to the Arabic language that would render it “a means of communication” reflective of the intelligence and cultural development of its people (140-41); the earlier Orientalist focus on “empirical particulars” could now be supplemented by appeals to “the abstraction of an oriental mentality” (140).

Mitchell complicates this essentialist argument using Derrida’s critique of the structural linguistics of Saussure (who studied under Bréal). For Derrida, he explains, the *repetition* of the word is what gives it its meaning. Repetition here is paradoxical, since it implies “inseparable sameness within difference.” This paradox, however, is what makes language “possible” and “is not something to be resolved … as a strange consequence of language.” The structural linguistics of Saussure (like that of his mentor Bréal) manages to avoid this “sameness within
difference” by considering the word as “an object made up of two opposing aspects, the material and the conceptual.” These two aspects of the word situate it at once within two realms: the “physical” and the “meta-physical,” both of which are somehow “conjoined in the unity of the word.” For Derrida, this “mystical distinction between two realms” is not “fundamental, but a ‘theological’ effect” that “depends entirely on the possibility of acts of repetition” (146). In Arabic, Mitchell argues, this “theological effect of a distinct ‘realm’ of meaning was not produced,” or if it was, it was “acknowledged to be something theological, and treated as such” (146).

Mitchell cautiously applies Derrida’s linguistic argument to the study of Arabic words in order to show how Orientalists managed to both overlook and manipulate certain linguistic features of Arabic to their own advantage. Mitchell points out, for instance, that Arabic writing has certain “inscriptional” features,\(^1\) what one might refer to in English as “vowels.” In a large number of Arabic texts, these features are absent, not as “something ‘missing’ from Arabic,” but as something that a fluent native Arabic reader can fill out for himself by relying on his logical understanding of the meaning and the grammatical structure of the sentence. In their translations, Orientalists replaced or, to be more accurate, re-created “different kinds of movement” by translating them into “vowels” (Mitchell 148). According to the argument of the “Tunisian linguist Moncef Chelli,” because the versatile “movement” of the Arabic word (singular harakah) “is not the equivalent of a vowel,”\(^2\) by replacing the “movement” with a “vowel” Orientalists gave Arabic words in their translations “a peculiar appearance of fixedness,

\(^1\) The Arabic name for these features is harakat, which in English would literally translate as ‘movements’.
\(^2\) According to Chelli, “the movement [of an Arabic letter] cannot be produced independently of the letter and the letter cannot be produced without a movement, whereas vowels and consonants seem to exist independently of each other” (Mitchell 148).
as opposed to the movement of Arabic words.” As such, the Orientalists’ use of vowels “mask[ed] the relations of difference between words,” rendering the word as an object (148-49). Mitchell does not use Derrida’s linguistic approach to deconstruct “this effect of meaning,” but to show how, from a political perspective, the study of the Arab world “comes to be ordered and experienced as though it were an exhibition” (149), not unlike Lewis’s reduction of thawra into ‘th-w-r’ by stripping it of its movements. As I will show in Part 3 of this Introduction, we may use an Arabic dictionary, for instance, not only to focus on one or two origins or definitions of thawra, but to observe how the meaning of the word changes with its movements, how it evolves, the contexts in which it is currently and repeatedly being used, and the specific cultural ramifications contemporary usages of the word tend to have.

There is no shortage of similarly provocative Western metaphors insinuating that the current movements in the Arab world stem from that Orientalizing perspective of the Arab as an irrational, over-excited, even primal being. As development director at the Arab Educational Institute in Palestine, Toine van Teeffelen points out in a 1995 article entitled “Metaphors and the Middle East,” the “explosion metaphor” in particular is often used by Western media to “discredit or de-emphasize rival interpretations” (114). Focusing on Western representations of Palestinian uprisings in Gaza to illustrate his idea, van Teeffelen argues that metaphors of explosion (as in “explosion of violence,” and related words and phrases such as “repressed,” “erupted,” and the “energy which they had bottled up”3) offer a logic “primarily based upon ordinary thinking about the psychology of anger.” Such a discourse serves to perpetuate “self-other relations” even as it “suggests a breakdown of self-control and a loss of rationality that

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3 These words and phrases are taken from Israeli novelist David Grossman’s Preface to The Yellow Wind (1988) where he describes his experiences during a seven-week journalistic assignment in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
violate a broadly shared set of Western values” (115). In a great many contexts, especially after 9/11, the use of such metaphors has aided Western powers in furthering their ‘fight against terror tactics’ by reducing Arab revolts to religious or sectarian conflicts, or by focusing on images of violence rather than on constructive movements and effective revolutionary rhetoric.

Given the stubborn persistence of this Orientalist discourse despite many efforts, it is not surprising that the Western media has in several instances capitalized on the Arab revolts of 2011 as another occasion to deploy such metaphors. For instance, in a CBC blurb promoting their rebroadcasting of a 2008 Al-Jazeera documentary on life in Mubaruk’s Egypt, we read the following:

Egyptians are *exploding with frustration* and demanding change to what they see as a corrupt regime, and a president, Hosni Mubarak, who has kept a 30-year stranglehold on their hopes. This documentary helps us understand what is *fuelling the passion* and commitment of Egyptians who have taken to the streets. (¶ 1; my emphasis)⁴

Such metaphors as used in the above excerpt (“exploding with frustration” and “fuelling the passion”) may tempt us to view the socio-political changes in the Arab world as sudden, emotionally-based, and irrational. Similarly, in the recent editorial “Sudan: Overview” in the *New York Times*, the Sudan appears as having “been at war with itself for almost its entire post-colonial history, starting in 1956.” Using explosive terms, the article describes the relations between various groups as “dominated by mistrust, outside interference and combustible animosities.” The article uses the combustion metaphor yet again to describe the “number of delicate and potentially combustible issues that need to be resolved before Sudan can peacefully

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⁴ The title of the documentary is *Egypt: A Nation in Waiting*; blurb posted on CBC’s “The Passionate Eye.”
break in two, namely how the two sides would share the south’s sizeable reserves of crude oil” (Addario ¶ 1-2; my emphasis).

Although it is difficult to comment on the revolts across the Arab world without resorting to some form of hyperbole, we must be cautious in our choice of metaphors so as not to find ourselves picking up where Lewis left off in his definition of thawra. The danger of using such metaphors to describe the revolutions in the Arab world today, even with the elements of violence that are accompanying some of these movements, is that underlying these representations is a sinister neo-colonial discourse that seeks to obscure the long-standing richness and diversity of Arab cultures and histories. Reducing the Arab thawra to a rising camel or to a bomb strips Arabs of their human qualities and renders them as incapable of achieving liberation or independence, clearly unfit to rule themselves. If these metaphors, along with the complex hegemony of Western discourse, seek to rob Arabs of their specific history, their culture, their reasoning, and their dignity, by what token are we to study the uprisings in the Arab world and their connection to Arabic literature?

Postcolonial theory has not, for the most part, been very successful in eliminating these recurring symbols of negation. One reason for that, as Wail Hassan argues in “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arab Literature: Horizons of Application,” is that postcolonial discourse has not focused sufficiently on “Arabic literary and cultural production” (2002, 45). Secondly, postcolonial studies, while attempting “to make the balance of global power relations central to its inquiry,” appears to privilege in its focus “the languages … of the major colonial powers, Britain and France.” While this bias has certainly been challenged in the abundance of postcolonial texts written in “Arabic, Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu” and European languages besides English and French, the challenge has not been strong enough to accept a significant number of
these works into the postcolonial canon, relegating them to the departments of “emergent literatures” or “new literatures.” Thirdly, in its emphasis on “the trauma of colonial history,” postcolonial discourse “sometimes homogenizes Asia and Africa in more subtle ways than...colonial discourse itself” (46). This sort of hegemony tends to obscure the specificity of colonial histories. For instance, postcolonial theory that relies on poststructuralism, as in the work of Homi Bhabha, does not effectively “threaten colonialism’s material hold on the colonies” since it allows, for example, “the subaltern no more than rhetorical acts of resistance” (49). Such readings as Bhabha’s have been challenged, as Hassan points out, by critics such as Abdul JanMohamed; Hassan argues along these same lines that poststructural postcolonial approaches rely too much on the “Western tradition of anti-humanist critique of metaphysics.” In other words, they do not offer an alternative discourse besides the Western-based one (50-51). Similarly, postcolonial arguments that rely solely on Marxist discourse, psychoanalysis, and feminism may likewise “foreclose any consideration of the kind of cultural memory that marks colonial history in the Arab world with a unique character” (54).

Hassan certainly does not dismiss these poststructural postcolonial approaches. However, what is needed in the study of Arabic literature, he argues, is a discourse that relies on “the pivotal role of cultural memory both in colonial and anti-colonial discourses” (Hassan 53). Colonial discourse has not remained the same over the course of history, and it certainly varies from one country (or colony) to the other; for this reason, it is not practical to adopt a theory that construes Arabic literature “as a singular form” (55). Modern Arabic scholarship has often been studied within the brackets of “Western periodization,” such as “romanticism, realism, [or] modernism.” Such bracketing is to be found, for example, “in the conventional division of Naguib Mahfouz’s lengthy [literary] career into phases that replicate the history of the European
novel” (58-59). In this regard, what is required in the study of Arabic literature is a marriage between the schools of postcolonial theory and Arabic scholarship. Both have much to offer each other; postcolonial theory definitely offers “interdisciplinary inquiry, theoretical sophistication, and historical contextualization” (60). While postcolonial theory serves, amongst other things, to unveil the hegemony of colonial discourse, once it “pretends to stand for or to subsume [the worlds beyond Western representation], it begins to re-enact” its former limitations as outlined above. In addition, the vast world of “Asian and African” scholarship cannot be homogenized under one category. Not all writers are “diasporic, migrant, or bilingual.” They do not share the same histories and neither do they have the same experiences of belonging or exclusion; some have never even left their countries. In summary, using postcolonial theory to study such writings may prove troublesome; we may, however, overcome this obstacle by “opening the [postcolonial] field to comparative literary studies and to comparative critical methodologies that rigorously interrogate the limits of postcolonial theory’s founding discourses.” Integrating Arabic discourse into postcolonial theory will help counter the “theoretical imperialism” that limits the uses of postcolonial studies (60). In this regard, using various poststructural postcolonial approaches in studying the concept of thawra is helpful for a number of reasons, but only when moderated by a close study of differentiated Arabic scholarship.

Modified by the integration of specific Arabic culture, poststructuralism can provide a useful approach for future socio-political studies. Philip Leonard makes this point in Nationality between Poststructuralism and Postcolonial Theory: A New Cosmopolitanism (2005). Leonard explains that while “poststructuralism and postcolonial theory do not arrive at a cohesive explanatory model that conclusively explains the relationship between cultural power and the
nation-state,” there is an overlap between the two that offers an alternative way of understanding “colonialism’s legacy, … postcolonial discourse, … and globalization’s impact on national identity” (154). In this sense, poststructuralism does not necessarily, as its critics argue, suggest “an emptily utopian and postnational agenda.” Rather, it seeks to “interrogate the conditions for thinking the future of national and international identities” (12). I add here that when used alone, poststructuralist theories, along with their advocates in postcolonial studies, may become an obstacle if we choose, as the Orientalists have done before, to homogenize what is happening in the Arab world with all its differences into one experience. On the other hand, when it is coupled with Arabic literature representative of specific national, racial, cultural, social, and personal experiences, it becomes useful. In this way, to use Leonard’s argument, poststructuralism “trigger[s] a shift in the understanding of regional, national, international, and global identity” in the very way it seeks to re-understand identity (12). In this study, my use in some instances of various poststructuralist approaches is always anchored to specific “regional, national, international, and global” contexts. I use spatial discourse not to drift away from these contexts, but to study the issue of identity as it is negotiated by different Arab writers in works of Arabic literature.

We may also encounter similar limitations in using the nationalist argument alone to study Arabic scholarship. For one, the modern concept of the nation is a European idea, and while dozens of books have been written by Arab authors on the subject of Arab nationalism, their arguments rarely account for the differences in cultural, ethnic, religious, and personal experiences. As with the case of using a solely poststructural approach, using nationalist

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5 Adeed Dawisha discusses the competition between Arab nationalism and other forms of collective identification in Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair (2003) in his discussion of “supranationalisms” (Dawisha 83-85). According to Dawisha, “supranationalisms” are “competing loyalties” that
discourse alone to study modern Arabic literature may obscure personal narratives. As we study them together, however, personal and national narratives complicate and enrich our understanding of liberation. The uneasy relationship between personal liberation and national liberation is famously discussed by Frantz Fanon in, among other places, his 1958 essay “Decolonization and Independence,” collected in 1964 in the posthumous *Pour la révolution africaine*, where he points out that “the liberation of the individual does not follow national liberation.” What Fanon describes as “an authentic national liberation” is only achieved once “the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation” (Fanon 103). For this reason, the national argument must be modified with particular narratives that address specific personal, cultural, and historical issues. Said builds on this argument in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), saying that there is an “uneasy relationship between nationalism and liberation” (Said 54). Taken alone, national discourse, explains Said, rarely addresses the different issues of identity from one Arab nation to another; it does not account for the relationships with “other cultures, states, histories, experiences, traditions, peoples, and destinies” (55). Can we describe today’s revolutions from a national perspective alone? Probably not, given not only the complexity of each of the struggles but also given the issue of what each country, what each *individual* in the country, is struggling for.

Returning to the question of *thawra* and, more specifically, to how it may be represented in works of Arabic literature, we begin to see the significance of combining different approaches in our textual studies. Using poststructural postcolonial theory alone to study Arabic writing
may prevent us from addressing, as Hassan has put it, the important and unique role “of cultural memory in the Arab world” (Hassan 54). It may not help us to know or access the Arab “Other” (51). The “cultural memory” Hassan alludes to here is certainly not a collective, homogeneous one. Just as we cannot interpret the revolutions across the Arab world from, say, the perspective of the French revolution, neither must we study them as replicas of one another. Certainly, some revolts in Arab countries have inspired others countries to follow suit, but to deem those revolts as contagious, as having the appearance of a domino effect, may lead us back to the metaphor of a camel with many humps, one rising after the other. Similarly, we must not look at literature representative of these revolts in the same manner; even within the same country, one writer will express his thawra differently than another. The role of Arabic literature in this regard is crucial; it offers us narratives of differently intertwined personal, social, ethnic, national, religious, and secular experiences. In various ways, these narratives combine the local and the global, the past and the present, the traditional and the modern. There are thawras in these stories, but each thawra is represented differently. My primary argument in this dissertation will be that these different thawras are achieved in the spatial representations of the texts I study. Here, a brief overview of the role of Arabic culture is in order, to understand its enormous contribution to the current day revolutions in the Arab world.

Part 2. “Discuss and argue and listen to the voice of the masses, only the groups of the deaf cannot hear”: Cultural thawra

The above lines quoted from the contemporary Egyptian poet Hisham al-Jakh’s poem “The Last Message” written on the occasion of the 2011 Egyptian revolution carry an important message: the voice of the people will no longer be silenced. Indeed, the “deaf” alone are unable to hear the voices of thawra expressed not only in poetry, but in all forms of popular and high
Arabic culture. Regarding the Arab *thawras* and how they have been represented in fiction since the 1880s to the present day, Elliot Colla offers an interesting perspective on revolution and literature.⁶ “The Poetry of Revolt,” Elliot Colla’s recent prize-winning post in *Jadaliyya*, describes the literature of the Egyptian revolution from a historical perspective. Colla points out the important role of the novel and explains how today poetry and slogans are the revolution’s “soundtrack” and play “a significant part of the action” (¶ 2). In a recent radio interview at Brown University, Colla discusses his article and is asked why the Egyptian youth, in their uprising against Mubarak, have not included “Uncle Sam” in their anti-government chants. For Colla, the youth represent a new “generation of activists who are not ideological.” They have looked at the fights of their ancestors “against imperialism, against capitalism, against all the ‘isms,’” and they are declaring that “that’s not how they want to understand the world, and that’s not how they’re going to organize their response to the problems that they face.” In this regard, most of their leaders “have no ideological platform; they are starting their analysis and their project from how they live their daily life, what they see, what they experience, what they would rather have.” Their demands, Colla argues, are not central to Egypt; they are “simple, straightforward civil and human rights that they started with.” He sees this as “a completely new way of doing revolution” that does not begin with ideology (¶ 6-7).⁷

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⁶ Colla, a specialist on Egypt, has authored *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (2007) and has translated a number of Arabic works. He is currently a professor of literature at Brown University.

⁷ In his perspective on the Egyptian revolution, Colla leans towards a post-ideological school of thought (of the sort critiqued by Slavoj Žižek). The argument about ideology Colla makes here has more to do with a people’s call for basic human rights and freedom of choice rather than a blind refusal to adhere to any ideology. Colla’s argument that this is a “new way of doing revolution” does not necessarily mean that the people revolting have no clear understanding of why they are revolting. On the other side of the coin, there are a number of commentators who feel that, while the Egyptian revolution does appear to be post-ideological, sooner or later it will *need* to be based on an ideology. For example, according to Michael Goldfarb of the *Global Post* in “Egypt Now Needs Ideology,” “with no guiding set of political and economic ideas and principles articulated by a charismatic leader, it is not clear
One may describe these revolutions as beginning in the cultural world. As Lila Abu-Lughod points out in “Finding a Place for Islam: Egyptian Television Serials and National Interest” (1993), “anthropologists are only beginning to examine the rich cultural forms of television, radio, and video” in Egypt and their role in defining the country’s socio-political status (493). In this sense, had “Uncle Sam” or the whole Western world walked through the streets of Egypt at night or, for that matter, followed TV series and shows, watched movies, and listened to Arabic songs, they might have understood earlier on the Arab frustration with their government regimes. Examples of the ways in which popular culture offers socio-political criticism abound, particularly in Egypt. For instance, Ma’ali al-Wezir (Supreme Minister; 2002), an Egyptian movie starring the late Ahmad Zaki, comments on socio-political life during Mubarak’s reign, and Muwatin Masri (An Egyptian Citizen; 1990) starring Omar al-Sherif, is another production that depicts the corruption of a powerful Egyptian mayor. The seasoned Egyptian singer Ahmad Adawiyya is famous for the oppositional lyrics in many of his songs, and the pop singer Shaaban Abd el-Rahim is popular for his bold political criticism. Popular Arab culture has gone global as it tours North America and other countries with the hilarious but scathing performances of “Im Hussain” (‘Mother of Hussain’, the leading character of the Arab-American AJYAL theatrical group), and stand-up comedy shows such as Arabs Gone Wild.

where the revolution goes from here.” Goldfarb argues that the Egyptian people “are going to have to re-create an ideological age” (Goldfarb, February 12, 2011).

Lughod discusses the role of Egyptian television in reflecting on national life. She writes:

Walk down the streets of Cairo or the lanes of any village during the early evening hours and you will see the flicker of television screens and hear the dialogue and music (usually melodramatic) of the current serial. Read the newspapers and you will find articles and cartoons that can only be understood if you were following these serials, known as the musalsalat. Easily the most popular of television genres, these Egyptian serials, usually lasting fifteen days, seem to set the very rhythms of national life. (494)
Reflecting socio-political reality, this type of culture had been popular for years before the uprisings and continues to be.

Similarly, if Western leaders had perused the vast collection of Arabic literature over recent years, they would have discerned many narratives of dissent that build on a tradition of resistance established in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, with the novels of Sudanese Tayeb Salih and Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, the poems and plays of the Egyptian Badie Khairie, and the work of the sixties generation authors. The works of Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal al-Ghitani, both sixties generation novelists, provide scathing critiques of the current and previous Egyptian regimes. Ibrahim’s *The Committee* (1981; trans. 2001) and *Zaat* (1992; trans. 2001) both, according to the online journal *Arabic Literature in English* (February 6, 2011), “reflect the Egyptian state apparatus in some way” (¶ 5). Al-Ghitani’s *Zayni Barakat* (1971; trans. 1988) is a bold critique of Abd al-Nasser’s earlier oppressive regime. More recently, sharing the same goal as Alaa al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* (2002; trans. 2004) with its harsh social criticism, Khalid al-Khamissy’s *Taxi* (2007; trans. 2008) with its language of the common folk uses the dialogues of Egyptian taxi drivers to comment on the country’s affairs and to reflect the public’s involvement with politics. As one taxi driver in al-Khamissy’s novel complains to his passenger: “Between you and me, we’re also fed up with news about the President … But the news that matters to us, there’s no mention of it … Now it’s their country and they do what they like with it. I’d better just stick to the taxi” (al-Khamissi 136). At different levels, therefore, the worlds of communication and culture play huge roles in anticipating, preparing for, and participating in political events.

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9 On the merging of popular culture and literature, particularly in Egypt, Amira el-Azhary Sonbol points out in *The New Mamluks* (2000) that “Egyptian society [is not] unchanging and static, waiting to be moved and transformed by outside influences” (Sonbol xxi). Cultural movements in Egypt today, including both popular culture and literature,
Culture has also been literally caught in the middle of the revolution. One prominent example in Egypt is that of the Cairo International Book Fair which was supposed to run in the Egyptian capital this year from January 29 to February 8 but was cancelled due to the magnitude of the events taking place in the country at that time. As a recent article of the U.K. *Guardian* reports, “Literature has been caught up in the protests that have now entered their seventh day in Egypt,” protests calling for the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s president for over thirty years. Thus it is that the Arab world’s largest literary event, continues the article, customarily opened by the same president against whom the protestors are chanting, has been “abandoned,” leaving a large number of foreign representatives either stranded in Egypt or cancelling their flights, with an equally large number of publishers facing substantial financial losses. In past years, the fair “has been marred by accusations that books critical of the government or books with explicitly sexual themes have been banned.” Furthermore, booksellers have been arrested and foreign-published books confiscated by the government, such as “works by Milan Kundera, Ibrahim Badi, Hanan al-Sheikh and Elias Khoury” (Page ¶ 1-7). The marring of the CIBF by government censorship, confiscation of books, and even arrests over the years designates that the Arab cultural arena, like the Arab public, has always had its share of oppression; the fair that is say a great deal about the shifting socio-political realities. What she describes as an emerging “culture of the base” (xxi) is dominating the Egyptian scene today, whereby the culture of the “khassa (special class holding power, molders of law)” and that of the “‘amma (general public)” (xxiii-xxiv) are more or less merging into one another. The turn to cultural revivalism in contemporary Egypt, argues Sonbol, here reflects class struggles and “would point to the success of social forces espousing this revivalism in establishing their own forms of culture as dominant forms in society as a whole.” In this sense:

Translated into class struggle, this would mean that the culture of the ‘amma is now becoming dominant, that the khassa is submerging into a process of culture building that the whole country is experiencing, and with it one sees the closing of the dual social structure and the movement of Egyptian society toward greater cultural homogeneity. (179)

Sonbol’s argument emphasizes the socio-political role of the examples of popular Arab culture as I have presented them thus far, not only on Egyptian and Arab soil, but also globally.
supposed to promote literary diversity and allow open access to knowledge had become a politically-controlled event.

Samia Mehrez discusses this issue extensively in *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (2008), arguing that in the Arab world, most “cultural figures are predominantly civil servants of the state” as long as they are smart enough to play by the rules of “the political game” (Mehrez 73). Being “smart enough” has many meanings, however, and Egyptian intellectuals do not always see eye to eye on current politico-cultural developments. Intellectuals who protested this year did so in different ways, some by demonstrating alongside the Egyptian youth, others by writing scathing articles, and still others by resigning from their posts. The passionate involvement between literature and politics is exemplified in other ways, such as in the works of the two Egyptian novelists studied in this dissertation, al-Aswany and al-Ghitani; the writing of both has always targeted the government and the rampant corruption in the country. Their criticism, however, did not go unnoticed by government authorities. Although al-Ghitani was jailed between 1966 and ’67 for his literary and journalistic position against the government, he has maintained this oppositional stance over the ensuing decades: in a profile on al-Ghitani published in *Al-Ahram Weekly* in March 2005, Gamal Nkrumah cites the author as follows: “I have deeper objections to the rationale that appears to inform official Egyptian decrees. I object to the element of whimsy that characterizes ministerial decisions” (¶ 5). Similarly, always a fierce critic of the Egyptian regime prior to the revolution of 2011, al-Aswany, as Rachel Cooke writes, has “endured years of rejection” by various government-controlled publishing houses and cultural events because of his criticism of the “tyranny and corruption of the Egyptian state” (Cooke ¶ 4).
The increasing discontent with government meddling in the cultural field imposes a new relationship between literature and politics in today’s Arab world. What happened at the CIBF in Egypt not only brings to the fore the obvious politico-cultural tensions that for years have cast a shadow over the Arab cultural world, but it also lays bare the ambiguous involvement of Arab intellectuals in politics. As the common people are calling for their democratic freedom in the streets, many writers and artists are also chanting for their intellectual freedom. The current responses of Arab writers to ongoing political and cultural events, dissimilar and even opposing in some cases, are reflections of the directions their literary careers have taken over the years. Their writing complicates our understanding of thawra, as it offers us different perspectives from which to study literature and its future socio-political role. Hopefully, a new cultural era is in the making in the Arab world; we are already starting to see signs of it in Egypt.

It is heartening to see the thousands of youth who were participating in the Tahrir demonstrations also protecting the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (the new library of Alexandria) from another historic burning and the museums of ancient history from further looting. It is also encouraging to see signs of a new, more liberal book fair in the making. There are plans today for a new book fair in place of the CIBF to be named the “Tahrir Book Fair” and to be held in the near future at the same freedom square where the Egyptian revolt took place. According to Al-Masry al-Youm, the Tahrir Fair is to “be open to the general public” and will display books by Mandela and Gandhi in an effort to educate the young about “non-violent revolution.” This new cultural project will also offer “many new opportunities,” with texts ranging from “photography and personal testimony to scholarly studies of the politics, sociology and economics of the 25 January revolution.” In other words, the organizers of the Tahrir Fair wish to “explore different ways of documenting and understanding the revolution and where it might lead.” Politically-
oriented books will come out, such as “Galal Amin’s *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak, 1981-2011*” and “al-Aswany’s *On the State of Egypt: A Novelist’s Provocative Reflections.*” In the educational field, changes also abound; for instance, American University of Cairo professor and author Samia Mehrez has responded to the events by shifting the focus of one of her university courses from “‘Translation, Children’s Literature and Cultural Representations’ to an all-caps ‘TRANSLATING REVOLUTION’ (Qualey ¶ 2, 9-12).

**Part 3. Between Egypt and the Sudan: Spatial *thawra***

My work focuses on literature from Egypt and the Sudan to show how it complicates our current understanding of *thawra* and political matters from a spatial perspective. Combining both spatial and socio-political theories, my study of the social and the political requires a “reassembling” strategy whereby the process through which characters or actors construct their identities and the relationships between these constructions involves the dissection of a large number of socio-political elements. Bruno Latour’s actor network theory and Doreen Massey’s spatial argument prove highly useful in this regard. I also make use of spatial arguments that deal with themes of transgression and subjectivity (Cresswell, Tuan, and Malpas, to name a few) to enrich my study and complicate the ways in which *thawra* and the political are constructed.

Adopting a spatial approach here frees us from the many restrictions specific ideological theories may impose on our study of Arabic literature of Egypt and the Sudan.

In *For Space* (2005) Massey envisions space as a moving locus of trajectories under constant construction. She urges us to “recognise space as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey 9). The multiplicity of interrelations can only be recognized in the “openness” of space, where space is never a “closed” or “completed” system, but always a “space of loose ends and
missing links” (12). It is only in this space that the political is constructed, and for us to adopt this kind of imagination, we must reimagine “things as processes” instead of “as pregiven discrete entities” (20-21). Space is a “locus” rather than a fixed location, where history and geography, the here and the now, the human and the nonhuman, are all implicated in the multiplicity of processes taking place therein (137-140). Massey describes this “coming together of trajectories” as the “throwntogetherness” character of space (140), a quality that forces us to re-negotiate rules of engagement while narratives of interrelational multiplicities unfold (142). For Massey, everything in place is on the move, even rocks (149); place itself is “an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories” (151). These trajectories demand “a politics of negotiation” (160) whereby we arrive at each place with an obligation to “examine anew and to invent” (169). Massey’s argument brings together a wide array of spatial theories, defying some, making use of others, and ending up with a comprehensive view of space that grants me the mobility and freedom to delve into various nooks and crannies in the novels I study to offer examples of the socio-political.

Latour’s discussions of the social and the political in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005) unfetter my argument from some of the constricting chains of the social sciences.¹⁰ Latour uses the terms “political” and “social” in more or less the same fashion as he metamorphosizes their meanings to unpack the definition of the term *network*. He takes a closer look at the social in order to determine the shortcomings of mainstream social theory in studying society, and to provide a counter-solution in the form of

¹⁰ Unless otherwise stated in the body of the text, all references to the work of Latour in this dissertation are taken from *Reassembling the Social*. 
what he calls “ANT,” an acronym for “actor-network theory.” Latour uses the “major intuitions” of the social sciences as the launching pad of his argument. He probes sociologists’ definitions of groups, actions, objects, facts, and studies (21-22) to show how all too often they jump to “stabilize the list of groupings making up the social,” instead of beginning exactly with that which is most controversial in these groupings (29). According to Latour, as soon as the social analyst defines a group and establishes its connections, then he has rendered that group silent and invisible. A group formation is visible only if (and while) “it is being performed,” and only then will our study of the group be rewarding (31). Latour’s perspective on group formation here focuses on movement, rather than on pre-conceptualized ideologies or socio-scientific explanations of social phenomena.

Combined with a number of other spatial arguments, these primary approaches will offer a vantage point from which to study the thawras in the novels alongside the present-day socio-political revolts. The thawras across the Arab world are not just against variously corrupt and oppressive governments; they are revolutions against systems that seek to control thought, expression, and way of life, and these systems are far more complex and have existed for far longer than we may imagine. By the same token, the ways in which people react to or revolt against systems of oppression do not always conform to our conventional understanding of thawra. Considering that a good deal of today’s Arabic culture, in its different forms and levels, reflects the sentiments and expressions of the Arab Spring, one cannot but wonder how the culture preluding it expressed its revolt against injustice and oppression. If we are of a mind to avoid the Orientalist discourse that considers thawra as a sudden, unexpected uprising undertaken by bovine, over-excited beings, then we must surely seek out alternative expressions of thawra. Using a spatial discourse, I argue, allows us not only to better dissect these systems
and the ways in which they impact people’s lives, but it may also grant us the opportunity to think of *thawra* in unconventional terms.

I would like here to briefly examine the common Arabic definition of the word *thawra* for two reasons. The first is to re-situate *thawra* within a contemporary Arabic cultural context (as opposed to the Orientalist definition of the word), and the second is to link that definition to spatial rhetoric. In the contemporary Arabic-Arabic dictionary, *Al-Munjid al-waseet fi al-‘arabiyyah al mu’asirah* (2003), one of the definitions of *thawra* is:

"إندفاع شديد إلى تغيير الأوضاع السياسية والاجتماعية تغييراً أساسياً." (149)

In English, this translates as *a powerful forward drive to radically change existing political and social conditions*. Among the types of *thawra* as a movement towards change, there is a peaceful *thawra* (*thawra silmiyyah*) and a violent or armed *thawra* (*thawra ghadabiyyah* or *thawra musallaha*). There is also the artistic *thawra* (*thawra fanniyah*), defined as an artistic revolution, but then there is the *thawra* that is expressed in art (*al-thawra fil-fann*) (*Al-Munjid* 149; my translation). Literature as a form of art may use various rhetorical strategies to demonstrate *thawra*, but what does it mean to think of literature as revolutionary? Seen through the lenses of today’s revolts, literature written within or before this period is revolutionary in the way it *anticipates* these *thawras* and offers important socio-political insights. Additional, it

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11 To some, my presentation of the word *thawra* at this stage may prove troublesome in that it appears to dilute the Arab Spring movement by offering different applications of the word that may extend to numerous fields. By definition, the word *thawra* is applicable to *any* revolutionary movement, be it social, cultural, political, or otherwise. In this regard, the term, in both its Arabic and English versions, could be used in a number of circumstances and myriad contexts. My purpose here, however, is not to undermine or dilute the Arab Spring *thawras* by presenting different situations in which the term *thawra* may be used, especially when I have commenced my Introduction by praising these momentous movements. In order to emphasize the socio-political role of Arabic culture, to highlight its historical significance, and to empower the *thawra* of today, I seek to re-present *thawra* in such a way that does not necessarily dress it up in banners and slogans but nonetheless renders it visible in other ways. Perhaps the most beautiful phenomenon to behold in today’s uprisings is that people from different walks of life, professions, genders, and religions are protesting in unison and for similar causes. However,
is revolutionary in how it deploys space to complicate the post/national argument, going beyond the recognized boundaries of post/national debates to address new spaces. Most importantly, this sort of literature is revolutionary in how it offers a reconfiguration of the social and the political in such a way that individual liberation here complicates the issue of national liberation. The above definition describes *thawra* as a *movement*; in order for movement to be possible, there must be room to move, or *space*. Similarly, for literature to be able to express a *thawra*, there must also be, in spatial terms, freedom of expression. We saw in the example of the Cairo International Book Fair with the past government’s stifling of literary voices, with the suspension of books, and with the arrests of writers, that there has been little space for the Arab voice to be heard (or any voice opposed the government, for that matter). In its struggle for change, Arabic literature has tried, in a heroic move, to seek more space.

In the literary world, I argue, *thawra* necessitates a united forward movement. In *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (2008), the African-American novelist Toni Morrison addresses a prominent cultural issue in an address delivered in 1981 at the American Writers Congress, where she discusses the growing problems with literary publication in America, pushing for a consolidated movement of “Heroic Writers.” In her speech, Morrison explains that “underneath the froth of book fairs and right in the middle of the world of books, something is very wrong” because literature is often held in contempt (157). Literature in America has fallen victim to censorship, intellectual dishonesty, and prejudice; as such, the best writing may go

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to acknowledge that individuals are different is also to acknowledge that they may express *thawra* differently, that they have been doing so for some time now, and that their voices are very much related and in conjunction with the voices of today. To the extent that we think of *thawra* as a *powerful forward drive*, we must also be able to imagine this movement, in contemporary cultural and socio-political contexts, as not necessarily involving a sudden surge or a vocal cry. From the other side of the coin, *thawra*, in its subtler and less obvious manifestations, is no less of a *thawra*.
unnoticed (157-58). The danger comes, Morrison argues, from the hunger “for a purely imagined past of innocence and clarity that is willing to subvert the future and, in fact, to declare that there is none, in order to wallow in illusion” (159). Writers should unite, therefore, to form a heroic movement that situates itself “at the barricades” (163). We may use Morrison’s argument to describe the state of literary affairs in the Arab world. Morrison directs her thawra against American capitalism, censorship, intellectual elitism and “glaring anti-intellectualism” (158-161). For her, it does not matter if writers are “dreamers or scholars, [or if they] need tranquility or chaos to write”; for her, they are all “workers” (162). She argues that it is time for the state to step back and grant writers their freedom. Similarly, literature in the Arab world has oft been subjected to government censorship, cultural elitism, and the demands of capitalism. The thawras in Arabic literature today must call for a similar, forward-moving heroic writers’ movement.

It is for this reason that Arab writers today are turning more and more towards literature that can help them escape the confines of the state while still being able to address issues of social and political importance. For them, the state itself still matters, but it is no longer the primary focus. In Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East (1995), Nazih N. Ayubi provides an interesting perspective on the Arab state issue in this regard. For Ayubi, while “political and social scientists have been busy ‘bringing the state back in’ as a major analytical concept … [in] real political and economic life, however, there has been a great deal of talk about having ‘less of the state’ and about ‘getting the state off our backs’” (Ayubi 4). This definitely applies to the cultural world; “getting the state off our backs” literally became, for a number of Arab writers, a pressing concern. Writers frustrated with the way their countries were being governed either resorted to inconspicuous literary strategies with which they could
express their criticism of the state, or else presented their distaste more directly in their writing, often suffering as a result of their views. In all cases, literature became a form through which writers could revolt against their government or other perceived sources of oppression. Here, one might turn to the Arabic novel itself as manifesting a rebellion of sorts, as being representative of thawra.

To discern these representations, I approach Arabic literature using a variety of spatial discourses. For one thing, both the colony and the nation are, in themselves, spaces. However, each of the works that I study in my dissertation represents identity narratives within spatial spheres that are never fixed within these structures. Rather, as I shall argue, these narratives eke out new spaces that allow us to rethink socio-political change. In other words, the works do not reject the spaces of colony and nation in order to imagine a Utopian space; they build upon these spaces to construct a new socio-political future in the Arab world. The extent to which each author is able successfully to reclaim his liberty and his culture within these new spaces will be a question left for later chapters in this study.

In various arguments presented by Egyptian and Sudanese writers and analysts, thawra is rarely perceived in the same manner, not only from one country to the other, but from one individual to the other within the same country; in all cases, thawra does not seem to sit comfortably in any ideological context. If we agree with Colla that the Egyptian revolt was not ideological in nature to begin with, would it be more productive to commence our study using a methodology not limited by the “isms” of ideology? Would the use of spatial discourse in the representation of thawra be more fruitful in this regard? In my analysis of the different positions on thawra in Egypt and the Sudan, I point out how complex the question of thawra really is to argue that it is tied up with space. I clarify this argument here by beginning with Egypt.
In past colonial times, as Mitchell points out in *Colonising Egypt*, Cairo along with other main cities underwent “tanzim,” or an organization/modernization process. Poor houses were pulled down, slums were wiped out, and narrow streets were closed to make way for the construction of grand buildings and boulevards (Mitchell 65-67). With this colonizing process, the “‘disorder’ of Cairo and other cities had suddenly become visible” (68). Gradually, a central city was constructed. On the topic of urban space, Mitchell writes:

The urban space in which Egyptians moved had become a political matter, material to be ‘organized’ by the construction of great thoroughfares radiating out from the geographical and political centre. At the same moment Egyptians themselves, as they moved through this space, became similarly material, their minds and bodies thought to need discipline and training. The space, the minds, and the bodies all materialised at the same moment, in a common economy of order and discipline. (68)

The space of the city centre as it is described in the above passage reflects the beginning of a colonial and national ordering of space. It marks, as Mitchell puts it, “the moment when a new politics of the modern state appeared” (68). While the colonizing movement sought to “order and discipline” the “space, the minds, and the bodies” of the people, the first nationalist stirrings in Egypt brought back the chaos that the colonizers had attempted to curb. This urban chaos highlighted the differences amongst groups and individuals. Therefore, that *thawra* of Egyptian nationalism in the late nineteenth century which supposedly stemmed from the centre of this city “was not a singular truth, but a different thing among these different social groups.” The British sought to regulate these demonstrating crowds, for it “was this obedient and regulated whole that was to be imagined under the name of the ‘nation’” (119).
What may be seen as chaos and disorder are actually crucial components in our contemporary spatial study; chaos and disorder designate differences amongst individuals. The chaos and disorder that were revealed during the construction of the city re-emerged during the earlier nationalist movement and continue to do so today. In 2011, the demonstrations that began in the Tahrir Square, the heart of downtown Cairo, seem to have unified people from different religions, sects, and walks of life; however, to use Mitchell’s argument, this does not necessarily mean that a “singular truth” unites all these people. In today’s thawras, the reasons for revolution tend to diverge. Spatial discourse complicates these events; where space may be used to homogenize a group, it may also be used to spell out the differences of those who make up that group. Space allows us to re-think and re-evaluate history and cultural tradition, giving the present reality a new dimension.

It is worth noting how writers from both countries perceive the thawra today, as these observations provide insight when it comes to studying spatial representations in literary texts. In Egypt, we find ambiguity in some of the comments of Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany about the Egyptian revolt. In a recent interview in English with National Public Radio, al-Aswany vehemently argued that the Egyptian uprising is against “the whole system” which no longer functions and which has become a burden on the new Egyptian generation (al-Aswany ¶ 14). It is not clear, however, what the nature of this “system” is or whether it designates a particular system of governance or a social structure. Al-Aswany’s interest in the world of politics certainly resonates in much of his work. However, his reference in the interview to a dysfunctional “system” is complicated in my study of his novel The Yacoubian Building, which relies on the concept of spatial networking amongst other spatial metaphors. While al-Aswany is currently quite involved in the world of Egyptian politics, seasoned Egyptian writer Gamal al-
Ghitani, on the other hand, prefers to contemplate the current events from his office window in Cairo, partaking little in direct political matters.

In a seminar entitled “L’Égypte de l’après 25 Janvier 2011” which was hosted at the Egyptian Cultural Center in Paris on March 17, 2011, al-Ghitani praised the Egyptian army and the youth of the revolution. Impressed by the developments in his country, al-Ghitani digresses, however, in his discussion to comment on the historical, cultural, and national significance of Tahrir Square where most of the demonstrations took place (¶ 11-12). One may ask why al-Ghitani expounds on the historical nature of the Tahrir Square and wonder if this historical digression figures in any way in his vision of a future Egypt. The authorial voice of al-Ghitani comes through in much of his historically-focused writing; however, the particular text I study, *Pyramid Texts*, engages with space and history in such a way as to depict a different kind of *thawra*. As we may infer from comments made by al-Ghitani and al-Aswany, liberation may be reached through different paths. For al-Ghitani, does liberation exist somewhere in the spaces between freedom of expression and the constant interaction with history? For al-Aswany, is it to be found somewhere in the spaces of the street? As the Egyptians focus on their own affairs, Sudanese voices ponder their position vis-à-vis the Egyptians and the Egyptian revolution.

In the Sudan, where tribal and ethnic differences are more clearly pronounced, as are territorial and regional distinctions, we encounter an even more complex situation. The landslide victory in January of 2011 saw Southern Sudan pass an independence referendum granting the African South independence from the mostly Arab North. However, not all critics saw the Southern independence as a victory. From another perspective, according to a recent article in *The New Sudan Vision* “Mr. Yasir Said Arman, head of the SPLM Northern Sector [SPLM split into North and South sectors in July 2010],” said he was going to continue his fight for a unified
Sudan. Arman supports pan-Africanism, arguing that “Africa is on the margin of the international system,” and that it must strive for political and economic efficiency and independence (“Sudan’s SPLM agrees to part ways with its Northern branch” ¶ 6-10). Is secession the permanent answer to the Sudan’s problems, or is forcing the Sudan into a pan-Africanist category which would deprive it of any Sudanese identity a more effective solution? Today, the Sudan is still in the process of accepting and coming to terms with its unique identity that consists of multiple identities, and it is possible for us to use spatial logic to look beyond nationalist discourse to discern these identity struggles.

If Egyptian literature can depict space in such a way as to engage in non-conventional ways with thawra, may not the same be said for Sudanese literature? The Sudanese perspective of thawra is not the same as the Egyptian one; space here complicates our study of the diverse representations of the Sudanese revolt. If the Egyptians today are calling for liberation from an oppressive regime, many Sudanese are crying for liberation from corruption, modern-day slavery, and the imposition on them of Arab and Islamic cultures. While some of the Sudanese demands overlap with Egyptian ones, others not only diverge from them but are generated by the complex and sometimes tense relationship between the two countries. As secularist Osman al-Hassan writes in the online English Sudan Tribune, “the remaining Sudanese people in the North, in addition to their great sadness at seeing their country split up, have been promised more economic hardship, more flogging, amputation and stoning by the current government in the North.” Decrying his people’s lack of religious and ethnic freedoms, al-Hassan places the blame on the cruel Northern government and on the “corruption [that has spread] from the top, permeating every level of society.” However, the struggle should not only be against the system, el-Hassan explains; it should be a fight “to restore the nation’s dignity.” Al-Hassan is cautious
not to compare the revolution in the Sudan to those taking place in Egypt or Tunisia, where “popular revolt ... [has been] a chess game which ended in a checkmate for their kings.” Rather, the Sudanese must take different measures because “[their] faceless rulers are more callous and morally inferior.” Nonetheless, he is optimistic that a true revolution will eventually take place in his country (¶ 2, 9-11). As al-Hassan points out, it is unrealistic to lump the revolutions in the Arab world under one category. It is also impossible to ignore the different colonial histories of most of these countries and the persistent foreign intervention into their affairs; a conglomeration of social, historical, religious, social, and economic factors differing from one country to the next has contributed to the causes of the revolts. A spatial study of Sudanese literature enables us to trace these components in their complexity and their continuous involvement in Sudanese identity struggles to this day.

From a spatial point of view, and given the complexity of its social, geographical, linguistic, religious, and racial structures, how does literature begin to address the ongoing conflicts in the Sudan? The late Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih had long preached for tolerance and had struggled with the issue of his own Sudanese identity. Al-Baqir al-Afif Mukhtar discusses the issue of the Northern Sudanese identity in his chapter entitled “The Crisis of Identity in Northern Sudan: The Dilemma of a Black People with a White Culture” (2004). Former “political analysts,” explains Mukhtar, have studied the struggle in terms of colonial intervention and its “calculated measures to separate the South from the North.” After forty years of “national rule,” analysts realized that the problem is far more complex, thus they “shifted the focus from the enemy ‘without’ to the enemy ‘within’” in order to identify the cause of the war as being a conflict between Northern and Southern identity (Mukhtar 207).
Focusing on the North, Mukhtar argues that the problem with both approaches is that within the North itself there is an identity issue that comes to bear on other conflicts. The etymology of the name “Sudan,” for instance, suggests in itself a narrative of racial, cultural, and national challenges: citing Tayeb Salih from an interview in 1989, Mukhtar explains that the late Sudanese author had often wondered about the reasons for naming Sudan as such (in Arabic meaning the ‘blacks’). According to Salih, the country’s name had always been a burden which had left his people “alone bearing this legacy on [their] shoulders” (qtd. 233). For Salih, liberation is through tolerance and dealing with the problem of Sudanese identity (we find that Sudanese analysts such as al-Hassan, Mukhtar, and Jok struggle with similar issues). The most recent rebellion in the Sudan was to achieve Southern secession from the North, a long struggle which finally accomplished its goals in the past months. But for Mukhtar, secession is not the answer; it may temporarily resolve the North-South conflict problem, “but will not solve Northerner’s identity crisis” (234). Mukhtar not only complicates the question of Northern identity to explore one aspect of the Sudanese struggle, but he also draws our attention to the role of Egypt. The relationship between Egypt and the Sudan has often been understudied in both Egyptian and Sudanese writing; however, it does constitute a complicating element in cultural representations from both countries.

Egypt and the Sudan have been, to varying degrees, connected geographically, economically, politically, and culturally over the course of history; the complex relationship between these countries has a bearing on current events and on the literature produced in these countries. Spatial metaphors and symbols may be used to designate the complexity of these

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12 In a general sense, ‘black’ today is a derogatory term for ‘African’; here, not only is it suggestive of a legacy of slavery, subordination, and racism in African countries, but it also disregards the Arab influence in the Sudan, particularly in the North.
relationships. Listing some of the ways in which the two countries are connected, Gabriel R. Warburg writes in *Islam, Nationalism, and Radicalism in Egypt and the Sudan* (1983) that the Nile River has always played a crucial role in increasing the interdependence between the two countries. Both countries depend on the Nile agriculturally and economically, and the “enormous waste of water resources by both” currently endangers their agriculture (1). From a Sudanese perspective, Tayeb Salih writes the Nile into his work as a landmark simultaneously symbolizing progress, change, and stagnation. One may add here to the river landmark the Saharan desert; while the two countries do not rely agriculturally on the desert (not yet at least), spatial representations of the arid landscape penetrate the texts of Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitany as metaphors with which to negotiate cultural and geographic identities. Just as the river with its liquid quality may allow the text to flow freely into otherwise inaccessible identity territories, in spite of its harsh terrain, the desert may likewise offer alternative identity narratives.

In addition to the geographical relationship between the two areas, other cultural and religious commonalities come to bear on spatial representations. The migrations from Egypt to the Sudan, the historical rule of the Sudan by Egypt, and the Arab Muslim trade route established on the southern Sudanese border have led to the “Arabization and Islamization” of Sudan. British meddling in the South, however, introduced Southerners to Christianity and the English language, so that “Islam and Arabic have hardly penetrated south of latitude 10°” (Warburg 2). The factors that have served to demarcate the Sudan as both an Egyptian and a British colony complicate the spatial study of the country in literature. Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* is ambiguous in its representations of the Arab Sudanese identity juxtaposed against the African Sudanese one, and even Egyptian literature grapples with similar conflicts. Al-Aswany’s novel
struggles with the role of an Egyptian identity juxtaposed against a Muslim one, and al-Ghitani’s attempts in some ways to unsettle racist representations of identity. The works of the three authors reveal different perspectives on history, culture, and religion. They deal with identity issues differently, and they deal with *thawras* differently.

Also emerging in textual spatial representations, the third aspect of the relationship is political. The two countries have often shared similar “external policies,” whereby a unified Nile Valley “became the cornerstone of Egyptian nationalism.” For a long time, the Sudan was an obstacle in the face of Egyptian nationalism until the Sudan declared its independence in 1955 (Warburg 2-3). The colonial and national spaces of the two countries have been uneasily intertwined over the past few centuries and continue to be so to this day. The more disturbing factor, however, is the legacy of slavery. As Joe Madut Jok in “The Legacy of Race” points out, the slave trade established between North and sub-Saharan Africa has often been neglected in the study of Egypt and Sudan today. Jok explains that “an explicit awareness is lacking about the legacy of race in the persistence of slavery in modern-day Sudan” (187). While the British claim to have ended the slave trade in Sudan, Jok argues, in reality they “only changed its forms and provided different definitions of what was [once] classified as slavery” (190). Even now, slavery in the Sudan is still taking place, perpetuated to some extent by its Arab neighbour (199). Salih’s novel addresses the issues of national ambiguity and, to some extent, slavery. While do we not see the Sudan being represented in al-Aswany’s and al-Ghitani’s writing, our reading of the Egyptian novels prompts us to ask serious questions about the representations of slaves and servants who are not of Egyptian origin. Such textual representations, as my study will show, come through in spatial discourse which has already started making its way into recent studies of the Arabic novel.
In modern criticism, spatial theory has begun to appear more frequently in analyses of the contemporary Arabic novel. In the past, a dominant focus of such analyses was on the ways in which the Arabic novel absorbed Western modernism and emulated Western narrative techniques, thereafter engaging for the most part with issues of nationalism and humanism. More recently, however, we have begun to see the development of new theoretical insights in the study of the novel. A prominent example here is in the work of Muhsin al-Musawi. In *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature* (2009), al-Musawi sees that Arab authors’ imitation of the European novel-writing tradition may have initially rendered artificial some of their personal experiences; at a later point, however, they engaged far more authentically with their own realities. In this regard, as Hisham Sharabi points out, the “Arab nahdah (awakening) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” was not actually a “renaissance” period inasmuch as it was “a reaction to the military and political threat of Europe” (qtd. al-Musawi xii). In other words, it was more of a defence mechanism than a true intellectual uprising. The writing at the time, continues Musawi, could best be described as “apologetic” or “compromising,” too much so to be able to “monopolize social and political resources to the full” (xii). Thus, instead of being employed as a powerful weapon in nationalist discourse, Western rhetoric tended to be diluted as it was integrated into Arabic writing. During and after colonial times, Arab intellectuals were distracted “from a purposeful effort aimed at achieving a full-scale mobilization of manpower and resources toward change” (Musawi xii). As it were, Arabic authors began turning to different approaches in their writing, many of which, as Musawi explains, employed spatial discourse.

Arab distrust in the concept of the nation-state after the 1967 defeat prodded writers to adopt new strategies in their writing. Spatial representation takes on a new trajectory in the post-
1967 era; as Musawi explains, spaces such as “opera houses and theaters” give way to “street” locations as “loci of action, as spaces of representation,” along the lines of Henri Lefebvre’s argument.\(^\text{13}\) The primary function of the street in this regard “is as a producer of meaning.” Similarly, “al-‘asimah,” or the capital as “the recognized center of authority” competes with the “street as the locus and space for action.” The street combines modern and traditional ingredients and becomes the “space for a symbolic order and also an arena for other players and contenders” (xxi-xxii). Musawi’s use of spatial rhetoric to explain the development of the contemporary Arabic novel sheds light on the direction of Arabic writing today. Arab writers are in search of a space to accommodate more actors, more voices, and more possibilities than those offered primarily in national discourses. At the same time, they are reengaging with their specific histories to make better sense of their present.

Another way of cautiously introducing the concept of space into my study of the Arabic is by using a postructuralist approach as described by Sara Upstone. As I stressed earlier, however, we must be careful that such approaches do not swallow up the specificity of Arab cultural memory. In *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), Upstone contends that “postcolonial space” is a concept that allows us to complicate our study of the political in postcolonial literature by offering a diversity of spaces where political negotiations take place (Upstone 1). In the nineteenth century, explains Upstone, history tended to overshadow space; this was the “height of empire and spatial violence” (4). Upstone maintains that through mapping, vision, and exploration, colonial powers ordered space and thus imposed the risk of identity loss on the part of the colonized (5-6). However, space is not a “medium that is capable

\(^{13}\) While I do not use Lefebvre directly, his famous work on the city and the production of space, in studies such as *The Production of Space* (trans. 1991) and *The Urban Revolution* (trans. 2003), indirectly informs a large number of spatial theories I use in this dissertation. Musawi’s reference to the street as a “producer of meaning” is an important tenet of Lefebvre’s urban space theory.
of being ordered” (6); space has a “chaotic reality” that has its own meaning (8). In this regard, the “destabilizations of space offered by postcolonial texts” provide new levels of meaning in which to discover the political (12). According to Upstone, colonization and nationalism both rely “upon the ordering of space and the subsequent overwriting of the process of construction” (29). Upstone introduces the concept of postcolonial space as a liberating concept with which to study traditional postcolonial texts.

While only one of the novels I deal with in this study, Salih’s, traditionally appears on postcolonial reading lists, it is still possible to use Upstone’s postcolonial spatial argument in the discussion of the other Arabic novels in this chapter. However, if Upstone maintains that colonization and nationalism have ordered space and threatened the colonized with the risk of identity loss, we must be extremely careful that her “chaotic space” does not, with the intention of destabilizing space, do the same. By using a variety of spatial approaches to study the Arabic novel here, one may be able to avoid both extremes. The movement of thawra easily lends itself to different spatial approaches whilst also remaining anchored in particular cultural contexts, and Upstone’s spatial argument may, in this regard, capture both the chaos of thawra as well as its specificity. On the other hand, thawra is also a political movement; because I am interested in how space may be used to reconfigure the political in the novels I study, I must provide here an explanation of the political.

As I mentioned earlier, writers do not share the same political views, nor are their conceptions of thawra necessarily the same. What each thawra has in common with the other, however, is the element of hope. In today’s world, spatial discourse may be used to offer a politics of hope. As Henry Giroux puts it in his Foreword to The Politics of Philosophy: Encountering the Radical Imagination (2007), our societies nowadays are becoming
“increasingly organized around shared fears, escalating insecurities, and a new politics of terror” (viii). Thus, the way in which we think about and teach the political must be centered around hope, which itself “is more than a politics; it is also a pedagogical and performative practice that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents” (xiii). Although it may imply something of a “utopian longing,” hope evokes new narratives of history even as it offers brighter futures; it “substantiates the importance of ambivalence while problematizing certainty” (xiii). Hope gives the political a plurality “by opening up a space for dissent,” thus both holding authorities responsible and ensuring “social transformation” (xiv). Giroux’s notion of political hope, as we may deduce, is tied up with the notion of space for a reason: spatial discourse grants us the freedom to think outside the figurative box of stuffy socio-political theories. It allows us to question authoritative discourse that seeks to limit our very existence and our imagination of the world.

Politics is a more or less discernible phenomenon; not so the political. What I am interested in here is the political, and politics and the political are not necessarily the same. While he tends to use both words, Jacques Rancière’s discussion of the politics of literature is closer to the notion of the political that will be central to my argument. As Rancière, author of *The Politics of Literature* (French 2006; trans. 2011) explains, “politics is often confused with the exercise of power and the struggle for power.” Just because there is power does not mean that there is politics (3). Our command of speech for example does not ensure that we are political beings. Rather, “political activity is a conflict aimed at deciding what is speech or mere growl.” Rancière’s political here attempts to re-locate the unstable “boundaries by means of which political capacity is demonstrated.” It is that which redistributes “space and time, place and identity, speech and noise, the visible and the invisible” into perceptible forms. It is a
movement which allows us to see what previously went unnoticed by introducing “new objects and subjects onto the common stage.” It gives voice to what is otherwise voiceless (4), and it is this function which makes the concept of the political important to my study of literature. Without conceiving of it in Marxist terms as a vessel used simply to convey ideology, Rancière explains in this regard that literature has its own politics, other than the author’s. In other words, literature does not necessarily “concern the personal engagements of writers in the social or political struggles of their times.” Rather, “literature does politics simply by being literature” (3). Thus for Rancière, literature engages in its own politics, one that is able to redistribute elements such as space, time, and identity into visible forms. This does not mean that we ought to dismiss the writer and his own views, however. Rancière does not do away with the role of the writer; what he is telling us is that at times, even if a writer does not intend for his work to bear elements of the political, it may still do so.

This view of the political enhances our understanding of literature and of the world simply by taking into consideration unlikely elements in the relationships between humans and humans, and between humans and inanimate objects. Emphasizing these distinctions, Jeremy Valentine explains in his essay “The Political” (2006) that the difference between politics and the political designates the variation between “normal, ordinary and routine everyday activities which are occupied by the production and distribution of power” on one hand, and “that which is supposed to ground, explain, or distinguish and locate these activities as a specific sphere of thought or action” on the other (506). Whereas politics is a highly descriptive concept, the purpose of the political is more demonstrative; it is used to designate “that which is political sui generis.” In other words, we may understand the political in one way as “the ground of the polity” (506-07). Today, the notion of the political has undergone a rescaling in order to
accommodate “the vastness of the globe and beyond, and the smallness of things down to the paradoxes of the nano level, where what is very small is actually very big” (510-11). In this regard, humans are no longer the monopolisers of agency with respect to all aspects of the technological, organic, and inorganic worlds; there are many other scenarios to contend with today (511). Along with Rancière’s view of the political in literature as an independent activity which renegotiates the “perceptible” boundaries upon which politics depends, Valentine’s exploration of the notion draws into the argument other minute but powerful political agents. Rancière’s and Valentine’s definitions of the political must be considered within the contexts of the Arabic literature we are studying. In other words, as we delve into the minute aspects of the political, we must not lose sight of the broader dimensions and structures of Arab politics. If we consider the political to be both the grounds for and the way out of politics, we must not dismiss the valuable uses of political sciences, whose focus is on politics. These ideas will become more concrete as I apply them throughout my study.

In my study, there are instances where I refer to the political in isolation, and others where I cojoin it with the social. This seeming interchangeability requires a little explanation; for this I turn to Latour. According to Latour, “the political project of ANT … [or its] political relevance” may be looked upon as involving the assembling or the organization of social “assemblages” or patterns of associations. However, we must be cautious that, in this assembly, were we to “raise a political question,” we would not “reveal behind a given state of affairs the presence of forces hitherto hidden.” If we end up doing that, we would “risk falling into the same trap of providing social explanations” as do the social scientists, “and end up doing exactly the opposite of what [Latour] mean[s] here by politics.” Speaking about politics may give you “the pleasure of providing a ‘powerful explanation’.” However, here “you partake in the
expansion of power, but not in the recomposition of its content.” In short, “[t]here should be no powerful [political] explanation without checks and balances” (260-61). If we maintain the distinction between politics and the political in our reassembling of the social, and if we take heed not to use the political to “partake in the expansion of power,” then we should be safe. Latour’s definition of the ‘social’ with all its elements and the associations between them that we must trace is not unlike the definitions of the political I have rehearsed in the last paragraphs. As such, in my study here, there is not a great variance between the terms the social and the political; while the ‘political’ tends to have more of an edge and where I use it to refer to the associations that bring about more radical change, I still need to treat both the social and the political in the same manner by unpacking them both and tracing all the actors and associations partaking in each.

To sum up this section, I briefly return to Upstone’s argument on spatial politics to make a final distinction. Upstone (perhaps over-enthusiastically) reflects on the trajectory of spatial discourse as a “post-space journey.” Whether or not we are even in a post-space epoch is unclear, and perhaps we need not bother ourselves too much with this delineation. Nonetheless, for Upstone, this “post-space journey” has neither a point of destination nor one of departure; rather, it is “a strategic nomadism that affirms a process of travelling defiant of absolutes” (181). When it is applied to literature, post-space becomes a resistance strategy. As we delve into multiple narratives of the political, post-space theory has us “question the scales on which we look commonly for signs of political agency.” In the case of the traditional nation-state, for example, post-space does not allow it to be “the apotheosis of anti-colonial resistance” anymore. In other words, from Upstone’s perspective, resistance to colonial and neo-colonial forces can no
longer be prefixed to the “national” for the reason that there are other, overshadowed spaces of resistance (183).

Naturally, we encounter some obstacles here for reasons I have already clarified earlier. For one, Upstone’s argument is useful only when we understand what sort of resistance is taking place (to recall our discussion of thawa\(ra\)). We have already encountered writers and analysts who differ in their understandings of resistance, thawa\(ra\), and liberation. If “post-space” constitutes a resistance strategy, then once again we ask: Resistance to what? If post-space, for example, does not allow the nation-state to be “the apotheosis of anti-colonial resistance,” then how do we conceive of the nation-state? Why do the Egyptians today sing their country as they demonstrate on the streets of Cairo? Why do the Sudanese dream of being Sudanese? Do we dismiss their calls and continue our journey towards a complete unknown? Is there more behind these calls for thawa\(ra\) than we can perceive? These questions complicate our study, and for this reason, we need to remain anchored, as it were, somewhere in between the actual acts of resistance and the forces against which resistance is pitted. These notions can really be understood only through a close reading of narratives where politics and the political are both played out in different ways. While a more obvious politics is being played out in clear view (as we see on TV, for instance, in what is happening across the Arab world today), the political is overshadowed and difficult to discern, although an “against the grain” spatial reading of literature can help draw it to the fore.

Part 4. Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani beyond Mahfouz

The three novels I deal with in this study represent shifts in spatial representation to accommodate more complex and highly developed spatial metaphors that in themselves constitute acts of resistance with which to re-envision the political. Each novel I study offers a
break-through in its use of space to re-configure the political. My study, therefore, aims at drawing out and discussing these spatial metaphors in the novels against the backdrop of the political. Looking once more at space through the lens of *thawra*, we find that in some earlier Arabic novels, especially those written during the heyday of Arab nationalism, space continued to rely mainly on nationalist rhetoric in its configuration. In introducing the novels I study, I would like to provide an aspect of contrast against which the spatial developments in my novels may be more clearly represented. To this effect, I make use of the first novel in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy*, *Palace Walk* (Arabic 1956), referring to Hutchins and Kenny’s translation (1990). Mahfouz’s novel, as I show, features some movement towards spatial resistance but for the most part remains anchored in the spaces of nationalist discourse.

For the most part, the earlier Mahfouzian novels remain anchored in national/colonial spatial configuration, and we find that their nationalist narratives tend to silence other narratives of resistance or *thawra*. In this way, *Palace Walk* remains for the greater part engaged in spatial binaries of the sort that are to be found in national or colonial discourse. As it seeks to homogenize the heart of the city under one nationalist uprising towards ‘liberation’ and modernization, *Palace Walk* does not address specific histories or different cultures, whereas the novels of Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani do, albeit to different extents. In an essay from 1994, included in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays* (2001), J.M. Coetzee discusses this dimension of earlier Mahfouzian writing. Coetzee writes that the early modern Arabic novel was imported as an art form from the West. He explains in this regard that the novel was initially “hostile” towards tradition as it sought to represent, especially in Egypt, “civil society and [its] sense of national identity” (Coetzee 192). Describing Mahfouz as “a novelist of medieval Cairo,”
Coetzee explains that Mahfouz drew on images from the historical city to depict scenes of a nationalist Cairo that the author had observed as a boy.

The Egyptian writers I deal with in my study are both influenced by Mahfouz and also build upon his tradition. Al-Ghitani, who collected and edited Mahfouz’s childhood memories in *Naguib Mahfouz Yatathakkar* (Mahfouz Remembers; 1980) and later compiled most of the late writer’s conversations and stories in *The Mahfouz Dialogs* (2006; trans. 2007), was both a friend of Mahfouz and a great admirer of his work. Al-Aswany, also a great admirer of Mahfouz’s writing, tends to borrow some Mahfouzian symbols in his own work. Both authors developed their unique styles by building in different ways upon the Mahfouzian model; one of these ways was by diverging from the predominantly nationalist spatial focus of a novel such as *Palace Walk*. As Samia Mehrez explains in *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal al-Ghitani* (1994), written texts provide a “narrative on history” as seen through the eyes of their authors. Such texts bring about socio-political change, “not necessarily in the form of political action but certainly in literary sensibilities, aesthetics of taste, and ideologies of reading, all of which are political changes” (Mehrez 11). Mehrez points out the importance of Mahfouz’s writing to the works of several authors of the sixties generation, such as al-Ghitani, for whom “Mahfouz is at once an important beginning and a necessary point of departure” (58).

While al-Aswany is not one of the sixties writers, he certainly makes use of Mahfouz to present a new “narrative on history” as Mehrez puts it, by extending Mahfouz’s models of space to complex networks. Al-Aswany takes Mahfouz’s cross section of Egyptian society and relocates it on the rooftop of a building, making the building metaphor a prominent spatial symbol in his work. However, little attention has been given to the ways in which the Yacoubian
Building becomes part of a greater spatial network in al-Aswany’s novel, designating a point of departure from the Mahfouzian cross section of society. In *Egypt’s Culture Wars* Mehrez briefly discusses al-Aswany’s use of the *imara* (building) as a postcolonial metaphor symbolizing the city, comparing it to Mahfouz’s *hara* (the neighbourhood) (147). She explains how, in realist tradition, al-Aswany uses the building metaphor to reflect on his experience of Cairo. The building metaphor, writes Mehrez, situates al-Aswany as “[an] underground historian of the city whose narratives participate in the construction of an imagined community and a national imaginary” (148). Mehrez does not, however, allude to the other spaces of the novel such as the restaurants, homes, offices, and desert; alongside the building, these additional spaces come to represent complicated networks that go beyond urban and national spaces.

With respect to al-Ghitani, very little attention has been given to the way in which his *Pyramid Texts* may represent Egypt through its spatial depiction of Egyptian monuments. Critics who do choose to discuss *Pyramid Texts* (and they are few), focus mainly on its mystical elements, without considering how these elements may be used to depict another space of resistance. On a different level, and in sharp contrast to the authoritative representation of space in Mahfouz’s novel, al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts* provides an alternative vision of Egypt through its Pyramids. With respect to some of his earlier writing, Mehrez contends in *Egyptian Writers* that as “al-Ghitani writes Mahfouz in the text, he himself is written in it, not only as a younger son of al-Gamaliya … but also as another critical eye in Cairo” (Mehrez 58). However, al-Ghitani’s past (and often painful) experiences have, not unlike Mahfouz, “changed the focus of his writings as much as the direction of his politics” (Nkrumah ¶ 42).

As a matter of fact, al-Ghitani’s integration of the more mystical aspects of Arabic and Islamic tradition in his later works, namely *Pyramid Texts*, has taken his vision of Egypt far
beyond Mahfouz’s earlier narrow alleys to a more universal perspective without losing sight of Arab culture. In this regard, al-Ghitani builds upon Mahfouz’s later surreal writing style, as I shall shortly explain. As al-Ghitani writes in his Foreword to Xavier Roy’s *Re:Viewing Egypt: Image and Echo* (2010), like existence itself, Egypt consists of a series of dualities and everything between: the old and the new, the sacred and the profane, the demolished and the constructed, and the calm and the chaotic (al-Ghitani and Roy 4-6). It is this vision of Egypt that gives al-Ghitani’s space a universalizing quality, allowing it to function as a space of resistance different from anything Mahfouz, al-Aswany, and Salih have written. While still writing the political in his work, al-Ghitani no longer writes politics. In an effort to escape “the painful reminder of memories” which brought about the writing of such as *Barakat* in the early seventies (Nkrumah), al-Ghitani resorts to tradition and to the mystical aspect of space to depict the political.

Mahfouz did not remain stuck in the “realist” era of nationalism forever. From the perspective of Western literary criticism, Coetzee points out that while Mahfouz’s *Trilogy* belongs in the Egyptian writer’s “realist phase” (Coetzee 192-93), after this phase Mahfouz shifted to a more surreal direction in his writing.\(^{14}\) In this shift, Mahfouz “was criticized [by the Lebanese author Elias Khoury] for falling behind the times” by failing “to give voice to wider ethical and political concerns” (196). According to Coetzee, Mahfouz’s response to this criticism was that in turning to symbolism, the latter sought “to exploit a more concentrated, more poetic, but also less ‘modern’ fictional language than the European masters of his early years could provide” (197). In employing symbolism and allegory in much of his work, al-Ghitani in particular emulates Mafouz’s allegorical trajectory to some extent, but he also

\(^{14}\) Note how Coetzee relies on the Western realist/surrealist time frame to describe the shift in Mahfouz’s earlier writing.
develops his unique collage-presentation of specific Arab historical and modern elements in his writing.

On the other hand, the relationship of the late Tayeb Salih to Mahfouz and his work is more ambiguous. Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* has in many cases been compared to Mahfouz’s work in its representation of women and gender issues. Both writers have, for instance, been praised for their depiction of women’s struggles against oppression. However, perhaps due to the fact that the two writers hail from different countries, little attention has been given to a comparison of the spatial representations in their texts. While Mahfouz, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani share some similarities in their depictions of Egypt and its capital city, the same cannot be said for Salih, whose work focuses on a different geography. From a spatial perspective, however, by juxtaposing the three novels against Mahfouz’s work we are able to identify further aspects of comparison.

To begin with, Mahfouz’s novel which is set mainly between the house and the street, features a doubled space: the house as representative of patriarchal oppression and the street as representative of colonial oppression. On the other hand, the novels of Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani go beyond the spaces of the house and the street to use metaphors indicative of more subtle acts of oppression not explicitly conveyed in Mahfouz’s novel. For example, while al-Aswany’s novel features similar accounts of family oppression in some of its narratives, it goes beyond the structures of the house and street to accommodate other complex structures, the

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15 As a writer, Salih’s position vis-à-vis the Egyptian cultural field is rather problematic, and may or may not have something to do with his own issues regarding his Sudanese identity. Mehrez discusses this matter in *Egypt’s Culture War*. In 2004, Salih was one of the presiding judges for the Arab Novel Award, at a time when various Egyptian writers were resisting the conditions of cultural oppression imposed upon them by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. When the award was fiercely rejected by several Egyptian authors, most passionately by Sonallah Ibrahim, Salih’s comments regarding Ibrahim’s position (vis-à-vis the ministry of culture) and that of many other Egyptian writers present at the time were quite belittling. Salih eventually accepted the award for himself (80-81).
spaces of which constitute a narrative that takes into account different sources of oppression than those suggested in Mahfouz’s novel. Secondly, not surprisingly, given that all three Arabic novels were published after Mahfouz’s novel (Salih’s in 1966, al-Ghitani’s in 1994, and al-Aswany’s in 2002), the novels of the three go beyond the issues of nationalism to address the impact of globalization and to study identity struggles from local, ethnic, and historical perspectives. Thirdly, while relationships in Mahfouz’s novel are very much localized, in my reading of the other novels they are not. Written in the heyday of Arab nationalism, *Palace Walk* centers on the life of an Egyptian family living in Cairo. We encounter the cloistered mother (Amina), the tyrannical father (Sayyid Ahmad), their three sons (Yasin, Fahmy, and Kamal), and two daughters (Khadija and Aisha), all of whom live in the huge Abd al-Jawad home. In the other novels, relationships go beyond family ties and friendships with the locals (as well as Kamal’s friendship with the British soldiers) to look at complex relationships with people from different ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds. In the case of *Pyramid Texts*, we do not come across regular social ties; human relationships are depicted through the lenses of history and the Arabic tradition.

From the start of the Mahfouzian novel, there is little doubt that the spatial depiction of the mansion and the surrounding streets symbolizes the dictatorship of Sayyid and the military occupation of the British forces; however, these spatial metaphors are gradually corroded with the progression of the work. While Sayyid rules his house with an iron fist, imposing Islamic conduct on his family members as he himself struts about the streets of Cairo in search of women, entertainment, and wine, the British soldiers maintain a strong occupation of the Egyptian streets. The novel paves the way for spatial resistance against the double tyrannies of the father and the British through the narratives of the family members, but the resistance is
mainly against clearly defined sources of oppression. Unbeknownst to Sayyid, his offspring and his docile wife have their own little secrets; as the father engages in his hypocritical pastimes, his three sons sneak out of the house on their own rampages, his wife goes on a forbidden journey to visit a mosque, and his daughters engage in their own fantasies and little acts of rebellion. Throughout the dark rooms of the house and in the British-occupied streets of Cairo, the novel depicts some extremely claustrophobic spaces in its suggestion of oppression.

The three novels are different from *Palace Walk* in how they go beyond national aspirations and address elements of corruption that emerge after the nationalist epoch. With the progression of Mahfouz’s story, the quality of the spaces of oppression changes when the Egyptian nationalist movement surges onto the streets of Cairo as an obvious form of resistance to British occupation. This form of resistance, as Timothy Mitchell has pointed out in his account of Egyptian urban space in *Colonising Egypt*, reveals a spatial chaos that the British soldiers and the Egyptian police sought to ‘organize’ using violent means (58). Mahfouz’s novel does not really address this chaos other than as a nationalist uprising. It does not effectively complicate the roles of religious, ethnic, racial, social, educational, and personal factors underlying the nationalist movement. Salih’s and al-Aswany’s novels go beyond nationalist aspirations in their emphases on these other factors, distorting the nationalist spaces laid out by Mahfouz. In addition, the Mahfouzian novel does not really explore the levels of corruption of both Egyptian and British authorities, while the novels of Salih and al-Aswany more explicitly address corruption from different local and global angles and the novel of al-Ghitani more implicitly suggests forms of corruption through various spatial metaphors.

Mahfouz’s novel *does* address a few other spaces of resistance besides those to be seen in the nationalist surge, but to a limited extent. At the start of the novel, for example, the emphasis
is not on the soldiers or on the lord of the house, but on Amina who, even in the confines of her home, is always wrapped up in a veil and never feels safe if Sayyid is not present. Amina’s daily routine consists of waking up in the morning to bake, clean, cook, and serve for the most part of the day and night. She is allowed very little liberty, and even the balcony is a “closed cage formed by the wooden latticework” from which she can only snatch peeks at the outside world as she turns “her face right and left.” The design of the house is such that the female family members may look outside, but nobody can look in at them (Mahfouz 2). Thus we catch glimpses of the tightly structured spaces of the house which suggest a severe spatial ordering that overshadows, to recall Upstone’s argument, the “chaos” of other spaces. Sayyid is the god of the family; he is “the one who commands and forbids,” and he is the one who accepts no criticism from his family members (4). Amina’s only access to the outside world and to the socio-political events taking place is through her husband; she eagerly listens to his stories, saving the news so she can then convey it to her daughters (12). Amina has two prayers in life: to visit her beloved al-Husayn Mosque, and to see the English being driven out of Egypt (35).

Amina’s space does not seem to represent any obvious form of resistance to tyranny as, for example, we will see in the transformations on the streets. Upon closer observation, however, this little tableau of a regular day in her life conceals potent spaces of resistance. For example, for Amina, the rooftop with the chickens and pigeons is perhaps the only space where she can experience “love and delight” and the “joys of play and merriment” as though it were “a new world she had discovered.” The rooftop sanctuary is a space she herself “had created … afresh through the force of her spirit” (33). Similarly, the rooftop space with its tiny garden is “her beautiful, beloved world and her favourite place for relaxation out of the whole universe, about which she knew nothing” (34). Amina’s creation of this small, living, but free world is in
itself a form of spatial resistance. In a more obvious display of rebellion, when Amina manages to go visit the al-Husayn Mosque during one of her husband’s trips, she engages in a bold act of transgression against Sayid’s will, although at no small price. On her way, she falls in the street, breaks one of her bones, and her secret is consequently discovered, leading to a series of detrimental effects in her relationship with her husband. This does not mean that Amina has failed; her little rooftop escapade remains an important part of her spatial narrative.

The rooftop example is, in fact, an aspect of comparison to point out here between the novels of Mahfouz and al-Aswany. To some extent, the example of Mahfouz’s rooftop space is emulated by al-Aswany, but where Mahfouz’s rooftop is intended for one woman, the Building’s rooftops in The Yacoubian Building represent an entire segment of Egyptian society which will come to symbolize that part of the Egyptian population resisting oppression and refusing to die. Al-Aswany’s rooftop people are all survivors, living by strength, cunning, and sheer will. While this appears to be nothing more than an elaborate replica of the Mahfouzian symbol, al-Aswany’s novel, with its complex spatial networking, does not isolate this cross-section of Egyptian society from networks existing within and beyond the local Egyptian space. While Mahfouz’s work does not focus on this roof-top sanctuary which may be represented as a space of resistance indicative of what Giroux would call a politics of hope, al-Aswany’s work connects this space to many others, offering his characters different trajectories which, in turn, are complicated with personal identity struggles.

For the most part, the spaces in Palace Walk outside of the house represent a very small world as seen through Sayyid’s eyes and, to different extents, those of his children; our view of the world is generously widened in the other novels. Our perception of the world outside Sayyid’s home is limited; we see the typical Egyptian vendors on the street, meet the same
friends and acquaintances, and stare at beautiful women. Sayyid’s tyrannical character transforms into a pleasant, sociable one just beyond the threshold of his own home. He owns a small grocery store, and his trips outside his home bring him into contact with friends and acquaintances, all of whom he treats with charm and friendliness (Mahfouz 41). The eldest son Yasin is a heavier replica of his father, and shares his father’s libidinal temperament (56). The girls, Khadija and Aisha, are more or less engaged with domestic chores as they fret over who is prettier and who will marry before the other. They are as spatially restricted as their mother, although their imaginations extend to areas beyond the Mosque and the little rooftop (147-50).

The youngest son Kamal provides a wider scope of vision for us: we experience through the eyes of this naturally inquisitive boy a world of fun and daring, of brawls and scraped knees, and of boyish fears and longing (50-56). Fahmy is the passionate student; patriotic to the bone, he enjoys more liberty as a university student than his younger brother (62). In Mahfouz’s novel, while we see the world mainly through the eyes of these family members, in the other novels we see different aspects of the world as they are presented in the relationships between actors and various social elements we may not even recognize as belonging to the social world. In these novels, the study of spatial representation is what shapes our understanding of the actor with its socio-political movements. Our study of spatial metaphors in Salih’s novel, for instance, complicates the Sudanese identity by scrutinizing a number of tribal, local, and foreign elements that impact this identity. Al-Aswany’s work constructs a social web the strands of which extend not only to local and global actors but also to historic and modern elements, all of which are connected to each other in this network. In al-Ghitani’s highly allegorical work, a spatial representation of historical sites depicts the movements of actors in such a way that has us question hegemonic representations by other actors; spatial hegemony and spatial transgression
as a form of resistance become the metaphors with which a new socio-political condition is imagined.

Spatial hegemony or the ordering of space tends to overwhelm Mahfouz’s novel, while in the other novels it is repeatedly countered through various spatial tropes. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, Mahfouz’s nationalist spaces tend to overshadow important spaces of potential *thawra*. We observe this spatial hegemony in Fahmy’s narrative; it is mainly through Fahmy’s eyes that we witness the unfolding of political events in Egypt. On the surface, Fahmy is the typical university nationalist, an example of what Dawisha describes as Abd al-Nasser’s foot soldier in the making. Dawisha explains that in Abd al-Nasser’s bid to generate support for his version of Arab nationalism (also known as Nasserism), he used the younger generation of students and middle class people as “his foot soldiers in the service of Arab nationalism” (Dawisha 140). For his father, Fahmy’s intense passion about the revolution is a source of worry; Sayyid’s “children were meant to be a breed apart, outside the framework of history. He alone would set their course for them, not the revolution, the times, or the rest of humanity.” The revolution was to remain as far from the household as possible (Mahfouz 451). Nonetheless, the revolution inside Fahmy’s heart proves to be stronger than that in the streets, which have now become the space for the birth of a new historical era. Fahmy focuses his passion on expelling the British from his homeland while his younger brother Kamal goes about befriending them in secret. Slogans of the Sa’d Zaghloul revolution at the time become a mantra in his heart, distracting him from “the agitation of his soul” (Mahfouz 384).

Similarly, it is in Fahmy’s narrative that we find the capital Cairo “sad, angry, desolate,” and we feel the “heart of the nation throbbing” as a “self-conscious awakening” takes place throughout the country. Mahfouz portrays the revolution as an overpowering force, capable of
invading any space. We see an example of this invasion as a torrent of angry university students invades the young Kamal’s school. “Like water rushing through an opening in a dam,” they burst into the classes screaming “Strike! Strike! No one can stay here!” The young boy understands nothing of this; his safe and secure space has been shattered as he is shoved forward and out of the school (Mahfouz 392). The revolution is described as a wave, the chanting like “the roaring of the wind” (393). It is described in terms of violence, magnified through the eyes of a terrified child; seeing the splashes of blood in the dust of the street, Kamal hears, “We die, but the nation lives” (394). The novel ends with the death of Fahmy at the hands of the police and with the grief-stricken Sayyid wondering in anguish at the choices he has made in his life. This sort of spatial hegemony is not allowed in the works of Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani. The fluidity of spatial metaphors in the works of Salih and al-Ghitani signifies a point of departure from the rigid structures of nationalist space.

Characters also evolve differently in their spatial narratives from Mahfouz to the other writers. We meet a somewhat different version of Sayyid in al-Aswany’s novel; Sayyid will no longer be a giant dominating his household, but becomes Zaki Bey, a washed down version of the Egyptian aristocracy, an actor bombarded by an assembly of other social and political actors, not all of whom are human or even animate. In *The Yacoubian Building*, it is through these associations that we witness examples of a new socio-political era in the making. Similarly, al-Aswany’s Egyptian streets, buildings, shops, and niches all become essential components in a new configuration of spatial networking. In *Season of Migration*, characters and their identity issues are made complex precisely in the spaces they occupy. From South to North then back again, Salih’s Mustafa Saeed struggles with his identity. The narrator alternates between city, village, and desert in his own identity search. In al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts*, the Pyramids
appear as the primary protagonists in the story, with which other characters must struggle in their searches for life’s meaning and hope. While Mahfouz’s narrative is rich with social relationships, the personification of power both in spatial representation and in the person of Sayyid tends to over-shadow many significant encounters. As Edward Said writes about Mahfouz’s *Trilogy* in “Egypt’s Greatest Writer: Naguib Mahfouz, 9/11 and the Cruelty of Memory”:

> Every one of Mahfouz’s works that I know has this central but distant personification of power in it, most memorably the dominating senior figure of El-Sayed Ahmed Abdel-Gawwad in the *Cairo Trilogy*, whose authoritative presence hovers over the action throughout the *Trilogy*. (Said ¶ 13)

Sayyid’s “authoritative presence hovers” not only “over the action” in the novel, but also over its spaces. While *Palace Walk* does offer various spaces of resistance, they are muted since resistance, although it eventually fails, is configured primarily through the lenses of nationalism. This ordering of space has its flaws; *Palace Walk* leaves nationalism out on a limb at the end of the novel with the death of Fahmy. In my study of the novels, to return to Said’s discussion of *thawra* with which I began my Introduction, I delve into a complex socio-political world where *thawra* means something different to each of the three writers.

Against Mahfouz’s spatial representation, my reading of the other novels designates space within different historical and cultural contexts to explore what resistance and socio-political change implies for each author. In her post-space argument, Upstone explains spatial developments in literature today by differentiating between macrospace and microspace. This view echoes Valentine’s notion of the political as encompassing major elements as well as elements at the smallest “nano” level (Valentine 511). For Upstone, anything that may be seen
to order or delineate space no longer effectively functions as a form of resistance, for the scales of “political agency” are shifting today (Upstone 183). Using Upstone’s argument to read various nationalist scenes in *Palace Walk*, we find that while citizens march and make powerful statements in the novel, “on other scales the imperfect nature of this [nationalist] order is revealed” (Upstone 183). “Personal acts of resistance,” writes Upstone, are important, for “without such voices … there is no way to envisage the possibility for change” (184). Of course, Amina’s rooftop space, as I have pointed out, does designate such a personal act; however, it is not given sufficient emphasis in the novel. The street remains the primary venue where resistance takes place. As Upstone might argue, the home and even the streets as depicted in *Palace Walk* no longer suffice as spatial metaphors. While there are “connections between domestic oppressions and colonial regimes” (Upstone 120), we need to look beyond these spaces to envision other kinds of *thawra*. This is what I set out to do in my study of Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani.

I have extensively discussed the concept of *thawra* to show how it is linked to space, and how it is designated differently in different works of literature. The ways in which each of the three novels departs from more conventional examples of spatial metaphors in themselves represent literary *thawras*. In Chapter Two of my dissertation, I study Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966; trans. 1969). Structured around the sweating body of the Sudan in Africa and the frigid northern empire of Britain in Europe, Tayeb Salih’s novel straddles landscapes. It is a difficult novel to categorize, for it addresses the plight of Sudan on the eve of independence, thus attacking British colonialism on one hand, but also criticizing the growth of internal hegemony and corruption on the other hand. In its negotiation of space, *Season* goes beyond the obvious postcolonial landscapes to present other spaces where the political is
enacted. *Season* uses space and textual heteroglossia to negotiate the themes of identity, diversity, tolerance, and belonging between different landscapes and between different spaces. In Chapter Three, Egypt in Alaa al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* (2002; trans. 2004) is the corrupt nation-state of the 1990s controlled by oppressive regimes and powerful factions. My use of space in *The Yacoubian Building* complicates the themes of globalization, tradition, modernity, and emerging classes. The novel invites us to reconsider Egyptian socio-political reality as it configures identity within the spatial networks of the social. My study of *The Yacoubian Building* involves the task of reassembling the social in order to trace these actor networks, a notion central to my argument in Chapter Three, since it links identity to spatial practice, and also because it situates network systems within the broader frameworks of nationalism, history, and globalization. While Chapter Two challenges the limits of postcolonial space, and while Chapter Three delves into the complexity of spatial networks and socio-political associations, Chapter Four studies the metaphors of thresholds, spatial transgressions, and the spatial sublime in its study of Gamal al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts* (1994; trans. 2007). With its unique style that combines both the ancient and modern in Arabic culture, the novel destabilizes authoritative representations of space in order to project the political into a more hopeful future. Each novel renders space uniquely within specific Arabic cultural contexts, offering a politics of hope through spaces of resistance.
Chapter Two

‘Denial’, the Desert, and the Text: Spatial Metaphors in Tayeb Salih’s

Season of Migration to the North

Part 1.a. The topographies of Season

“Were we in winter or summer? Was it a casual flight or a migration?” (Salih 168). These are some of the thoughts of the narrator in Tayeb Salih’s novel Season of Migration to the North (1966; trans. 1969) before the story leaves him flailing and floundering, both in the waters of the Nile and in a state of ‘denial’, in its closing scene. The narrator, who at the start of the novel had always imagined himself to be as firmly rooted as a palm tree in his village (2), finds himself in this last scene questioning the purpose of his life, which is as turbulent and multidirectional as the currents in the river. The narrator finally gives up on this dilemma: “It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. If I am unable to forgive, then I shall try to forget. I shall live by force and cunning” (168-69). With this resolution, as both an escapist and a survivor the narrator sums up all his energy in the end to voice an audible cry for help (169). Who is the narrator calling upon for help? Had Salih added a few more pages to his novel, would the reader perhaps have witnessed one or two of the narrator’s fellow villagers come to the aid of the village’s pride and joy, the village-born Sudanese who had made it to England and earned a doctorate degree in English literature? Would the spectre of the dead Mustafa Sa’eed, the narrator’s nemesis in the novel and the major source of his anguish, confusion, and fascination, have swooped down on him from the dark night of the narrator’s unquenched desires and faceless fears? Perhaps the narrator would not have found anyone to save him at all, neither from the treacherous river nor from his own “nightmare” (168). As it were, however, it is the reader who ultimately saves him by drawing him back to the beginning of the novel.
*Season of Migration to the North* commences with the return of an anonymous narrator to the little village of Wad Hamid in the north of the Sudan, that “small village at the bend of the Nile,” after an absence of seven years of study in Europe. The narrator pleasantly describes his long-awaited return to the village, dwelling on the “great yearning” he has experienced for his home and his people throughout his absence when he was “in a land ‘whose fishes die of cold’” (1). At the start of the novel, with the wind whispering through the firmly rooted palms and the gentle cooing of the doves infusing the narrator with serenity and peace (2), the narrator captures the attention of two audiences: those “gentlemen” whom he addresses in the opening sentence of the story and the readers of the novel. His own attention, however, is soon to become riveted not on his village, but on another character in the novel: the strange Mustafa Sa’eed. Mustafa is a newcomer to the village; he has returned to the Sudan after many years of study and other engagements in Britain, choosing the narrator’s village as his final point of destination. Assuming himself to be the only English-educated person in his village, the narrator is stunned to discover that Mustafa has outdone him in terms of travels and accomplishments (or so the narrator thinks at first). Mustafa chooses the narrator to be the privileged and only member of his own audience, disclosing to him the secrets of his north-bound journey and his sexual exploits in the land of the colonizer and imposing upon him the burdens of a life he leaves behind about halfway through the novel when he dies, either by drowning or committing suicide in the Nile. As the narrator rediscovers the village he calls home, he encounters changes in the villagers and in their way of life. What he assumed would be a pleasant reunion with his people becomes, instead, an emotional rollercoaster alternately easing him into warm and familiar encounters before plunging him into shocking and painful discoveries. Alongside these discoveries, the chapters of Mustafa’s own tale trespass, as it were, on the narrator’s story in
flashbacks and flashforwards, unwelcome, haunting, and disturbing. The narratives of the narrator, Mustafa, the villagers, the British and the Sudanese are strangely intertwined within spatial tropes extending across landscapes and dialogues.

From house to house and street to street in the little village, from the village to Khartoum, from Khartoum to Cairo, from Cairo to London, from the Nile to the desert, from desert to sea, Season distributes the trajectories of its narrators and actors across multiple geographical and textual landscapes. At a geographical level, we find that the recurring motifs in the novel, such as those of the desert and the Nile, are used differently from one actor to the other. In the case of Mustafa, for example, the desert is usually the mirage from which he draws the exotic metaphors of his fabricated identity, using them to ensnare and destroy British women. For the narrator, the desert alternates between myth and reality; it is the place where his travels must occasionally take him and where his own identity is prostrated naked beneath a scorching sun. Likewise, the Nile is at one moment a gently-flowing symbol of romance and myth, and at another it is a turbulent body reflecting the turbulences of the novel’s narratives. As part of the Sudanese space, these topographies are also used in the novel to illustrate a particular phase of Sudanese history; historical changes are transcribed in landscape metaphors. Set in the 1960s, Season emerges from a country which, broadly-speaking, had back then just become both newly ‘postcolonial’ and newly ‘national’. While critics such as Samir Seikaly (1986) have covered the most significant historical components of the novel in terms of how it depicts both the influences of British imperialism as well as the growing internal corruption which, under the guise of a national government, festered in the country as a disease caught from the colonizers, very little has been written about how the novel addresses the diversity of the Sudanese identity in its spatial representations.
Another significant geographical element in the novel is the village, the place where the novel begins and ends; in many ways, the village and its vicinity become spaces where local and global elements as well as traditional and modern ones are forced into this corner of the huge Sudan in an experimental fashion. In the village, we find that aspects of modernity have permeated the spaces there, and that reverberating across the spaces of the Sudan, other changes have also taken place. One may wonder why Salih focuses on this particular village rather than on the whole of Sudan. Is it to designate a particular struggle in one location of the country, or is the village meant to be a cross-section of Sudanese society? Why is this village the coincidental meeting point not only between Mustafa Sa’eed and the narrator, but also of other inhabitants, some of whom were born there and some of whom moved there? My study will not be confined to the village space, but it will use the village space as a central pivot from which to locate and analyze other spaces. If there is a form of struggle in the novel, then how may we conceive of it in terms of today’s Sudanese struggle? To my knowledge, the socio-political value of *Season* in informing and anticipating today’s Sudanese *thawra* has not yet been addressed.

At a textual level, as the novel grapples with historical changes and identity issues, it uses multiple narrators whose fragmented stories and reports we must stitch together in order to grasp the entire picture. These voices are not always in agreement; just as there are contradictions and overlaps between the geographical tropes, there are contradictions and overlaps in the novel’s dialogues. These dialogues represent a textual landscape where identity is negotiated. For example, in addition to Mustafa and the narrator, we have characters who have known Mustafa and who speak about him directly to or in front of the narrator after Mustafa’s death. We also have instances where we are not sure whether the narrator is speaking to his audience or to himself. In other cases, we have dialogic scenarios which are imagined but never played out:
instances where, for example, the narrator or Mustafa wished they had said something but didn’t. Between the villagers, we also have conversations in which minute details playing considerable roles in the construction of the political emerge. These dialogues, some of which are loud and others muted, are between actors whom we may not initially discern. In these vocal struggles there is yet again a thawra against oppression and confusion. We may still hear some of these voices today, for in the Sudanese uprising there is not one truth but many.

I use the concept of thawra as one of the main unifying devices in all of my chapters; if the narrator’s final struggle in the waters of the Nile and his ultimate resolution to survive at all costs is representative of a thawra, and if this concept of thawra seemingly draws on movements of the political as represented in literature, then what are these movements and where do they take place in Salih’s novel? I discussed the question of thawra and its various definitions and metaphoric representations in Orientalist and Arabic discourses in the Introduction, not only to situate the novels I study within the present-day context of the Arab world’s revolutions, but also to argue that each Arabic novel reflects, in one anticipatory way or the other, on the thawras of today. My argument uses spatial discourse to draw out and analyze the political in each novel. For this purpose, reiterating Jacques Rancière’s definition of the political as it is expressed in literature (regardless of the author’s political views or agenda), when we study the political, we are retracing the shifting “boundaries by means of which political capacity is demonstrated.” The political redistributes “space and time, place and identity, speech and noise, the visible and the invisible” into perceptible forms. As a movement, it brings to the fore unnoticeable elements by introducing “new objects and subjects onto the common stage.” It gives voice to what is otherwise voiceless (Rancière 4). The political, as Valentine also explains, is a demonstrative concept rather than a descriptive one. Its study encompasses “the vastness of the globe and
beyond, and the smallness of things down to the paradoxes of the *nano* level, where what is very small is actually very big” (Valentine 510-11). The political draws into its study not only human actors but numerous other technological, organic, and inorganic entities (511). As they are distributed across the landscapes of Salih’s novel, these elements of the political are best analyzed in the study of spatial metaphors. In drawing out the textual representation of these spatial metaphors, I will complicate and analyze the dynamics of the political.

From a spatial perspective, in this chapter the concept of *thawra* is very much tied up with the issue of the Sudanese identity. The ongoing identity struggles described in this chapter manifest themselves spatially over two types of landscapes: the geographical and the textual, with space, a socio-political product, being the unifying element between both landscapes. The bulk of this chapter (Part 3) will be devoted to a discussion of the first type of landscape, where I refer mainly to the topographical tropes configured in the novel. As I shall argue, the novel’s interplay between metaphoric and literal geographical landscapes goes beyond typical postcolonial discourse and its focus on anti-colonial resistance. As I have shown in my representation of the relationship between Egypt and the Sudan in Part 3 of the Introduction, there are a number of crucial national, ethnic, religious, and tribal elements to contend with in this spatial study. For the second type of landscape (Part 4 of this chapter), which complements the first, I refer to the text’s “heteroglossia,” using Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology, as a topography of utterances, so to speak. In my study of the novel, I will develop my spatial argument by also referring to the textual deixis in the novel (I will later explain these terms). When studied together in the novel, both heteroglossia and textual deixis point out the complexity and the directionality of specific spatial metaphors as represented in the text. Both
topographical and textual landscapes feed off one another to inform us about the nature of these identity struggles and their position within spatial discourse.

Of course, these spatial approaches to *thawra*, particularly the metalinguistic one, ultimately problematize the issues of identity in the novel. The heteroglot nature of the novel presents us with a great many voices: those of its characters and those of other actors we do not directly encounter, not all of which are in harmony or agreement. Within this cacophony, it is not always clear whose identity is being dealt with in the novel. However, the complexity of narratorial/authorial voice(s) in the work is particularly relevant to this study, for it contributes to the richness and diversity of the Sudanese identity issue while also raising an important question: who is involved in this *thawra*, and who is it against? Another way of looking at this problem is by posing the question of who the novel was written for. While a novel does not have to have a specific audience, a novel such as Salih’s, which deals to a large extent with identity struggles, must surely target a more or less sympathetic/empathetic audience. If, as we shall shortly see, Salih strove in his literary career to achieve tolerance through his writing, then who or what was to be tolerated? By the same token, who was to be tolerant? Is the intended audience a strictly Sudanese one? Could the novel be addressing a broader Arab audience or an African one? Was it intended for Muslim or non-Muslim readers? By virtue of its excellent translations into English and other European languages, might not its target audience extend to British or broadly Western readers? These questions uneasily address the myriad forces of hegemony depicted in the novel itself, for the achievement of tolerance through literature necessitates the pre-existence of intolerance and oppression.

This is how a spatial study of the work at the two levels I have addressed proves its value; *Season of Migration to the North* becomes a novel illustrating *thawra* against internal and
external forces of hegemony. In the spaces between and beyond Mustafa Sa’eed’s landscapes and the narrator’s, there is an uneasy relationship amongst spatial metaphors. There are no clear-cut distinctions between the two worlds; while Mustafa Sa’eed’s spatial metaphors appear to constitute a *thawra* against the colonizer, and while the narrator’s spatial tropes appear to question and criticize manifestations of modernity, corruption, backwardness, and oppression on local soil, there are disturbing lapses in both spatial representations whereby it is not always clear whether these *thawras* are directed against external forces, local powers, or even against the characters themselves. Similarly, the multiplicity of voices in the text engages with a repertoire of spatial metaphors that serve to complicate the directionality of *thawra* in the text, if we may conceive of *thawra* as having a direction. Taken together, these spatial metaphors not only unsettle the locations of center and periphery but also begin to hint at a whole new level of space, that of spatial networks, which will be taken up in Chapter Three. The extent to which *Season’s* narrator considers his personal struggles as a *thawra* is negotiable. Does the narrator remain, even at the end of the novel, in a state of ‘denial’? Who or what is the cause of his distress, and what is he struggling against? Who is he narrating the story to, for that matter?

One may ask in this sense whether Tayeb Salih is writing for or against a particular audience or audiences, and one may also ask whether his authorial voice comes through in the voice of Mustafa Sa’eed, that of the narrator, or even other characters in the novel. Perhaps, like the narrator, he is even arguing at some level with some of these characters by way of negotiating his own identity. To sum up the argument of this chapter, in terms of geographical landscapes and textual landscapes, where does the novel stand? Where do we locate the political in these spaces, and where is *thawra* best expressed? In such a study, how do we also remain vigilant to specific cultural, ethnic, religious, social, and political differences? If our questions
are met with some degree of doubt, perhaps it is in our interest to hold onto that doubt, as eventually it will lead us to a more open and constructive way of imagining future spaces.

**Part 1.b. Different thoughts on the novel**

In her introduction to a *Casebook* on Salih’s novel, Mona Amyuni transcribes a lecture he gave at the American University of Beirut in 1980 in which the Sudanese author spoke about his writing career, and shared with the audience some of the experiences that went into the writing of *Season*. Salih confessed to his interest in “crimes of passion,” and in English characters such as “Lawrence of Arabia, Sir Richard Burton and such people who showed a strange attraction to the Arab world, the type of romanticism which I started to challenge in the novel.” Salih was captivated by Freud, Dickens, Faulkner, and Shakespeare, as well as by the Arab poets Al-Mutanabbi and Abu Nawas. The greatest influence on the writer’s work, however, was the issue of his own identity as “a Sudanese Muslim Arab who was born at a certain time, in a certain place.” It is worth noting here that Salih conveyed his identity to his audience in the order of first Sudanese, second Muslim, and third Arab; this articulation leaves out an important racial component: the African one. We will find in the study of the novel how these identity terms also come to be confused. Similar to *Season*’s narrator, the author was reared in a Northern Sudanese village famous for having the “greatest concentration of Bedouins anywhere in the Arab world” (qtd. Amyuni 15). Commenting on his Sudanese environment, the writer referred to the Nile as being “a center, a focal point” in his writing. With regards to the religious and ethnic diversity in his country, Salih also said: “I believe that if I have contributed anything to modern Arabic literature, it is my constant plea for toleration, and this I owe entirely to being a Sudanese” (qtd. 16).
In the work of the Sudanese Salih, as with the cases of Egyptian al-Aswany and al-Ghitani, place and time play important roles in configuring the political in each of the authors’ respective novels under study in this dissertation. On this point, Salih noted in his lecture that “place is therefore the thing for me … [A] foreign, alien element gets injected into it in Season and the result is tragic.” According to Salih, the most obvious theme in Season is spatial: “the East/West confrontation, or to be more specific, the confrontation between the Arab Muslim World and the Western European one.” Salih added that his contribution to the East/West issue was in redefining the “relationship as essentially one of conflict, while it had previously been treated in Romantic terms. We know better now.” Salih’s treatment of the relationship, he continued, is not as “a romantic affair,” as numerous English authors have been known to treat it. Such a treatment of the relationship by English writers has harmed the Arab world, “because Britain was responsible for the single most catastrophic act in modern European history, and that is the creation of Israel in spite of all the romanticism of the world.” While the Arabs have also fallen victim to such romanticized representations, Salih argued that in Season such illusions are challenged. Broadly referring to the novel’s audience as being “both Arab and non-Arab,” Salih imagined that the reader would “find[] himself caught between various conflicting ideas, so much so that he’s got to make up his mind himself (or her mind herself) in the last analysis” (qtd. Amyuni 16).

The issues Salih focused on in his talk are not necessarily the same ones we encounter in his novel; for this reason, a spatial study lays bare a large number of spoken and unspoken conflicts other than those expressed by the author himself. While they appear sincere, Salih’s comments on his own novel situate him in a rather ambiguous position regarding his racial, religious, national, and political views. For one thing, the spatial confrontation in Season Salih
finds existing between “the Arab Muslim World and the Western European one” appears to situate the Sudan in the “Arab Muslim” category, whereas the Sudanese identity is not limited to Arab-Muslim. Secondly, Salih did not elaborate on the Egyptian colonization of his country save by pointing out that “[w]hen the Arabs came to the Sudan, they did not take it by force, it fell to them peacefully, on the whole.” Salih did not address the legacy of Arab slavery in his own country which continues to this day (as we saw in Part 3 of the Introduction with reference to Jok’s discussion of slavery in “The Legacy of Race”). Thirdly, regarding the Islamization of the Sudan, he maintained that the Sudan had been predominantly “Christian for over a thousand years, which explains why the type of Islam in the Sudan, even now, is not ideological, is not fanatical. It is a mystical, spiritual type of religion.” In anticipation of a question on the nature of the Mahdist revolution in this regard, Salih argued that “[w]e think it was not a religious uprising but a nationalist one” (qtd. Amyuni 16). Salih did not point out that Christianity was imported into the Sudan first by the Byzantine Empire and later by the British missionaries, both of which were religious conquests. Furthermore, bringing us to the fourth problematic aspect in his claims, the Mahdist revolution involved a different sort of nationalism which Salih did not discuss. This view of Mahdism and Salih’s reference to the creation of Israel in the previous paragraph may position him as in sympathy with Arab nationalism, particularly in its Nasserist version.16

Salih’s plea for toleration is understandable; the object of his tolerance, however, remains ambiguous. Clearly, there are a number of conflicts troubling both the writer and the characters in his novel, but how are these conflicts to be resolved, and how does one become tolerant of others, for that matter? Is Salih in as much of a state of denial as his own narrator? By leaving

16 Dawisha discusses the different versions of Arab nationalism in Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair (2003).
the reader of *Season* to make up his or her own mind, Salih appears to be doing exactly what his narrator does. In fact, Salih himself said: “[The narrator] comfortably claims no responsibility whatsoever. I created therefore a conflicting world in which nothing is certain” (qtd. Amyuni 16). Does that mean we must also remain in ‘denial’ of certainty and responsibility? As readers, it would be unfair to hold the author’s claims about tolerance against him in light of the discrepancies in some of his comments; however, his views do make my particular study more valuable, for they enable us to view his work of literature as demonstrating the political independent of the author’s views. Furthermore, his comments present an interesting point of comparison when it comes to configuring the complexity of the Sudanese identity as the novel struggles with it. Salih’s *desire* for tolerance comes across as sincere and clear as an emotion; the *object* of his tolerance, on the other hand, remains as ambiguous and undecided as *Season’s* narrator. We will leave the concepts of *thawra*, the political, and the complex object(s) of Salih/the novel’s tolerance for a later part of this chapter. For now, to understand the emotion behind Salih’s connection between the “plea for toleration” and “being a Sudanese,” one must have an idea of the reality that is the Sudan. I have discussed the Sudanese issue extensively in the Introduction, pointing out in particular the ethnic, geographic, political, and cultural factors that have complicated the Sudanese-Egyptian relationship over history and to the present day. Here, some additional focus on the geographical and demographical aspects of the country is in order, since my study will come to bear in different ways on these aspects, and also because the issue of identity is further complicated by the topographical and demographical nature of the country.

A microcosm unto itself in the north of Africa, the Sudan is the largest country in the continent, the tenth largest in the world, and also one of the most densely and diversely
populated, with over twenty six million people speaking approximately one hundred forty different languages (according to Abdel Mugaddam in “Small Languages and Small Language Communities” 123). In addition to linguistic, political, and social issues, the landscape and geography of this 2,505,810 square kilometre area also play a major part in identity formations and human conflicts, as history, literature, and present-day predicament inform us. Krzysztof Grzymski gives an overview of the Sudan’s geography and topography in “Landscape Archaeology of Nubia and Central Sudan” (2004). The mostly flat terrain of the Sudan is punctuated by several mountain ranges in the west and the south with the blue and white Niles meeting in Khartoum to form the river Nile. Whereas rainfall gradually increases in the South, the North is dominated by the extremely arid Nubian desert, and while the northern and western areas receive only very little rainfall, the tribes there are nomadic, traveling with their herds in search of pasture (Grzymski 13-14). Indeed, that the heterogeneity of the Sudan does not manifest itself only with the diversity of its languages and cultures but also with its landscape is an incontestable fact; the land itself, as Caroline A. Mohsen in “Narrating Identity and Conflict: History, Geography, and the Nation in Jamal Mahjoub’s Portrayal of Modern-Day Sudan” (2000) puts it, is “a happening, an event, a gathering of constantly changing parameters: physical and geographic, social and political, cultural, religious, ethnic, and perceptual” (Mohsen 542). In “Season of Migration to the North: History in the Novel” (1986) Samir Seikaly likewise describes present-day Sudan “[i]n its immense size, in its desert wastes,” as “primarily a physical fact” dominated by the sun, the desert, and the river (Seikaly 135). The Sudanese demographical and geographical landscapes continue to this day to present an existential challenge for the

17 Mohsen’s article describes how Jamal Mahjoub’s narratives structure themselves around the Sudan’s geography, rather than use it as a mere setting backdrop. Mohsen likens Mahjoub’s sensitivity to “the landscape’s role in the formation of human identities and the creation of experiences of rootedness and dwelling, uprootedness and homelessness” to Salih’s in Season of Migration to the North (Mohsen 542).
We find many aspects of these landscapes presented in *Season* as the spatial tropes with which the novel configures identity.

The novel’s depiction of these landscapes has caught the attention of numerous critics ever since the publication of the novel in Arabic and its subsequent translation into other languages. For the purpose of debating some of these views, I would like to present several of the critics who have addressed this particular aspect of the novel. The most commonly recurring theme in the works of critics who have chosen to focus on landscape configurations in the novel is its modernist and/or postcolonial representation of geographical tropes. It would be inconceivable for critics not to discuss in their analyses the Nile River or the desert, for example; these tropes, as Salih himself mentioned, depict the very essence of the struggles in the novel. Salih gives his Nile River in *Season* (in a fashion not unlike T.S. Eliot’s rendering of the Thames in *The Waste Land*) elements of both realism and fantasy. Similarly, the desert is at one moment a romanticized, exoticized landscape in which noble savages travel and, at the other, a real, harsh, and arid terrain where even iron groans under the heat of the sun. Thus, critics are tempted to read the novel as typically representative of postcolonial literature. Many find that between the extremes of the river and the desert, the novel is never settled; the constant flow and flux of imagery oscillates between the real and the fantastic, giving the novel its unique position in postcolonial literature. In terms of its comparability to other texts, *Season* has most frequently been juxtaposed against Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a novel writing back against empire. The extent to which the novel both borrows from *Heart of Darkness* and “writes back” against empire has also been a point of debate amongst critics. However, as I later argue, these approaches have their shortcomings.
Some critics choose the desert as their focal point in studying the novel. For example, in “The Traveling Theater or the Art of Entertaining a Doomed Caravan with Amusing Stories” (1986), As’ad Khairallah approaches the novel as a collection of Shehrezad-like tales designed to save “[the narrator] along with a whole caravan from the waste land of absurdity and loss, and in order to affirm life as well as his own will to sing the tales of struggle, fertility, and joy” (Khairallah 95). Comparing the desert in Season to Eliot’s barren desert in The Waste Land, Khairallah sees the journey of the characters in the novel as an existentialist one, where place “[is turned] into a strange wilderness, into nothingness” (100). The only way to face the desert challenge and that of Sudanese life is to see life as a “caravan” (107), as a “theatre” that one must accept (108), whereby the narrator’s task “is to celebrate the rebirth of hope, and the return to life” against all odds (111). Khairallah approaches the novel as a work of art (which undoubtedly it is); however, his emphasis on the timeless tropes of the Arabian desert caravan and the Shehrezad-like narrator whose voice is able to echo across the dunes of time and space, decontextualizes the spaces of the novel both historically and geographically.

Seikaly points out the geographical metaphors in the novel, but in doing so chooses to re-anchor Season to its historical and geographical contexts by laboriously tracing the narratives and events in the novel back to their purported historical and geographical origins. Seikaly argues that in their “zeal to demonstrate the scope and universality of third world literature” literary critics have been inclined to see Mustafa Sa’eed as “a legendary figure, reproducing in the twentieth century the timeless quest of man to acquire an identity and find a spiritual home to call his own” (Seikaly 136). To break away from this rather modernist trend, Seikaly juxtaposes the events, places, and characters in the novel against historical and geographical ones. Seikaly finds that the novel “cannot be a viable work of fiction outside time and historical contexts.”
Outside these contexts “the novel ceases to exist as a meaningful artistic creation, and
degenerates into a titillating record of explicit sexual exploits,” something of “a Mandingo in
Arabic” (135-36). Seikaly certainly reminds us of the novel’s importance as a historical work;
however, his emphasis on the historical and geographical contextualization of the novel does not
adequately address or unravel the spatial metaphors presented in the work.

Other critics focus on the Nile symbol in *Season* to argue their points in terms of the
Conradian connection. I consider here the works of Saree S. Makdisi in “The Empire
Renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the Reinvention of the Present” (1992) and
Byron Caminero-Santangelo in *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial
Intertextuality* (2005). Between Conrad’s Thames and Salih’s Nile, Makdisi considers the flow
of the former river to stand “in remarkable contrast to the Nile that rages through al-Tayyib
Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*” (804). According to Makdisi:

If *Heart of Darkness* narrates the history of modern British imperialism from a position
deep within its metropolitan center, *Season of Migration* presents itself as the
counternarrative of the same bitter history. Just as Conrad’s novel was bound up with
Britain’s imperial project, Salih’s participates (in an oppositional way) in the afterlife of
the same project today, by “writing back” to the colonial power that once ruled the
Sudan. (805)

Makdisi acknowledges, however, that *Season* “is also a radical intervention in the field of
postcolonial Arab discourse, which has long been centered on the debate between
‘traditionalism’ and ‘Westernism’” (805). Makdisi argues that *Season* unsettles this dualistic
relationship since it “lies … [in] that confusing zone in which the culture of an imperial power
clashes with that of its victims” (807). For Makdisi, therefore, in addition to landscape tropes,
the many metaphors used in the novel position it as “sprawling not only between the past, the present, and the future” but as fanning out “through and across the different registers of textuality, narrative, form, chronology, and history, none of which remain stable” (808). Like many other critics, Makdisi focuses on the novel’s contradictory forces, its turbulence, and its refusal to settle for any fixed representation of either the traditional or the modern.

In his chapter “Legacies of Darkness: Neocolonialism and Conrad in Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North” Santangelo argues against Makdisi’s claim that Season “deliberately confronts [Heart of Darkness] from within” (qtd. Santangelo 69). Santangelo likewise challenges Edward Said’s claim that Salih’s goal in Season was to debate “some of the discrepancies and their imagined consequences muffled by Conrad’s majestic prose” (qtd. 69). For Santangelo, both Said and Makdisi “failed to recognize that the real objects of scrutiny in Season of Migration are the Sudanese themselves, who have inculcated the colonial mindset and ignored their own particular manifestations of it” (69). It is worth pointing out here that Makdisi did not entirely base his study of Season on a comparison between that novel and Heart of Darkness (a glaring aspect of the argument that Santangelo seems to have missed); rather, Makdisi chooses to focus on Season as a novel that escapes “the narrow and tightly defined orbit of the debates surrounding the Nahda” through its negation of both Arab traditionalism and European modernism (Makdisi 817). When Santangelo studies the relationship between Season and Heart of Darkness, he looks at the ways in which “Salih used certain Conradian elements to expose and attack the contradictions of late twentieth-century neo-colonialism in Sudan,” but he also considers “aspects of Conrad’s fiction that might be antithetical to [Salih’s] own goals, such as Conrad’s conceptions of women and non-Western peoples” (Santangelo 70-71). Santangelo sees that the novel’s representation of the village “is not at all the simple, pure place Mustafa
imagines it to be.” Oppression here is not only colonial but is “found in certain aspects of traditional [Sudanese] culture” (77). Santangelo focuses his argument on the struggle between Sudanese traditional values and imported European modern ones (78-79), claiming that the audience to whom the narrator of Season chooses to tell his story are probably influential Sudanese gentlemen who may have the power to change the country (83) by rescuing it from its “neo-colonial mindset” (87).

The readings of both Makdisi and Santangelo do not adequately address some crucial elements in the novel which pertain to the Sudanese struggle. Both critics exemplify in their studies the ways in which Season rises above and beyond the traditional postcolonial, nationalist, or modernist trends in Arabic fiction, which tended to view the Arab situation in terms of rigid binaries and ordered spaces. However, in his focus on the novel’s disruption of the traditional versus modern binaries, Makdisi loses sight of Season’s depiction of a specifically Sudanese identity. Makdisi acknowledges that the novel shatters the boundaries between traditional ways of life and modern life-styles (Makdisi 808), but for him, history and tradition are broadly Arab rather than specifically Sudanese (811). If identity is depicted as Sudanese, it is “neither black nor white, but grey; neither wholly Eastern nor wholly Western … neither entirely Arab nor entirely African” (814). Makdisi finds that the novel’s ambivalent representation of identity addresses “readers who do not yet exist: those who can see things as both black and as white” (820). While this is a powerful statement on the part of the critic, it does not address the specificity of the Sudan; it does not consider, for instance, the impact of the Sudan’s relationship with Egypt alongside its relationship with Britain. Makdisi’s reading of Season inclines towards an ambiguity characteristic of poststructuralist thinking, and suffers from some of the limitations of the poststructural postcolonial approach that (as we saw in Part 1 of the Introduction) Wail
Hassan has warned against; it does not effectively account for the vast diversity of specific cultural, ethnic, and religious differences within the Sudan. By the same token, Santangelo, although he insists that Season’s point of focus is the Sudanese people, does not address the Sudanese diversity at all. While he effectively complicates his comparison of Season to Heart of Darkness in order to go beyond traditional colonial/anti-colonial binaries, Santangelo’s use of a European model in this comparison forces him to see the Sudan as one whole. Such a study inevitably overlooks the diversity and fragmentation of the Sudan. Does the novel itself address this Sudanese diversity? It may not appear to do so at an obvious level, but a close spatial reading of the novel which seeks elements and movements of the socio-political draws attention to an amalgamation of tribal, ethnic, and foreign components, as well as to both modern and traditional components of the Sudanese identity.

Another significant critical review of Season which has the novel lose much of its socio-cultural specificity is that of the critic Gayatri Spivak, famous for her feminist and deconstructionist approaches to postcolonial literature, particularly in her work on the subaltern. Considering what Spivak has to say about Season in Death of a Discipline (2003), we find her reading is inclined towards the deconstruction of various relationships in the novel. In other words, rather than seek relationships and associations in the work, she sees displacements, interruptions and fractures. She also juxtaposes the novel against Conrad’s work: “If Conrad’s novel is about civility and the savage, Salih’s novel obviously shuttles between its displacement: modernity and tradition” (Spivak 57). As we have seen with Santangelo, this comparative approach is bound to have its drawbacks. One way in which Spivak does not properly address cultural differences in the novel is in her presentation of the Sudan as another chunk of the African continent. She refers to “the Sudanese people” on one hand and “the British people” on
the other, without delving into the differences among the Sudanese themselves. She reads Mustafa Sa’eed as “the postcolonial” in the novel; for her, the British kingdom is the “other place” and the narrator is the only one who is able to see similarities between the Sudanese and the British (56). A second way in which she does not properly address cultural differences is by referring to spaces in terms of modern and traditional, with the narrator as an element that interrupts this binary opposition (63). In my spatial reading of the political, modern and traditional cultural elements constitute new relationships in space to produce the political; these elements are not isolated from each other, nor are they somehow deconstructed by virtue of an interrupting actor. Finally, Spivak’s study of the Bedouin scene in the novel as the “very type of a nomadic prenational collectivity,” the space of which “is carefully tabulated as constructed by the fractural relationship between precolonial and postcolonial collectivity” (64), is highly problematic. She describes the scene as “a subaltern framing of the traditional in the modern as temporary” (65). As I explained earlier in my presentation of the Sudan, nomadic tribes are part of present-day Sudan. They have played a significant role in determining the national fate of the Sudan; they are not “prenational” entities, as Spivak puts it, but they exist alongside the national through association. These are a few of the ways in which Spivak’s reading misses the enormous cultural diversity and specificity of the Sudan as presented in Season.

While the above-mentioned critical assessments of Salih’s novel are certainly useful and demonstrate clever and diverse ways in which it may be read, I do need to highlight that these treatments, although they discuss important spatial representations in the novel, do not really help us to bring the novel up to date with the present times. To look at how the novel may be used to address issues of the Sudan today, as I argue, such studies must be tied in to a specific Arab-African context, in such a way that may at times go against the grain of postcolonial and
poststructural approaches to the novel, valuable as they may be. As Hassan and Leonard have argued about this matter, the postcolonial and the poststructural must be used vigilantly in the study of third-world literature. We have seen how, particularly with Spivak and, to a lesser extent, with Makdisi, the poststructural emphasis in postcolonial criticism overlooks a large number of crucial elements in the novel. A poststructuralist approach can still be effective, but only when used in such a manner that we remain sensitive to the specificity and diversity of Arabic culture.

**Part 2.a. Spatial division of the Sudan in colonial and post-colonial times**

In the past, critics and historians tended to represent the Sudanese landscape in terms of binary oppositions. Such representations have proven to be inadequate in the analysis of the Sudanese identity, calling for the use of alternative representations as I will show in Part 2.b. Before studying the landscapes of *Season*, therefore, I need to introduce some of the theoretical terms I will be using in my approach and show how these definitions complicate and challenge the earlier binaries that were used to divide the Sudan as a space. In the past, the Sudan and the entire African continent were divided racially. According to Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban in her chapter “A Critical Anthropological Review of Race in the Nile Valley” in *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley: Ancient and Modern Perspectives* (2004), “European geographers and anthropologists in colonial and post-colonial times divided the Nile Valley and Africa into categories specifically described as ‘racial’.” In their division, they used “ranked racial-linguistic terms such as ‘Arab-Semite’ defined as superior to lower ‘Hamite-Negro/African’ people.” Subsequently, Africa was separated into “North Africa” or “Arab-Semite,” “Caucasian” Africa and South or “Black Africa.” Historically, this division led to a hierarchical distinction whereby the Arab ranked above the African (136).
This historical insight helps us understand how various Sudanese leaders over the course of the Sudan’s modern history may, as Fluehr-Lobban explains, have exacerbated “the country’s deep religious and racial divisions” and problematized the Sudanese identity issue further. Giving some contemporary examples, Fluehr Lobban writes that Eliaba Surur, the founder of a now defunct Sudanese political party, “regretted that [one former prime minister] felt uncomfortable as just ‘an African or just a Sudanese’, and thereby aspired to a ‘superior’ identity as an Arab and as a Muslim” (150). The people themselves were rarely in agreement with respect to the racial labelling of their Sudanese identity, and the politicians’ attempts at unification, which forced the Sudanese identity into either an African or Arab category, ultimately failed to bring any form of unity or harmony to the country and likewise failed to unite the views of its people. Paraphrasing the argument of one specialist on the Sudan, Fluehr-Lobban writes that for Douglas Johnson, it “has never been possible to divide the Sudan neatly into Arab and ‘black Africa’, though this has been the simplest way, at least journalistically, to represent the racial animosity that does exist in the country.” From here, we can see why, in the studies of earlier analysts, “Afrocentrism, as a necessary antidote to Eurocentrism,” has failed (150-51).

The South’s recent vote to secede from the North obviously aggravates the sense of failure involved in the Sudanese quest for national unity. The reasons for this failure, as Francis Deng explains in Sudan at the Brink: Self-Determination and National Unity (2011), are that “although the preservation of unity was considered of paramount importance, especially to the North, not enough was being done to make unity attractive to the South.” According to Deng, the ruling NCP (National Congress Party) was regarded with suspicion “in certain circles, 

18 Today Deng is the Under-Secretary-General of the UN and Secretary-General’s Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide.
including in the North” since the NCP was seen to favour “Southern secession to rid themselves of the non-Muslim factor that was a constraint in their implementation of the Arab-Islamic agenda” (Deng 3). In his observations, Deng draws our attention back to Salih’s call for tolerance; if tolerance is to be achieved through unity, then it is important for us to question not only the extent to which the NCP attracted the South to its idea of unity (a matter left for analysts of the Sudan), but also how the Sudanese imagined this unity or tolerance. For the Northerners, having to deal with the problem of their own identity (as well as acknowledge that others in the Sudan had identity issues of their own) must not have been easy. It is for this reason that I refer to thawra (particularly in this chapter) not only in terms of a rebellion against external and internal sources of corruption and power, but also as sometimes a rebellion against one’s own identity. The spaces of both geographical and textual landscapes become the focus of my study since they bring to the fore the diverse manifestations of identity in the novel.

**Part 2.b. Spatial methodologies: Geographical and textual landscapes**

My methodological approach disrupts these types of binaries as I have presented them above. I use a combination of spatial and socio-political theories to study, as I have designated in Part 1.a, two types of landscapes: the geographical and the textual. I use (among others) the arguments of Massey, Latour, and Tuan to analyze various topographical tropes in the novel, and those of Bakhtin, West-Pavlov, and Mondada to look at various representations of heteroglossia and textual deixis. In *For Space* (2005), Massey argues that in order for us to reconceptualise place in such a way “that might challenge exclusivist localisms based on claims of some eternal authenticity,” we must imagine “things as processes” (20). These “things” are not “pregiven discrete entities,” but are in a constant state of becoming (21). According to Massey, these “things” partake in “interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” to
produce space. Space therefore becomes “the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality” (9). For Latour in *Reassembling the Social*, these “things” are “actors,” whereby the actor is defined not as “the source of an action but [as] the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (Latour 46). The interactions or associations between actors and the “entities [also actors] swarming” towards them generate “a movement, a displacement, a transformation, an enrolment” which Latour defines as the “social” (65).

These arguments allow us to conceive of the landscapes in the novel in such a way that space and the social are not limited by the sort of hegemonic binary divisions we examined in the previous section. According to Massey, modernity tended to hegemonize space by presenting “space and society [as] mapped on to each other.” It imagined space as divided and regional across nations and territories. Modernity tended to legitimize “a whole imperialist era of territorialism” by way of “taming the spatial” (Massey 64-65). Such a “modern, territorial” view of space, argues Massey, sees “geographical difference as being constituted primarily through isolation and separation.” First, different places exist *separately*, “and then those different places come into contact.” Massey’s definition of space refuses this isolation and requires space to be “always and ever open, constantly in a process of being made” (68). Natural landscapes or geographical topographies also represent this type of space; according to Massey, historically, natural landscapes have never been what they are today. They came to be through gradual tectonic shifts and various natural geological phenomena (134-35). In this way, just as the spatial sphere is constantly in motion, we must not assume that natural landscapes have “fixity” (137). The purpose of approaching natural landscapes in this fashion is in order to acknowledge that our understanding of “here” will not be the same “when [here] is no longer
now” (my emphasis). It is not that one must wait for millennia to pass for landscapes to shift and change geographically, but that “here,” in the sense of a specific landscape, becomes “an intertwining of histories in which the spatiality of those histories (their then as well as their here) is inescapably tangled” (139).

In defense of my argument about both the danger and the value of applying certain poststructural approaches in my study of the novels in this work, it is worth pointing out here that Massey’s approach to space relies on a certain use of poststructuralism that enables us to remain anchored to various cultural and historical specificities and differences. Massey’s conceptualization of spatiality “encompass[es] more than one understanding of space.” Her aim is to develop a “process of liberating space from its old chain of meaning and to associate it with a different one in which it might have, in particular, more political potential.” Massey’s situating of space as “a discrete multiplicity” combines this multiplicity with “temporality.” As such, she gives space a dynamic quality where space is imagined as “an open ongoing production.” In this regard, “neither time nor space is reducible to the other…They are, however, co-implicated” (55).

Massey’s idea of natural landscapes as constantly moving and never fixed (which is a geographical fact) brings with it a valuable perspective from which to study landscapes in literature. It allows us to be alert to the fact that land has not one history, but many. Furthermore, as we are interacting with that landscape, our associations with it produce new social and political meaning. We become, as Latour explains, involved in the ongoing reassembly of the social. Using this perspective, we would be able to trace the specific histories and cultures of the people who live in the Sudan. The Bedouin will no longer be, as Spivak argued, a transient element of the traditional or a prenational entity in the Sudan just because he
lives in the desert. Mustafa Sa’eed will no longer be simply the “postcolonial” in his
construction of an anti-colonial narrative of oriental stereotypes with which to attract those white
women he seeks to destroy. The narrator will no longer be the (modern) interruptive element in
traditional spaces. Critical studies of Season have placed so much emphasis on the postcolonial
element and on the juxtaposition between the traditional and the modern in the novel that they
have forgotten about the actual Sudanese landscape and how it is a site of ongoing associations
among all these elements. By juxtaposing these elements against one another, these critics
inadvertently order space, no matter how hard they try afterwards to designate, using
postcolonial terms, interruptions or slippages or unstable boundaries between them. It is not
slippage or interruption that we must look for, but interrelations and coexistences. The
landscape, like the social, depends on movement, on interaction between different, unlikely
entities. If tolerance is ever to be achieved, we must be able to envision interactive relationships
between unlikely elements. Latour clarifies this point in what follows.

Latour chooses to study the social as a landscape, and a flat one at that. Such a one-
dimensional social topography, argues Latour, would enable us to make connections between
one site and another, whereby each site features numerous associations between actors. This
way, the local and the global may sit side by side without one jumping on top of the other, so to
speak (Latour 174). Similarly, each of the macro and micro elements involved in the social is
neither above nor below the other. There will also be connections between these elements in this
social landscape (177). This does not mean that all social elements are homogeneous or equal
(176), but that “if you wish to go from one site to another, then you have to pay the full cost of
relation, connection, displacement, and information. No lifts, accelerations, or shortcuts are
allowed” (176-77). This linear trajectory from site to site allows us to trace all the connections
between actors without skipping or jumping over any of them. From here, social interactions would “overflow with elements which are already in the situation coming from some other time, some other place, and generated by some other agency” (166).

In this landscape context, keeping Latour’s definition of the social and his notion of the actor as being bombarded with numerous entities in mind, the literary text is representative of such landscapes in fiction. According to Latour, a “good text” becomes a test on “how far [the writer] is able to achieve the social,” and it is valued by the extent to which “it allows the writer to trace a set of relations defined as so many translations” (129). On the other hand, a “bad text” designates only a few actors to be “the causes of all the others, which will have no other function than to serve as a backdrop or relay for the flows of causal efficacy.” In this case, such other actors in the text will simply “not act” (130). By virtue of its “flattened” quality, Latour’s social landscape lends its structure to the pages of the text, where it becomes possible to trace social associations as presented by the writer. Like Massey’s space, Latour’s social landscape calls upon us to recognize the multiple elements in any given situation: the human and the non-human as well as the macro and the micro. Because a novel usually relies on dialogue alongside action in order to advance its plot(s), explain or exacerbate various situations, or simply present criticism, social discourse here becomes a major component in these textual landscapes.

The dialogic quality of the text brings us to our second landscape, the textual. Mikhail Bakhtin being an authority on the subject of textual discourse, I will be using his definition of heteroglossia in my study to argue that this dialogic element has spatial components that will enhance my study of Salih’s novel. In “Discourse in the Novel” (from the mid-1930s), Bakhtin argues that the content and form of a novel must be taken together “once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon – social throughout its entire range and in each and
every one of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (Bakhtin 259). To the literary investigator, the novel projects its stylistic heterogeneity at “different linguistic levels…subject to different stylistic controls” (261). These stylistic components are broken down into direct narration, variations on “oral everyday narration,” written narration (such as letters or diaries), “extra-artistic speech” (such as “moral, philosophical or scientific statements, etc.”), and characters’ speech (262). As such, the novel combines different styles of different languages which may be characterized as “a diversity of social speech types…and a diversity of individual voices.” Any given national language has its dialects, its jargons, its age groups, its authorities, its fashions, its slogans, etc., which the novel uses to “[orchestrate] all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in [the novel].” The novel’s orchestration of the “social diversity of speech types” is known as “raznoreče” or “heteroglossia” (262-63). Through these linguistic variations and associations, the theme of the text extends and moves throughout the work, to be dispersed “into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia” (263). We also notice here how spatial rhetoric figures in Bakhtin’s definition of heteroglossia; heteroglossia configures the novel as a social landscape where voices representative of numerous actors partake in constantly changing and developing associations. These associations prompt movements of both the social and the political.

Traditional scholars tended to view the (European) novel as being unified in style, thereby unified in language. For Bakhtin, such an approach emphasized “the unity of an individual person realizing himself in this language” (Bakhtin 264). If one were to go beyond this linguistic unity, one may perceive that “between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same
object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate” (276). In this sense, “all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve” (Bakhtin; Glossary, 428). These definitions are closely linked to Latour’s conception of the actor as “the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (Latour 46), and his definition of the social as movement. Similarly, the “matrix of forces” in heteroglot utterances is not unlike Massey’s constantly moving spatial sphere, which accommodates numerous trajectories of actors. Bakhtin’s heteroglossia is an effective tool with which to study Salih’s novel, for it allows us to be sensitive to the diversity of voices in the text, the social, the ethnic, the religious, the political, and the gendered.

By way of example, Eve Powell draws our attention to the ways in which the heteroglot Arabic novel may provide a rich diversity of voices that enhances its historical and socio-political context. In A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Sudan (2003), Powell argues that Egyptian nationalist writers tended to address the Sudanese issue in their writing by creating “characters who spoke with a certain kind of Sudanese voice or accent and who discussed important themes of the time” such as marriage or slavery. Citing Bakhtin, Powell explains that this heteroglot aspect of their writing, that of “another’s speech in another’s language” (qtd. 19), served the purpose of the author. At the same time, the creation by the Egyptian writer of other (Sudanese) voices alongside the vocal authorial voice resulted in a “double-voiced discourse” designating a form of struggle (qtd. 19). Similarly, the “argument with the British [also] remained heated in such dialogues” (19). For Powell, this insight into the heteroglossia of Arabic writing allows her to locate deeper ethnic meanings in the texts she studies. While any work written in Arabic will undoubtedly lose many of these heteroglot
particularities through translation, it is still possible to discern multiple voices in the English translation that would enhance our understanding of a text’s ethnic and historical connotations. Since Salih’s novel is written for the most part in formal Arabic, we do not face a tremendous challenge in terms of differentiating Sudanese dialects. The English translation still provides numerous examples of heteroglossia, and wherever possible I will make references to the original Arabic version to designate certain variations.

Linguistically, there is another concept I wish to address which also aids my study of landscapes in Season: spatial deixis. While the notion of deixis is originally a grammatical construct, it gives the spatial metaphors constructed in the novel’s geographical landscapes a specific directional orientation which plays an important role in identity configuration. According to Russell West-Pavlov, in *Spaces of Fiction/Fictions of Space: Postcolonial Place and Literary Deixis* (2010), the concept of deixis is originally “the linguistic means by which a speaker anchors utterances in the concrete place of enunciation (‘here’, ‘there’, ‘this table’).” In the study of literature, deixis offers itself as a metaphoric notion to provide “a general model, beyond its own limited and specific sites of implementation, of how language and space might interact” (2). This flexible use of the term allows me to use it in my study of both topographical as well as textual landscapes; as West-Pavlov puts it, “Deixis can be understood, in a book as much as about literature as about language, as modelling the tenuous grasp language has upon physical space” (3).

In a work of literature, textual deixis plays an important structuring role for the author, since it allows him to control, to various degrees, the reader’s point of view of the narrative.

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19 My discussion of textual deixis in the novel and its relevance in particular to the arguments of Massey and Latour was written before the more recent introduction of West-Pavlov into my argument. Incidentally, West-Pavlov also uses some of the arguments of Massey, Malpas, and Latour in his own work (all of whom I use in different chapters), particularly where he discusses the openness, mobility, and subjectivity of space.
Such manipulation of textual deixis involves the use of not only verbs and phrases, but also metaphors. Lorenza Mondada explains in “How Space Structures Discourse” (1996) that “while [space] is structured by the language which expresses it, it also plays a structuring role, serving to order and to inform non-spatial entities.” This structuring is represented by “spatial metaphors” as well as “models which use space to visualize and organize objects of discourse and objects of knowledge” (571). Deixis implies directionality; textual deixis mainly “conceives the text as a linear space” whereby certain “deictic verbs such as ‘to go’ or ‘to come’” allow the speaker to “pass from a place to another.” At the same time, this linearity can also be reversed in term of its orientation using other verbs. In this sense, the text becomes “a space organized around a given anchoring point” (584-85). Such textual structuring allows the writer to organize a work of fiction in such a way as to give the reader a “specific point of observation on the character’s actions” whereby different verbs would serve to “organize the text’s progression in relationship to spatially metaphorized time as with space itself” (576).

Textual deixis involves the use of certain metaphors, models, and verbs that designate directionality in the written text; Salih’s novel abounds with such examples. Textual deixis plays an important role in Season’s representation of topographical landscapes and other spatial tropes. Regarding the movement across landscapes, for example, a comparison may be drawn between Mustafa Sa’eed’s trajectory and that of the narrator at a metaphoric level. Mustafa’s account to the narrator of his journey towards London includes a vast number of spatial metaphors and verbs that designate both a particular linearity as well as reflexivity. On the other hand, while the narrator attempts to order his space by maintaining the linearity of his own journey, his trajectories are soon dispersed, sundered, and scattered. While both characters come to the village at some point in their lives, their journeys may be studied in deictic terms that would
inform us about their identity quests and their subsequent *thawras*. The novel plays around with deictic metaphors in such a way that its spatial “anchoring point,” to use Mondada’s argument, is never fixed. Even the title of the novel designates this contradictory play, whereby a ‘season of migration’, as it were, usually designates a departure to warmer, southern climes rather than frigid northern ones. Textual deixis also comes to bear on the novel’s representation of identity; verbs and models of movement and direction are used to illustrate the themes of egocentricity, foreignness, belonging, and alienation as different actors in the novel perceive them. Textual deixis becomes an important factor around which the expressions of identity and *thawra* revolve.

Using these methodological approaches as I have outlined them above, I will commence my reading of the novel by looking first at its spatial construction of various topographical landmarks which play a critical role in the novel. Since textual deixis primarily bears on the construction of topographical tropes, I will punctuate that study with various deictic observations. My analysis of *Season’s* topographical spaces in Part 3 will alternate between the landscapes of Mustafa Sa’eed and those of the narrator in order to study the ways in which these spatial representations come to simultaneously inform and unsettle one another and, consequently, combine to form a new space where the socio-political emerges. I will shuttle between the topographies of the Nile, the desert, and the village to show how the text complicates and unsettles the linearity of spatial trajectories.

**Part 3.a The topographies of Mustafa and the narrator**

To understand how spatial metaphors function in the novel, we need to both differentiate and establish a relationship between space and place. Massey explains that when we view “places” simply as “the surface of maps,” we would also be viewing space as a surface. Since space “is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then places are collections of these stories,
articulations within the wider power-geometries of space.” Space is characterized by a series of intersections between “that wider setting” (which is place) and “what is made of these intersections” (which is space). Also coming to bear on this relationship between space and place are those “non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the relations not established, the exclusions” (Massey 130). It is important then to note that the spatial sphere, as a locus in motion, consists of intersections and interactions, and is not a discernible place. For Latour, these intersections designate movements of the social whereby the “social is not a place, a thing, a domain, or a kind of stuff but a provisional movement of new associations” (Latour 238). These distinctions will apply to the spatial tropes I study here. To begin with, I will portray some of the topographical metaphors we encounter at the beginning of the novel with the narrator’s return to his village.

At the start of the novel, the spatial metaphors presented to describe the narrator’s return to his village suggest stability and permanence and are hence expressed using a specific deictic terminology suggestive of linearity and order. In the very first sentence, the narrator informs his audience that it was “after a long absence – seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe – that I returned to my people” (Salih 1; my italics). From one angle, the verb “returned” designates the narrator’s linear journey back to a specific place; using Mondada’s explanation, the verb “returned” grants us a “specific point of observation on the character’s actions” (Mondada 576). From a different angle, the verb returned in English could mean an “action or an act of coming or going back to or from a place, person, or condition,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and the verb in Arabic (‘aada) may also be used to mean “returned to his original state,” according to the standard Arabic-Arabic dictionary, Al-Munjid al-waseet fi al-‘arabiyyah al mu’asirah (765; my translation). In this sense, we may anticipate that
the narrator, who has returned to his roots, expects to return to a pre-existing state or situation that has remained, for the most part, unchanged. Indeed, looking at the “strong straight trunk” of the palm tree, “at its roots that strike down into the ground” (2), the narrator assumes that he, too, will be able to re-establish himself in the village. Like “a piece of ice,” he gradually thaws upon his return (1) and deems that “life is good and the world as unchanged as ever” (2).

Of course, both the “world” and the narrator have already changed. Although the narrator does not initially recognize it, these changes are narrated through spatial tropes as they subtly change from scene to scene. The narrator seeks “to renew [his] relationship with people and things in the village”; as he sits under the “acacia tree” observing the river, fancying himself to be as firmly rooted in his village as the tree, we find that the river reflects the changes the village has undergone in his absence. Pumps have replaced water wheels and steamers now cross the Nile (4). This image of the river has often been discussed in various studies of the novel, but the relationship between the observer and the objects of his observation not as much. Watching the flowing river, the narrator imagines himself to be firmly rooted; he idly spends his time philosophizing on life, dreaming of “horizons that must be visited, fruit that must be plucked, books read, and white pages in the scrolls of life to be inscribed with vivid sentences in a bold hand” (5). The narrator imagines clarity and consistency, endurance and stability. Forebodingly, the following scene tells us otherwise:

I looked at the river – its waters had begun to take on a cloudy look with the alluvial mud brought down by the rains that must have poured in torrents on the hills of Ethiopia – and at the men with their bodies leaning against the ploughs or bent over their hoes, and my eyes take in fields flat as the palm of a hand, right up to the edge of the desert where the houses stand. (5)
While the cloudiness of the Nile waters hint that this romantic tableau is soon to be unsettled, the map-like scene the narrator enjoys as he sits under a tree resembles, in Latour’s terms, something of a social “cenotaph,” a large-scale panoramic view of society that a social scientist, seeking to order the space of the social, might “set up before doing the study.” Here, whatever actors may appear in the narrator’s portrait of the village would not really be actors, since, as Latour puts it, “[it] is of little use to respect the actors’ achievements if in the end we deny them of their most important privileges, namely that they are the ones defining relative scale [of the social landscape]” (Latour 183-84). According to the narrator’s perspective of the village at this point in time, the villagers are not yet essentially actors who are allowed roles in defining the social landscape.

The topography changes with the introduction of Mustafa Sa’eed into this space, as both the textual deixis as well as the spatial tropes in the narrator’s story are transformed. At first, the narrator’s representation of his village is not only egotistical but also egocentric, whereby his construal of place imposes upon space a specific deixis stemming from his own egocentricity. According to West-Pavlov, “[m]ost commentary on deixis … assumes its inherent egocentricity … [T]heorists of deixis have repeatedly stressed the agency of the human speaker” (28). We find that the topographical metaphors and the deictic language used by the narrator abruptly change, however, with the intervention of Mustafa’s narrative, which I shall shortly discuss. After Mustafa tells the narrator about his childhood experiences and his travels to Cairo and London, the narrator resumes his own narrative using a different spatial language. Right after the first section of Mustafa’s narrative, we find that the Nile has “experienced one of those floodings that occur once every twenty or thirty years and become legendary.” Water floods much of the “land lying between the river bank and the edge of the desert where the houses
stood.” It is also with this flooding that Mustafa is proclaimed dead, having either drowned or committed suicide (45-46). It is at this point that the narrator’s serene view of the village is shaken. The village is no longer a flat panorama, but now consists of “winding lanes” through which the narrator “wander[s]” in a state of restlessness and disquiet (46-47). The flooding of the river may, to use Latour’s argument, suggest that the actor is soon to be bombarded with a vast number of associations with other actors. Additionally, the verb “wandered” indicates, from a deictic point of view, a sort of aimlessness suggesting that the once linear path on which the narrator had initially situated himself has now become multi-directional. The verb also suggests that the village landscape through which the narrator is to pass has now acquired a new topography with its twisting streets. In order for us to trace the social here, we must travel these winding lanes alongside the narrator.

Mustafa Sa’eed’s account to the narrator of the first part of his life similarly suggests a linear spatial trajectory; while both the narrator’s topographies and those of Mustafa abound with spatial metaphors and deictic language, in Mustafa’s case, the images are far more fantastic. From a deictic perspective, as Karin Wenz argues in “Iconicity in Verbal Descriptions of Space,” “[s]pace is always a semiotic phenomenon insofar as its structure depends on the process of human perception” (269). Even when it is used as a point of reference, “space is not an independently given phenomenon of the ‘real’ world itself but depends on the cognitive capacity and structure of the perceiving mind” (269). Mustafa’s cognitive workings indicate a certain perception which informs our spatial argument here. Comparing his own mind to a “sharp knife, cutting with cold effectiveness” (Salih 22), Mustafa likens himself to a nomadic Bedouin travelling in pursuit of higher summits. For Mustafa, to use Wenz’s argument, the images he constructs “are sign vehicles which share mere qualities with their object of reference.” The
metaphors Mustafa constructs become repeated, rhythmic, durable, and temporal icons (Wenz 270). These icons transform him into a one-man tribe fixated on a precise goal: that of conquering the conqueror. This is the commonly interpreted ‘postcolonial’ Mustafa at work here.

For my purpose, I look at the postcolonial here from a spatial perspective in order to determine the extent to which the novel’s representation of spatial tropes allows for the dynamics of the political. From both a linguistic and a spatial point of view, Mustafa’s journey to the frigid north suggests, as West-Pavlov would put it, a certain “imperial deixis” (117) in reverse; linear in its course, Mustafa’s journey is captured in a series of desert images the trajectory of which is, for the most part, one-dimensional. Mustafa is free to choose his own course; there is no one to order or determine how he will plan his journey, no guiding parents or advising friends (Salih 19-20). Initially comparing himself to a rubber ball, Mustafa explains that if he were thrown in water, he would not get wet, and if he were to land on the ground, he would bounce back (20). The metaphor of the rubber ball suggests that Mustafa is both ‘emotionally impermeable’ as well as resilient or reflexive; his bouncing from place to place without making any emotional attachments extends this metaphor. Secondly, likening the journey he makes to a caravan trail (24-25), Mustafa’s north-bound trajectory situates him on a pilgrimage made (in retrospect) to one woman (Jean Morris). Like the arrow from a bow with string well-stretched (27), Mustafa is on a one-way non-divergent trajectory. Using West-Pavlov’s deictic argument, one may also sense in Mustafa’s journey a “notion of timelessness.” Similarly, Mustafa appears to exist in a non-place, a place “outside history” (West-Pavlov 118).20

20 “To be outside of history is to be in a negative space of what Edouard Glissant has called ‘nonhistory’ [‘non-histoire’]” (West-Pavlov 118).
Postcolonial critics may tend to find in this journey north and in Mustafa’s single-minded destructive sexual exploits a reversal of the colonization act. In this sense, to use Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s argument in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), the colonial and neo-colonial phases of imperialism “[put] blinkers on [the African] to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with the bible and the sword” (4). We may see how Mustafa inverts this relationship through icons of his own creation, and how with these creations, any socio-political movement is denied. From a spatial perspective, the metaphors used to describe this act are expressed in exaggerated and highly suggestive tropes of conquest. With Mustafa, the “blinders” are now placed on the eyes of the colonizer, as in his turn the actor attempts to dominate the colonizing country armed, not as Ngugi wa Thiong’o puts it, with “the bible and the sword,” but with Abou Nawas (an Arab poet) and his own penis. Mustafa must *stake* his claims, “driving [his] tent peg into the mountain summit” (Salih 39). He must *spread* his germ: “You, my lady, may not know, but you…have been infected by a disease” (39). He *transforms* the space of his home abroad into a “harem,” an “operating theatre in a hospital” (31), thus latching onto and destroying his victims. Mustafa fabricates his own space, but in so doing, he closes up that space.

To further illustrate this point, I refer to Ali Abbas’s representation of Mustafa in “The Father of Lies: The Role of Mustafa Sa’eed as Second Self in *Season of Migration to the North*” (1986). Abbas argues that although Mustafa justifies his sexual associations with the European women on the grounds that they are fuelled by “a desire for revenge,” this is merely “a rationalization or an expression of this tendency to indulge in melodramatic gestures and use hyperbolic language” (Abbas 31). According to Abbas, whatever historical references Mustafa makes to the battle of Carthage, the conquest of Jerusalem, and the mayhem inflicted by the
colonizers in both their lands and in their colonies (Salih 94-95), “the actor in this historical drama is nothing but a jester.” In fact, Mustafa “tramples on Afro-Arab culture and its emblems of worship and kingship” (Abbas 32). Abbas refers to a number of these emblems, such as Mustafa’s dream of the Citadel Mosque and “the smell of incense in [his] nose” (Salih 28) as being put to “perverted use” in Mustafa’s seduction of his women (Abbas 32).

While Abbas focuses on these elements to argue that Mustafa is “the father of all lies” in Salih’s novel, I consider these elements to be entities or actors which Mustafa uses, without associating with them, to construct his personal space. Mustafa is thus able to isolate his space, pervert its use, and control his associations. For the most part, Mustafa’s space does not allow for any movements of the political. Alongside his linear trajectory, the landscapes that Mustafa crosses in his journey to Britain are, in a sense, part of the web of Orientalist fantasies that Mustafa weaves in his escapades abroad, and we may read the war-like images Mustafa uses as signs of imperialist conquest. However, seen in this light, Mustafa’s metaphorical desert becomes a place that, as Massey would put it, “denies a space of multiple becomings: the ‘others’ are not allowed a life of their own” (Massey 173). By “others” Massey means the ongoing trajectories of actors that intersect within these spaces. By depicting himself as a nomad, Mustafa denies his Sudanese identity. Using Massey’s argument, we may say that Mustafa has said “‘no’ to nation, home, boundaries and so forth” (Massey 174). Indeed, Mustafa himself confirms his lack of identity through the metaphors he uses. This negation is suggested in Mustafa’s rubber ball analogy; nationless, homeless, and unbounded, Mustafa bounces across desert dunes until he reaches the cold Northern shores (“I thought of the town I had left behind me; it was like some mountain on which I had pitched my tent and in the morning I had taken up the pegs, saddled my camel and continued my travels”) (Salih 24). From Massey’s perspective,
this movement “is not in itself a political advance” (Massey 174) since Mustafa’s metaphorical desert is yet uninhabited by any actors. It entails a framing of place that does not allow us, using Massey’s words, a “serious way of getting to grips with the heterogeneity within the multitude” (174-75). It is very difficult for us to negotiate the social in this space as depicted in the novel.

Along Mustafa’s journey, we begin to see the introduction of other actors who are also denied associations in his ordered space. If, in the narrator’s case, the flooding of the Nile may be seen as the beginning of an onslaught of new associations, in Mustafa’s case, a sexual awakening is what complicates his space and potentially introduces a number of social associations. However, how much impact, if any, these actors leave on Mustafa’s space is questionable. For example, upon meeting Mrs. Robinson, the wife of his mentor in Cairo, the adolescent Mustafa experiences “a vague sexual yearning I had never previously experienced. I felt as though Cairo, that large mountain to which my camel had carried me, was a European woman” (Salih 25). In Mrs. Robinson’s embrace, Mustafa experiences the embrace of Cairo. Mr. Robinson’s knowledge of Arabic, “Islamic thought and architecture” introduces Mustafa to a form of Arabic culture from the perspective of a European individual (25-26). However, in spite of the introduction of these new actors, elements, or entities, Mustafa continues his North-bound journey as though the associations he makes along the way have had no impact on his space. As he tells the narrator, “Behind me was a story of spectacular success at school…while within my breast was a hard, cold feeling.” For Mustafa, “the sea swallowed up the shore…and the blue horizon encircled me.” Once more, as he continues to London, he has the “feeling of being nowhere, alone, before and behind me either eternity or nothingness. The surface of the sea when calm is another mirage” (26-27).
Using the reversed “imperial deixis” argument to supplement the spatial one, we find, from West-Pavlov’s point of view, that Mustafa’s space is “curiously vacant.” His gaze is that of the conqueror; it “is the central norm around which everything else is organized.” Mustafa’s spatial representation here emulates that of the Western perspective “which arranges the viewed landscape according to a radiating zone of straight lines emanating from the viewer’s stance” (West-Pavlov 125-26). Indeed, we find that Mustafa is unable to change the deixis of his narrative. He asks himself “during the whole journey whether it would have been possible to have avoided any of what happened.” The text depicts Mustafa’s silence; he is incapable of answering his own question, repeating only that “[t]he string of the bow is drawn taut and the arrow must needs shoot forth” (27).

Upon his arrival in London, we find that Mustafa’s space is still isolated and dominated by this point of view of place as it is designated by the author. In London, place has an orderly plan; space is unable to be open and thus cannot accommodate different trajectories. We may contrast the narrator’s earlier description of the twisting roads of the village with Mustafa’s London. Mustafa says: “This is an ordered world; its houses, fields, and trees are ranged in accordance with a plan.” Furthermore, “the streams too do not follow a zigzag course but flow between artificial banks” (Salih 27). Mustafa’s spatial perception of London reflects his use of an imperial deixis as described earlier by West-Pavlov. Similarly, the deictic language describing the linear course of the London trains organizes space in such a way that associations between actors are prevented: “The train stops at a station for a few minutes; hurriedly people get off, hurriedly others get on, then the train moves off again. No fuss” (27). This description of London presents it as a highly ordered and closed space where significant meetings are unlikely to occur; there is little chance that trajectories would intersect in this sort of spatial sphere.
Whereas the city may be the ideal space for both encounters and exclusions, Mustafa’s London is more of an excluding sort of space. The city may potentially become, to use Massey’s words, the “[arena] of chance encounters.” At the same time, London may also be the space of “countless exclusions.” Both the encounters and the exclusions “together accumulate to produce the space of that city” (Massey 179). The representation of Mustafa’s London becomes a challenge for us in studying his space, since “the condition of both the existence of difference and the meeting-up of the different…can rarely be met full on” (180). However, of significance to this study is also the actor’s “way of dealing with the multiple becomings of space,” whereby the political seeks to address “the nature of the [time-space] embeddedness in all those distinct, though interlocking, geometries of power.” In other words, the relations between identities is directly related to the “relations of their construction,” which is where we find movements of the political (180).

Mustafa’s topographical tropes and his “egocentric deixis” reflect, to use West-Pavlov’s argument, “the mentality of empire” (128); considering the way in which the author carefully extends Mustafa’s topographical metaphors in such a way that suggests a reversal of the colonizing process, shows us that ultimately there can and will not be any accommodation for socio-political movement in this space. For one thing, Mustafa’s engagement with Eastern culture, something he studies in both Cairo and London, is from a Western perspective; he learns about the East from the West. Subsequently, what he learns abroad becomes a mere tool for him, something with which to “entice a woman to my bed” (Salih 30). The associations Mustafa makes with all these entities do not, through the course of the novel, become “mediators,” to use Latour’s word, or relations whose “input is never a good predictor of their output.” While mediators are those associations that bring about radical change, intermediaries do not do so.
Mustafa’s associations may be labelled as intermediaries, since it is easy for us to predict where these associations will lead. Intermediaries “[transport] meaning or force without transformation,” and we usually know the output of these associations in advance (Latour 39).

Secondly, Mustafa does not even conceive of himself as an actor; he says he is “a corpse” and “a lie” (Salih 32-33), and for this reason, he is unable to make any real associations with other actors. Thirdly, the events that take place at his trial for the murder of Jean Morris further suggest that, like him, his space is fabricated, framed, and lifeless: “In the courtroom in London I sat for weeks listening to the lawyers talking about me – as though they were talking about some person who was no concern of mine” (31). Similarly, upon hearing the court’s accusations, it seems to Mustafa “as though [the Prosecutor’s] voice came to me from another world” (32). Mustafa is detached from all these spatial contexts. In my spatial argument, since this textual representation of Mustafa deliberately prevents the dynamics of the political, we must look for it elsewhere in the text in Mustafa’s engagement with other actors.

Ultimately, this sort of spatial and textual representation in the novel may be countered by the intrusion of actors who act upon Mustafa’s space; in Mustafa’s case these actors are Jean Morris (to a limited extent) and the narrator. The text uses the spatial tropes of the two rooms that Mustafa builds, the bedroom in London and the library in the village, to challenge this artificial representation of space, thus rendering it void. The spatial doubling between the two rooms has been discussed by other critics from different perspectives. For instance, for Salwa Ghaly in her chapter “Evil Encounters with ‘Others’” in This Thing of Darkness: Perspectives on Evil and Human Wickedness (2004), Mustafa is a “hybrid” who straddles two worlds but is unable “to find some ‘in-between’ zone where he could enjoy an unscripted fluid identity” (26-27). On the one hand, he constructs in England “an oriental shrine” while on the other hand he
builds “a European edifice” or “a mausoleum near the Equator to which he transports the Western canon” (26). Ghaly depicts Mustafa as a victim of two cultures; his “evil” nature is the result of this victimization. In my study, these spatial constructions and their destruction inform our understanding of thawra and the construction of the socio-political. To illustrate the significance of the bedroom as a spatial trope, I use the following argument.

In Secret Spaces, Forbidden Places: Rethinking Culture (2000), editors Fran Lloyd and Catherine O’Brien suggest in their Introduction that the construction of space is “an interactive social sphere through which power and presence is either negotiated or claimed by diverse cultural groupings.” Place, on the other hand, is a “located site/sight” (xv). In this regard, “[m]apping the secret and the forbidden is a formidable project” since what is “secret may include the suppression of truth, the concealment of information, or the preservation of desires and dark knowledge” (xvi). The secrecy of space, therefore, suggests that what is concealed is not the truth. Secrecy is key in Mustafa’s construction of both of his rooms; from this definition of secret spaces one may certainly question Ghaly’s argument that Mustafa seeks to construct anything remotely representative of either European or Arab-African culture. I have already emphasized that the depictions of Mustafa’s spatial tropes do not take into account the specificity or the diversity of a Sudanese culture. As Abbas has argued, Mustafa “tramples” on his Afro-Arab culture; along with his projected image abroad, the spaces he creates are not real. The same is true for his room in the village. Nonetheless, these spatial constructions provide an important perspective for us from which to observe the fate of the socio-political in Mustafa’s spatial tropes.

The construction of the bedroom as one such secret space is highly suggestive of spatial hegemony. In her contribution to Secret Spaces, Franciska Skutta argues that “bedrooms can
easily become places of secrets and prohibition. Their natural isolation favours withdrawal, the accumulation of bizarre objects and the pursuit of peculiar occupations” (63). This holds true especially for Mustafa’s London bedroom which features “sandalwood and incense,” “ostrich feathers,” “ivory and ebony figurines,” and “the paintings and drawings of forests of palm trees” (Salih 146). The room has been transformed into a microcosm of the African equator with all of the wonder and fascination it might hold for a tourist. In such “a little closed world,” as Skutta might say, “the bedroom’s inhabitant reigns supreme” (63). When Mustafa attracts the women to his secret place, their eventual demise suggests that they have not been able to alter his space. With the exception of Jean Morris, the women do not actively occupy the room along with Mustafa. Once he marries Jean Morris, however, “my bedroom became a theatre of war; my bed a patch of hell” (Salih 33-34). According to Skutta, once the “bedroom is occupied by two people, it becomes a place of hidden conflict or connivance, by turns prison and refuge for its occupant and a disturbing or fascinating place for those kept inside” (63). In Jean Morris’s spiteful destruction of Mustafa’s cultural artefacts (156-57), we observe a dismantling of this artificially constructed space. She is the only female who actively co-occupies his secret space, challenging it, mocking it, and threatening it with destruction. In the narrator’s desire to burn down Mustafa’s secret room in the village, we witness a similar instance whereby an artificial space is threatened with destruction. That this room harbours even more untruths is suggested in the narrator’s quick loss of interest in all that is on display in the den.

These moments where Mustafa’s artificial spaces are either partially destroyed or threatened with destruction are possibly the only instances in Mustafa’s narrative where a political movement begins to emerge and the linear trajectory is threatened. To use Massey, these “chance encounters (that mixture of order and accident)” taking place in both rooms
“create spaces where you might come upon the unexpected” (Massey 180). For Latour, these associations may have the full potential of becoming mediators inducing radical socio-political change. The unlikely “throwntogetherness” of actors is what determines the “relational politics of place” and is also what gives rise to “inevitable negotiations” in “terms of openness and closure [of space]” (Massey 181). However, these negotiations are quickly terminated in both rooms; in London, Jean Morris is killed and in the village the narrator walks out of Mustafa’s secret room without setting fire to it, feeling only “bored with reading the bits of paper” (Salih 154). However, beyond these spatial tropes, the novel continues to make use of Mustafa’s narrative in a different way; by allowing Mustafa’s space to intersect with the narrator’s, it allows new associations to take place. Mustafa’s narrative impacts the narrator’s perception of his own space and, consequently, the novel’s negotiation of the narrator’s identity emerges. To understand the correlation between the two spaces we must meet both actors in the village.

Part 3.b. Intersecting spaces: The village and its vicinity

In the preceding section, I began with the narrator’s portrait-like view of the village as a relatively small and ordered space where the socio-political has not yet emerged. I suggested that the serene image of ordered space is soon to be distorted with the introduction of Mustafa’s narrative. I pointed out that certain topographical metaphors and textual deixis initially hint at an ordered and linear spatial course, but that this course is soon to change. The chance encounter between Mustafa and the narrator, both of whom set out on linear trajectories, is to give rise to changes in these spatial metaphors and the deictic language used to describe them. In the village, the spaces of both actors intersect, making way for a new space in which the social and the political are given new dynamics. The production of this space will also eventually give rise to the heteroglossia in the novel, which I will address in Part 4. The space that is constructed in the
novel’s textual landscape will accommodate a far greater variety of voices and actors who in turn become defining elements of the socio-political. At this point, I will resume the narrator’s story after Mustafa’s first account of his own narrative to show how space has been altered through changing topographical tropes.

Even after Mustafa’s death, his phantom continues to encroach on the narrator’s spaces, giving them a strange, unreal quality; this fantastic element allows for the introduction of new actors. When the narrator leaves Mustafa’s house after the latter has told him of his journey North, the narrator experiences a sense of unreality. Although the narrator feels that he knows everything there is to know about the village topography, his feeling is threatened with doubt. He insists: “I know this village street by street, house by house.” He feels that he knows “the shrines,” “those who inhabit the graves,” “the fields,” “the fertile land stretching from the edge of the desert, where the houses stood, to the bank of the Nile.” He feels that he knows “those men who had migrated [and then] came back.” In short, he feels that “[all] this I had been a witness to ever since I opened my eyes on life” (Salih 47-48). However, during his twilight walk after he has heard Mustafa’s account, “the sky seemed nearer to the earth, and the village was enveloped in a hazy light that gave it the look of being suspended between earth and sky” (48). The narrator has the strange feeling that the village is suspended; however, when he dispels the images of Mustafa from his head, he feels his “spirits being reinvigorated as sometimes happens after a long period of depression” and his “brain cleared and the black thoughts stirred up by the story of Mustafa Sa’eed were dispersed” (48). Space regains its orderliness as the village ceases to be “suspended between sky and earth” and becomes “stable.” The “houses were houses, the trees trees, and the sky was clear and faraway” (48-49). However, in that brief moment when the
narrator imagines these topographical changes, we sense the encroachment of active socio-political movements.

This twilight promenade is a crucial moment in the novel, for at this point, the narrator begins to question his little village and its inhabitants. The village and its people are no longer passive or easily determined:

I am from here – is this not reality enough? I too had lived with them. But I had lived with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them. I used to treasure within me the image of this little village, seeing it wherever I went with the eye of my imagination …

[Abroad] I would breathe in the smell of it, and at odd fleeting moments before sunset I would see it. (49)

For the first time, and due to the intrusion of Mustafa’s narrative on his mind, the narrator finds that the quaint, panoramic little village is not all that it seems. The space he sought to order before by limiting it to the smallness of the village as place has now, by virtue of its momentary suspension, begun to transform into a far more complex space. For this reason, the narrator questions his knowledge of the villagers. Where once he did not allow them to be actors, here they are beginning to assume their roles. Another informative way of imaging this spatial change is by looking once again at the deictic language with which the narrator describes this strange village scene.

The narrator’s use of deictic language begins to get confused as he juxtaposes this perception of the village in the twilight hour with the image he had of it when he was abroad. He says: “I would imagine the faces over there as being brown or black so that they would look like the faces of people I knew. Over there is like here, neither better nor worse. But I am from here” (Salih 49; my emphasis). The narrator uses these deictic utterances as I have italicized
them not only to order the village space but also to explain away and simplify the colonial presence in his country: “The fact that they came to our land, I know not why, does that mean that we should poison our present and our future? Sooner or later they will leave our country, just as many people throughout history left many countries” (49; my emphasis). With this simplification, there is also an act of denial on the narrator’s part; however, while he begins with this almost dismissive attitude towards the situation in his country, his attitude quickly changes to one of confusion.

Let us consider here more closely the spatial and temporal aspects of the language the narrator uses to imagine his village. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), Yi-Fu Tuan finds that space has different “temporal meaning at the level of day-to-day personal experiences. Language itself reveals the intimate connectivity between people, space, and time.” When a speculating actor is “there,” “there is then, and then refers to a time which may be either the past or the future” (Tuan 126). Is the narrator then or now? Is he from there or here? His substitution of white faces with black or brown ones when he is “there” appears to over-simplify this distinction between the there and here by replacing one place with the other. We may consider the narrator here to be that “cogitating self” whose “purposeful activity” seeks to orient both time and space (Tuan 127); his attempt to maintain the image he has had of the village when he was “there” is shaken up when he is actually “here.” In addition, the narrator’s shift from a use of the first-person singular (“I am from here”) to a first person plural (“they came to our land, I know not why”) suggests that, in terms of the colonizing process, he sees that he and the villagers are one entity.

Does this mean that there are no differences between actors who have been subjected to colonization? The narrator tries to brush off the enormous impact of colonization by stating that
just as the colonizers came, they will go. Tuan has recourse to an argument made by Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century monk and social activist, to suggest the consequences of using this over-simplifying deictic language; the relationship between the here and the now is more complex than we imagine. According to Merton, who championed dialogue and inter-religious exchange in his social and religious career, “life may be so cool that ‘here’ does not even warm itself up with references to ‘there’.” Comparing this over-simplified relationship between the here and the there to a “hermit’s life,” Merton describes it as “a life of low definition in which there is little to decide, in which there are few transactions or none, in which there are no packages delivered” (qtd. Tuan 127). The narrator is still attempting to simplify not only his experience of his village, but also the act of colonization. In doing so, he is like Merton’s “hermit,” isolating himself and living a “cool” life with virtually no transactions. However, his own confusion about his “here” and his “there” also point to the important fact that life is not “cool” and that there are in fact a great many “transactions” underway and “packages [to be] delivered” that he may not be aware of. In other words, the narrator’s over-simplification of historical events and his homogenization of people here and there, now and then, suggest that he is still in ‘denial’, even as spatial changes are taking place.

To acknowledge both the social and the political, the narrator must first admit that he has over-simplified his perspective of space. He does acknowledge to himself this newly-learned truth, but the knowledge of it fills him with fear: “And thus too I experience a remote feeling of fear, fear that it is just conceivable that simplicity is not everything” (Salih 50). It is his fear of this truth, of the complex nature of the world, of the strange associations actors make during the courses of their lives, that brings the narrator to an utter state of confusion as the story progresses. For us, however, this process is simply the construction of a new space, the
introduction of numerous actors and associations, some of which are intermediaries, others mediators. With every unlikely encounter the narrator has with other characters in the novel, especially those who knew or heard of Mustafa, he is drawn deeper into a state of confusion. For instance, when he meets the “retired Mamur” on a train journey “between Khartoum and El-Obeid,” and the Mamur begins talking about Mustafa, the narrator experiences “the world at that moment” differently “in relation to the retired Mamur” (51). While critics such as Abbas have pointed out this aspect as an example of the interplay between reality and make-believe, for us this confusion designates a movement of the socio-political (Latour), a shifting of trajectories in space where unlikely elements have chance encounters that most likely will bring about social or political change (Massey). I will return to this encounter in my discussion of speech and the heteroglot novel in Part 4, for the voices of Mustafa, the narrator, the Mamur, and numerous other characters come through most strongly in the textual landscape in which a new socio-political dynamic develops.

Beyond the river and the village, there is another significant topographical trope to be discussed for the way in which it emphatically introduces numerous entities into the narrator’s space. When the Mamur finishes talking and falls asleep, the train passes “the Sennar Dam, which the English had built in 1925, heading westwards to El-Obeid, on the single track stretching out across the desert like a rope bridge between two savage mountains, with a vast bottomless abyss between them” (Salih 54). This spatial representation in the novel is one of the recurring but telling instances where, to use Seikaly’s words, the “pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial” come together in the text (140). Seikaly does not refer in his study to this particular scene, but my focus on spatial elements in the novel designates it as a coming together of three eras, so to speak, in Sudanese history. Representing the “post-colonial,” El-Obeid is a
major industrialized hub in the Sudan, famous for transportation, commerce, and education centers; the dam built by the British is a “colonial” construction; and the “desert” and “savage mountains” possibly designate an uncivilized, uninhabited “pre-colonial” aspect of the country. These three elements come together in the train scene, bringing with them chains of associations or, as Latour puts it, “the circulation of different vehicles which cannot be substituted by one another” (Latour 36). In other words, the socio-political is produced in this scene as a movement, the shuffling and coming together of trajectories, the displacement of old associations by new ones. At the same time, these elements coexist to produce a new space, the unique identity of the Sudan which the novel encapsulates in this scene as well as in others like it.

The narrator senses these changes, but is unable properly to come to terms with them; in this fashion, however, his confusion is our confirmation of spatial transformation. Returning to Salih’s question of tolerance, we may argue that, as an observer, in order for the narrator to be tolerant of change and of difference, he must not only register these spatial changes but accept them in their totality. However, the narrator appears to remain at the brink of this acceptance. For instance, at one meeting in Khartoum at the house of a Sudanese lecturer, the topic of Mustafa is raised once more. Again, the narrator experiences a sense of unreality as space is transformed before his eyes. He notes to himself that “in an instant outside the boundaries of time and place, things appear…as unreal. Everything seems probable…The world in that instant, as brief as the blinking of an eyelid, is made up of countless probabilities” (Salih 57). The coming together of these “probabilities” is what gives rise to social and political transformations. Interestingly, these probabilities only appear when Mustafa’s narrative imposes itself upon the narrator’s own space; what some critics see as a suspension of reality brought about by the
intrusion of Mustafa’s phantom, I would interpret as a spatial change which allows for the introduction of new actors, associations, and, consequently, transformations.

As a poet, the narrator’s imagination has him fantasize all these transformations; this does not mean, however, that he finds these imagined experiences either welcome or pleasant. Indeed, in most cases, he dismisses and flees the memories of Mustafa which generate these new spatial observations. The narrator continues to deny these changes and struggles to maintain his orderly spatial vision of the world in what follows:

But I hope you will not entertain the idea, dear sirs, that Mustafa Sa’eed had become an obsession that was ever with me in my comings and goings … In any case, he had died … Thousands of people die every day … The world goes on … And I, like millions of mankind, walk and move, generally by force of habit, in a long caravan that ascends and descends, encamps, and then proceeds on its way. (Salih 61)

Of course, the fact that the narrator is adopting Mustafa’s caravan trope here is evidence enough that Mustafa has “become an obsession” with him. The narrator’s positioning of himself as part of a multitude in the travelling caravan suggests that he is also rejecting any responsibility for what happens in the “world.” The deictic verbs the narrator uses here suggest a linear movement across a desert terrain whereby the narrator struggles to maintain his ordered space (“goes on,” “walk and move,” “ascends,” “descends,” “encamps,” and “proceeds”). In this fashion, he is also attempting to thwart any unwelcome associations along the way. Blaming the disturbing visions he has on the sun’s heat, the narrator notes: “If occasionally we are deceived by a mirage, and if our heads, feverish from the action of heat and thirst, sometimes bubble with ideas devoid of any basis of validity, no harm is done … Is there any alternative?” (62). These bubbling “ideas” suggest a change in spatial configuration that we also register in the shifting metaphor of the
Nile: the narrator sees changes in the Nile’s suddenly shifting trajectory “where the river, after flowing from south to north, suddenly turns almost at right angles and flows from west to east” (62). In his struggle to order space, the narrator exhibits a sort of rebellion against spatial changes; however, in this *thawra* against spatial change, as readers we are able to perceive important associations.

In the village, the narrator’s associations with both Mustafa and the other villagers also result in the shifting of the spatial sphere to give rise to important socio-political changes. As Latour puts it, the social cannot “[be] limit[ed] in advance to one small repertoire.” What “is needed for actors to generate social asymmetries” is the *acceptance* of these actors “as full-blown actors … that were [initially] explicitly *excluded* from collective existence” (Latour 69). The local actors (villagers) and the foreign (Mustafa and, differently, the narrator) are set in the village at an intersection; the way in which the narrator responds to these associations is significant here. The first mention the narrator makes of Mustafa suggests the former’s rejection of the latter and any associations Mustafa brings into his relationship with the narrator. While the narrator returns after an absence of seven years to “his people,” to the “life warmth of the tribe” (Salih 1), he refers to Mustafa, whom he meets there, as “not a local man” (2). Our concept of “locality” is muddled here, for we wonder at this point what exactly defines the “local.” Although he fancies himself to be tolerant of others, the narrator does not exhibit the same tolerance towards Mustafa. He insists on knowing if the latter is from Khartoum or not (10).

The narrator’s denial of Mustafa as a village local suggests two aspects of the narrator’s perception of his village, one emotional and the other cognitive, both of which are linked to the shifting of the spatial sphere and the narrator’s discomfort with that spatial development. The
narrator’s conception of “home” is threatened by Mustafa’s very existence. We may use Tuan’s analysis of the home to develop this idea. Borrowing St. Augustine’s notion of home, Tuan explains in his own words that “the value of place was borrowed from the intimacy of a particular human relationship; place itself offered little outside the human bond” (Tuan 140). Here, the “[h]ometown is an intimate place” (144) and what is “real is the familiar daily round” of that homeplace (146). When the actor stops to think about his homeplace, “[t]hinking creates distance [from that place] … [T]he instant [natives] think about the place it turns into an object of thought out there” (146).

The two effects that Mustafa has on the narrator’s perception of his hometown are, therefore, emotional and cognitive. Mustafa’s intrusion upon the narrator’s mind and Mustafa’s actual presence in the village force the narrator both to feel alienated from his own homeplace and to see a more complex space where numerous entities are coming together. Because of his emotional insecurity, however, the narrator is one of the first to exclude Mustafa from a communal belonging: “Look at the way he says ‘we’ and does not include me, though he knows that this is my village and that it is he – not I – who is the stranger” (Salih 6; my emphasis). At a cognitive level, Mustafa forces the narrator to think differently about his village. He wonders at the reasons that brought Mustafa to this village to “exaggerate in the way he acted out that comic role [of attending prayers at the mosque]. Had he come to this faraway village seeking peace of mind?” (64). The narrator’s resentment of Mustafa’s presence in the community points to a failed attempt on the narrator’s part to maintain his homeplace as the center of the universe, not because the village is such a universal center for the narrator, but because the narrator needs to place this value on his hometown in order to anchor himself to a clearly-ordered space. As Tuan
puts it, this spatial conception positions “[h]ome … at the center of an astronomically determined spatial system” by giving home a “supreme value” (Tuan 149).

The only actor privy to Mustafa’s true identity is the narrator, who struggles to understand Mustafa’s role in the village. To return to the question of tolerance, would the acceptance of Mustafa into the village be an indication of that tolerance? What exactly does Mustafa bring to the village and how does he subsequently alter that space? Mustafa succeeds to some extent at ‘modernizing’ the village. As Mahjoub, the narrator’s childhood friend, tells the narrator:

God rest [Mustafa’s] soul … We had a mutual respect for each other. At first the relationship between us was not a strong one, but our work together on the Project Committee brought us together. His death was an irreparable loss … It was he who pointed out that we should invest the profits from the Project in setting up a flour mill … It was he too who pointed out that we should open a cooperative shop. Our prices now are no higher than those in Khartoum. (Salih 101)

Mahjoub respects Mustafa for his accomplishments in the village. On the other hand, those in charge of the district dislike Mustafa, for he “opened the villagers’ eyes and spoiled things for them” (101), continues Mahjoub, and “after his death there were rumours that they had planned to kill him – mere talk. He died from drowning” (101-102). However, Mustafa’s achievements in the village and his attempts at unifying the villagers do not interest the narrator. Being the poet he is, he is more eager to hear about the man that Mustafa was rather than about the village or about politics. In his fanciful naïveté, the narrator does not see that this is, in fact, an example that bears on Mustafa the man. Time and again, the narrator tries to over-simplify space, denying the changes happening. From one perspective, as Seikaly describes him, the narrator’s
view of Mustafa’s world is “in keeping with the poet’s inclination to resolve all complex questions by transferring them to the realm of the imaginary, thereby rendering them impenetrable to human intelligence and critical analysis” (Seikaly 139). As a fanciful poet, the narrator is perhaps typical of that bourgeois Westerner who would like to examine identity in reflexive, psychological terms. From our spatial perspective, however, the poet’s imagination is that window opening onto the formation of socio-political changes and the altering of space. Tolerance here, for both the narrator and his creator, becomes the ability to accept these changes; it is the understanding that all of these elements – the global, the local, the modern, and the traditional – coexist and interact in such a way as to open space.

There is much to glean, therefore, about the socio-political from these examples within the village sphere and its interactions with the outside world. To this day, as Sharkey puts it in Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (2003), “the Sudanese are still trying to decide, from their varying perspectives, where the colony ends and the nation begins” (Sharkey 12). True, among the villagers there is an inherent mistrust and suspicion of the English and the advent of modernity in the country, but at the same time there is a desire for change, for abundance and profit. There is also a sense of village competitiveness with the Sudanese metropole (as we find in Mahjoub’s comments), a desire to improve the village’s economy and trade; in other words, there is a desire to open up the space of the village to other spaces. The village is changing, not by the replacement of the old and the traditional with the new and the modern, but with the interaction, not always harmonious, between all of these entities.

Part 3.c. The nomad and the desert
At the beginning of Part 3, I described Mustafa’s construction of a nomadic, tribal identity as that of an actor who creates an artificial space where no associations are permitted. Later, I designated how the narrator used some of these nomadic spatial tropes for the purpose of escaping reality and fleeing the new spatial changes that were forming before his very eyes. An important aspect to consider in this section is how such nomadic depictions influence our understanding of the Sudanese identity. After the episode in the story where the narrator visits Hosna, the late Mustafa’s widow, he must cross the desert to return to Khartoum after the circumcision ceremony of Mustafa’s two boys. This journey takes him through a desert topography that has been a critical focus in the novel. Before presenting my own reading, I would like to briefly go over what a few other critics have pointed out regarding the Bedouin scene to better situate my own argument.

As I mentioned in the first part of this chapter, Spivak’s description of the Bedouin scene in the novel as the “very type of a nomadic prenational collectivity,” the space of which “is carefully tabulated as constructed by the fractural relationship between precolonial and postcolonial collectivity” (Spivak 64), is problematic. It dismisses, to use Massey’s argument, the role of space “as relational and as the sphere of multiplicity,” as “both an essential part of the character of, and perpetually configured through, political engagement” (Massey 183). Spivak’s description of the scene as “a subaltern framing of the traditional in the modern as temporary” (Spivak 65) denies space its perpetual re-configuration. Expressing her view of Spivak’s writing in general, Massey finds that while Spivak’s “deconstructive strategy may enable critique of colonial discourses and a pointing towards other voices, other stories for the moment suppressed, its imagery is not one which easily provides resources for bringing those voices to life” (Massey 110). I have emphasized earlier that Spivak’s deconstructive tendency denies coexistence and
association. Spivak fractures the socio-political elements in the novel with her interruptive contrasts and juxtapositions between the old and the new and between diverse and unlikely actors. Such an approach does not produce the movements of the social and the political. Spivak’s framing of the scene and her reference to collectivities such as the “precolonial” and the “postcolonial” make it exceedingly difficult to reassemble the social and the political in this space.

While they may indeed appear out of place, the desert or Bedouin scenes in the novel represent a specific Sudanese identity, a present reality; they are part of the Sudanese scene, as are metropolitan Khartoum and the village of Wad Hamid. The narrator’s vivid imagination which, as I have pointed out, is his curse but our blessing, enables us to imagine this scene in a manner different from other critics. Others such as Khairallah have also restricted spatial socio-political movements by studying the desert scene from a strictly psychological perspective. Khairallah argues that for the narrator, the desert has only “psychic or moral” symbolism (Khairallah 99). This symbolism has inclined critics such as Khairallah, Ihsan Abass, Jareer Abu-Haydar and others to study the desert in Season primarily in terms of nomadism and existentialist symbolism, detached from any socio-political, national, or historical meanings. For instance, Khairallaa emphasizes the necessity of the narrator’s desert crossing as an “odyssey” of life, where the struggle is not against the sea, but the desert (99-100).

How may we study the desert space in the novel in keeping with our spatial argument? In the desert, where may we find the “resources for bringing those voices to life” (Massey 110)? If we decide to view the desert only as symbol, how would it impact the novel’s depiction of present-day socio-political reality? In order to recognize the social and the political in space, we must acknowledge the work of all actors, even those whom we do not recognize as actors, in the
desert topography. According to Latour, who champions the actor-network-theory over the conventional theories of social scientists, social scientists always sought to separate the “symbolic” from the “natural” domain in order to gain autonomy over spatial representation (Latour 83). For Latour, “[t]o be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts.” One must design “specific tricks … to make [objects] talk, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce scripts of what they are making others – human or non-human – do” (79). Similarly, in studying the desert, we must be careful that we do not, as Massey would also caution, deny “other people and places … trajectories of their own” (Massey 173). In this context, the desert becomes the space where trajectories meet and where movements of associations take place. The desert is symbolic in many ways, but its symbolic value lies in its capacity to accommodate a wide range of voices rather than in its representation of an individualized psychological state. My study of the desert in this final section devoted to topographical landscapes will ultimately introduce my next study, that of textual topographies. Because the desert topography induces the narrator into a state of delirium, it subsequently assaults him with a barrage of strangely disconnected voices. The interplay between these voices is the defining element of the novel’s heteroglossia.

The desert space not only lays bare numerous associations, but by virtue of its starkly open topography, it forces the narrator face to face with these associations which he constantly tries to avoid or deny elsewhere. While hurriedly journeying by “desert road” (Salih 105), the narrator is assailed by images of the hot, arid desert land, of “thorns and leafless, miserable trees,” of “lean and emaciated” camels (Salih 105), as he impatiently awaits the deliverance of the night (106). Repeated twice, the phrase “[t]here is no shelter” is drummed into the narrator’s consciousness as he finds he can no longer escape not only the heat, but a socio-spatial reality
that manifests itself to the narrator, ironically, in *hallucinatory* images. The narrator experiences catatonic-like symptoms, as he goes into a kind of heat-induced stupor. “In a state close to fever,” he recalls mantra-like snatches of past conversations with other actors, such as Hosna, the villagers, Mustafa, and his grandfather: “‘Why the hurry’” she had asked me. ‘Why don’t you stay another week?’ she had said. ‘The Black donkey, a Bedouin fellow cheated your uncle and sold him a black donkey’” (Salih 106). Not only do these strange voices come together in his mind, but the narrator also encounters a way of life where the modern and the traditional are not juxtaposed against each other, but coexist. Actors of all sorts pass through the desert before the narrator: there is, for example, the Bedouin fellow craving a cigarette with whom the narrator exchanges words. The nomad here is humanized in the novel; he is given a voice and a character. Similarly, lorries as well as camels cross the desert, and poems are sung in praise of both (113); both are a regular way of life. The narrator also comes across a “government car that had broken down” whose travellers are military personnel on a mission to arrest a tribal woman accused of killing her husband. In this scene, we have mention of the tribal (“El-Mirisab, El-Hawaweer”), the national (“Commissioner of North Kordofan, the Commissioner of the Southern North Province”), the nomadic (“the Bedouin in hair tents”) and the religious (“the Sheikhs and the Nazirs”) (110). We discern associations between tribe and tribe and between tribe and government; these specific details show how these entities, commonly categorized by most critics simply as the traditional and the modern, are neither juxtaposed nor segregated in this study. Nor, for that matter, does one entity interrupt the other; they coexist and associate, and their association produces this new Sudanese space as we see in the desert terrain and through the poet’s eyes.
For the narrator, the phantasmal and the mundane cross over into each other in this space. Even as images of sterility and emaciation reflect a state of need and futility in that land, it is also within this arid clime that travelers dance, drink, and celebrate. The heat and the monotony of the desert road become factors we use to our advantage as readers, since they induce the narrator into this semi-consciousness, a mental state which enables these unlikely elements to come together in his mind. The narrator finds “haphazard thoughts flood[ing] through my head: words taken from sentences, the forms of faces, voices which all sounded as desiccated as light flurries of wind” (106). Along with these thoughts the memory of Mustafa returns to the narrator: “How strange! How ironic! Just because a man has been created on the Equator some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god. Where lies the mean? Where the middle way?” Similarly, with the thought of his grandfather, the narrator asks, “Where is his place in the scheme of things? Is he really as I assert and as he appears to be? Is he above this chaos? I don’t know. In any case he has survived” (108). For the first time, the narrator is addressing in this state of mind the positions of all these actors whom he did not previously acknowledge. For us as readers, Mustafa is neither an African slave nor a god; he becomes instead the fulcrum from which the narrator must negotiate identity between these extremes. Also, the survival of the grandfather indicates to us that there is an ongoing association between the traditional and the modern. Space has now assumed a chaotic structure where before it was ordered and simplified. Now, all things have shifting positions in the “scheme” of life.”

There are power relations at play in this scene; they emerge in the movements left behind by these ongoing associations. There are victories and losses, overwhelming voices and subdued ones. Unfortunately, most of these developments are lost on the narrator. At the closing of the unbearable day and after the festivities, the narrator expresses in weary cynicism his thought:
“Suddenly the war ended in victory … for us all: the stones, the trees, the animals, and the iron – the source is the same” (112). For the poet in denial, all is futile: “a feast without meaning, a mere desperate act that had sprung up impromptu like the small whirlwinds that rise up in the desert and then die” (115). For us, these scenes are meaningful in that they serve to designate a specific Sudanese reality while at the same time engaging us with that struggle of Sudanese identity. Additionally, it is in the desert that for the first and only time in the novel we encounter Salih using the provincial Sudanese accent in poetry and song as opposed to the classical Arabic he uses throughout the novel (113). Numerous associations take place at different levels in the desert scene: human and non-human, gender, group, language, ethnicity, and culture. They designate, as Massey puts it, “the negotiations of political identities in practice.” They are what allow us to come “to grips with the heterogeneity within the multitude” (Massey 174-75). It is this heterogeneity that we will explore in the following section on the novel’s textual landscapes.

Part 4. Textual landscapes and the heteroglot village

The heteroglot nature of the novel designates a textual landscape where space is also under construction; I will flesh out here the relationship between space and heteroglossia. In different ways, I have emphasized that in spatial discourse, space is the product of interrelations between different identities. The focus here is on “interrelations” whose “politics takes the constitution of the identities themselves and the relations through which they are constructed to

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21 The widespread use of Arabic prompted British authorities between 1885 and 1955 to exert control through the educational system by suppressing the use of Arabic in southern Sudan and the Nuba mountains and encouraging the spread of English and the reinforcement of ethnic languages in its stead (Mugaddam 123). Following independence in 1956, the Arabic language surged more rapidly across the country, suppressing the use of other ethnic tongues, even the Sudanese vernacular, which was considered by many Sudanese as “as having no grammar, as being undeveloped and incapable of playing a significant role in people’s socioeconomic life.” Furthermore, conditions of drought and war in southern Darfur and the Nuba mountains encouraged mass migrations from south to north of Sudan, further contributing to the shift to the Arabic language (123).
be one of the central stakes of the political” (Massey 10). For Bakhtin, heteroglossia brings into the text “languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life [which] cohabit with one another.” Each of these socio-ideological “epochs and periods” (“days”) has “its own slogans, its own ways of assigning blame and praise.” Prose “often deliberately intensifies differences between [‘days’], gives them embodied representation and dialogically opposes them to one another in unresolvable dialogues” (Bakhtin 291). For us, the dialogic relationship between voices from different socio-ideological times is what represents identity interrelations in space, from the relations between the identities themselves to the relations with which they are constructed. For Latour, these observations are at the heart of the social; they designate the challenge of making oneself “sensitive again to the sheer difficulty of assembling collectives made of so many new members once nature and society have been simultaneously put aside” (Latour 259). This is the challenge Season offers us in its heteroglot nature.

I will begin here with a scene from the village to illustrate how actors’ dialogues inform us about the construction of social identity and how the political, as Massey has explained, emerges in the relations between these identity constructions. At the narrator’s grandfather’s house, we encounter a gathering of some of the grandfather’s friends, Wad Rayyes, Bint Majzoub, and Bakri. The narrator’s visit to his grandfather brings him upon this scene of old friends joking and laughing. Oddly enough, although some of these actors are not originally from the village, the way in which they construct their identity comes to bear on their acceptance into the community and their influence on its space. For instance, we may ask what it is that makes a character such as Wad Rayyes, who is from a different tribe, liked and accepted in the village of Wad Hamid. When Wad Rayyes discloses to the group his intention of marrying Hosna (in absentia), what is it that makes the widow, also from a different tribe, treated by many
villagers with suspicion and, eventually, condemned, even after her death? By the same token, what is it that makes the bold and uninhibited Bint Majzoub, whose mother is from Darfur, welcomed as a member to the group of old timers in the village? Do factors such as age, sexual prowess, wisdom, or humour serve in the construction and communication of identity so that one actor may be accepted into a group whilst another may not?

These notions of acceptance and rejection of identity are complicated in the textual landscape, which brings with it a barrage of racial, cultural, and socio-political elements as we discern them in different dialogues. The old but sexually insatiable Wad Rayyes delights his friends with stories about his sexual accomplishments, even as he sets his eye on Hosna. In Wad Rayyes’s dialogue, the metaphorical iceberg-tip of an historical narrative of racism and oppression emerges through his anecdotes. For instance, he narrates to his peers a sexual tryst he had when he was young with “a young slave girl from down river” (Salih 74). Johnson-Davies translates Salih’s Arabic word (jariya) as slave girl. But to be more accurate, jariya does not exclusively mean slave girl, but also has strong sexual connotations. Historically, jawaree (the plural form) were sex slaves bought and sold exclusively as concubines (Al-Munjid). This implied reference to the Arab enslavement of Africans hints at the history of slavery that existed in the Sudan and continues to this day. Wad Rayyes is on the verge of raping the girl when of a sudden he is apprehended by his uncle who implicitly applauds his nephew’s prowess, thus propagating this act of oppression: “This son of yours is a real devil” (Salih 75).

Not only is Wad Rayyes’s sexual insatiability strong enough to overpower any moral qualms he may have, but it also overrides (when it is convenient for him) any tribal or racial prejudices. Wad Rayyes is known to boast:
‘A stallion isn’t finicky.’ I [the narrator] remember that among his wives was a Dongola woman from El-Khandak, a Hadandawi woman from El-Gedaref, an Abyssinian he’d found employed as a servant…and a woman from Nigeria he’d brought back with him from his fourth pilgrimage. (79)

In the original Arabic version, Salih uses the word “Fulata” which, incidentally, is not Nigeria, but a district in African Guinea. The references Wad Rayyes makes to these women not only introduce new associations into this space, but also suggest that a dominant male actor in the village, while being able to escape this sort of scrutiny about his own origins through the language of sexual subjugation that uses a strange sense of humour, is still able to discriminate amongst other actors based on their own origins. We discover that, strangely enough, Wad Rayyes does not even belong to this tribe: “This tribe of yours isn’t any good. You’re one-women men,” he says to his friends (80). While this detail complicates our understanding of who is locally acceptable, at the same time it draws attention to the blatant double standards in the village.

Hosna, like Wad Rayyes, is also from a different tribe, but having gone against the patriarchal will of the village, she becomes a devil’s sister and a “hussy” (Salih 123). According to the grandfather, in her case “[n]othing but trouble comes from that tribe” (124). In contrast to the absent Hosna, Bint Majzoub, who is “a tall woman of a charcoal complexion like black velvet” (76), is admired and even respected for her own legendary sexual experiences. Wad Rayyes tells her: “Is there anyone who knows the sweetness of this thing [sex] better than you, Bint Majzoub?” (75). Furthermore, not only is Bint Majzoub not from the same tribe, but her mother is all the way from Darfur, south of the Sudan. Although Bint Majzoub’s skin colour is “charcoal” black while her friends are lighter in colour, she escapes any racist bias. In War of
Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan (1995), Deng explains that skin colour in the Sudan often forms an obstacle in identity acceptance and has led to a particular form of racism. He argues: “Physical appearance is the most indelible attribute; where skin pigmentation serves to segment societies, only a handful of persons at the color margins may be permitted any choice of identity on racial lines” (391-92). It certainly appears that Bint Majzoub is one of those select few in this northern village. She speaks her mind when she sees one of her daughters married to a man she suspects is not fulfilling her sexually, even as it results in her daughter’s divorce (Salih 75); she smokes like a man, uses sexual language like a man, and is as physically strong and limber as a man, in spite of her seventy years (76-85).

This scene illustrates the complexity of identity construction in the little village that emerges in the heteroglossia of the novel. Some of the voices that come through in this scene are strangely muted; they are the voices of actors who are denied associations within the village space. To apply Powell’s argument about heteroglossia in Egyptian and Sudanese nationalist narratives to my study of Wad Rayyes’s dialogue, for instance, we find that his speech appears to contain “words of the market and the slave trade.” Such words would belong to supremacist and racist Arabic narratives, and “were of grave importance in identifying who could be sold [as slave] and who could not” (Powell 17). Powell refers in her study of Arabic literature to the heteroglossia of not only Egyptian nationalist texts (especially those written in colloquial Arabic), but also to the heteroglot “language of Sudanese traders and religious leaders.” The immensely controversial nuances of the words appearing in Sudanese narratives were used in such a way that “[o]ne Sudanese tribe could identify another with such words and could reveal a kinship based on shared religion or trade networks” (17). While slavery was imported into the Sudan first by the Egyptians and later indirectly propagated by British practices, we find here
that it is a Sudanese who uses this language to oppress members of his own country and other African countries. To use Le Houérou’s argument in *Forced Migrants and Host Societies in Egypt and Sudan* (2006) in a heteroglot context, through our study of “everyday life and meetings, avoidance or conflict strategies” (Le Houérou 6) in the village space, we understand not only how racism is manifested “through oral violence” (7), but also how different identities are constructed orally. In other words, locality or belonging to a certain group has to do with more than just tribal origins or gender. Mustafa is from Khartoum, and Wad Rayyes is from a different tribe; both are male actors and yet Wad Rayyes is accepted into the village community while Mustafa is not.

Are these characters who are accepted in the village accepted because they do not ask difficult questions about life or truth? I argue that while they may not directly do so in their speech, the heteroglot nature of their dialogue raises many serious questions. Some critics such as Khairallah pass off the acceptance of such actors such as Wad Rayyes and Bint Majzoub into the community as being due to their talent, as actors, to “play games.” According to Khairallah, pessimists are not accepted into the theatre of life. Unfortunately, Khairallah dismisses this serious question of acceptance by saying, “Can’t one accept this theatre whole-heartedly and act one’s part in full conviction, i.e., identify with one’s role, as it were?” (Khairallah 108). We must all learn how to “play games,” how to assume all the roles that life and nature might force upon us, those of them that appear false as well as those of them that are authentic. Those actors on the stage of life are happiest, he argues, who act their parts well; those who “are not convinced of the whole play and are too self-conscious, egocentric, or intolerant to go into, or wear, any other personality than their own” fare quite poorly in life (108). This is quite a generalization to make about these representations in the novel, but perhaps it does reflect the
attitude of the narrator at the end of the novel who decides to no longer worry himself about any of these matters and “to live by cunning.” However, the “actor” I deal with in my study is not at all related to this theatre of the absurd, but brings with him a cumbersome baggage of associations that we need to unpack in order to determine the nature of the socio-political here and question the novel’s representation of tolerance.

At a more complex level, beyond day to day dialogues, textual heteroglossia manifests itself in many of the narrator’s lapses from reality. As we saw in the numerous topographical representations, there are similar textual landscapes in the novel where the narrator’s poetic imagination, against his will, allows other voices into his consciousness. For instance, when the narrator goes to visit Hosna after Mustafa’s death, he sits with her in complete darkness, able only to listen to her voice and smell her perfume. The absence of vision not only intensifies the auditory quality of the actual conversation that takes place between the narrator and Hosna, but it also draws in the whispering of other voices, such as Mustafa’s. The narrator muses, “Nothing remains but the voice [of Hosna], warmed by affection” (Salih 90). Quickly, however, “[i]n this very place, in just such darkness as this, [Mustafa’s] voice, like dead fishes floating on the surface of the sea, used to float out” (91). In his conversation with Hosna, the narrator also picks up bits and pieces of Mustafa’s narrative at the time of his trial in the English court; Mustafa’s voice intrudes upon the actual conversation (94-95). For the narrator, these voices mingle “in my mind with scattered noises which I had no doubt heard at odd times but which were all intertwined together in my brain like a carillon of church bells” (95). From Bakhtin’s perspective, such heteroglossia presents us with “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (Bakhtin 291-92). The voices the narrator hears present different views of the world, each with
its own “objects, meanings and values.” In this way, the textual landscape orchestrates the themes of the novel.

Who orchestrates the voices themselves, however, and what socio-political forces work behind these textual landscapes? For one thing, while it is the author, obviously, who creates these characters and these textual landscapes, I have already pointed out that a text is not necessarily the vehicle with which the author conveys his own political statements. There are times, as Rancière explains, when a text conveys its own political message depending on how we might read the text. As such, for Bakhtin the “stratifying forces in language” are not “neutral” words and forms.” They are forces that do “work,” and every “word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (Bakhtin 293). Bakhtin’s words are forces that have a life of their own. In Latour’s argument, these words would function as acting entities carrying with them numerous socio-political associations; in Massey’s terms, these words would represent different trajectories intersecting in the spatial sphere. For these reasons, textual heteroglossia is yet another way in which space opens in the novel.

In the novel, the relations between textual landscapes, like the relations between topographical ones, upset linear trajectories and complicate spatial representations. Using Bakhtin’s argument, because language occupies a space “between oneself and the other,” it “[becomes] ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word” (Bakhtin 293). However, “not all words for just anyone submit … easily to this appropriation” since language is not a private property but “is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others” (294). In the novel, we notice how, in the narrator’s meeting with Hosna and elsewhere, the narrator uses certain elements of Mustafa’s
language and his metaphors; however, because they are not part of the narrator’s language, what this appropriation does is force a marriage between spaces and associations, those of the narrator and those of Mustafa. For instance, when the narrator is with Hosna, obscene images merge in his mind:

I imagined Hosna Bint Mahmoud … as being the same woman in both instances: two white, wide-open thighs in London, and a woman groaning before dawn in an obscure village on a bend of the Nile under the weight of the aged Wad Rayyes. If that other thing was evil, this too was evil. (Salih 86-87).

Both scenes anger the narrator because they are both suggestive of dominance, oppression, and cruelty. What causes the narrator to imagine these scenes are memories of Mustafa’s words and the language Mustafa uses to describe his sexual encounters. In order for these images to filter through the narrator’s consciousness, multiple voices must speak at the same time, allowing for a comparison between these two wrongs.

With the intrusion of these voices upon the narrator’s consciousness, we discern a struggle between them; this struggle also extends across different textual landscapes in the novel. For one, while we learn about Mustafa from what he has said to the narrator, we also learn about him from what others have said. Thus, we are exposed not only to different voices, but also to different perspectives, not all of which are in harmony. For instance, we learn about Mustafa from the retired Mamur on board the same train as the narrator. For the Mamur, Mustafa is “the black Englishman,” (53), the son of slaves who was a puppet of the English (54). For the young Sudanese lecturer (Mansour) whom the narrator meets at a gathering, Mustafa is “a millionaire living in the English countryside” (56). For the Englishman at the same gathering (Richard), Mustafa “was not a reliable economist,” although the Englishman bases his knowledge of
Mustafa on hearsay (57-58). In the midst of these arguments, the narrator’s own voice emerges as he reflects on the differences in Richard and Mansour’s representations of Mustafa: “What was the use of arguing? [Both men] were fanatical. Everyone’s fanatical in one way or another” (59). But even as other actors are arguing with one another, the narrator, too, is arguing with himself. He wonders at this debate about “colonialism” and “neo-colonialism” between the two intellectuals. He also wonders but does not speak aloud how they can have this argument even as they are laughing, “a stone’s throw from the Equator, with a bottomless historical chasm separating the two of them” (60).

In many instances in the novel, the narrator never tells other actors what he is thinking. He does not comment on the argument between Richard and Mansour but keeps his speculations to himself. We observed this silence earlier with Hosna, and we also encounter it when the narrator is with his relatives in the village. He finds he cannot explain to his grandfather, for example, “that revolutions are made in his name, that governments are set up and brought down for his sake” (64). As we saw in the desert scene, many of these voices later come back to haunt the narrator, perhaps to demand some sort of response, some responsibility, from him. Towards the end of the novel, comparing himself to the villagers who “take everything in their stride” and are astonished at nothing, the narrator asks himself twice at the end of the day: “And I, what have I learnt?” (130). For us, these dialogues across the textual landscapes of the novel may bring together a certain coexistence, a democratic relationship, so to speak, where voices may not agree but are free to argue and exchange ideas; the narrator speculates on these exchanges in uneasy silence, as he is wont to do.

What a study of the novel’s textual landscape has shown here is that each actor brings into his speech not only a different perspective of the world, but also a different truth, a wealth of
social, political, racial, and cultural narratives. Perhaps because he is a poet, the narrator is unable properly to contextualize these dialogues within specific social, historical, and political contexts. As Bakhtin puts it, “The poet is a poet insofar as he accepts the idea of a unitary and singular language and a unitary, monologically sealed-off utterance” (Bakhtin 296). This may explain the narrator’s uncomfortable silences, his tendency to romanticize and describe the world in poetic metaphors. This is not a bad thing at all, however, for his poetic tendency is what has enabled us to read the socio-political in these topographical and textual landscapes in the first place. Seeing the world through the eyes of a poet in denial has made the idea of thawra especially useful in this study, for each moment of the narrator’s confused rebellion has opened the door to significant spatial changes.

5. Conclusion: Thawra in ‘denial’

In this chapter we studied a number of representational tropes, most of which were topographical, and some of which were textual, in order to designate the socio-political in the novel. What has become of thawra at the end of this study? Of course, we witnessed a large number of struggles on the parts of different actors in the novel. These struggles, as I have depicted them, were often directed against the transformation of space to accommodate new associations. We saw this in Mustafa’s linear journey, in the narrator’s attempt to simplify his village space, in the metaphors of the desert and the river, and in the heteroglossia of the novel. I will go back to the final scene in Season with which I began this chapter: the scene of the narrator flailing in the Nile. Critics such as Makdisi find that the last scene in Season shows how the novel “does not merely reinvent the present, it opens up new possibilities for the future. The process of cultural production not only shapes perceptions but constitutes a lived system of beliefs, values, and realities” (Makdisi 819). For Santangelo, “the narrator’s cry for ‘Help’ is
“read as a plea for salvation from the neo-colonial mindset through collective interpretation and action.” The novel’s ambiguity “is whether or not the auditors and the readers will eventually try to understand and act” (Santangelo 87). Robyn Cresswell writes in a recent review entitled “Eloquent Phantom: Tayeb Salih’s Search for an Elusive Present”: “One suspects that for Salih there is no real alternative to rootlessness, and no place to be but the middle of the river” (¶ 21). The general consensus about the ending, it seems, is either to accept that there is no solution or to relegate that solution to some obscure, distant place in the future.

For a work of literature to be relevant to our present times, we may look for the ways in which that work addresses current issues in today’s world and, perhaps, offers viable solutions. We may also look at how the work relates to our own identity and humanity. Let us return once more to present-day Sudan to see what Deng has to say about the country in his latest book, *Sudan at the Brink*. According to Deng, the Sudanese conflict over the years has been aggravated because of the “tendency to emphasize what divides, which gives extremists on both sides slogans for their divisive agendas” (53). Deng finds that the “vision of the New Sudan” must correct historic distortions of the past, that of the “dominant Arabized group at the Center” which “disdain[s] … their African element” (7-8). What is needed to achieve unity, Deng sees, is diplomatic negotiation by all parties. What is needed is a return to traditional wisdom; Deng calls on the Sudanese to return to their elders, their “traditional mediators” who are “endowed with indigenous knowledge and wisdom” to help solve their problems (50). The Sudanese must be able to see the Sudan as a complex network; for example, Darfur must not be seen in isolation from the Sudan, but as part of “the complex web of Sudan’s interconnected regional conflicts” (51). Deng proposes ten “principles on negotiation” for the Sudanese to go by, one of which involves speaking all that is in one’s heart and listening with all of one’s heart (47-49).
If one is a sympathetic listener, does this mean he is being tolerant of the other? Also, why must the Sudanese turn to their elders as mediators? What have the elders learned from their own histories? Were they more tolerant of others? What of the narrator in the novel, to what extent was he tolerant? It seems that tolerance is a confusing concept and means different things to different people in search of harmony. In War of the Worlds: What about Peace? (2002), Latour finds that tolerance has a rather condescending meaning. He writes: “Diversity could be handled by tolerance – but of a very condescending sort since many cultures were debarred from any ontological definition of the one world of nature” (9). “Nobody,” argues Latour, “can constitute the unity of the world for anybody else,” as was the case in the past (30). Indeed, “modernism was invented … in order to avoid having to put up with so many worlds, so many contradictory ontologies and so many conflicting metaphysics” (31). For Latour, the solution to the world’s problems lies with the “diplomats” and in peace negotiations whereby “both sides give up exoticism and its perverse complacency with the false difference introduced by the one nature-many cultures divide” (42-43). While the ideas published in this slim book by Latour appear to be generalizing and universal, when applied to specific contexts they make a great deal of sense. The concept of negotiation that Deng proposes, of speaking and listening, of seeing the country with all of its parts as a network, necessitates the existence of diplomatic relations. However, as Latour points out, the peace negotiations organized by diplomats must not seek to exoticize the other and create false differences that each side hopes to eradicate in the other. These ideas tie in to Latour’s definition of the social in Reassembling the Social, where he argues that we need to “retool our disciplines to become again sensitive to the noise [new entities] make and to try to find a place for them” (262).
If the narrator is unable to “become again sensitive” to these noises, and if he cannot always find a place for them in the spaces of the novel, what he tries to do, instead, is resist them: “If I am unable to forgive then I shall try to forget” (168). Resistance takes many different forms throughout the novel, and ends in the river with the narrator in a state of ‘denial’. In spite and because of this ironic twist, the spatial reading of the novel has depicted how the narrator’s confused denial manifests itself in spatial changes that disrupt his previously-ordered linear trajectories. Denial twists and convolutes spatial images in the narrator’s imagination, upsetting the orderliness of space and giving us fleeting glimpses of the socio-political. However, this is also a wearisome, exhausting state of existence to be in, for both the narrator and author. For this reason, perhaps, the narrator insanely craves a cigarette even as he is struggling to stay alive in the last scene. Salih gives him that much needed breather at the end of the novel, perhaps only because coming to terms with the socio-political is such an arduous task. Our spatial reading of both topographical and textual landscapes has enabled us to locate not only the significant spatial changes, but also the controversial nuances. The narrator is the one who reluctantly bears witness in the novel to all these changes; as readers, as we associate with these elements, our associations may develop into mediators effecting change.

The novel’s depiction of spatial metaphors informs us not only about social, racial, and political diversities, but also about the danger of maintaining linear trajectories and the risks of ordering space. Moreover, these metaphors caution us about the harm that silence can inflict if one remains a silent witness to injustice. In the poem by Mustafa that the narrator finds in the dead man’s secret room, Mustafa has written:

*The sighs of the unhappy in the breast do groan*  
*The vicissitudes of Time by silent tears are shown*
And love and buried hate the winds away have blown.

Deep silence has embraced the vestiges of prayer,

Of moans and supplications and cries of woeful care,

And dust and smoke the traveller’s path ensnare.

Some, souls content, others in dismay.

Brows submissive, others ... (153)

In Mustafa’s poem, dismissed by both the narrator and the majority of Season’s critics, there is a supplication, a silent plea directed to whoever may chance upon the poem that the reader speak up and not remain a silent witness. The narrator ends the poem with a line of his own: “Heads humbly bent and faces turned away” (153). The poem seems to echo the narrator’s own silent call for help, which is rendered audible in the final scene.

For the narrator, the thawra that began as a state of denial becomes in the final scene a different thawra against death and despair. Could it be, that at some subconscious level the narrator has come to grasp the significance and enormity of the spatial transformations that have been taking place around him? Or has he really given up on his struggle to understand? The roaring in his ears as he is dragged in the river, the “vivid brightness like a flash of lightning” could be suggestive of both deafness and blindness, or, in contrast, of illumination and understanding. Could his assertion that “[t]hough floating on the water, I was not part of it” indicate that he does not belong, either willingly or unwillingly, to that space? Or, on the other hand, could it be that he does not belong to the river because it represents an ever-changing space? We do not have answers to these questions, but whatever meanings have been lost upon
the narrator in his struggle to maintain an orderly spatial narrative between the landscapes of the novel are re-generated by us, the readers, in the disorderliness between.
Chapter Three

The Bey, the Servant, and the Group: Spatial Networks and Movements of the Political in

Alaa al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building*

Part 1. What’s in a Building?

Published in Arabic in 2002, translated into twenty-three languages by 2006, and transformed into an Arabic movie starring ‘giants’ of the Egyptian cinema such as Adel Imam and Yusra by 2007, Alaa al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* is a novel that offers an intricate representation of the political to complicate our view of modern-day Egypt through its spatial narratives. Centred around an actual building on Cairo’s Suleiman Basha Street in which the author (a dentist by day and a writer by night) set up his first dentistry office, the story traces complex networks and social relationships from the spaces of the streets and alleys of Egypt, to those of local coffee shops and restaurants, and to the desert beyond. Disrupting our traditional conceptions of city center and periphery, unsettling our common perceptions of how and why people come together and fall apart, and complicating our understanding of politics today, *The Yacoubian Building* offers a microscopic view of Egyptian society in the 1990s that combines elements of the local, the global, the historical, and the contemporary through spatial associations. The novel reveals the flimsiness of the walls separating the residents – aristocrats, politicians, lawyers, students, army officers, commoners, servants, crooks, and peasants – of a run-down sixty-something year old building in one of Cairo’s neighbourhoods. The inhabitants, some of whom have set up their homes in the Building and some their businesses, all have their stories. The Building houses a variety of social specimens: middle and upper class on each of its

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22 The novel was translated into English by Humphrey Davies (who also translated a number of works for Naguib Mahfouz) and published in 2004.
floors, but an unsightly tumour-like growth of lower-class denizens on its rooftops. Like other older buildings, it has its share of cockroaches and vermin that scuttle in and out of the cracks of its decaying foundations; the Building does not discriminate between its residents.

Imperviously, the Building overlooks the Egyptian city as the residents go down winding streets and alleys to public and private locales such as restaurants, police stations, jails, schools, and houses to convene, conduct their businesses, argue, and sin. And in the distance, the African desert is a shimmer; whatever trajectories may take some of the residents to yonder arid place appear mirage-like and unreal. In the paths between these places, still more stories unfold as the occupants and other people go about their functions. Their identities are laid bare in the spaces they occupy: shifting, changing, and transforming. Through permeable and interactive networks, the characters in the novel shape the places they occupy just as the places they occupy shape them. These spatial networks extend across Egypt in the nineties, a country grappling with the rising tides of political corruption, modernization, and fundamentalism, a country where the center is never fixed and is often difficult to discern.

Al-Aswany himself has commented that his story’s “heroes” are not people but places. When asked in a 2006 interview with Al-Ahram newspaper why most of his characters live in the same place but lead “parallel lives,” he responded that his purpose in writing The Yacoubian Building was to make places, not people, the major characters in the novel, explaining that this place-as-hero element of the novel does not necessitate the relatedness of characters or sub-plots, and, as such, he was not obliged to present these relationships when writing the work (¶ 3; my translation). This claim is arguable, as I later show, for it is precisely through the novel’s spatial characteristics that characters and sub-plots are related. For now, though, we need only point out that as the most obvious “hero” in the story the Yacoubian Building’s importance lies in the way
that its architecture draws attention to the impact space has on our social lives. Bill Hiller and Julienna Hanson’s discussion of architecture, in their *The Social Space of Logic* (1984), can help illuminate this point. There, they point out that although it is tempting (and, perhaps, easier) to discuss architecture in aesthetic terms, “[architecture’s] most far reaching practical effects are not at the level of appearances at all, but at the level of space.” Inasmuch as architecture configures the spatial systems we occupy, it not only symbolically but also directly influences our social lives, “since it provides the material preconditions for the patterns of movement, encounter and avoidance … of social relations” (x). In this regard, by conditioning the movements of its inhabitants through its architectural design, the Building’s significance as a spatial metaphor extends to our study of the social. This spatial quality of the Building makes it a valuable object of study in the context of my chapter. However, my discussion goes well beyond the obvious spatial interconnections between the Building and Egyptian society that some critics such as Samia Mehrez in *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (2010) have pointed out. As I have explained in my Introduction, *The Yacoubian Building* builds on the earlier Mahfouzian spatial representation of society in its configuration of spatial networks to encompass more socio-political, historical, local, and global elements than those to be found in the Building space alone.

To understand how al-Aswany’s novel builds on Mahfouzian spatial metaphors, I refer to Mona N. Mikhail’s description of Cairo in Mahfouz’s early works. In “The Search for the Authentic Self within Idriss’s City” (1980), Mikhail explains that in the earlier works of Mahfouz, most notably *The Trilogy* (Arabic 1956-1957) and *Midaq Alley* (Arabic 1966), Cairo “is very much the thriving bustling city of the middle ages. A city that has not changed much over the centuries, it remains [in Mahfouz’s] works furrowed with ever narrowing streets, [and]
overcrowded alleys dazed by the pounding of metal and the din of brass.” These characteristics have served “as metaphors to Egyptian writers” (105). Mahfouz’s representation of Cairo is also greatly influenced, as we have seen in Part 4 of the Introduction, by his nationalist views.

Describing the nationalist trend in Arabic literature during the first half of the nineteenth century, Sabry Hafez explains in *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993), that “the national question had become both the major concern of the intelligentsia and the drive behind writers’ search for a means of expressing the views and aspirations of their people” (79). In this regard, Mahfouz’s city for a while remained with its noisy narrow streets the heart of nationalism and anti-colonial resistance.

In terms of its spatial representations beyond the Building-as-metaphor-for-Egyptian-society, not enough attention has been given to the ways in which *The Yacoubian Building* builds on the Mahfouzian tradition in its portrayal of city spaces. As I discussed in the last section of the Introduction, Mehrez’s brief analysis of the shift from the *hara* to the *imara* (neighbourhood to building) metaphor explores the development from Mahfouz to al-Aswany in both authors’ Cairo experiences. For Mahfouz, as Mehrez explains in her earlier work *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction* (1994), Cairo as represented in *The Cairo Trilogy* “documents the period from the 1919 revolution to 1944 through the changes and conflicts which take place within an urban middle-class family” (60).\(^23\) On the other hand, al-Aswany’s Cairo, as Mehrez points out in her later book *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, is depicted in the Building metaphor. Here, Mehrez describes the contrast between the “hara” and the “imara” metaphors as being a contrast between “the well-ordered urban fabric of the old city” and “the contradictions of the global face of the mega-metropolis” (146). Al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* historically traces “the

\(^{23}\) I made use of the first novel in *The Trilogy* in my Introduction to refer to the ways in which the three novels I study in my dissertation depart from the earlier Mahfouzian spatial tradition.
transformations that beset the Yacoubian Building from colonial to post-colonial times in Egypt … [encapsulating] not just the history of twentieth century Cairo but also that of modern Egypt at large” (160). Describing the novel as “a ruthless attack on the Egyptian state” (162), Mehrez refers to the Building as a spatial metaphor in what follows:

Through the changing catalogue of residents of the Yacoubian Building, and their use of the urban space, al-Aswany traces the political, ethnic, economic and social changes that have occurred in the city over more than five decades. First readers learn about the history of the building, its architecture and its residents during the first half of the twentieth century… (160)

In her following plot analysis, Mehrez does not explore the ways in which the Building metaphor extends to other significant spaces in the novel such as the restaurants, homes, offices, and desert. In privileging one space over the others, her focus remains centered on the Building and on the distinct subplots in the novel without commenting on spatial developments beyond the Building metaphor. With this single-minded spatial emphasis, Mehrez’s reading of al-Aswany’s novel does not show how the novel goes beyond the Mahfouzian tradition; the focus remains on the Building metaphor and its representation of Egyptian society just as Mahfouz represented it in the narrow streets and alleys of Cairo. On the other hand, the spaces I follow are represented in complex networks that a distinctly socio-political spatial study of the novel draws out; these networks go well beyond the traditional Mahfouzian representations of the urban or the national.

Another spatial aspect Mehrez does not adequately address is the concept of Cairo as an imagined community. In Egypt's Culture Wars, Mehrez describes al-Aswany as “[an] underground historian of the city whose narratives participate in the construction of an imagined community and a national imaginary” (147-48). If the novel’s community is imagined, as
Mehrez argues, in what sense is it so? Similarly, in what sense of the word is al-Aswany an “underground historian?” If Mehrez is using Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as presented in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), then the nation as “an imagined political community … is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (Anderson 6). While this may appear to be the case in the novel’s forced isolation of its characters and, subsequently, its sub-plots, spatial discourse will allow us to ‘open’ space up, as it were, rendering these characters and their narratives inter-connected. Indeed, in several of the novel’s isolated spaces such as its cafés and restaurants, our imagination of space overcomes the claustrophobic delineation of space that characterizes the novel’s various meeting spots.

Al-Aswany’s isolation of some of these spaces is reminiscent of Arabic literature in the early twentieth century, whereby cafés usually designated the chaos in Egyptian society. Timothy Mitchell elaborates on this representation in *Colonising Egypt*. “Descriptions of café life,” writes Mitchell, “are found frequently in the literature of the period, particularly that concerned with describing the country’s state of disorder. They enabled the writer to follow the existence of the crowd into confined, interior spaces” (117). The “confined, interior spaces” of these cafés are not unlike Mahfouz’s narrow, over-populated streets or, for that matter, al-Aswany’s roof-top residences; such an imagination of the Egyptian community is to be found in many of *The Yacoubian Building*’s scenes. As with the Building metaphor, however, the point of departure between that novel’s cafés and earlier literary representations of cafés is in our deployment of spatial imagination to complicate and question the author’s own, at times spatially limited, imagination of his community. The novel lends itself to such a spatial study. In this
regard, it depicts its own *thawra* in terms of its complication of the Mahfouzian national urban spaces, yielding new spaces of resistance that encompass local, global, traditional, and modern socio-political aspects.

Other critics who have commented on *The Yacoubian Building* focus for the most part on different aspects of its socio-political commentary on Egypt in the 1990s. For instance, Joseph Massad in *Desiring Arabs* (2007), a study which discusses representations of sexuality and desire in the postcolonial Arab novel, explains that *The Yacoubian Building* not only deploys “tropes of degeneration and decadence that it links to sexual deviance, but goes further to make not sexual deviance, but a community of sexual deviants, the manifest sign of postcolonial degeneration.” Massad argues that, out of all the characters in *The Yacoubian Building*, the only ones that are able to survive the Egyptian “colonial and postcolonial violence (physical, social, economic, and epistemic) [are] the degenerate, the corrupt, and the sexual deviant” (Massad 389). Through its spatial focus, my work complicates the novel’s (and Massad’s) representations of degeneration, corruption, and sexual deviance to draw attention to its silenced narratives. For example, by focusing on the novel’s representations of servants, I argue that the subaltern emerges as a full-fledged character to displace louder hegemonic narratives. Similarly, the novel’s depiction of historical elements is further complicated using a spatial discourse that situates the historical as an actor partaking in socio-political changes in the country. Equally important is the way spatial imagination prevents the isolation of places representative of Egyptian corruption. In this regard, my reading sometimes will go against the author’s intent to demarcate the spaces of coffee shops and restaurants as being particularly representative of Egypt’s corrupt spaces. My spatial study questions topographical representations of power by situating them against other spaces where
powerful authorities are toppled. In this sense, *thawra* emerges in movements of the political, through the associations of actors that are not initially recognized in the novel as actors.

Other commentators have pointed out the novel’s significance in anticipating today’s *thawra*, as I have mentioned in the Introduction. As Chris Patten, Chancellor of the University of Oxford wrote earlier this year in the *Sunday Times*, “Anyone who has read *The Yacoubian Building* … will regard the revolution in Egypt as long overdue.” In fact, continues Patten, “the most interesting question is not ‘Why did it happen?’ but ‘Why did it not happen before?’” (¶ 1-4). Beyond its obvious socio-political critique, however, not enough attention has been given to the novel’s intricate representation of space, which is a literary *thawra* in itself. When space is studied in the novel, all too often the emphasis is placed on the writer’s politics and his perception of his own space, rather than on how the *political* is represented in terms of spatial discourse, which involves a special kind of *thawra* that may go beyond the author’s socio-political narrative. As such, Mehrez’s description of al-Aswany as an underground historian is problematic, as it is not clear in this description what history or what community for that matter the author imagines in his view of the city. A spatial reading, however, renders us sensitive to the metaphors he uses in his own representation, allowing us to analyze, question, and complicate textual representations and, in some instances, the author’s relation to his text.

**Part 2.a. Egyptian spaces past and present**

In the Introduction, I discussed a developing trend in the Arabic novel that involved the use of a spatial approach after the emphasis in earlier writing had been mainly on nationalist discourse. In this section, I emphasize some of the specific spatial distinctions in earlier socio-political discourses on Egypt for the purpose of contrasting them with later perspectives and introducing my own methodological approach in the study of the novel. In considering how
spatial representation has evolved in Egyptian scholarship, therefore, we see how earlier twentieth-century critical discourses tended to represent space in terms of dichotomies. In its emphasis on national resistance, such spatial dichotomization overlooked the complex roles of social, economic, cultural, political, religious, and personal differences. After the 1952 Arab revolution, Egypt was characterized as a split community, whereby its center was dominated by the ruling military officers. In “The Consequences of the Introduction and Spread of Modern Education: Education and National Integration in Egypt” (1980), Mahmud A. Faksh explains that after the revolution, military officers took over a country that was deeply split in terms of its national identity. Faksh identifies political reality in Egypt at the time of his essay (1980s) as “administrative-oligarchic in nature,” with the country being ruled by a “governing inner circle comprising a hard-core military-technocratic elite” (49-50). Such a spatial representation remains tethered to the concept of the capital as core and does not take into consideration the significance of other spaces that may dislocate the center.

In later representations of Egypt, spatial dichotomies persist but take new forms with the increasing assertiveness of Islamism and its role in the country’s socio-political restructuring. For example, in his later work The Future of Islam in the Middle East: Fundamentalism in Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia (1997), Faksh pits “Islamic doctrine” against “democracy,” describing fundamentalists not as “democrats” but as “the new religious Bolsheviks in the unending cycle of Arab-Muslim authoritarianism” (xv). Focusing on the ideological quality of fundamentalism, Faksh describes fundamentalist Islam as “the fusing between religion and politics” (5). Faksh argues that the “mass appeal of Islamism has its roots in worldly frustrations and denials, and those frustrations and denials have been given a religious idiom” (xii). Faksh’s ideological representation of Islamism, while it may have “worldly frustrations and denials” at its
roots, pits Islamism against the modern Egyptian, Algerian, and Saudi Arabian states whereby the Islamist agenda “does not square with the realities and changing circumstances in the Middle East.” The modern capital remains the urban center against which all other socio-political spaces are defined (xiv). Faksh uses this spatial rhetoric to discuss why, from his perspective, fundamentalist groups have no future in the center.

Faksh’s conception of fundamentalist groups does not take into account the differences within each group or the personal reasons (other than being vaguely linked to frustration and denial) that prompt actors to join up with these groups. The Yacoubian Building’s configurations of center and periphery displace the earlier and later spatial dichotomies in Egypt as exemplified by Faksh. For one thing, in the novel the military elite are replaced by government personnel, mainly high-ranking police officers. People of plebeian origin gain socio-economic power in the country and corrupt businessmen control the country’s economy. One of the novel’s narratives deals with the aspect of fundamentalism in Egypt in such a way that the actor’s movements towards and away from his group are complicated by the very way we tend to define groups. As sociologists, our definition of a group, as I later argue, may render that group stagnant and fixed by giving little attention to the complex movements of actors towards and away from the group. Studies such as Faksh’s may consequently overlook the silenced narratives of group members; these narratives point to movements of the political, rather than the obvious politics being stated and orchestrated by vocal group leaders. Spatial networking in the novel designates movements of the political that destabilize the clamouring politics of the master narrative.

Another way in which the novel complicates traditional socio-political representations is in its depiction of local, global, traditional, and modern elements. My spatial reading of The Yacoubian Building’s thawra against spatial dichotomies will argue that we can no longer
restrict our understanding of Egypt and its capital to past configurations. In this regard, as editors Diane Singerman and Paul Amar stress in their introduction to *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (2006), Egypt and its capital “cannot be easily contained or understood through the rigid categories of the past” (3). The following description by the editors of *Cairo Cosmopolitan* is useful to present here, for it draws attention to the novel’s own diversion from “mainstream politics” in its depiction of the political, as well as its rejection of “rigid social sciences” with its spatial networks. Indeed, the editors point out several trends I will be using in my spatial study of the novel:

*Cairo Cosmopolitan* strives to capture the innovations of Cairo-centered scholars and critical thinkers who have rejected the narrow lenses of both mainstream politics (e.g. rationalism, fundamentalism, and security hysteria) and rigid social science methods (e.g. rationalism, positivism, and neo-orientalism). (4)

In this regard, Egypt’s political chaos today must also be studied within the broader context of globalization, where “global trends in cities [such as Cairo] seem to be characterized by efforts to wall some in and keep others out” (7). As we see here, the spatial metaphor of the “wall” is introduced to enhance the description of a new global city. However, even the notion of Cairo’s centrality as capital city has come to be challenged as the concepts of city and periphery are complicated in one of the chapters in *Cairo Cosmopolitan*. Describing the redistribution of Egypt’s population beyond the capital, in “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital?” Eric Denis re-conceptualizes desert, city, and suburb spaces in Egypt to argue that “spaces of power” are constantly being restructured. “From this point on,” explains Denis, “living in the desert is no longer conceived of as a departure toward the periphery, but as a relocalization of the city center and new focus on places of innovation” (63). Al-Aswany’s novel offers us an innovative way of
reconceptualising both Egypt and its capital without adhering to mainstream politics and rigid social sciences. In what follows, I show how this is possible by presenting the spatial definition and socio-political methodology that I will be using in my study.

Part 2.b. The spatial sphere and networks of the political

My analysis of the novel will commence with a close reading of some space-actor encounters in order to illustrate how space is rendered open at local, subjective, and global levels, and how literature plays its own politics in this regard. I will then, in order to see how the novel depicts actors in so-called ‘marginal’ spaces, return for a closer look at some characters in the novel who appear to be silenced by virtue of an attempted ordering of space. My study requires a methodology allowing me to combine the social, the political, and the spatial in interactive, non-bounded relationships, one that would force us to think about the political as I have discussed it in my Introduction. Massey and Latour provide rewarding insights in this regard; their unique and effective combination of numerous spatial and socio-political elements allows me to integrate other theories without limiting myself to rigid or incomplete definitions of space and the social.

Latour hinges his definition of the actor-network on associations between social and political actors. Groups are constantly being formed and reformed, and our goal is to locate the traces left behind in the wake of these formations (Latour 34). To locate our object of enquiry, we must become “sociologists of associations” (35). The “actor” that “works” in Latour’s definition is “the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it,” and in order to retrieve the multiplicity of “actor-network,” we must hold on to our uncertainty about the sources of the actions (46-47). In other words, the social scientist must never presume any knowledge about the actors, but neither must the actor be an irrefutable source of that information (47).
Actors are not to be likened to “puppets” manoeuvred by invisible forces stemming from this thing called “society” (59), because the social is not an “item” or entity but a “movement,” “an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together” (64-65). ANT provides in this regard descriptive narratives where all actors are performing, and where the social and the political henceforth become “circulating [entities]” rather than fixed, “stale [assemblages]” (128).

In reading literature, then, our success as critics is measured by the number of actors we are able to trace and the extent to which we are able to locate the social and the political. In our tracing of these actor-networks, we are really tracing relations “defined as so many translations” (129). As a concept, therefore, Latour’s network captures “energy,” “movement,” and “specificity” (131). Because the social is so difficult to locate except “at the fleeting moment when new associations are sticking the collective together” (159), the trick is to constitute a new, rather flattened landscape to traverse through in our study of networks (165). Echoing Valentine’s idea of the political today as having undergone a rescaling to accommodate “the vastness of the globe and beyond, and the smallness of things down to the paradoxes of the nano level, where what is very small is actually very big” (Valentine 510-511), Latour proposes a set of strategies, what he refers to as “clamps,” that will serve to “flatten out” the landscape of the social, making it impossible to segregate the micro from the macro, or separate the local from the global (Latour 169-70). According to Latour, while conventional sociology depends upon this type of segregation, he works hard to avoid it by implementing his ANT theory. Latour’s actor-network-theory is not so much a new methodology by which to study the social as it is a warning of how not to study it. It helps us to see new social and political entities and connections by
freeing us from the givens of social theory that all too often overlook existing associations and prevent the formations of new ones.

Massey’s and Latour’s arguments coincide in a number of ways. Latour’s definition of the social as an “association of entities” which are constantly being reshuffled resonates with Massey’s characterization of the “throwntogetherness” of space as a “locus,” or as a “coming together of trajectories.” Both analysts look at movement rather than inertia, at constant change rather than stagnation, at patterns of associations coming together at one moment and then shifting again to form new configurations at another. Rather than studying what is obvious in relations between actors (the human and the non-human alike), it is more rewarding to look for links that are not obvious in order to determine the political. Massey and Latour offer a new perspective from which to study the political in a spatial context. Both writers have infused space and the social with pulsing life: Massey has thrown space wide open to give it “a new and more productive life” (Massey 19) where the social is constantly being created, and where “space is indeed a product of relations” (11), and Latour has transformed the social network into a “superposition of various canals as entangled and varied as those … of all the nerve, blood, lymph, and hormone pathways that keep organisms in existence” (220). Massey’s open space “makes room for a genuine multiplicity of trajectories, and thus potentially of voices” (Massey 55), while Latour’s living network urges us to “retool our disciplines to become again sensitive to the noise [new entities] make and to try to find a place for them” (Latour 262). Both critics invite us to embrace doubt in our studies and, with it, hope; Massey in order for us to maintain constant negotiation with place as an “event” (141), and Latour in order for us to re-envision the social. Without losing sight of Arabic cultural, historical, and personal differences, I primarily use these spatial and socio-political approaches in my study of the novel and in my incorporation
of other significant theories. At this point, though, it is time to introduce *The Yacoubian Building* with its actors, plots, and themes.

**Part 3. The tenants at No. 34 Talaat Harb, Cairo: Between fiction and reality**

Since we encounter quite a variety of actors in the work under study here, we must introduce some of the more obvious performers and their roles in *The Yacoubian Building*. On first reading, the novel entertains us with a colourful portrayal of the comedies and tragedies, the pride and humility, the aspirations and despair, the scandals, the mishaps, the secrets, and the hubris in the lives of its characters in order to reveal, very much in the style and fashion of Egyptian cinema, the drama of present-day Egyptian life. The most offensive human characteristics such as degradation, cruelty, dishonesty, and hatred are given the most prominence in the novel. The more admirable human traits, such as devotion, faithfulness, kindness, and honesty, seem unable to survive in a society that has become a cesspool of vices. The characters in the novel are either residents of the Building, business owners who set up offices in the Building, poor residents of the roof-top shanties, or else are associated with, or share connections in one way or the other to, those residing in it. Taha el-Shazli is the son of the Building’s doorkeeper. He is a devout Muslim who aspires in life to become a respected police officer and to marry his sweetheart Busayna, the daughter of another poor rooftop family. Hatim Rasheed, a closet homosexual, is an aristocratic-born talented journalist who resides in an apartment in the Building. Hatim lusts after Abd Rabbuh (Abduh), a simple police officer from the Egyptian south (the Sa’eed). Zaki Bey el Dessouki ("aging playboy") and his serpent-tongued sister Dawlat (with whom he is constantly at odds) are the children of a once rich and famous prime minister who left them a generous but dwindling inheritance. Zaki Bey is an unsuccessful engineer who owns an office just for show in the Building. Abaskharon is Zaki
Bey’s wily servant, and Malak is the servant’s brother. The very rich Hagg Muhammad Azzam, on the other hand, is an ambitious businessman who rises from poverty to set his eye on politics. Kamal el Fouli is a majorly corrupt politician who wields much power over national elections. The other characters in the novel are given the roles of servants, small business-owners, government employees, spouses, sheikhs, or other miscellaneous members of society.

Most of these characters lead secret lives. As actors, their roles designate seemingly disjointed narratives that only intersect where some characters are directly involved with others. The pious Taha el-Shazli finds his dream of becoming a police officer shattered, and ends up as a member of a fundamentalist Islamic group with an anti-governmental terrorist agenda. Hagg Azzam is very much the hypocritical Muslim; outwardly devout he is secretly greedy and licentious. His political and financial demise is a sign of justice being served for his cruelty to Souad, his second wife, and for his insatiable lust for power. Busayna and Zaki Bey, on the other hand, are both survivors from different generations. Busayna looks out for her best interests, even if it means compromising on her principles. Zaki Bey, who has long since given up on his country, survives by searching for pleasure, be it in the form of art, music, women, or wine. The young woman and the old man marry at the end of the novel. Hatim, the homosexual journalist, lures the married Abduh (a police officer) into a carnal relationship that culminates with the violent murder of Hatim at Abduh’s hands. Unable to bear the feelings of guilt that his homosexual behaviour inflicted on him, Abduh interprets the death of his baby son as a punishment from god, and so in a fit of frustration and anguish he strangles his lover. These are the lives of the decrepit, the wealthy, and the poor in al-Aswany’s novel, very few of whom attain a “happily ever after” status towards the end, except (perhaps unrealistically) for Zaki Bey.
and Busayna. The novel’s plot hinges on the stories of these characters as we follow their movements in and out of the Building and through the spaces of the city.

As a concrete edifice that geographically and historically contextualizes the story’s plot, the Yacoubian Building is not, in reality, a fictional landmark. It exists in Egypt at the same address mentioned in the novel (Suleiman Basha Street), and was actually constructed in 1934 by Hagop Yacoubian, a wealthy and prominent member of the Armenian society in Egypt (al-Aswany xi, 11). The novel’s building (as translator Humphrey Davis points out in his Note) differs only slightly from the actual one. The characters, however, are fictional, although al-Aswany does borrow some attributes from well-known real life characters in the construction of his fictional ones (xi-xii). In the novel, al-Aswany adds balconies and a little more grandeur to his building to produce “an architectural gem” in which only the crème de la crème of Egyptian society could afford to live, this being the case upon the completion of the building in 1936 (11). In its early days, the Building (from here on I refer only to the fictional building) featured tiny rooms on its roof which were mainly used for storage; after the 1952 Revolution, however, wealthy Jews and foreigners fled the country, leaving the apartments to the newly influential government officers and the cramped quarters on the roof for servants (12-13). Due to the movement of the wealthier residents from Suleiman Basha to more aristocratic neighbourhoods, and due to the growth of the lower class, the Building eventually came to house an impoverished community not unlike a tumour on its rooftop, a community independent of the well-to-do (or formerly well-to-do) residents of the Building’s apartments (14-15). This rooftop community, not unlike Mahfouz’s neighbourhood, comes to resemble that of any cross-section of present-day Egypt’s poorer areas, where lives dictated by hunger, hardship, and strife are nevertheless sweetened and made bearable by brief moments of pleasure and well-being.
To return for a moment to Massey and Latour, in my reading of the novel I must search out the loci, the mobile points at which trajectories converge in the story, not necessarily at obvious meeting places but, more importantly, at obscure conjunctions. These associations will be between beings (not necessarily human) that bring with them older associations; time here, in conjunction with space, will then not be restricted to the here and now, but will also configure in these associations as one of the currencies of the translation of socio-political meaning in human relationships. Indeed, past and present time here become actors taking part in these socio-political relationships. In this way, I am able to represent the micro and the macro, the local and the global, not as juxtaposed against one another, but as part and parcel of the same “flattened” landscape to which Latour alludes. This landscaping task will use some of Latour’s metaphorical “clamps” to reveal hidden associations. As Latour explains, social scientists deem that the social may be recognized through its assembly, convocation, and mobility. That is the “easy social.” The “difficult social” on the other hand depends upon “stitching together elements that don’t pertain to the usual repertoire.” Social scientists have configured the domain of the social as a territory with too many ups and downs that can never overlap, hence the need for this sort of “flattening” of the landscape (Latour 165). Latour proposes a relocation of the global alongside a redistribution of the local in order for the “collective [to] have enough room to collect itself” (172). Similarly, Massey with her opening up of space and, consequently, time, urges us to avoid the “modern, territorial conceptualisation of space” that interprets different places “as different stages in a single temporal development” (Massey 68). According to Massey, places must be seen as “integrations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events” (130). As events, spaces become open when they bring together the interactions, the trajectories of the “here and now” as well as the “thens and theres” (140) in what Massey calls “stories-so-
far” (142) and what Latour might describe as the “list of traces left by the formation of groups” (Latour 30). These are the traces I shall attempt to look for in the novel.

**Part 4. The Bey and the “belle époque”**

Beginning with the actor as “the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (Latour 46), I look at Zaki Bey el Dessouki. The story opens with the scene of Zaki Bey el Dessouki’s stately crossing from his apartment in Baehler Passage to his office in the Yacoubian Building. The distance he covers is roughly a hundred meters, but traversing this distance takes him all of one hour, because along the way he encounters:

Clothing-and shoe-store owners, their employees (of both sexes), waiters, cinema staff, habitués of the Brazilian Coffee Stores, even doorkeepers, shoeshine men, beggars, and traffic cops – Zaki Bey knows them all by name and exchanges greetings and news with them. (al-Aswany 3)

The Bey (an address reserved only for gentlemen of the upper class) is one of the oldest residents of his neighbourhood, which he came to in the 1940s after having completed his engineering studies in France. As the son of one of the wealthiest and most politically prominent bashas in Egypt, he does not, unfortunately, inherit his father’s agricultural fiefdom nor his wealth; in the aftermath of the revolution, his father the Basha loses everything, leaving behind a son who inherits only an empty title. With his French degree in engineering, he anticipates that he will eventually take over his father’s political role, but after the arrest of the father at the hands of the revolutionary party, the son sinks into a life of decadence, preferring to pursue pleasure in his “engineering office” in the Building rather than engineering projects. To the street residents of his neighbourhood, however, Zaki Bey is well-liked but “folkloric,” as he parades all year round in his “three-piece suit” which conceals “his tiny, emaciated body” (3). With an immaculate
handkerchief to match his tie, a low-quality cigar to replace the “Cuban deluxe” brand of his better days, his “false teeth,” and his “dyed black hair, whose few locks are arranged in rows from the left-most to the right-most side of his head” in an attempt to conceal his baldness (3). Zaki Bey literally appears as an “actor playing a part” (4).

If the novel depicts the Bey as an actor, then what is it that determines his role? Latour argues that an actor’s role is never determined by the actor’s will alone (Latour 46). If this is the case, what forces the Bey, with his anachronistic appearance, to this setting in modern downtown Egypt? We question the influences behind his actions and his appearance, wondering how authentic he is as a character parading on one of Egypt’s urban streets and what purpose he has in the novel. The novel’s description of Zaki Bey as an actor in this regard may correspond with Latour’s definition, since “it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting” (Latour 46). Latour’s statement is important here, for it points out the existence of other actors in this apparently isolated performance. In his costume and with his contrived behaviour, Zaki Bey’s actions might be said to be “dislocated … borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated” (Latour 46).

Latour’s string of adjectives evokes other actors without naming them for a reason; we must not rush into a search for the sources and influences of the actor’s (the Bey’s) actions. Our uncertainty about the Bey should not push us to invent a “hidden social drive, an unconscious” for the actor, for in this way we would be never be able to reassemble the social (Latour 47). We are left in doubt about the source of the actor’s actions here; this is not a bad negativity, however, for it prompts us to explore the uncertain foundations of his social role. Our uncertainties lead us to use the social sciences in our observations with caution; we must be careful not to overlook the “hidden variables [which] have become packaged in such a way [by these sciences] that there
is no control window to check what is inside” (Latour 50). We unpack these “hidden variables” using tools that trace spatial trajectories and associations. In this regard, our challenge is to reenvision the Baehler Passage, a hundred-meter distance, as an open space in which countless actors’ trajectories converge. If it seems obvious at first that the numerous exchanges between Zaki Bey and the people he meets constitute the only relationships on that street, these relationships initially appear highly subjective and limited to a local space. However, if we are to discern other associations, we must reconsider our understanding of subjective space.

Subjective space is limited when it is confined to the narrow point of view of the actor; when we go beyond that narrow perspective we notice the emergence of other actors and the spatial sphere expands. In this regard, we may think of the Bey as a highly self-conscious character; he sees himself as he imagines other people in the street see him: a stately and refined gentleman. To go beyond this limited spatial perspective, we may make use of other socio-spatial theories that build upon Massey’s and Latour’s arguments. Jeff Malpas’s account of subjective space is useful here; in *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (1999), Malpas provides a structured account of space and place in relation to human cognition, experience, and identity. In his argument, it is only when we start to look at how people view themselves and order their actions that we start to understand how space really functions (Malpas 44). How the Bey sees himself and how others see him constitute different perceptions. Using Malpas’s argument, if we are to see that the Bey’s actions are limited to a local, subjective space, then we must consider a “notion of perspectivity” that “does not allow of the reduction of perspectivity to a mere ‘point’.” Subjective space has “orientation and extension to it” as it unfolds to become “a space that ‘gives space’ for action” (Malpas 50-51). In other words, we must look at space from a perspective beyond one subjective “point.” If the self-conscious Bey
does not pay much heed to his surroundings, we must pay attention to the narrator’s awareness of the Bey’s setting. The narrator’s description of the Bey’s surroundings allows us to unfold the Bey’s narrow space in order to draw into it important historical and cultural elements.

Malpas’s unfolding of space agrees with Massey’s terms, and as we return to Baehler Passage (certainly not a random selection on al-Aswany’s part) we find that Zaki Bey’s personal interactions inadvertently include numerous other interactions taking place in an extending space. The local and the global become inseparable here; we return to the scene for another look not only at the Brazilian Coffee Stores and at the Bey’s cheap local cigars that have replaced his deluxe Cuban ones, but also at the streets to find that Suleiman Basha Street was named after the Basha who reigned during the Ottoman Period, but that today it has been renamed Talaat Harb Square, and that Baehler Passage was named after Charles Baehler, the Swiss architect. Upon further research, we find that the history of the Baehler passage depicts chains of associations between numerous actors pointing to a downward trajectory in social and architectural structures in the capital. Historically, we discover that Charles Baehler was dubbed the “father of Egypt’s hospitality industry” and that he built in Cairo’s Baehler Arcade (today named Baehler Passage) a chain of super-luxurious internationally-known hotels (such as the Cosmopolitan) and a number of impressive residential and business buildings. Today, the passage has been transformed with a lot of “vulgar additions” and “time has been unkind to Cairo’s belle époque architecture” (Rafaat, October 28, 1999). It is worth commenting on the “belle époque” representation of the Baehler passage here, for this adds to the fact that the street is more than just a name and that it too reflects change and has played a role in the coming together of trajectories and of narratives. The feeble self-resurrection of Zaki Bey’s image in the novel reflects the Egyptian capital’s struggle to maintain its own “belle époque” image. In Cairo
Cosmopolitan, Galila el-Kadi and Dalia el-Kerdany refer to the “belle époque” label as resurrecting “the memory of Cairo as a world-class, cosmopolitan capital, dreamed up and built by some of the best global and architectural talent of that era.” Those “preservationists” who wish to keep Cairo in its “belle époque” image see the present time “as a time of great risk and urban decline” (347). The deterioration of the urban image is reflected in both the present-day reality of the Baehler passage as well as in Zaki Bey’s clothes, cigar, hair, and teeth.

Similarly, as remnants of that “belle époque architecture,” the once grand and luxurious shops and brands we come across in the novel suggest the deterioration of the Egyptian capitalist bourgeoisie of which Zaki Bey is a remnant. In terms of literary representations of bourgeois deterioration in capital cities, one may compare certain aspects of the Egyptian Baehler Passage to representations of the Parisian arcades here. In “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935), Benjamin discusses city life in Paris making interesting references to the ways in which various authors and artists reconstructed the French capital in their work. The Parisian arcades, which appeared during the early 1800s, initially catered to the marketing of luxury, whereby the artistic goods on display were for a while to remain “a drawing point for foreigners” (3). With their displays and architectural structure, the French arcades elicited in the minds of their viewers images “in which the old and the new interpenetrate;” these images became “wishes” or dreams which somehow distracted the viewers from “the inadequacies in the social organization of production” (4). Such a collective mental experience of the arcades led to the fantasy of a “classless society,” a “utopia” of sorts as described by Charles Fourier (4-5). The utopian fantasy that French preservationists sought to reproduce in their building of the arcades is not unlike the Egyptian one in their reproduction of Cairo. For us in the novel, however, the attempt to segregate space from (present) time by preserving the architectural image of a golden past
within this street is foiled not only by the appearance of the Bey as an actor, but also by the presence of other aspects of deterioration as we have seen in the above descriptions of the Baehler Passage.

Meandering on the streets of Cairo, the Bey functions in the novel as both the observer and the observed. Through his eyes, we capture that narrow point of view Malpas describes as being limited to subjective space; this sort of perspective attempts, unsuccessfully, to isolate both the view of Cairo as well as that of the Bey in their “belle époque” image. On the other hand, as an observed actor, the Bey is not only looking upon a new image of the city, but he is also engaging with that new spatial representation. The Bey’s modification of his appearance indicates a self-conscious attempt on his part to preserve his image with whatever resources are accessible to him. In this way, he is reproducing not only an image of himself in keeping with the changing times, but also, in our view of him, an image of the Egyptian capital against the spread of poverty and the growth of population. Using Benjamin’s assessment of the role of Paris in Baudelaire’s work (Benjamin 10-11), we find that in some ways the Bey resembles a flâneur, the French term for one who strolls or loafs around in aimless or idle observation. The Bey in his Cairean capital retains some characteristic traces of the Baudelairian flâneur in the French city, but with his eccentricity and alienation the Bey falls awkwardly into this category. According to Benjamin, Baudelaire’s flâneur “is to art what the dandy is to fashion.” One of the images of Baudelaire’s city-as-commodity is that of the prostitute, the “seller and sold in one” (10-11). In a sense, the Bey is not unlike that prostitute, both the sold and the seller of his decaying folkloric image.

The Bey seems to stand at the city margins here, and with his energetic interactions with the people he meets he seeks refuge in the crowds. From a spatial perspective the Bey’s view of
the city alternately narrows and widens as we see space from a singular subjective perspective at one moment and then widen it to encompass the entire city at another. The Bey may once have been similar to Baudelaire’s flâneur who wandered around in the city, but today he belongs more fittingly among the ruins of the Egyptian bourgeoisie and their capital. While the Bey may not be the genuine flâneur of his city, we may conceive of his spatial engagement with history and present time as a waking call or a reminder of present Egyptian social reality. Benjamin made this point about Paris in his description of the surrealist’s portrayal of the French capital. The surrealist “realization of dream elements” in their portrayal of the arcades becomes “the paradigm of dialectical thinking” which in turn is conducive to a “historical awakening.” As such, each “epoch … not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening.” In this sense, surrealism turns the bourgeois monuments “into ruins even before they have crumbled” (13). While the promenade tableau in the novel is not a surreal work of art, some characteristics of these Parisian representations may apply to our spatial portrait. Drawing a comparison between both cities, we may find the same sort of decay suggested in the transformation of the Baehler Arcade into the Baehler Passage. Similarly, the Bey’s descent from aristocracy mirrors the same ruins of the once-prevalent bourgeoisie class. But because for us space has that ability to accommodate associations between the old and the new, the decaying and the living, we do not stop at the thresholds of the ruinous city, but look beyond at the emergence of a new reality that combines elements of the old and the new. Hardly anything comes to a standstill in this space.

Another way of viewing how space does not come to a standstill but remains the locus for trajectories constantly in motion is in the repeated bonding Zaki Bey makes with the people in the street. None of the actors, each busy with his/her trade (or lack thereof) is stagnant; the daily
appearance of Zaki Bey in the street is enough to trigger a bustle of joyous activity in his friends and acquaintances as they rush to bid him good morning, whilst a number of the young men will joke with him and press him for details about “sexual matters that remain obscure to them,” to which queries the Bey will respond with pleasure and in much detail (al-Aswany 4). This performance is not a one-time occurrence, but a daily habit. The Bey befriends all, sharing his experience, joviality, and good nature. Seen from Massey’s perspective, these encounters, trivial though they seem, are interrelations that further constitute this space (Massey 10); without them, space could not be made, and the Baehler Passage would be nothing more than a street. Moreover, the specificity of the actions of these individuals may be “reconceptualised in relational terms,” prompting an ongoing negotiation of space (Massey 10). Multiplicity characterizes the sphere of space here, stimulating us to “recognize the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell” (Massey 10-11). Where these trajectories may lead us is picked up in Latour’s argument about mediators and intermediaries.

These coexistences open up the ground for the political as we come to understand it. The opening of space necessitates the opening up of the future; Massey cites the political theorist Ernesto Laclau here to assert that unless the future is open, there can never be “any ground for a politics which can make a difference” (qtd. Massey 11). To use Latour’s argument here, the ongoing associations happening in this space may serve as “intermediaries,” “[entities which transport] meaning or force without transformation,” or as “mediators,” which may look simple but which later on “may become complex” (Latour 39). To put it differently, the associations taking place may either be nothing more than meetings confined to the exchange of pleasantries and information (intermediaries), or they may become mediators which change lives as they “change or modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.” Once we identify
mediators, we generally follow their chains wherever they lead us (Latour 39-40). Latour’s argument is crucial to our spatial analysis, for at its micro-level, the political is spatially produced in the engagements between unlikely actors (both intermediaries and mediators). In other words, Zaki Bey, the Baehler Passage, the shops, the signs, and the people on the street engage in associations the traces of which designate the Egyptian socio-political future. For Zaki Bey, the associations he makes with the people in the street may lead to more complex relationships, or they may remain at the level of every-day meetings. For the most part, while radical spatial transformation takes place in the presence of mediators rather than intermediaries, the political continues to emerge in the presence of both.

Local, global, historical, and contemporary elements function as actors in the associations on the street. Egyptian, Ottoman, British, Swiss, and even Brazilian and Cuban influences find their way into this hundred meter passage, and while the actor meets other actors along the way, his subjective space continues to extend to other spaces. Street names and objects are no longer simply part of the local background; they prompt us to wonder how they came to be there in the first place, and how they figure in our spatial imagining of the here-and now alongside the then-and-there (Massey). Like the Bey, the street itself in this regard reconstitutes the past as it suggests a shifting of trajectories. To sum up, testament to Egypt’s bygone era of aristocracy, refined taste, and European acculturation, Zaki Bey promenades at leisure in a space where different entities reflect the ways in which aristocracy has bravely struggled to up-hold its feeble demeanour, archaic as it is, even while it interacts with different entities to produce new associations. The newness being produced is part and parcel of the traces and movements which constitute both the social and the political. Noblesse may appear as a decrepit old joke mirrored in the Bey’s folkloric appearance, but these transformations concern us because they open up the
negotiation of space. The detailed descriptions of Zaki Bey’s promenade figure thus far in designating the social as “an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together” (Latour 64-65). The reshuffling of associations we observe during the Bey’s walk is reflected in other settings in the novel beyond the street, such as in local coffee shops and restaurants. In these spaces, the social is once more reassembled to depict Egypt’s changing reality whereby necessity often forces unlikely actors to meet. Once these associations between actors become mediators that produce significant spatial transformations, they enhance our understanding of socio-political reality in Egypt.

Part 5. Café encounters

The Egyptian thawra did not begin on the streets of the capital alone; if the street today designates a meeting point between Egyptians from different classes and walks of life, it is worth looking at how the novel anticipates the coming together of these actors. Upon seeing how socio-spatial discourse configures these unlikely encounters in the novel, we come to anticipate future encounters between these actors as being movements towards a new socio-political reality. As we see in the novel, the haunts and secret meeting places that Zaki Bey frequents constitute a theatre where a select few masquerade. These are members of an underground society who harbour an intense nostalgia for a pre-revolutionary, and, for them, better-day Egypt. These actors are not just relics in an ordered place. Rather, they occupy a space characterized by a “throwntogetherness,” as Massey puts it (Massey 151). This space is never closed, nor are the

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24 The 1952 Revolution in Egypt was a successful attempt to overthrow the monarchy which, at the time, was criticized for being corrupt and pro-British. The coup d’état, headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, eventually resulted in the establishment of a republican government. One of the major outcomes of the revolution was also the banning of all political parties and organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood.
associations taking place therein isolated from the rest of the world; the space upholds older associations even as it forces new ones into being.

To return to the masquerade of the elite and to what seems to be the creation of artificial and clandestine places where they convene to enjoy the privileges of their bygone era, we visit the Chez Nous and Maxim’s, two of the underground haunts of actors like Zaki Bey. Very much a secret and old-money type of joint, the Chez Nous is figuratively and physically an underground place, located as it is “a few steps below street level,” and with its heavy curtains, dim lighting, and antique Viennese design (al-Aswany 35), it appears as a space disconnected from social and temporal reality. The Chez Nous, once owned by a Greek man and formerly frequented by foreigners, tourists, and aristocrats, has now become a private meeting place for those who lead secret lives in contemporary Egypt: the former aristocrats and the homosexuals. Not only does the discreet physical location of the Chez Nous facilitate the practices of the actors within it, but so does the financial comfort of Aziz, its present owner. With the profits that Aziz acquires from the business of homosexual prostitution that takes place in his establishment, he is able to pay off “the bribes that have made his place a safe haven from the annoying attentions of the security forces” (al-Aswany 35). Again, we encounter numerous associations between actors that we may not initially recognize as taking part in the social. Necessity has forced the has-beens (aristocracy) of Egypt into associations with the cannot-be-seens (homosexuals), both of which ‘groups’ benefit the opportunists of the country who wish to escape the notice of the powers-that-be (police).

A similar place to the Chez Nous is Maxim’s, a favourite haunt for Zaki Bey. Once more, as we enter through the “small wooden door with the glass panes,” we feel, with Zaki Bey, “as though a magic time machine has carried [us] back to the beautiful years of the 1950s” (al-
Aswany 107). The decor in Maxim’s bespeaks old money and European taste, from the expensive paintings on the walls down to the elaborate silverware and immaculate table cloths, and from the old grand piano to Madame Christine Nicholas (Greek born), the restaurant owner herself (107). Everything at Maxim’s rings of nostalgia and bears the stamp of the elegant past in the same way as do old Rolls-Royces, ladies’ long white gloves, hats decorated with feathers, gramophones with horns and gold needles, and old black and white photos in wooden frames that we hang in the sitting room and which, when from time to time we do look at them, make us feel tender and melancholy. (107)

Even the presence of the silent “ancient Nubian waiter” (108) appears to contribute to the ambience of that particular place. But tempting as it is for us to view it thus, the narrator’s description of these meeting places cannot re-enact a lost era by reconstructing a closeted space which attempts to capture the glamour of a faded age.

Our reading of this particular scene in the novel does not transport us, in spite of the cars, the clothes, the gramophones, or the waiter, via time machine back into history; rather, these depictions invite us to a new way of looking at the social and the political. As Massey would say, history is not mysteriously resurrected as history; it is present in this space, “[provoking] a reimagination of the nature of the present” (150). As we see, space here accommodates a multiplicity of different entities (each bringing with it different associations); our “negotiation” of space “stands for the range of means through which accommodation, anyway always provisional, may be reached or not” (154). Furthermore, the space neither homogenizes nor heterogenizes the antagonisms present; its associations demand a renegotiation of the political. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the political is “a community consciously undergoing the
experience of its sharing” (qtd. 154). If we are to view the traces left behind by the associations between mobile entities (human and non-human) in order to reassemble the social and reintroduce the political, then there is no way that we can consider these entities simply as historical/artistic artefacts (such as the paintings, the musical instruments) or merely as part of an exotic background (such as the Nubian waiter, a figure to whom I will return shortly). The constant mobility of these entities serves to dislodge the fixedness and ordering of space.

Like Zaki Bey, other actors choose particular restaurants as their meeting places; it seems that al-Aswany is very much interested in local restaurants as meeting places particularly representative of political change as he sees it, for he draws interesting parallels between two other restaurants, each of which captures a specific scene in Egypt’s political history: the “Oriental [kebab] Restaurant of the Gezira Sheraton, [where] you will find very few who are ordinary citizens” (al-Aswany 144) and the Royal Automobile Club. These scenes in particular designate points in the novel where we must read against the author’s intentions, as it were, if we are to maintain our spatial argument. The kebab restaurant’s customers are “well-known faces – leading businessmen, ministers, and present and former governors who come to the restaurant to eat and meet, far from the eyes of the press and the curious” (144). As in the case of Chez Nous and Maxim’s, secrecy is once more a concern here, but this time, not to hide the former elite and the homosexuals from the watchful eyes of the oppressive regime, but to ensure the protection of the newly-empowered “business” class. It is at the kebab joint that we get a whiff of corruption and dirty money as men in power convene to do business at their dinner tables. It is in this setting that Hagg Azzam, who himself rose from the position of shoe shiner to become a corrupt businessman, meets with powerful members of political parties in his effort to bribe himself a
seats in the next political elections. Hagg Azzam is a sample of some of those of “plebeian origins” (145) who achieved status through bribery and deceit, and on the backs of decent folk.

On the other side of the coin, there is the “Royal Automobile Club,” which once played a prominent role in Egyptian politics in the era before the revolution. We learn in the novel that the “difference between the Automobile Club and the Sheraton’s kebab restaurant accurately embodies the change that the Egyptian ruling elites underwent between, before, and after the Revolution” (145). The Club meets the demands of the former aristocracy who no longer play a political role in the country, and just as we witnessed earlier how similar establishments bear a particular European stamp to match the western refinement and education of their patrons, here too we observe the ladies in their “revealing evening gowns” accompanying their husbands who are “sipping whiskey and playing poker and bridge” (145). Once again, from the standpoint of direct socio-political criticism, the narrator can be seen as juxtaposing The Club with the Sheraton Restaurant in an attempt to contrast social practices and emphasize the shifting social and political norms of these places. However, the narrator’s technique of jumping from place to place to describe different encounters between actors in oddly segregated spaces presents an obstacle for us in our imagination of spatial networks. Using Latour’s argument in conjunction with other spatial arguments will allow us to reassemble the social here and see how these spaces as well as the sub-plots are in fact connected.

In the study of literature, theorists have more freedom to ask questions about textual representations than traditional social scientists. There are a few instances in the novel where al-Aswany, in his eagerness to criticize social and political corruption in his city, assumes the role of social scientist. As such, he occasionally depicts groups in isolation, a problematic representation for our purpose. The problem of group formations that we encounter in the novel,
specifically in its representation of isolated spaces and disconnected groups as we have seen in the above juxtaposition of different restaurant scenes, presents us with the problem of group stagnation. For instance, while we are usually able to reassemble the social in different settings, there are other places in the novel where this becomes a challenge, mainly because spaces are closed. In this way, we may consider the author in his representation of these scenes as playing the role of the social scientist who seeks to direct socio-political criticism by juxtaposing different groups against each other to emphasize corrupt social and political practices in his country.

The social scientist, Latour argues, may be caught up in “‘hypostasizing’ society,” but so might any other individual (Latour 54). From here, using Latour’s argument about literary theory, we may free ourselves from these limiting representations. The literary theorist may study literature to “provide a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act” (54-55). In this sense, continues Latour, ANT may borrow “from narrative theories … their freedom of movement.” Another important point to consider here is that the author himself is also an actor (as is the reader, of course); his voice will come through in the narrator’s own voice. As such, the author, who has certainly “read a lot of novels and watch[ed] a lot of TV” will combine his personal associations and experiences with his narrative point of view (Latour 55), rendering his novel an account of agency. As “accounts of agency,” novels may use group formations to “map[] out for the benefit of the enquirer the anti-groups making up [the group’s] social world.” In so doing, the novel-as-agency “will constantly add new entities while withdrawing others as illegitimate” (56). In this way, the author may seek to present his narrative as social scientists are wont to present the domain of the social: as an uneven territory with ups and downs that can
never overlap (Latour 165). Here is where we need to flatten the socio-political landscapes in the novel in order to open space up.

With this in mind, our task as literary critics will be to observe how the author, as a source of agency, presents his characters with the purpose of designating groups and anti-groups. As we encounter different actors in the novel, we find that a number of them are presented as types similar to some of those presented in earlier Mahfouzian works. The descriptions of particular places (such as the restaurants we have seen) seem to perpetuate these actor stereotypes, thus isolating them from the spaces of other actors. The social scientist might pause at these scenes to make a statement or two about social forces at work, about power struggles, about the “dark powers pulling the strings,” before abandoning these scenes altogether. It is not that these scientists are at fault here; as Latour points out, “older social relations have been packaged in such a way as to seem to provide a ready explanation for many puzzling subjects.” As literary critics, in order to ensure that in our return to the actors to look for “aggregates” and to “trace connections” (Latour 22-23) between them we will not come up empty-handed, we may use a different view of the production of socio-political space in the Arab scene.

I make use of some of Lina Khatib’s arguments in *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (2006) to provide a useful insight regarding the conception of space in the Arab scene. Although Khatib’s study is limited to the cinema, she nevertheless lends my argument another perspective on space by allowing me to look at some of the influences on Arab writers’ imagination of their societies. Khatib addresses the “trialectics of space,” using Soja, Lefebvre, and Spivak to maintain that “First Space” (the physically mapped) is that which we perceive, “Second Space” is “where certain orders are imposed on space,” and “Third Space” is “the space of critical awareness” (Khatib 31). In Arab
cinema, *perceived* space “remains a tool of demarcation between the inside and the outside.” In this sense, the depiction of space becomes a problem in the Arab landscape in that it “erects walls to separate the inside from the outside and its Others.” Khatib describes this space as contradictory, arguing that “our relationship with [it] becomes ambivalent,” since “it is at once [depicted as] a fortress and a carnival.” Mobility of the actors is severely limited here, bounded as it is by the “generic aspects of the films” which emphasize the interiority of spaces. Such physical spaces, which Khatib describes as “womb-like, with narrow, interlocking winding roads that seem to protect the people living within the city,” appear to exclude other spaces (32-33).

Khatib explores how the cinema deploys spatial representations in order to illustrate the tensions between the nationalist and the fundamentalist uses of space; her critique of such spatial representations is useful in that it offers an alternative way of imagining space. Khatib draws our attention to spatial demarcation as a way in which to separate different groups or classes. In our argument, space cannot be rendered as one complex structure. Along the lines of Latour’s social networks and Massey’s coming together of trajectories, Malpas suggests here that we must not be tempted to describe “the grasp of this single, though complex structure [of space] as the grasp of a single ‘space’” (Malpas 69). If we do describe the structure as a single space in order to stress its “unity,” then we will inevitably overlook all of its contents, since this structure “encompasses irreducibly different, though interdependent, spatial structures” (69). So even if we were to view places as being “nested” within other places, this nesting inevitably opens them up to other places “within a larger spatial structure or framework of activity” (Malpas 105) or, as Latour has described it, within a spatial network. In encountering such places, we automatically encounter a larger network that is by no means unified. What enables us to grasp the complexity of space is the *movement*, or the *possibility* of movement, which would “enable the ordering of
things in space” (Malpas 166), which in turn allows us to understand space as that “within which the political can arise” (198).

While the author’s spatial demarcation here tends to limit the mobility of the actors operating within the confined spaces of the novel, this limitation need not extend to our own imaginative mobility as readers. In other words, if the actors themselves are restricted from moving to other spaces except in terms of how the author wills them to do so in his designation of group formations, as readers, we are not limited to the same confinement. Massey explains how the imagination of space is able to connect various spaces in terms of the network. For one, she maintains that space “can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established” and in which all places are linked to all other places (Massey 11-12). On the other hand, while seemingly isolated spaces such as we see in the novel do not connect geographically, they connect at another level of imagined space. Our role as imaginative readers will then be to deconstruct the novel’s demarcation of spaces in order to read the political in the text. While it may seem, in accordance with Khatib’s argument about perceived space, that the narrator occasionally fortifies space as a “tool of demarcation” separating the ‘classes’, 25 or isolating the corrupt (Khatib 33), the specificity of these representations needs to be reconsidered.

Massey deals with the problem of this specificity in terms of “the geographies of relations, and of the geographies of the necessity of their negotiation” (Massey 10). She argues that if no space or place is to be rendered as a “coherent seamless authenticity,” and if identities are relationally constructed, then it is our responsibility to bring “the potential geographies of our social responsibility” into the “politics of these geographies.” Space is always “a space of loose

25 I use the word “classes” cautiously, since Latour dissuades us from using such social “meta-language” when it comes to reassembling the social (Latour 36).
ends and missing links” (10-11) but never dead ends. In other words, while we may view some of the actors here as stereotypes, inasmuch as their spaces appear to be dead ends, it is the novel’s representation of these spaces that ultimately needs to be addressed, even if, when imagining these spaces, we must also take into account how and why the author, with his personal socio-political concerns, has chosen to render them. In so doing, we may be able to reconstruct a socio-political narrative that frees us from such “tools of demarcation.” Thus it is that as readers, we are also actors in action constantly involved in the production of space. By bringing our own associations into the text, we too become mediators as we interact with the text to produce new meanings of the social. If we come up against any loose ends, any uncertainties, or any ambivalence, this only furthers our understanding of the political and the social and opens gateways into the future. Therefore, while the author might choose to isolate actors and spaces, in one way or the other they are connected; these restaurant spaces, inasmuch as the work intends them to represent isolated segments of society, are inadvertently linked in our own imaginations.

**Part 6. Come into my “office”: Transgressing the Building spaces**

The way in which spaces are intricately connected is also configured in the Building metaphor. Here, the Building structure offers us a new way of looking at socio-political relationships. While the Building appears, by virtue of its walls, to isolate residents of different classes from one another, its walls are fractured and decaying and socio-political isolation is no longer feasible. In the first part of this chapter, I began with a description of the Building overlooking a complexity of interweaving locales. In order to trace the actors’ associations in the spaces of the novel, we must visit the Building’s complexity to reassemble the social. To situate that complexity within the terms of my study, I make use of David Kolb’s spatial
argument to describe the Yacoubian Building. According to Kolb, author of *Sprawling Places* (2008), as a complex place, a building has “multiple roles, forces, norms, processes, internal spatial divisions, and external links to other kinds of places that bring together multiple forces and systems” (Kolb 54). We find in the novel that some of the Yacoubian Building’s residents (depending on their means, craftiness, and skill) will either choose to change the function of their living compartments to better suit their needs (thus going against the social norms of the places they inhabit), or else will attempt to take over more space, or will have different interactions with other residents or with people from outside the Building context, or will simply move out to new spaces. There is no unity to the Building, other than in its “perceived character” as Kolb would put it (51). The Building, to continue with Kolb’s argument, is certainly no “structurally simple place” that “embodies only one pattern of life composed of roles that don’t interact much” (57); rather, it is a more complex structure. According to Kolb, a building may manifest “interwoven multiplicities of kinds of life with more potential for conflicting internal tensions” (57). Because the novel’s Building is associated with multiple narratives (histories, human emotions, and dreams), it has a certain “historical density” that Kolb associates with older buildings (74-75). To use Kolb’s argument to describe the Building, we find that it bears traces upon traces of evolving patterns that also “[shape] the identity of [its] people and the social roles in [its] place” (75).

As one of the inhabitants of the Building, Zaki Bey’s use of his apartment reflects several aspects of Kolb’s argument about the function of a building. The Bey initially sets up one of the apartments in the Building as an engineering office. Before long, however, the office ceases to function as an office, but becomes a place where the Bey “spends his free time each day reading the newspapers, drinking coffee, meeting friends and lovers, or sitting for hours on the balcony
contemplating the passersby and traffic on Suleiman Basha” (5). Kolb might explain this phenomenon as an example of how social practices may often ignore the architectural design of a certain place: “Sometimes the social norms will ignore or go against the architectural effects in the place, as may happen when a new institution is founded in an older building” (Kolb 44). Kolb shows how, for instance, an “office building could become an apartment house, and in that conversion some elements of the building would not change” (88). Distinguishing between the “operative form” and the “functional unity” of a building, Kolb explains that a building (or any architectural structure for that matter) may continue to operate as a building, but its function, or the goals for which it was initially erected, may change (88). Zaki Bey’s transformation of the apartment space first into an office and then into a social lounge does not involve much difficult labour, but it does exemplify an important point about how changes in spatial functionality reflect associations constantly in motion.

It is true that the purpose of the apartment has changed over time, but what is important is not that Zaki Bey has made functional changes to his apartment; as an actor, he is also making new associations, just as we saw him do on the street. We are concerned not only with how he modifies the places he occupies, but with the pattern of traces left in the wake of his associations, for it is these patterns that enable us to reassemble the social. It is not that his disillusionment and ennui have rendered him capable of finding new uses for the spaces he deems worthless in that they have outlived their practical function (if they had any to begin with); rather, through his renewed associations, he has transgressed what we perceive to be the ‘social norms’ of his domain. With his shifting associations between his clientele and the odds and ends with which he redecorates his office, what was once a public space has now become private. But along the way, by transforming his apartment to an office then to a harem, the Bey
has also transgressed some kind of social code. With the movement of this transgression, a number of important socio-political traces are left behind.

Transgression is both a spatial and a socio-political movement; as such, it impacts the spatial sphere, the actor’s identity, and the associations he makes with other actors. In his recent book *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (2008), literary critic Julian Wolfreys has provided a relevant account of the movement of transgression and situated it within the spatial sphere. According to Wolfreys, transgression is not only the “breaking of a code” or a “rebellion against normative social or cultural constraints.” Transgression is what gives us our identity and our own “sense of subjectivity” (1). Citing Foucault, Wolfreys explains that transgression involves a crossing and recrossing of a line that “closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration” (130). Transgression is only apparent through its movement – “an incessant spiral” – that makes room for “the entirety of a temporally evanescent alternative ‘space’” (133). This ceaseless movement also maps out a space for transgression “through the discontinuous but constant tracing of narratives and other trajectories across lines that are already marked as the topography that transforms” (133).

As a transgressor, Zaki Bey is not only breaking a number of rules within the space of his apartment, but he is also venturing to and from a number of spaces. With each venture, his movement causes a spatial shift. Linking Wolfrey’s notion of transgression to Latour’s spatial sites, we may define the spiral movement of transgression in terms of a form which “circulates from site to site” (Latour 222). In Latour’s flattened landscapes where “no jumping is allowed,” we may consider the spiral movements of transgression as forms, as “simply something which allows something else to be transported from one site to another.” With each formal shift from site to site, “each site has to pay the connection with another site through some displacement”
The displacement caused by the transportation of this “something” (which in this case is the movement of transgression) brings out the meaning of the social. This idea becomes clearer in Zaki Bey’s transformation of his office space.

The Bey transforms his office into a place where he temporarily resides as lord and master; this is made possible by the addition of certain domestic and entertainment features (such as a bed and alcohol) and his employment of Abaskharon, a lowly Christian servant of dubious origins. We characterize these spatial modifications as transgressions. What Wolfreys offers here is a different way of conceptualizing space to negotiate its openness as a site of transgression. In its evanescence, the movement of transgression reflects the fleetingness of Latour’s “moment when new associations are sticking the collective together” to construct the social (Latour 159). Furthermore, the constant changes the Bey undertakes and undergoes through his transgressions constitute part of a narrative which, through its spatiality and temporality, is positioned “in relation to other trajectories or stories” (Massey 12). On the spatial quality of transgression and its role in constructing new social meaning, Kevin Hetherington in *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics* (1998) similarly argues that transgression is a spatial act, and that “acts of transgression” do not signal social rupture “but involve an interplay between challenging society and ordering new social practices” (Hetherington 149). “Social practices” necessitate the constant formation of new associations between actors, and we find that with the Bey’s example, there is no shortage of either “social practices” or new associations. The Bey’s engagements with his female friends, his servant, and the objects in his room are examples of associations, some of which become mediators where socio-political meaning is radically changed (Latour).
Kolb’s argument regarding the complexity of the building space allows us to distinguish between the intended use of space and how that space is actually used in a building, as we find in the Bey’s office. More importantly, the intended functionality of space that Kolb discusses serves to highlight the nature of transgression, a movement which in turn allows for the opening of space and the construction of a new social identity. My emphasis on Zaki Bey as he moves from the street to the restaurant to his apartment/office as a “moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward [him]” (Latour 46) exemplifies the reassembling of the social through the traces left behind by the swarms of associations he makes along the way. As I mentioned before, if these associations are intermediaries, they may indicate minor socio-political changes; when they become mediators, change is more sharply pronounced. Our imagination of the space of the actors as an open and moving locus of trajectories (Massey) makes it possible to include many more social entities and thus observe more associations already made and in the making.

**Part 7. Servants and subaltern spaces**

As we move on to the more inconspicuous spatial narratives in the novel, our imagining of space offers yet another way of studying the political. Massey urges us to consider space as “constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny.” As a “sphere of possibility” in which multiplicity exists in all its plurality, space is “never finished; never closed,” and it is this imagining of space as the sphere or locus of “stories-so-far” that serves to open up space as the “very sphere of the political” (Massey 9). Social and political theory need to be spatialised in order to “force into [our] imagination a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell” (11). From a historical perspective, for instance, our imagination of globalization today overlooks the existence of “other histories” as well as other potential futures; this imagination needs to be
countered by an imagination of space as an open system in order to “escape the inexorability which so frequently characterises the grand narratives related by modernity” (11). It is not that we should replace the “single history” of modernity’s narrative with “no history”\footnote{According to Massey, structuralism’s attempt at dealing with the temporal was to “hold the world still” in order to “analyse its structure,” thus prioritizing space over time (Massey 36).}; rather, we need to “replace the single history with many” (14). We saw in the examples of the Baeheiler Passage and of the restaurants how history is constantly being reconstructed, and how it becomes, in turn, an actor of its own accord that takes part in the numerous associations occurring. These associations transform our understanding of Egypt’s socio-political reality.

Our understanding of space as a meeting point of trajectories demands a complete revision of histories, one that does not “[understand] geographical differences as being constituted primarily through isolation and separation.” The opening of space in this way brings “distinct temporalities into new configurations,” thus setting off social progress (Massey 68). The narratives that unfold in this space will not be about pre-established identities, “but about interaction and the process of the constitution of identities” (71).

I would like to look at another way in which history may be revised through spatial interactions by studying the roles of three servants in the novel in order to understand how, as actors, they shake up our understanding of the historical and political through their spatial narratives. The first servant is the nameless Nubian waiter we encounter in Maxim’s Restaurant, the second is Idris, the steward in Hatim Rasheed’s home when the latter was a boy, and the third is Abashkaron, Zaki Bey’s servant. In discussing these actors, I use their narratives to redefine the role of the ‘subaltern’ in the novel, and to address the issues of identity recognition and trust which figure significantly in the construction of particular histories that redefine the present and shape the future. To begin with the case of the Nubian waiter, he appears at first as a fleeting
textual instance of how the subaltern might be overlooked as a mere shadow in the text. In the example of Maxim’s Restaurant, I explained that the waiter was made to appear as part of the decor of the place, his part being nothing more than an exotic prop accentuating the old money ambience of the establishment. His apparent role in the novel is to cater to the whims and appetites of other actors who in turn attempt to recover the roles they have lost with the turning pages of Egyptian history. Our textual experience of the Nubian is limited to this perception of him as hovering in the shadows: there and not there. Nameless, voiceless, and dark, the waiter is briefly juxtaposed in terms of his exoticness against the lighter background of a more colourful, European-influenced setting.

The accentuated difference between the waiter and his surroundings requires a closer look at the Nubian’s spatial narrative and how it threatens the narrative’s ordering of space. We must read against the grain here to go beyond the narrator’s forced confinement of the Nubian in the shadows to understand how spaces may become spaces of resistance. Using Craig Ireland’s argument about the subaltern will be useful to see how the subaltern may be spatially confined. In *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience: Self Identity, Late Modernity, and the Politics of Immediacy* (2004), Craig Ireland cautions against de-historicizing the subaltern. Experience, argues Ireland, must be considered historically for a number of reasons, most important of which is that “sociohistorical developments … helped the term experience gain currency in the first place in both academic discourse and daily practices.” Experience, he continues, “must first be considered in terms of its sociohistorical conditions of possibility before it can be either debunked or rehabilitated, let alone put to political, cultural, or aesthetic use.” In its focus on immediacy of experience, continues Ireland, subaltern studies has too often negated history in its call for “counterhistories” which “have yet to be written.” Any approach, in fact, “that hoped
that the mere fact of being positioned in the larger social whole as a subaltern was a sufficient condition of possibility for a certain form of consciousness” was doomed to failure (11).

Ireland’s argument serves two purposes here: first, it allows me to study the subaltern while maintaining a historical foothold; secondly, it dissuades me from cocooning the subaltern within inaccessible spaces, an isolation that will defeat the purpose of my study.

The waiter in this section of the novel is simply described as “Nubian,” but the narrator does not elaborate on his origins. In his discussion in “Afrocentric Perspectives on Race Relations in Dynastic Egypt” (2004), Richard A. Lobban questions the representation of the Nubian identity in modern Egyptian literature. Lobban asks, “Are the ‘Nubian slaves’ appearing in Egyptian texts … actually Nubians in the modern sense or are they Nuba who are from much further south [of Egypt]?” (37). The origins of the Nubian are never addressed in the novel; however, in depicting the Nubian as a waiter, the narrator plays the subtle role of what Maurita Poole in “Distinctive Tastes: Aesthetic Prejudice in Contemporary Egypt” (2004) calls “cultural racism.” Here, “literature” along with “other cultural forms” may subtly use racial semantics “where the language of culture and nation invokes a hidden racial narrative” (267). Is the author a “cultural racist” in this sense? Is he trying to “assert [his] cultural superiority to others?” (267). The author’s juxtaposition of the Nubian against the former Egyptian elite society designates the former elite’s sense of cultural superiority, which is not necessarily the author’s.

Still, as Ireland cautions, simply positioning the subaltern in the sphere of the social could never be “a sufficient condition of possibility for a certain form of consciousness” (Ireland 11). Even the accentuated portrayal of group differences could not suffice to “strike a blow, either philosophically or politically, against tyranny” (21). According to Ireland, while the sociological focus on experience initially was to permit the “subject to reenter history” (8), what was really
needed was not a return to history as such, but a return to the ways in which “historical processes or phenomena … continue to inform our self-understanding” (185). In other words, acknowledging the existence of the other by simply accentuating his racial differences in order to fit him into a social structure does not enable us to reassemble the social as Latour envisions it. In this sense, perceiving the Nubian waiter in terms of analyzing his Nubian heritage would not allow us to grasp the ways in which history shapes our self-understanding. We would not, as Massey explained it, be making room for a “genuine multiplicity of trajectories, and thus potentially of voices” (Massey 55), nor would we, as Latour put it, be “retool[ing] our disciplines to become again sensitive to the noise [other entities] make and to try to find a place for them” (Latour 262). Neither entrenching the subject in his history nor de-historicizing the subject altogether would allow for a true recognition of the other; only a reconfiguration of the social can do that. So even if the novel makes no further comment on the Nubian waiter, his spatial narrative will be shouldered by the next servant.

The novel’s vague depiction of the Nubian waiter is countered by its representation of Idris, Hatim Rasheed’s Nubian steward, setting an excellent example of how the subaltern may escape his cocoon (a cocoon that social scientists have been endlessly over-analyzing) to return to space as a full-fledged actor. The novel’s introduction of Idris serves to unsettle, but not invert, the power dichotomy illustrated in the association between the previous Nubian waiter and his employees. Hatim Rasheed’s father returns from the West to apply his learning “within Egyptian academia.” Unlike the Bey, Hatim’s father becomes a prominent intellectual figure in his country with much “reverence for the great Western values” and much “ignorance of the nation’s heritage and contempt for its customs” (al-Aswany 73). Together with his French wife and their only son, the nuclear family “lived a life that was European in both form and essence”
Since both parents work, Hatim is left alone for the most part at the manor with the influential manservant, Idris. With his “white caftan, broad red cummerbund and tall fez, and his tall, strong, slim body, his handsome brown face, his intelligent, bright eyes, and his beaming smile,” Idris would entertain the child with his translations of fantastic Nubian tales, with stories about his own childhood in the village, and with accounts about his parents and siblings who had been taken from him when he was old enough to work (74-75). Gradually, despite Hatim’s initial confusion, Idris is able to coax the child into a homosexual relationship, so gently that, thinking back as a man on his initial homosexual experience, Hatim “cannot remember feeling any distress at all” (75). When the mother lays some servants off after her husband’s death, Idris disappears without a trace and Hatim launches into his secret life of homosexuality, searching amongst his lovers for the image of “the rough-hewn, primitive male whom civilization had not refined” and for the “hardness, crudity, and vigor that such a man represented” (76).

It is this memory of Idris that attracts Hatim to the married police officer Abduh. With his “dark brown face, his thick lips, his snub Negroid nose, and the heavy eyebrows that gave his face its stern cast” (al-Aswany 77), Abduh is not unlike Idris in appearance. The turbulent homosexual relationship is sustained with Hatim’s financial adoption of Abduh, although it is clear that the latter, to whom Hatim “would cling like a frightened child, nuzzling his coarse brown skin like a cat and telling him about…his childhood, his father and his French mother, and his first beloved, Idris” (131), is more of the adoptive parent in the relationship. Hatim’s success as a journalist is threatened by his burning need for security and a settled life, which he attempts to enact with Abduh. But in his darker hours, Hatim secludes himself at home, feeling suicidal and spending his time drinking and remembering his parents with “resentment and hatred” (182). Hatim’s violent end at the hands of his lover comes when Abduh, shattered by his son’s death.
and by his feelings of religious guilt, meets up for a final sexual tryst with Hatim before killing him (235-37).

Hatim’s embracing of the modern lifestyle in terms of both his sexual activity and his left-leaning intellectuality clashes violently with the traditional values he comes up against in his associations with other actors. These associations will be the part of the social I wish to scrutinize at this point. If we slip for a moment into the role of the social scientist here, we may view Hatim as an actor at once situated in two places: the modern and the traditional. To describe Hatim using the argument of the prominent social scientist Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), we may say that Hatim’s modern life-style is not characterized by any “sureties of tradition and habit,” but by “the certitude of rational knowledge” (Giddens 2-3). However, his associations with Idris and Abduh cannot simply be written off as associations with the “traditional” simply because both Idris and Abduh are described as having Negroid characteristics. Instead, his relationship with the two prominent lovers in his life shakes up our understanding of the modern and the traditional even as it reconfigures the role of the subaltern. Giddens’s emphasis on trust as one of the displacers of rational certainty furthers my argument more effectively than his differentiation between the traditional and the modern. As it were, rational knowledge in this sense can never replace trust, which is “a crucial generic phenomenon of personality development” (Giddens 3). So although he attempts to create “a full and satisfying existence” (9) for himself, Hatim’s rejection by his parents and his fluctuating moments of despair deny him that security modern rational knowledge attempts to provide. To use Giddens’ argument, in Hatim’s case trust is not established in his youth, and since trust is inevitably linked to the way in which we organize time and space, the associations established in the individual’s youth follow
that individual for the rest of his life (Giddens 38). Because trust functions as a major
determinant in the associations actors make, it complicates Latour’s network theory and
Massey’s spatial sphere, neither of which really addresses the concept of trust in determining
actor relationships. As we will later see, the way in which power relations are spatially
configured in Hatim’s case has very much to do with these issues of trust and dependency.

When attuned to the issue of trust in actor relations, socio-spatial rhetoric helps us trace
the new associations that allow the subaltern to win back his rightful role in society. In the
moment when trust is displaced and panic sets in, the political emerges as a movement that
capitalizes on the brief shifting of boundaries. In other words, the formation of the political
relies on the shiftiness of social boundaries. To this effect, in Geographies of Exclusion (1995),
David Sibley explains that “moral panics” highlight the boundaries between the powerless and
the empowered (Sibley 43). Sibley discusses how actors may stage an inversion of these two
roles as a means of protest, thus “rais[ing] consciousness of oppression” (43-44). Parody
becomes a form of inversion here, symbolizing revolt, which in turn gains “political currency”
(44-45). Sibley characterizes this inversion of power as the oppressed’s “challenge [of the]
domination of space” by those in power (46). Those authorities have mapped out the spaces
“according to which some groups or peoples are deemed not to belong over a long historical time
period” (49). Idris’s transgression into the private spaces of Hatim illustrates not an inversion
but an unsettling of power, thus forcing a renegotiation of the political as well as a reconstruction
of the historical. Hatim’s trust in the servant manifests itself “in an inclusive, heterogeneous,
dangerously unstable zone” where (those deemed) civilized make close contact with (those
deemed) uncivilized (Sibley 51). It is in the instability of this zone that the novel demonstrates
its own politics.
Hatim’s relationship with Idris, which he attempts to re-enact with Abduh, challenges the rejection of humanity in servant-master relationships, thus making space for a new political configuration. According to Sibley, it is “through political action [that] the humanity of the rejected will be recognized and the images of defilement discarded” (Sibley 69). This political action as demonstrated in the master-servant relationship is not inverted in the case of Hatim and Idris; rather, it leads to a “moderation of the system” (76). The hegemonic system that seeks to order space here is moderated when Idris brings his own associations into his relationship with Hatim by sharing with him his Nubian cultural heritage. Similarly, through the sexual and emotional association between the two, history regains its currency in space as a new entity which unbalances the traditional master-servant equation. Idris’s accounts of his past not only bring into the present historical narratives of oppression; these stories are also personal and subjective. Thus, the personalization of these historical narratives, Idris’s own feelings for the boy, and the boy’s trust in the servant, make room for even more voices and new trajectories. It is within this newly-discovered space that we return to the ways in which “historical processes or phenomena … continue to inform our self-understanding” (Ireland 185). That is why, when Hatim attempts to force Abduh into complete submission (which Abduh violently refuses), the former’s role is violently terminated; Hatim’s desire to restore the servant-master relationship in his adulthood through his association with Abduh is no longer permitted. More importantly, the political, like the subaltern, resituates itself in a space where present trajectories converge with past ones. In this space, the subaltern can no longer be relegated into the past; it has come back to reassert itself in the present by unsettling power relationships. Through this displacement, the political projects itself into the future in a new representation of the subaltern.
Abashkaron is another example of how power relationships can never be settled except through a reconsideration of the political in this newly-defined space. We meet Abashkaron early on, when the Bey arrives at his office after the leisurely promenade with which the novel begins. Abaskharon, who “had learned to understand [Zaki Bey’s] moods at a single glance,” hastens to enhance the office interior in preparation for the arrival of a female visitor by enhancing the ambience of the social quarters (al-Aswany 8). Thus the servant sweeps the reception room, injects his master with an “imported Tri-B vitamin supplement,” and feeds his master coffee, opium, and alcohol in readiness for the latter’s anticipated sexual tryst (8-9). Zaki Bey’s experience with his servant, however, also reflects the former’s failure to uphold his aristocratic role. As Zaki Bey looks at Abashkaron’s “striped flannel gallabiya, torn in numerous places, at his crutches and his amputated leg, at his aged face and the grizzled stubble on his chin, at his cunning, narrow eyes and the familiar unctuous, scared smile that never left him” (8), he is blind to (or perhaps chooses not to see) his servant’s resentment toward him (later on in the novel, we will find Abaskharon plotting with his brother Malak on ways to deceive Zaki Bey into signing off the ownership of his office).

Abaskharon, in his poor traditional Egyptian garb, would never have been allowed to venture into downtown Cairo in its better days. He is likened to a cockroach that has managed to crawl its way into the dilapidated ruins of the Building:

Thus, in the midst of the quiet darkness that reigns over the apartment during the daylight hours and of the ancient musty smell that emanates from the mixing of the scent of old furniture with that of the damp … in this “medium,” when Abaskharon emerges from one of the corners of the apartment with his crutches, his ever-dirty galabiyya, his aged hang-
dog face, and his ingratiating smile, he seems like a creature functioning effectively in its natural surroundings, like a fish in water, or a cockroach in the drain. (25-26)

Like the cockroach he is compared to, the actor scuttles “odd and out of place” in the sunny streets outside the building; his insect-like “integrity is restored only when he returns to the office where he has spent two decades concealed in darkness and damp” (26). The servant has waited twenty years for his opportunity to invade the spaces of the aristocracy. With the decay of the noblesse, as we saw earlier in the Bey’s depiction on the street, the opportunity to enter these formerly-inhabited spaces finally comes. David Sibley provides an interesting analysis of the “bestial” that helps illuminate the preceding description of Abaskharon in this context.

The author’s use of the vermin metaphor to describe Abashkaron in regards to his invasion of space is interesting as it also serves to unsettle master-servant relationships and bring the subaltern back into view. Regarding the use of the bestial metaphor in social spaces, Sibley argues that vermin such as “rats, pigs and cockroaches” have always played a specific role in “racist bestiary because all are associated with residues – food waste, human waste.” These creatures appear in “spaces which border civilized society, particularly subterranean spaces like sewers, which also channel residues and from which they occasionally emerge to transgress” social boundaries (Sibley 28). In this way, Abashkaron has crawled out of the woodwork of “subterranean spaces,” but the author does not perpetuate this negative stereotype; a cockroach he may be, but Abaskharon is nevertheless praised in the novel for his “strong will and precise goals that he will fight courageously and obstinately to achieve” (al-Aswany 26). The servant, through craftiness and cunning, coexists with his master not just as a human cockroach emerging from the cracks of a decaying social structure; the servant has always been in that space but has existed through different associations.
There is a liminal zone between the Bey and his servant characterized by the constant interplay between transgression and shifting boundaries. This zone keeps spatial negotiation alive and prevents the ordering of space. As Sibley points out, the elimination of the “liminal zone,” that space between social boundaries which is a constant source of anxiety, “is not always possible” (Sibley 33). Nor should it be, I argue, since the spiral movement of transgression, to recall Wolfreys’s explanation, is what gives us our identity and our own “sense of subjectivity” (Wolfreys 1). The nature of transgression here liberates space from “chains of meaning” which would otherwise close it up (Massey 19). Transgression is necessary for us to discern movements of the political. As such, transgression would not be possible without the presence of these zones. Transgression allows us to observe socio-political mobility; it offers future possibilities by presenting spaces of resistance we would not be able to discern outside of the liminal spaces. The spiral movement of Abashkaron’s transgressions, like those of the Bey, opens up “the entirety of a temporally evanescent alternative ‘space’” (Wolfreys 133), thus setting off “new social processes” (Massey 71). Through transgression’s movements, Wolfrey’s “alternative space” here allows us to observe Massey’s “constant open production of the topologies of power” in the context of “the wider power-geometries” (Massey 101-02). Such contextualization of these particular master-servant associations within geometries of power allows us to re-imagine the wider landscape of power topographies as they appear in other spaces, such as those of the restaurants. Now or in the future, transgression will always seep into ordered spaces through pockets of resistance. The novel shows that today’s dying classes may re-emerge in the future through other associations; similarly, the rising classes may in the future descend into the subterranean spaces of the dismissed and the forgotten. In no way, however, do actors – human and non-human alike – disappear.
Part 8. “I don’t have an organization!” Taha’s story between the group and the network

There is one more actor-network station I need to visit to open up the spatial sphere in al-Aswany’s novel and reassemble the social. From our spatial perspective, the narrative of Taha el Shazli is the most striking example of identity conflict in the novel. It is tempting, as I shall later illustrate, to adopt the role of the social scientist and attribute Taha’s end to his unfulfilled national dream and to class discrimination, but this perspective would never allow us to reassemble the social since it ignores the multiplicity of associations occurring in space. The young son of the Building doorkeeper has two dreams in life: to become a respectable police officer and to marry his childhood sweetheart Busayna. As he performs his morning prayers in his tiny “chamber” in one of the “the iron rooms” on the rooftop, he asks God to bring him hope and bounty. However, the “dim, small light on the roof” shining into his room (al-Aswany 15-16) does not bring with it much hope. He pursues his ambition by studying hard for the police admission tests and by befriending the local police officers because, “[s]ince childhood, he has dreamed of being a police officer and has devoted all his energies to realizing that dream” (16).

To what extent is Taha the patriotic and underprivileged citizen who has been oppressed by the corrupt powers in his country? How complex is his narrative, and, more importantly, what determines an individual’s thawra?

There are a number of factors that influence Taha’s trajectory; we may conceive of them here as the components of various associations he makes in the course of his short life. Consider, for example, how Taha’s education and his faith render him a candidate for a number of roles. Taha’s firm belief that “God would make all his dreams come true,” firstly because he does his best “to honour God’s commandments,” and secondly because “he had the highest expectations of God’s good intentions” (al-Aswany 20) gives him both confidence and high
expectations that he will achieve his goals in life. But when the day comes for Taha to sit for the interview, he stands before the Police Academy Building, “impressive and historic, as though it were the fortress of fate in which his destiny would be decided,” with “heavy worry weighing on his heart” (23). The Police Academy Building, which (until further notice) is now known as the Mubarak Police Academy, is yet another symbol of oppression in the novel. Indeed, the formidable structure appears as oppressive and unforgiving as the regime it supports. In these details, the novel foreshadows Taha’s fate and perhaps the fate of those young students today who recently died at the hands of the Egyptian police while rebelling against the government.

We wonder what will become of Taha if he is rejected by the academy; the associations he will make beyond the formidable doors have the potential to become powerful mediators because, for Taha, his entire future is at stake in those associations.

Another factor to consider is Taha’s social background. As the son of a doorkeeper, although he is educated, Taha remains an underprivileged citizen, constantly oppressed by those in power and those holding high positions in society. For instance, although Taha grudgingly performs menial tasks for the privileged citizens of the Building, and although they are aware of his outstanding academic success, in secret they share their insults and their annoyance, proclaiming that “jobs in the police, the judiciary, and sensitive positions in general should be given only to the children of people who were somebody,” and not to “the children of doorkeepers, laundrymen, and such like” (al-Aswany 18). The residents even go so far as to misquote the Prophet, proclaiming: “Teach not the children of the lowly!” (18). The senior

27 There is a great deal of irony in the naming and the renaming of the Police Academy. According to Dahsan of the New York Times, “The Mubarak Police Academy still maintains its name but already some are demanding it be renamed the ‘Khaled Said Police Academy’, after the young Alexandrian man killed by the police last year and whose death helped galvanize the Egyptian movement” (March 1, 2011). This is certainly an ironic twist linking the novel to the present times!
officers at the Police Academy likewise express blatant disdain for Taha even though he excels in his police exams. For both the privileged Building residents and the police officers, if Taha were to succeed, this would indicate an abnormal reversal of social roles that would serve only temporarily to “compensate for the [lower class’s] inferiority complexes” (al-Aswany 18).

The demise of Taha initially appears to be the result of his despair with the ‘system’ and his oppression. Recoiling from the brutality of the same regime he had aspired to join, Taha’s disillusionment about his country’s government is what seems to set him off on a trajectory of pain and despair, a path that culminates in his martyrdom at the end of the novel when he joins up with a radical Islamic group. But that is not the whole story; Taha’s associations leave numerous traces in their wake, and we need to use these traces to open up space and understand how the political takes shape. Going beyond the limiting theories of the social scientists, we are able to read more of the political in this regard. Different versions of classic and Western social theories that have been propagated by the Western world for years and have been borrowed by Arab theorists in their development of the Arab nation, often tend to lump people who come together for various reasons into homogeneous groups, without delving into the heterogeneities of each group, the differences between group members, and the specific movements that determine the true political nature of associations. The following reading of Taha’s narrative questions and complicates these assumptions. I focus extensively on this narrative since it combines most of the socio-political and spatial arguments I make in this chapter.

Taha’s narrative opens space up in a different manner as we come to a new understanding of the ways in which space brings together the social, the political, the bodily, and the textual through different associations. Reconfiguring the political in this sense yields an abundance of meaning which challenges the conventional ways of thinking about narratives such as Taha’s.
Especially in analyzing the nature of the group, Latour’s argument is very effective in how it complicates the actor’s movements towards and away from his group. On the other hand, social scientists, in their desire to label groups, define social forces, and categorize social movements, fail to reassemble the social before giving it a name. For one, the social cannot be determined simply in terms of “the nature of groups,” for the identity of actors is never limited to the identity of the group. Secondly, the “nature of actions” of any actor cannot be solely decided by one original goal, but by “a great variety of agents [which] seem to barge in and displace the original goals.” Thirdly, objects also function as agencies to take part in any given interaction (Latour 21-22). These reasons alone complicate both classic and contemporary social theories that seek to reduce both the social and the political to words such as “society,” “power,” “structure,” and “context” (Latour 22). These theories can only provide ready-made explanations for far more perplexing topics; our first goal in reassembling the social here is to recognize that “there is no relevant group that can be said to make up social aggregates” (Latour 29), simply because it is not the group itself that we must consider, but its “formations [which] leave many more traces in their wake than already established connections” (31). Similarly, we must not rush into a search for the actor’s “source of action” (a point I stressed earlier), but we must hold on to our uncertainties regarding the sources of action (47). Latour’s argument is not meant to dismiss the role of the social scientists. Rather, as he contends, “it’s precisely because [social scientists] are so good at calibrating the social world that they are ill-adjusted in following associations made of many non-social entities” (248). The reassembling of the social that takes place in our perusal of socio-political associations in the movements of today’s Arab world destabilizes the hegemony of Western discourses and unsettles the metaphors of thawra as they have been presented by orientalists and neo-orientalists.
Similarly, our envisioning of space beyond the ordering of, for example, national discourses, allows us to situate actor associations in an ever-widening spatial sphere. Massey’s envisioning of space as a “locus” where countless trajectories fluctuate in ever-changing patterns allows us to extend space to different dimensions whereby power relations must be readdressed so as to make room for a new vision of the political. In her argument regarding the local versus the global, for instance, Massey urges us to do away with the “ politicisation” of power (Massey 103) and to re-examine the relationship between “power and “resistance” so that space becomes an ensemble of intersecting and non-intersecting narratives (130). Through this reconceptualization of space, a new political agenda is offered “where there can be no assumption of pre-given coherence or collective identity.” Space necessitates constant negotiation and a challenging but needed “invention” where we are implicated in “the lives of human others, and in our relationships with non-humans.” Our new configuration of the political here draws on the element that any entity may contribute to the social (the human actor, the body, or the text itself) as “collectively produced through practices which form relations” (141). The political must focus on these practices and relations. The politicisation of power is often the result of authoritative spatial representation, as I will discuss extensively in Chapter Four.

To designate here the effect of authoritative spatial representation, I refer to J. B. Harley’s chapter “Deconstructing the Map” in the edited collection The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography (2002). Harley argues that one should not represent space authoritatively, for such representations “may be laden with concealed exaggerations and omissions serving, intentionally or no, to advance the representor’s assumptions and interests at the expense of others” (277). To bring together the novel’s narratives, we must first reconstruct space and the social non-authoritatively in the terms
outlined by Massey, Latour, and Harley. My goal in reading the final narrative of Taha is to unsettle authoritative representations of space and thus renegotiate the political in this regard. To avoid getting caught up in questions about the sources of this actor’s actions, I use Latour, who suggests that we focus in our reassembling of the social on “face-to-face interactions” as “terminus point[s] of a great number of agencies swarming toward them” (Latour 196). Therefore, as we trace connections rather than obvious causes, these connections drop into the foreground chains of motions and translations between “loci rather than the loci themselves.” In other words, whatever action stems at a specific point in place and time always emanates from “many other places, many distant materials, and many faraway actors” (200). At the same time, however, it is difficult to view simultaneously all of these participating actors (201), for while some actors are more “pressing” than others as they clamour to be heard, others sink into muteness in that cacophony. What we are left with is a “bewildering array of participants” taking part in the same face-to-face interactions, an array that dislodges boundaries that may be said to be local or global (202). For this reason, we must focus on “what circulates” in space in order to locate other agencies “whose displacements were barely visible before” (205). Rather than look at direct sources of action, we locate the ties, the “large network of attachments making [an actor] act” (217).

In this manner, as I have pointed out, I will study Taha’s spatial narrative at three levels: the textual, the bodily, and the social/political. A good point to start off with in readdressing the larger “network of attachments” in Taha’s situation is at a textual level (i.e., representations of texts – or even, as we will see, the absence of texts – in the novel). At one point in the novel, Taha decides to write a letter of protest to the Egyptian President. When Taha complains to Busayna that, had he known the sons of doorkeepers were not permitted to apply, he would never
have done so in the first place, his anger is directed at “them,” but it is never clear who they are (al-Aswany 59). For this reason, Busayna bitterly tells him: “Complain about who and to who?” (60). In a powerful moment of textual revelation, al-Aswany literally lays bare a gaping space on a page of his novel at the precise moment when Taha “applied himself diligently to writing” his letter of complaint (61). Breaking this moment of silence, the authorial voice intervenes here to say: “I have left this space empty because I couldn’t think what to write in it” (61). The author’s technique of leaping from scene to scene opens an escape route for him to leave the bewildered Taha at his desk with pen and paper in hand in order to pick up Zaki Bey’s story right after. And although Taha does end up writing his letter (68), the response from the Presidential Public Complaints administration is polite but clear: Taha’s case has been reviewed, but his “complaint is unfounded” (79).

This textual gap, fraught with suspense as it is, opens up space by allowing us to think about, question and complicate the relationship between the actor’s identity and the agency the author (whether intentionally or not) permits that actor to exercise. Taha feels he has been wronged, and that by writing the letter to the President he will somehow right that wrong. As he moves as an actor to repair the damage done him by writing the letter, he faces a blank space. We may think of the textual gap in the novel as being a narrative in itself, an opening up of space that forces us to consider not one addressee, but a “bewildering array of participants” (Latour 202) taking part in associations with Taha and with other actors. It is Taha’s movement towards writing the letter that constitutes the political, because that movement indicates a shifting of associations. The ensuing silence of the text signals a momentary confusion – a dispersal of associations – before new associations are assembled again differently later on in the novel. When Taha lays blame on the ‘system’ for his rejection by the Police Academy, he believes at
some level that his nation is responsible for his well-being, that his government owes him the right to a life where he has a job and a family. But, maddeningly abstract, this ‘system’ is not something we can define because it does not exist. It is, to be sure, a convenient term – one that al-Aswany himself uses in his criticism of the Egyptian government. In a far more complex manner, however, the novel plays its own politics here, showing us that this system is more of a broad conglomeration of associations difficult to follow except through the traces they leave behind.

On a different level (socio-political), we witness the construction of the social in Taha’s movements through the Cairo University to the edges of the desert and right back to a little Egyptian street where he dies. In a second endeavour, Taha’s attempt to seek social equality and continue along another career path leads him to study economics and political sciences at Cairo University. Regarding Taha’s political views, however, the associations he makes at the Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences of Cairo University show us how the political is rarely defined through pre-existing affiliations. As Hetherington points out, we must observe identities “in their own situated practices, rather than seeing them on another level as an indication of social changes that might come about through their activities” (Hetherington 11). The novel’s following description of the faculty, “associated in people’s minds with affluence and chic,” is of great relevance to this point:

No one knows the reasons behind this mystique that surrounds the faculty. It may be because it was created separately, many years after the other faculties, that it acquired a special cachet, or because the government established it specifically – or so they say – so that the daughter of the Leader, Gamal Abd el Naser, could go to it, or because the

28 In the Introduction I point out that in several interviews, al-Aswany frequently describes the revolution in terms of an uprising against a damaged or non-functional “system,” although what constitutes this system is never clear.
political sciences put those who study them in close daily contact with world events, which lends a certain stamp to their way of thinking and behaving, or finally perhaps because this faculty was for a long time the royal gateway to a job in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the children of the great would join it as a sure first step to a diplomatic career. (al-Aswany 89)

The elite and politicized ambience of the Faculty description is dismaying, although the author does cite different circumstances surrounding its construction and also assures us that Taha has no concerns about the ambience when he first enters the faculty (89). However, the socio-political account of the Faculty’s construction is problematic, for it suggests an authoritative ordering of space that relies on binary oppositions between “the children of the great” and the other, less fortunate students. To “try and theorize [space] from such a position – a position that is both privileged and partial but blind to its own partiality – is to miss what is happening among the detail” (Hetherington 11). In other words, we must avoid regarding the Faculty space here merely in terms of social dichotomies between privileged students (potentially the future holders of political power) and the underprivileged (those who will not likely play powerful socio-political roles), for insisting on such binary oppositions means assuming a partial position on space. On the other hand, viewing space in terms of a network counters this partial positioning. Hetherington explains here that the “network of identity politics” functions to blur “[mainstreams] and alternativeness” (Hetherington 13). Identity politics has not only to do with mainstream activism or education, but also with the “relationship between belonging, recognition or identification and difference.” Moreover, identity formation “is not only achieved through identification with groups of individuals who share a common outlook but also through recognizable performative repertoires that are expressive and embodied” (17). These
“performative repertoires” are not always easily recognized, nor are their expressions and embodiments obviously represented.

While we anticipate from the novel’s description of the Faculty that Taha will face the same discrimination he experiences elsewhere by virtue of his social class, we must also consider his personal aspirations, as they are important factors in the associations he makes. His dream of becoming an officer “strutting proudly in his beautiful uniform” and moving “to a suitable apartment in an up-market district far from the noise and dirt of the roof” (al-Aswany 20), and his attitude towards the wealthy residents of the Building (19), reflect a strong desire on Taha’s part to join up with the very group of people he passionately resents. Taha is entitled to these sentiments, but it is important to acknowledge how these sentiments bear on his future relationships in the University space. In this regard, both the social and the political are under construction here; the Faculty is a space where intellectual exchange and social associations are intensely concentrated. Like the Building, the Faculty brings people from different places into close proximity with one another. Unlike the Building, however, this uncomfortable proximity is not buffered by the physical boundaries of concrete walls and separate storeys, nor is it regulated by any implied codes of conduct. Within the confines of the University, a number of tensions and conflicts arise within actor networks; it is important to frame the argument with which I study the network in this case.

At the Faculty, since the formation of new associations between different actors both inside and outside the campus may imply a sort of resistance movement, closer observation is needed to determine against what or whom this thawra is directed. Usually, some movements are studied at the level of the group. We must differentiate here between the general patterns of groups and the patterns of movements of individuals towards and away from these groups. In
doing so, we must also pay close attention to authoritative representations of groups not only by social scientists but also by group spokespersons. We must consider that the social scientist’s study of groups usually relies on the durability of group boundaries, boundaries often proclaimed by group spokespersons (Latour 31). As we study group formations, we must follow the traces these formations leave behind, and not the group itself. The problem with designating groups in terms of group boundaries here is that as soon as the groups are traced, “other groupings are designated as being empty, archaic, dangerous, obsolete, and so on.” Such a strategy renders the actors themselves as mere “informants” who “have to be taught what is the context ‘in which’ they are situated and ‘of which’ they see only a tiny part, while the social scientist, floating above, [purportedly] sees the ‘whole thing’” (32). In this case, while the University may nurture the growth of social alliances, polarize political leanings, politicize religious affiliations, and intensify personal conflicts, as inquirers we must remain, as Latour tells us, “one reflexive loop behind those [we] study” (33).

Taha’s identification with a new organization is not a countermove to establish his identity, but a gradual and complicated process, subconscious at a number of levels. The factors that inform Taha’s shifting associations come in different forms, and there is no doubt that personal and emotional aspects play significant roles. For Taha, the political or religious affiliations he commits himself to, of whatever kind, always seem to have, at their roots, personal grievances. Thus to understand how and why Taha is swept up in the undercurrents of political change, we must understand how his personal values of commitment take shape and develop at a spatial level. When Taha first sets foot in the University campus, he experiences a personal sense of scorn (brought about by his own feelings of inadequacy alongside his upper class university peers), and a strong sense of inferiority. From the onset, he “felt that he was
something extremely small in the midst of a terrible congregation” (al-Aswany 90). For this reason, he strives in his shabby clothes to “sit far away at the highest point in the lecture hall, as though hiding himself in a safe place from which he could see everyone without their seeing him” (90).

Since the Faculty classroom does not offer Taha the opportunity to hide himself from upper class individuals, he tries instead to create a place for himself in which he may become invisible. To use Kolb’s argument here, although the space of the lecture hall does not feature any “elaborate place norms” as present in heavily ritualized sites such as churches or courtrooms where there are “zones of general movement...and zones that are forbidden to most people” (Kolb 35), Taha attempts, in his struggle to sit in a faraway, inconspicuous spot in the lecture hall, to create a “temporary place [albeit one only visible to himself] by establishing limits and dimensions” (Kolb 36). Kolb maintains that no place may exist “without some divisions, for in such a place no form of human life could be enacted.” In other words, there will always be “a border, however vague” (37), that is crucial to our sense of well-being. Taha’s sense of survival overpowers him, compelling him to erect and fortify these invisible social borders. To avoid a repeated experience of his earlier humiliation, Taha needs to differentiate himself from others lest they discover, as did the police officers at the academy, that he is “the son of the doorkeeper” (al-Aswany 90). Taha’s past experiences here act in part as forces in determining his movements, but because his personal boundaries are constantly shifting, they become, for us, sources of uncertainty. For this reason, we must not consider individual boundaries as determinants predicting future involvement with certain groups. Looking at group formations from this perspective is what renders groups stagnant (Latour 33-34).
In this sense, Taha’s movements as an actor become a personal struggle for survival. His well-being depends not only on what associations he allows into his space, but also on what other associations these in turn bring with them. The movement of the political is determined in the “circulation of different vehicles which cannot be substituted by one another” (Latour 36). The novel’s presentation of this circulation betrays these small but critical movements. For instance, upon the call for noon prayer on Taha’s first day, he follows several of the students to the faculty mosque for prayer, “and noticed with relief that like him they were poor, most of them being apparently of rural origin” (al-Aswany 90). This sense of comfort and familiarity prompts him to associate with those he feels are like him in dress and in piety. As soon as Taha makes his first acquaintance with a fellow student who later introduces him to the rest of the “mosque group,” he suddenly realizes that:

from the first moment, just as oil separates from water and forms a distinct layer on top, so the rich students separated themselves from the poor and made up numerous closed coteries formed of graduates from foreign language schools and those with their own cars, foreign clothes, and imported cigarettes … The poor students, on the other hand, clung to one another like frightened mice, whispering to one another in an embarrassed way. (al-Aswany 91)

Whereas at first Taha does not really view these as group distinctions, the moment he goes along with the mosque group, he begins to identify himself as part of a certain group. However, the political is not determined in the particular group he belongs to, but in his movement to join that formation. The novel’s comparison of the separation of students to the segregation of oil from water indicates a “slight movement,” an “occasional spark generated by the shift, the shock, the
slight displacement of other non-social phenomena” (Latour 36).\(^{29}\) The movement is a trace left behind by shifting associations which also extend to Taha’s new friendships.

From these friendships, other associations come into play to determine Taha’s movements. Gradually, Taha’s strong affection and respect for his new friends builds trust (to refer back to Giddens’s argument), an important determinant of Taha’s actions. Drawing self-confidence and a degree of empowerment from each other, the members feel that they may now speak openly about how distasteful they find the frivolous behaviour of some of their male and female colleagues, and how disgraceful is their “abandonment of the True Religion” (al-Aswany 92). These discussions constitute further associations that strengthen Taha’s negative feelings about the richer students. From these discussions, more complex discussions ensue as the students – “all country boys, good-hearted, pious, and poor” (92) – decide to have their own meetings every Thursday evening after the last prayer in which they discuss the shameful “pre-Islamic” state Egyptian society has come to.\(^{30}\) Gradually, Taha is subjected to a new education as he learns about the evils of “communism, which was against religion, and of the crimes committed by the Abd al-Nasser regime against the Muslim Brothers” through reading books by authors such as “Abu el Aala el Mawdudi, Sayed Kutb, Yusef el Karadawi, and Abu Hamid el Ghazali” (92), all of whom are philosophers and thinkers who wrote about social and political issues from an Islamic perspective. These conversations and these books now function in their associations as mediators. As different entities taking part in new associations, the books Taha

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\(^{29}\) By the “non-social,” Latour, quoting Emile Durkheim, refers to “systems of emblems” that function symbolically to designate a particular group. A group’s unity is rendered visible “in the collective emblem reproducing the object designated by this name.” Hence the “foreign clothes” and “imported cigarettes” of the rich students suddenly stand out as emblems designating a particular move towards a regrouping. Of course, these objects are all entities taking part in numerous associations.

\(^{30}\) By “pre-Islamic” the author means the age of “Jahiliyyah” (translated as ignorance), an era in Arab history infamous for its corrupt and decadent society, as well as for its idolatry, after the people had supposedly discarded the teachings of earlier prophets and had once more returned to idol-worship.
reads now are not the secular academic texts from which students at the Faculty learn about economics and political science; instead, they deal with these topics from an Islamic perspective, thus introducing even more actors into the space of the political.

Our recognition of the action of any actor within these networks depends on our understanding of action not as conscious and controlled movement, but as a coming together of many entities. In essence, “action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (Latour 44). Action is performed by an actor but at the same time it is “distributed to others.” This does not mean that an actor is never responsible for his own actions, but that there are a huge number of “uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when ‘we’ act” (45). Negotiating such uncertainties inevitably renders space as “a concept...which always keeps under scrutiny the play of the social relations which construct [it]” (Massey 153). Our recognition of public space, for example, considers “the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate” (153). Negotiating the political in this regard demands a recognition of multiple trajectories that may at times clash (157); however, the aim is not simply to recognize one antagonism and replace it with another. Rather, “negotiations of place take place on the move, between identities which are on the move” (158). In this sense, Taha’s movements draw with them a multiplicity of clashing trajectories constantly in motion.

While we may hold that Taha controls some of his own movements, we must also recognize that the space of his actions is ordered by a larger “range of trajectories which … is carefully controlled” (Massey 179). In this sense, current forms of what Massey calls “social organisations” strive to “regulate … the range and nature of the adventures and chance encounters which are permissible.” We must thus address the nature of the University as one of
these organizations in how it embeds “distinct, though interlocking, geometries of power” (180).
The University legitimizes, for instance, particular forms of western knowledge; Taha and his friends pursue Arabic and Islamic studies, thus drawing into that space a network of entities that “both acknowledges the past...and is open to the unknown.” This educational networking leads to “chance encounter[s] intrinsic to spatiality” – that “throwntogetherness” of space privileged by Massey (180). To return to the novel’s description of the Faculty of Political Sciences, the Faculty’s aim is to “put those who study [political sciences] in close daily contact with world events,” thus “lend[ing] a certain stamp to their way of thinking and behaving” (al-Aswany 89). The Faculty attempts to draw the global into the local by offering studies of “world events” to its students; at the same time, however, it also attempts to extend the local globally by presenting itself as “the royal gateway to a job in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” that “the children of the great would join … as a sure first step to a diplomatic career” (89).

The Faculty’s approach to learning is structured by a local/global binary whereby the (mainly elite) graduating students can either achieve influential positions or else be well-educated in both local and international political domains. The Faculty may produce the future presidents of Egypt, or its prime ministers and ambassadors. But if the thawra against Egyptian authority begins in the Faculty, against what or whom is it directed? Is it locally or globally based? Our uncertainty about the distribution of Taha’s actions supports Massey’s argument that “the agents of local struggle” have more to offer us in our negotiation of “identity and politics than there is room for in that topography where identity seemingly emerges from the local soil” (Massey 182). Political identities “are constantly produced through negotiation at the intersection of a nexus of connections” (183). Taha’s spatial narrative exists within such a nexus. In other words, as an “[agent] of local struggle,” Taha’s movements do not stem from
“local soil” alone. As he is drawn into associations he does not anticipate, we find that these local and global associations function as mediators that transform his understanding of his own struggle and, consequently, his own movements. His political identity is by no means determined a priori; it gradually takes form through his constant movements between groups. But while Taha appears to belong to a political group, his motivations remain more or less personal. His voice becomes muted as he merges into the group; it is swallowed up by louder voices.

A group spokesperson becomes that voice of the group which drowns out the political in its insistence on politics. Another actor, one drawing more associations into Taha’s spatial narrative, will play this role of spokesperson: the Sheikh Muhammad Shakir. We must be critical of the role of the spokesperson here as we trace his associations with members of the group. As Latour argues, “the spokespersons” who “speak for’ the group existence – and sometimes are very talkative” (Latour 31) will search “frantically for ways to de-fine [their groups]” (33). Like social scientists, these spokespersons “make possible the durable definition of groups” (33), thus rendering them stagnant. How the sheikh in Taha’s narrative struggles to define the boundaries of his group may be illustrated as follows. In Identity, Morality, and Threat: Studies in Violent Conflict (2006), editors Rothbart and Korostelina describe a group leader as a spokesperson who will offer the group “divine authority” and “feelings of absolution and adornment” (Rothbart and Korostelina 33). In the novel, this process will take place in the mosque, under the leadership of Sheikh Muhammad Shakir. Shakir plays the role of what Rothbart and Korostelina define as the “storyteller,” the individual who “offer[s] the faithful ingroup a scenario for establishing a moral separation from criminals” (33). In this regard, Sheikh Shakir’s role in shaping Taha’s new identity is profound.
Shakir is able to channel a small part of the university student body into his own space at the mosque. This demonstrates what Michael C. Hudson in “The Gulf Engulfed: Confronting Globalization American-Style” (2006) describes as Islamists’ “piggy-back[ing] on existing social and cultural networks” (157). Hudson explains how Islamists “migrated into the subaltern spaces in Egyptian society to find sanctuary and launch new initiatives to participate in High Politics” during the stifling regimes of Sadat and Mubarak (157).31 Shakir takes advantage of his position as storyteller for his own agenda. To put it in Rothbart and Korostelina’s terms, Shakir “recounts the morally reprehensible actions of members of the outgroup,” reassuring group members of “their own sense of virtue … [and] moral privilege” (Rothbart and Korostelina 33). As Taha gathers with the other faithful in the packed mosque of Anas Ibn Malik to listen to Shakir’s Friday sermon, the place of the mosque is transformed into a space “too small to hold them all” (al-Aswany 93). In this setting, Sheikh Shakir brings up the Muslim concept of “gihad” as the most important “pillar of Islam” (95).32 Shakir’s actions, however, must be considered, as Latour has explained, as “a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (Latour 44).

We need to explain Shakir’s strategies in order to designate how we may conceive of the local and the global relationally in terms of locally situated practices with significant associations, religious scripture being one of the most prominent of entities within these associations. In “Islamic Tradition of Non-Violence: A Hermeneutical Approach” (2006), S. Ayse Kadayifici-Orellana explains that religion may be used or abused, but there are few feelings that are able to influence one’s identity as much as religious ones (4). In conditions of

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31 Hudson uses the term “subaltern” in a non-theoretical sense to mean subordinate or subdued.
32 Gihad simply means jihad. The Egyptian dialect pronounces the formal written Arabic J sound as a hard, plosive G. Although al-Aswany writes in classical Arabic, Humphrey Davies’ use of the uncommon spelling of the word may simply reflect his close association with the Egyptian dialect.
war and hostility, “religious texts are interpreted through deep fears and concerns” in such a way as to “legitimize war and construct negative enemy images” (6). The construction of stories that rewrite histories “create[s] the imagined boundaries that contain the identity of the people.” Such modes of exclusion and inclusion create, as Orellana puts it, “the contexts for [violent] action.” In this light, group leaders make use of this religious power in order to legitimize their policies and “get the support of their communities and reinforce their power” (6). Using Latour’s face-to-face encounters to resituate Shakir’s local actions in a relational narrative between the here and there, the now and the then, we begin to observe a coming together of numerous trajectories within space.

Shakir manages to bring a vast number of both local and global entities into his associations with the group. He preaches to his audience that Egypt today does not apply in its governing the teachings of Islam, that it lies to its citizens, that it “spews out its ill-gotten gains in the form of salaries for the Muslims,” that it “rig[s] elections,” and detains and tortures innocents (al-Aswany 95-96). Interesting to note here is how Shakir artfully broadens his case against the Egyptian government into a fiery tirade against “Almighty America and Invincible Israel” – thus further inflaming his audience’s injured sense of justice – by bringing into his speech examples where “gihad” prevailed over injustice in the cases of Hamas and Hezbollah’s struggles against America-backed Israel (96). Although Shakir’s group is localized, he manages to globalize it by citing examples where gihad has been successful and reminding his audience of what their Muslim brothers in other countries are doing.

Shakir draws the global into the local to establish a spreading localized network, thus strengthening the stance and defining the boundaries of the group. By transforming his call for gihad against the Egyptian government into a battle cry against the “crusader West,” Shakir is
able to invoke and strengthen the group’s sense of solidarity. Pointing out to his audience that “[m]illions of Muslims [are] humiliated and subjected to dishonour by the Zionist occupation,” Shakir is invoking the spirit of the Muslim “Ummah” (al-Aswany 96-97), 33 and extending the boundaries of his group. What Shakir achieves on local soil is to bring together an alliance by modifying the identity of the group members and hence the group itself. By reinforcing the “connection and constitution of a common antagonist,” Shakir subjects to change “the identities of the constituent local struggles,” as Massey would put it (Massey 182). From this point on, such an alliance will “[hold] together differences whose negotiations are never complete” (182).

As a spokesperson, in his attempts to fortify the boundaries of his group, Shakir’s associations with the group members are Latour’s mediators. In Latour’s and Massey’s terms, these mediators translate and distort meaning in order to “reshape[] both identities and spatial relations” (Massey 183). But while Shakir is the authoritative actor who uses political discourse to establish the boundaries of his group, our imagination of space does not recognize the rigidity of boundaries which makes groups stagnant and stifles the political. Shakir performs politics within his group; the political takes place in the movements between group boundaries.

Our study of the political here focuses on the face-to-face interactions occurring at both local and global levels; as we assemble the political through spatial practices, we discern its open-endedness which does not allow for the rigidity of boundaries. In other words, movements of the political are “always incomplete, open-ended, hesitant.” They begin at some indefinable point only to “stop for no special reason” (Latour 243). In this sense, we find that Taha’s face-to-face associations with Shakir and members of his group appear as nothing more than a “knot,” and that whatever boundaries Shakir erects cannot withstand the introduction of other

33 Ummah refers to the nation or collectivity of Muslim people over the world.
associations. This corrosion is what resituates the political in my study. Such a study questions and complicates the novel’s typical representation of Islamists and their group-networks. While the novel suggests that Taha has become a full-fledged Islamist, his movements are those of a more complex actor. As a mediator and a spokesperson, Shakir succeeds in only *momentarily* changing the way in which Taha views the world around him. While Taha initially believes in the Gamaa Islamiya group, “so much that he would sacrifice his life for them” (al-Aswany 115-16), his movements lay bare a more complex network of associations.

At the level of the human body, space plays another important role in determining socio-political associations. The network here is made all the more complex in spite of the group spokesperson’s struggles to maintain the boundaries of the group. To draw Taha’s attention back to jihad, for example, the sheikh presents Taha with some clippings from “foreign newspapers” which show images of Muslim victims in Iraq, particularly a photo of an “Iraqi child, ripped open by American bombs” (al-Aswany 121). Similarly, Shakir convinces him to join a demonstration at the University the following day, one which the sheikh does not attend (122). Shakir also gives Taha a copy of “the Islamic Action Charter” (122), introducing other mediating associations which will eventually lead to Taha’s capture by the local police. Shakir’s attempt to strengthen the boundaries of the group reaches a dead end when Taha is imprisoned and subjected to the worst forms of human degradation and abuse. Taha is beaten, tortured, attacked by dogs, and brutally sodomized as the guards interrogate him, asking him to what organization he belongs. Taha answers: “I don’t have an organization!” (151-53). Although he cries out under torture, Taha’s exclamation here reveals the flimsiness of group boundaries and the complex factors that function in bringing people together. The violence enacted on his own body
is another example where socio-political associations come to function as mediators of radical change.

Although the novel appears to set its characters off on preconfigured trajectories, if we are to read the political here we must acknowledge that actions are not as simple as they seem. A conventional reading of the novel would undermine the complex associations taking part in the formation of identities and the assembling and dismantling of groups; it would regard action as something more or less expected. Rather, action is really a “surprise,” according to Latour; it is *underdetermined* by virtue of “who and what is acting” (Latour 45). Latour explains that events are put in motion not by “purposeful humans, intentional persons, and individual souls,” but by “a vast outside to which every course of action has to appeal in order to be carried out” (Latour 244-45). Any laws, theories, or explanations of the social and the political come “after the action, *below* the participants, and smack in the *foreground*” (246). At times, the novel suggests a certain order of actions, order being, as Latour explains, what scientists use to designate politics and obscure the dynamics of the political; however, the political is often marked in a sort of dis-order.

As explained by Giddens, narrative building, or the way in which human actors attempt to order their day-to-day lives, is an aspect of identity construction that would supplement Latour’s social network argument by designating how actors attempt to order their personal associations in keeping with their daily habits. As we saw in Giddens’s insistence on the role of trust in determining socio-political relations, here he offers another argument that tends to build upon Latour’s formation of spatial networks. According to Giddens, human behaviour is modified to a large extent by a sense of order each individual maintains in his life through the creation of a personal narrative. He argues that our sense of order is very fragile; “the slightest
glance of one person towards another, inflexion of the voice, changing facial expression or
gestures of the body may threaten” our day-to-day orderliness (Giddens 52). Not only does the
actor’s need for orderliness determine, to some extent, his associations with others, but it also
becomes a spatial determinant. As actors, we use our capacity of narrative-building to maintain
our identity; our capacity “to keep a particular narrative going” reflects who we are (54), and our
“[normal] appearances” produce a “protective cocoon in situations of ‘normalcy’” (58). But
doubt and insecurity threaten our cocoon as soon as authoritative “forms” crumble under
pressure (195). When this occurs in “fateful moments,” actors must “confront concerns which
the smooth working of reflexively ordered abstract systems normally keep well away from
consciousness” (202-03). In other words, Giddens is implying that while the sources of our
actions and associations may appear clear to us (as well as to Latour’s social scientists who use
such sources to label group identities) they are never really so; during moments of uncertainty,
we are forced to confront and question individual narratives we have constructed. During these
moments, patterns of associations shift. Latour’s argument does not take into account these
personal identity narratives, yet we may conceive of them here as being among the determinants
in socio-political associations.

For Taha then, his confession that he belongs to no group or organization is a moment at
which he confronts his concerns, or his identity narrative. His statement bears witness to the fact
that the social and political commence neither entirely with the actor nor with the group.

Groups are in themselves stagnant; the movement of actors towards and away from the group
and the shifting of associations speak of the actor’s constant attempts to maintain a particular
narrative. But if actions and identity narratives cannot be certified either separately or within a
group, then how are they to be interpreted? Since Taha’s narrative is one that cannot be
maintained individually or as part of a group, it follows that his identity must not only be defined within networks of the social, but must also be studied as a personally-imagined narrative.

Malpas here argues along Giddens’s lines that we come to understand who we are by configuring and reconfiguring “our lives in ways that enable those lives to be integrated in an interconnected and comprehensive fashion” (Malpas 80-81). Again, these stories that order our lives are “imagined stories of how we hope or expect things might play out,” and all too often they rely on stereotypes or “exemplary motifs or figures” (81-82). Giddens’s personal narratives and Malpas’s “imagined stories” complicate the actor’s actions and his movements towards or away from a group. Once an individual is forced to confront his personal narrative, his position within a network may shift radically. As such, the actor’s movements designate the political.

The humiliation of Taha at the hands of the guards is enough to shatter all of his previous beliefs by the introduction of new associations that destroy the false unity of the group to which Taha belongs. His need to belong leads him to construct a narrative which, eventually, is dominated by other, louder narratives. Taha’s movement away from the group reveals the “fears,” as Eric Denis puts it, that “define borders” and that “lie at the heart of the interactionist formulation of identity as relationships of domination” (51-52). This is but one example of how and why groups cannot maintain their boundaries for long; associations are constantly ongoing, and the causes for actions are tangled up in the chains of other actor networks.

From this point on, the last episode of Taha’s life and this chapter will be a movement away from, rather than towards, the group. Tracing Taha’s movements from the Building to the Faculty and then to the streets, these spatial networks extend beyond the city to reach the desert. Just as Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* unsettles our traditional conceptions about the desert as the archetypal space of the nomadic and the uncivilized, so does (our reading
of) the desert space in *The Building* complicate our understanding of the center and the periphery. When Taha is subjected to torture and is forced to confront his personal narrative, his belief in the principles of his group is shattered. As such, he becomes more of a threat than an asset to the group, since his desire is to move away from the group in order to settle his own scores with the Egyptian police. To get him out of the way whilst keeping him under control, Shakir sends Taha to the desert for training; we visit that place where the Gamaa gathers and trains its warriors (al-Aswany 191) to find that the desert does not belong at the spatial margins of the city. The author’s depiction of Taha’s life in the desert setting introduces two aspects of space: a complicated space that interweaves militant, domestic, and religious narratives of life; and a second, dangerously isolated space that seeks its own closure through the death of the actor. While the author may seek to present us with a character that the social scientist would easily recognize, a young man thrown down a track of hatred, revenge, and destruction, our spatial actor network theory offers an alternative way of interpreting Taha’s narrative.

As the political is redefined in terms of spatial networking to allow for a vision that welcomes new associations, the novel’s depiction of place here completely throws off our conventional understanding of deserts. Any conception of the “desert” as “the opposition between nature and science, between wilderness and civilization” (Khatib 22), is thrown off by the novel’s description of the place where the Gamaa sets up military camp as an “urban slum” set in the area of Turah el Asmant (the name of a Swiss cement company). The camp is camouflaged between the company’s office buildings on one side, and the “vast desert, bounded by mountains” on the left (al-Aswany 191-92). Like the Baehler Passage and the Building itself, Turah el Asmant is something of a historical legacy; it was a Swiss-owned company that later on
became Egyptian, thus designating the move towards growth and the spread of industrial civilization in an otherwise uninhabitable area.

In addition to the cement company, the presence of slums in this space designates a new residential area where, as Eric Denis points out, the space of the desert now figures as “a visible show of the reconstruction of the spaces of power” (63). Moreover, in sharp contrast to places such as the Baehler Passage which, as Farha Ghannam in *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo* (2002) puts it, “tried to integrate within Cairo areas of significance to Egypt’s glorious past,” the slums stand out against the cement company as “less desirable parts … which did not represent the modern image of Egypt” (Ghannam 30). The relocation of the Gamaa to this area not only reflects the group’s desire to remain inconspicuous under the watchful eyes of the government, but it also signifies a resettlement “central to the rearrangement of power relationships and a manifestation of many of the economic and political changes that Egypt has experienced” (Ghannam 40). The novel’s depiction of the desert area certainly unsettles the binaries Khatib critiques, so that the place can never be seen merely as a wilderness. Such a stamping of the desert as “foreign” and as provoking “a condition of excitement” and “fear” would otherwise serve to naturalize the people living there “as part of the landscape, or as a reflection of what wilderness represents” (Khatib 22). This traditional depiction of the desert denies it the privileges of place by rendering it, in Lina Khatib’s words, “mute” (23). More importantly, what further displaces these binaries is the novel’s depiction of the dwelling spaces of these residents.

As I address the novel’s depiction of Taha within the final pages of his narrative, I look at the spatial depiction of ‘dwelling’ to discuss how identity formation unsettles the conception of center. I therefore use Kian Tajbakhsh’s definition of dwelling place for two purposes: firstly, it
ties the concept of dwelling to the issue of identity; secondly, it provides an alternative way of understanding how the center may be dislocated using the concept of dwelling-place. This argument re-configures the actor-network referring to an actor as one who dwells and, consequently, as one whose identity occupies complex and multiple spaces. Tajbakhsh’s argument, along with that of Giddens, allows us to conceptualize the movements and associations of actors otherwise. According to Tajbakhsh in *The Promise of the City: Space, Identity, and Politics in Contemporary Social Thought* (2000), to “dwell is to live in relation to one’s environment, landscape, and community within a certain space” (7). This dwelling space is not one but many, wherein the actor “dwells in the multiple spaces of one’s subjectivity, but also in between them, on the borders, in between these spaces” (7). Such a depiction of space allows for what Tajbakhsh refers to as “hybrid identities,” identities that are “overlapping and undecidable” (35). The usefulness of Tajbakhsh’s notion of identity is that it veers away from social and political representations of identity that “tend to be organized around the defence of identity and specificity in terms of place and history” (39). Tajbakhsh maintains that the “boundaries or borders [of identity] are both productive and subversive of identity,” rather than being just margins between different groups (173).

While Tajbakhsh uses this argument to treat the *city* as “a promise” built on the hybrid nature of identity (182), there is nothing to prevent us from treating the desert as a dwelling place. In the desert camp, although Taha is bent on taking revenge on his assailants, his camp leader encourages him to marry Radwa Abu el Alaa, a widow whose husband was martyred while she was pregnant with their son (al-Aswany 208). The introduction of marriage into Taha’s life is a factor that introduces new associations into his dwelling space. Radwa’s warmth and understanding and Taha’s love and desire for her are the ingredients for a temporary lifestyle
whereby a certain dwelling unity is achieved. Habit is an essential component of this unity here; Giddens argues that a lifestyle constituted by a “cluster of habits and orientations” is vital for “a continuing sense of ontological security” (Giddens 82). Taha experiences this sense of security particularly at night, when after they have made love, his burning anger and pain are gradually “replaced by a calm, steady affection that grew more firmly rooted every night” (al-Aswany 225).

Taha’s domestic life momentarily turns his attention away from his purpose of exacting vengeance on those responsible for his humiliation. His identity in this dwelling is hybrid in the sense that it is no longer specific to “place and history” (Tajbaksh 39) since he dwells with Radwa in a space momentarily suspended from place and history:

[His] sweetness overflowed and he emptied himself in her embrace of all his feelings – his sorrows, his memories, his frustrated hopes, his unstilled desire for revenge and his savage hatred for his torturers … to emerge liberated, at rest, the fire damped and replaced by a calm, steady affection that grew more firmly rooted every night. (al-Aswany 225)

Ironically, though, his sexual relationship with Radwa will also return him to his exact time and place, and, henceforth, his purpose, which is to seek revenge on his torturers. Sexual activity here is another actor participating in the associations determining his movements. Giddens argues that sexuality “addresses problems and stimulates feelings which are not restricted to a personal relation between two human beings” (Giddens 205). Taha’s sexual experience with Radwa acts as a reminder to him of his sexual abuse at the hands of the prison guards, causing him to fail in his performance with her as the burning desire for revenge resurfaces (al-Aswany 226). His fleeting happiness with Radwa and his fear “that [his] determination will weaken as
time passes” (226) hold for him as much despair as hope for the future. Although his day-to-day interactions with Radwa serve to momentarily take him off course, the reason why he goes ahead with his mission has to do with an “empowering, transitional identity” overpowered by the ordering of a stronger “performative repertoire” (Hetherington 103). Ironically, his sexual relationship with his wife conjures up the older associations he has had at the hands of his torturers, which quickly overpower his marital ties. In other words, the associations Taha makes throughout the novel are not of the same character; some are more powerful than others. As such, to use Latour’s argument, some of these associations are transformed into mediators that become the determinants of radical change.

Towards the end of the novel, in the final scene of Taha’s story, all his past associations return to him as Taha embarks on his mission of revenge and is shot. The depiction of this final chapter in Taha’s narrative is very telling, as it sums up flashbacks of his life at the very moment it takes leave of him. At the same time, in the dying Taha’s mind, he is unable to focus on a single one of these associations or figure out how they led him to be where he is now:

He tried to focus his mind on a single point, but a roaring cataract of images swept through his mind’s eye and a minute passed in which he saw his whole life scene by scene – his room on the roof of the Yakoubian Building, his memories of his childhood and his good-hearted mother and father, his old sweetheart Busayna el Sayed, his wife Radwa, the general in charge of the Police Academy condemning him for his father’s profession, and the soldiers in the detention center beating him and violating his body. (al-Aswany 241)

These associations and many others are the spatial networks that give rise to new definitions of the social and political. While we have used Massey and Latour to reassemble the social, it
reshapes itself in these spatial networks in these final scenes. Although social scientists such as Hetherington have not explained the reassembling process or the movements of the social and the political, their arguments here are useful when it comes to imagining the body of the network. The “coming together of many within this network of identity politics,” as Hetherington puts it (13), summarizes this spatial web quite well. My emphasis on Taha’s narrative has been motivated by the fact that its complexity effectively sums up many of the social and political arguments I have used throughout this chapter. In addition, it is a prime example in the novel of the actor’s quest for identity in the context of the spatial network.

Although the narrative of identity is rarely achieved, the actor’s work takes place within spaces that, “as well as being places for change or resistance are also, therefore, spaces that produce alternate social orderings” (Hetherington 17). Rather than viewing the novel as featuring a designated social or political order, my reading proposes alternative social structures as spatially constituted.

A new configuration of associations as suggested in the scene below appears to welcome a new era, one of hope perhaps. Even during Taha’s final moments, when he has taken a bullet and lies bleeding in the street, the “babble” of voices that he hears heralds a multitude of new associations even as they signal Taha’s death: “A babble of distant sounds came to his ears – bells and sounds of recitation and melodious murmurs – repeating themselves and drawing close to him, as though welcoming him into a new world” (al-Aswany 243). While the “process of dying,” as Giddens puts it, “cannot be seen as anything other than the incipient loss of control,” death may be conceived of here as one of those “fateful moments” that radically “disturb routines” as the actor is “forced to rethink fundamental aspects of her existence and future projects” (Giddens 202-03). Of course, the character here is dead and cannot do any rethinking;
we, on the other hand, find our own “routines” disturbed by this event. Always remaining a loop behind these actors and the spaces they make for themselves, we are forced to reconsider the ways in which we view the world.

**Part 9. Conclusion**

The novel’s actors and their narrative spaces as examined in this chapter have been viewed from a stance that places the actor and his movements first and foremost within a constantly moving spatial sphere. To unpack the social and the political, I have retooled the social disciplines in order to accommodate as many voices or entities as possible. I have unfettered space from its conventional boundaries by suggesting other ways of imagining space. Whether it is configured as a site of transgression, limited by the writer’s own restrictions, impressed in the pages of the text, or inscribed on the body, I have attempted to open up space to encompass movement, to accommodate more associations and more identities striving towards self-achievement. Progressing towards a spatial reconstruction of the social and the political, I could begin to introduce social theories that would give a more panoramic view of the actor network as it unfolds in space.

We have also observed how space engulfs human and non-human actors, each of which bears in different ways on the actor’s work and on the composition of the network. We have seen how intermediaries may become mediators that change the nature of associations, and, more importantly, how such relations bring into the network entities unlikely to be noticed by social scientists. Finally, we have observed how the detailed topography of place may bring into our line of vision elements of space that enrich our understanding of identity narratives. It is impossible to follow the movements of the social and the political without tracing the smallest details within actors’ lives and the spaces they occupy. It is likewise difficult to gauge the effect
of an actor’s associative role unless we trace its associations back to their very roots – a difficult, doubtful task, but one whose doubtfulness only strengthens our understanding of the social and the political. We cannot discuss entities such as religion or education as things “perceived to brainwash or dupe their supporters into a slavish obedience” (Hetherington 42). Associations between human and non-human entities have a way of changing from intermediaries to mediators, particularly, as in Taha’s case, as we consider the role of the group and that of its spokesperson in the transformation of associations. From what we can tell, it is through the actors’ movements and the shifting of associations that we glimpse the actual making of the social and the political. The network itself is the final, though never finished, product of all these movements occurring in space; we conceive of identity within this complex network. Identity here, as Hetherington puts it, is all “about issues of belonging, expression, performance, identification and communication with others” (63).

This chapter has been an exercise in tracing where the struggles to belong, to speak, to perform, to identify, and to communicate take place. Al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* is valuable not only for its obvious social criticism but more importantly for the ways in which we may use it to recognize our own vulnerability as actors and our dismissal of the forces that move us. This reading of the novel not only re-configures history, but it shows us that history is always part of the present; our understanding of how past and present come together helps us envision the future as a space of hope. Furthermore, this spatial study shows that power relationships are not to be conceived of simply in terms of subservience and hegemony; rather, this study empowers those actors who are often silenced (intentionally or not) by the master narrative of the author. Similarly, spaces that have often been described in conventional terms so as to reinforce the boundaries between the city as the centre of power and the periphery have
now become spaces not only of resistance, but also of legitimacy. With its spatial arguments about the aristocracy, the peasantry, and the politicized groups in contemporary Egypt, my account of al-Aswany’s novel in this chapter encourages us to rethink and re-evaluate our own assumptions about the political.

Today, Alaa al-Aswany is being harshly criticized by some for his radical political views against the government as he passionately engages in the world of politics, leaving few of the actors in Egypt’s political arena unscathed. He writes, for example, in his latest book *On the State of Egypt: A Novelist’s Provocative Reflections* (2011): “The regime did what it liked with Egyptians and used the vast apparatus of repression to crush its opponents” (viii). Al-Aswany also expresses these views no less aggressively in his fiction; unfortunately, even to this day, not many of his readers see beyond the moral controversy of the sexually graphic content of *The Yacoubian Building* to appreciate the value and complexity of its spatial representations. Where al-Aswany’s literary interests will take him in the immediate future is perhaps suggested in *On the State*. Assuming more explicitly the role of the social scientist in this book, al-Aswany chronicles the history of Egyptian society to analyze the economic, social, and political factors that led to the overthrow of Mubarak’s regime, arguing that this revolt was bound to happen sooner or later. Interestingly, perhaps because he was still caught up in the fervor of the revolution, al-Aswany writes in his introduction to *On the State*:

Thousands of people danced for joy and the devout with their beards could not help but sway to the rhythm. An atmosphere of complete tolerance made the protesters accept and respect all those who were different. We may have had different ideas and ideologies, but the most important thing was that we had the same objective: bringing the dictator down and winning freedom for Egypt. (ix)
Al-Aswany appears here to lean towards a post-ideological perception of the Egyptian *thawra*. Today, the fervor that united the Egyptians and led to the toppling of the Mubarak regime is slightly diluting, however, as the different groups and factions remain undecided as to what sort of government is to be elected, and who the best presidential candidate would be. Today, the future of Egypt, like that of the Sudan, remains in question. As we have seen in this chapter, particularly in the study of social and political networks in *The Building*, revolts do not always happen for the reasons we imagine. Only a close study of the spatial determines the complexities of the political. The *thawra* has not yet ended, but al-Aswany, like Latour, finds hope in democracy: “Egypt has risen and no one, whoever he may be, can stand between Egypt and the future. Democracy is the solution” (*On the State* 192).
Chapter Four

Overwriting the Past: The Transgression of Pyramid Spaces

in al-Ghitani’s Pyramid Texts

Part 1.a. Why Pyramids? Al-Ghitani and heritage

In Chapter Two, my discussion of Salih’s Season of Migration to the North focused on
topographical metaphors and textual heteroglossia in a spatial study that revealed essential socio-
political relationships in the novel. I observed how topographical landscapes and places, such as
desert, river, and village, when represented by actors using deictic language and spatial tropes,
imposed upon space limitations and an ordering that essentially denied the possibility of social
and political movements. When paths crossed, however, these limitations made way for a new
spatial phenomenon emerging from the marriage between once-linear trajectories to allow for
new socio-political associations. My study of the novel’s textual heteroglossia introduced into
these spaces further associations impregnated with significant cultural, political, and racialized
meanings. These topographical and heteroglot readings generated an enhanced sensitivity with
regard to issues of Sudanese identity, tolerance, and thawra. In Chapter Three, my reading of al-
Aswany’s The Yacoubian Building explored the world of spatial networking as depicted in the
metaphors of Egyptian urban spaces. I focused on the role of the actor and the group, on the
association between the traditional, the modern, and the subaltern, to illustrate a complex world
where the local and the global, the macro and the micro, the human and the non-human, all
worked within this social network. The meaning of thawra, explored and developed in the
Introduction and in Chapter Two, became an even more complex issue in the Egyptian city as we
observed the ramifications of socio-political associations and the complicated role of the actor
through movements of transgression and movements towards and away from groups.
In this chapter, space becomes increasingly ethereal; gone are the villages, streets, offices, and buildings. Human actors in Gamal al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts* (Arabic 1994; trans. 2007) appear to have roles secondary to historical artefacts; indeed, cultural tradition itself is magnified and becomes the lens through which the actor’s identity is studied and negotiated. A new perspective on *thawra* manifests itself in this space; the *thawra* in al-Ghitani’s novel is both a *thawra* in artistic representation as well as a *thawra* in using art to call for social and political change. In this short novel, which constitutes of a series of fourteen narratives that may be read independently of each other, a number of travelers set out on quests that have as their objects the Egyptian Pyramids. The actors stand or are perhaps stranded at thresholds of anticipation; they watch, wait, and hope with dogged determination for a metaphorical *sign*, the clichéd key that would unlock the ancient secrets of those symbols of greatness and power. Whether the travelers enter the Pyramids, whether they scramble over the dusty rocks, whether they measure, observe, or scale the massive monuments, their quests remain either futile or without closure. What are the travelers searching for, and why is the emphasis on the Pyramids? Do they search for an irretrievable treasure concealed somewhere in the spaces behind those ancient rocks, or is their quest one of self-discovery? Is it to make sense of a rapidly changing world? Is it to generate new meaning in a climate charged with political tension? What power, if any, lies in accessing the secrets of the Pyramids? What power lies in their representation and in the transgression of these ancient spaces? Does the return to the Pyramids signify a frantic return to an ancient civilization in the hope of retrieving a lost cultural identity? Or does it involve the construction of a new identity, a combination of the old and the new? These are only a few questions we ask about al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts*. In this chapter, I argue that the novel, permeated in content and in structure by the Egyptian Pyramids, uses these ancient spaces to offer an alternative way
of coming to terms with the socio-political reality of the Arab world today by challenging authoritative representations of space.

Caught between the Pyramids and the quests of its characters, al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts* is a novel that deals structurally and thematically with these Egyptian landmarks. The novel has fourteen texts, each of which involves a quest for knowledge or wisdom concealed somewhere within or without the Pyramids. With its almost matter-of-fact combination of the fantastic and the factual, the novel suspends reality to replace it with a new vision of the world. The first text, “Anticipation,” narrates the quest of a certain Shaykh Tuhami hailing from an African country: he journeys to the Pyramids in search of an old manuscript but fails to discover these never identified “ancient texts.” In the second text, “Entry,” a group of close friends enters a Pyramid; even as their leader is cast into confusion and uncertainty within the labyrinth of the Pyramid, the others do not question his judgment but follow him into the darkest mazes where they soon begin to disappear in an astonishing interplay between different spaces. In “Annihilation,” a famous man, gifted in the art of climbing, wants to discover what sort of pattern the Pyramids conceal: the man, who commenced his climbing adventures when he was a youth, finally reaches the summit in his adult years, only to disappear in a blinding flash of light when he reaches the summit of one of the Pyramids. “Realization,” the fourth text, narrates the story of the Caliph Ma’mun: preoccupied with measuring the pyramids, he is eventually baffled when he realizes at the end of his scientific experiment that the breadth of the greatest Pyramid is the same at its base as it is at its summit.

“Ecstasy” marks a turning point in the novel where the substance of reality, suspended to begin with, takes wing and flies away. This fifth text designates a pronounced shift in the use of spatial language, an important aspect of my argument I will be emphasizing: in it, a man and a
woman venture into the dark depths of the Pyramid, are consumed by a fiery lust, and disperse into ashes right after the peak of their sexual consummation. In “Shadow,” a stranger from the East comes to the Pyramids searching for a sign of the ancient knowledge manifest in the changing of the shadows, which only takes place at very rare moments in history: the shadow transformation occurs at night when the man is not vigilant, and he is enraged to learn that the change had been observed only by a bird. In the seventh text, “Luminosity,” a man crossing from East to West, from below to above, sees a light at the summit of the Pyramid: as he moves closer to the light, he somehow disengages from himself; he can no longer look backwards, but advances as a borderless being. In “Silence,” a man strategically builds his house by the desert so as to have a simultaneous view of the three Pyramids; he believes there is a talisman that protects the secrets of the Pyramids. “Dance,” the ninth text, depicts the appearance of a divine female who is only visible to the patient and observant watcher. Texts ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen bear no titles, and consist of only a few lines that dwindle to the repetition of the final words in the last text: “Nothing, nothing, nothing” (al-Ghitani 131).

Al-Ghitani borrowed the title of his novel from the actual ‘Pyramid Texts’ which historically represent, as Rudolf Anthes explains in “Remarks on the Pyramid Texts and the Early Egyptian Dogma” (1954), “the most voluminous work of Egyptian literature which has been transmitted from the third millennium B.C.” Anthes explains that the “earliest versions [of the Texts] were incised on the inner walls of five pyramids during two centuries around 2350 and discovered in A.D. 1880” (Anthes 36). Archaic in language, the original Pyramid Texts represented in content “both the ritual and the hymnal which were employed for the celebration of the king’s burial and transfiguration.” At a time when the “king was god,” “government and religion did represent a unity which we may call governmental theology” (36-37). However, the
traditional Texts teemed with contradictions, brought about in part by different opinions on translation, and also due to the fact that the Texts “represented a compilation of heterogeneous elements” that were not necessarily “in accordance with common sense” (37-38).

There are more differences than similarities between the ancient Texts and the modern novel. Al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts*, written in formal Arabic, similarly contains features of “both the ritual and the hymnal,” but the “king” of the Pyramids in question is certainly not a pharaoh. Like the ancient Texts, there are also a number of contradictions in al-Ghitani’s work; however, these contradictions are intentional and, as I shall argue, are constituted by a strange inscription of modern elements upon past ones. Al-Ghitani’s work contains a wealth of heritage that encompasses some elements of the original manuscripts and yet goes beyond them. The author integrates into his work scenes and places from old and modern Egypt; he includes specific names of streets, mosques, and shops; he brings to us other countries, such as the Hijaz and Morocco; and he draws into his work famous Arab rulers, philosophers, and historians past and present. His novel draws on diverse epochs in Egypt’s history: ancient Egypt, Mamluk Egypt, Ottoman Egypt, colonial Egypt, and modern Egypt. However, what is most unique in al-Ghitani’s work, as this chapter shows, is the spatial representation of the Pyramids; *Pyramid Texts* relies heavily on the use of cultural tradition to offer an artistic *thawra* which, for the author, represents a different way of viewing the world, one that questions the spatial hegemony rendered through certain socio-political practices. For al-Ghitani, Arabic heritage has always played a significant role in furthering socio-political progress since it provides the writer the venue from which he may return to the essence of humanity.

To grasp what al-Ghitani is doing in his novel, we need to know where his position is in terms of cultural freedom and the use of Arabic heritage. Al-Ghitani has been a fierce champion
of cultural freedom throughout his career; as Samia Mehrez explains in *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*, the author has frequently spoken up in defence of the cultural freedom of Egypt’s “literati” (Mehrez 17) and campaigned for a return to heritage and to humanity in much of his journalism, literary writing, interviews and conferences. Indeed, his influential position as chief editor of *Akhbar al-Adab* (Literary News) allowed him, as Mehrez puts it, to “[construct] the values and positions within the literary field from the vantage point of his position” (31). However, the author’s use of heritage has not been the same throughout his writing career. At present, al-Ghitani’s position on heritage, as he recently explained in his introduction to Xavier Roy’s collection of photographs of Egypt *Re:Viewing Egypt: Image and Echo* (2010), sees it as a return to “the origin” of mankind; with this return, there is much to be learned. He writes: “Egyptians today practice many of the particularities of everyday life precisely as their ancient ancestors did” (al-Ghitani and Roy 2010, 2). With an intense nostalgia for the past, the writer finds in Roy’s juxtaposition of photographs of modern and ancient Egypt a fascinating similarity between old and new spatial representations.

From his commentary on Roy’s work, we find that al-Ghitani’s current perspective on heritage focuses on spatial symbolism and architectural structure rather than specific historical events or characters.34 These spatial elements come to bear on different aspects of humanity as depicted in Roy’s photographs, and al-Ghitani’s views on these photos have much to tell us about his current interest in historical spaces and their relationship to humanity. For instance, al-Ghitani sees circular and pyramidal forms as being representative of “gradation” and “unhurried change.” The pyramidal form begins on the surface then rises “toward the point at which all

34 In Zayni Barakat, al-Ghitani’s use of history is more anchored to the theme of the story, more reliant on specific characters and events in Arab history.
angles meet, and every element.” The circular form is perfect, since it “has neither beginning nor end.” It is a form that “may be entered from any point” (al-Ghitani and Roy 2010, 3). Similarly, the life of man has its own “gradation,” expressed in the form of the pyramid (4).

However, there is also an element of subdued irony in some of the author’s remarks on the photos. Al-Ghitani writes, for instance, that “the Egyptian was, and still is, more concerned with his eternal resting place than with the house he occupies in this lower world” (al-Ghitani and Roy 2010, 5). He finds that in Roy’s photographs of Egyptian tombs past and present, an “Egyptian concern for survival in the face of extinction imposed itself.” Commenting further on this phenomenon, al-Ghitani observes that after the deaths of presidents Abd al-Nasser and Sadat, Egyptians discovered that both presidents had been keen on constructing tombs that would commemorate their names (6). Interestingly, al-Ghitani points out that while Abd al-Nasser had invested heavily in the construction of a mosque in which he was to be buried, Sadat “was preoccupied with building himself [not a mosque but] a tomb … though he did not live long enough to do so, being assassinated in 1981.”

Al-Ghitani writes: “Rulers and princes built mosques in order to lie among the living in a place filled with the odor of sanctity, so that they might add a further legitimacy to their memory, and so that their names might remain on people’s lips” (6).

Al-Ghitani’s ironic comments on tombs and on Egyptian presidents may take us back to a phase in his literary career when his writing was more expressly engaged in political criticism.

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35 In Islamic tradition, the construction of a mosque is considered to be sadaqa jariya (an ongoing charity), whereby he who builds a mosque in his lifetime will be continuously rewarded by Allah after his death for as long as people come to pray in that mosque. People often build mosques for their dead as a way of commemorating them and adding to their list of good deeds after their death. For a famous leader to be buried inside a mosque, this means that the mosque becomes something of a mausoleum, whereby the living, when they go to pray, are simultaneously doing worship and paying homage to the dead (as in the case of the al-Amin Mosque which was constructed in downtown Beirut for the burial of the assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005).
and his approach to heritage differed. In one of his earlier works such as *Khitat al-Ghitani* (Arabic 1981) (The Layouts of al-Ghitani), as Samia Mehrez explains in *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction* (1994), al-Ghitani creates “narratives on history” by tapping into specific historical epochs in order to present stories that “question and subvert the official, exclusionary versions of history” (Mehrez 61). Studying what al-Ghitani does with tradition in some of these earlier works, Mehrez describes the author’s use of Arab history in order to forge a new history of Cairo today, thus destroying “the classic and comforting distinction between ‘history’ and ‘fiction,’ between the ‘imagined’ and the ‘real.’” In so doing, al-Ghitani has the reader question what is real in present day Egypt (68). In *Pyramid Texts*, as we will see, al-Ghitani departs from the use of specific historical epochs, replacing it with a collage-type presentation of Arabic culture.

The metahistorical trend in al-Ghitani’s earlier fiction is further explored by Issa J. Boullata and Roger Allen. In “Contemporary Arab Writers and the Literary Heritage” (1986), Boullata writes that the creative Arabic author continually draws on older literary tradition in his writing, but he also “has to obey his inner stirrings in order to have peace with himself” (Boullata 112). To illustrate, Boullata describes how writers on history may “use the power of the tradition, its psychological and historical associations, its strongly effective symbols and allusions in order to press on the modern Arab reader a new message” (115). Boullata describes al-Ghitani’s technique in his earlier writing as a manipulation of tradition “in order to make it portray his own vision of present conditions” (116). He describes the author’s depiction of the isolation and the alienation of the Egyptian people in many of his works (116), explaining how the author uses tradition in order to usher change into Egyptian society (118). As a writer of the sixties generation, Boullata continues, al-Ghitani uses the past in order to forge new and strained
associations with the present, thus commenting on current and future political predicaments. Similarly, in “The Novella in Arabic: A Study in Fictional Genres” (1986), Allen refers to al-Ghitani’s earlier work as one example of how Arab writers sought (then) to explore a recent trend in Arabic writing where the use of historical texts illustrated “possible directions for a vigorous tradition of Arabic fiction” (Allen 481).

The emphasis by Boullata on al-Ghitani’s belonging to the sixties generation is important here; not only were the sixties a time of intense political struggle for Arabic writers, but also a time of cultural reform. Authors of the sixties generation, as Mehrez explains in *Egyptian Writers*, effected a crucial “[moment] of departure from the Mahfouzian model” in their writing. Speaking of al-Ghitani, Mehrez argues that this departure could be seen “not just in the modes and thrusts of his literary production, but also by the space [he has] come to acquire and inhabit within the cultural scene in Egypt” (Mehrez 12). One of the reasons I drew on Mahfouz in my Introduction was to highlight these literary developments in the works of Salih, al-Aswany, and al-Ghitani. Before revisiting Mahfouz, however, we must recall that in the sixties, al-Ghitani was jailed by Abd al-Nasser’s regime for his political views against the government. Hence, the statements he makes on Egyptian rulers past and present who sought to commemorate their legacies by building monuments in his introduction to Roy’s work are not bereft of some sorrow and irony. The author’s jail sentence was an extremely painful episode in his life, but that did not deter him from continuing his battle, albeit allegorically, against government censorship and oppression as we find in some of his earlier novels.36 In his most recent comments, there is still an indirect reference to that bygone age, perhaps because it lives on to this day.

36 This phase ended roughly towards the end of the 1980s with the final publication of al-Ghitani’s three-volume work in Arabic, *Kitab al-Tajaliyyat* (Book of Illuminations).
Another way of designating some of the changes in al-Ghitani’s use of history is by comparing one specific earlier work to *Pyramid Texts*. *Al-Zayni Barakat* (Arabic 1971; trans. 1988) may be used here as such a point of reference marking the difference in al-Ghitani’s approach to Arabic heritage. In her essay “In Quest of New Narrative Forms: Irony in the Works of Four Egyptian Writers: Jamāl al-Ghiṭānī, Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ʿAbdallah, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Ṣunʿallah Ibrāhīm (1967-1979)” (1981), Céza Kassem Draz discusses the element of irony in *Barakat* to show how it is a parody of the historical novel. I will make use of some of Draz’s points to highlight the changes al-Ghitani implements in *Pyramid Texts*. Draz explains that *Barakat* parallels “the ideological, social and cultural postulates of two epochs: Egypt under the Mameluk’s Rule at the time of the Ottoman conquest and Egypt of 1967 at the time of the military collapse” (Draz 138). Al-Ghitani also uses a form of parody in *Pyramid Texts*, but in the recent novel, I argue, he relies more on the juxtaposition of random historical moments on present ones by using graffiti-like strokes. According to Draz, al-Ghitani uses irony in *Barakat* to make the novel *appear* as “a historical source but introduces into it products of his own fantasy and thus confronts history as it was with history as it could have been” (Draz 139-40). In *Pyramid Texts* there is none of the historical chronology or order we find in *Barakat*; we come across seemingly disconnected historical references thrown in almost haphazardly as the ingredients in a new narrative.

What is also noteworthy in Draz’s analysis of *Barakat* is her observation of how al-Ghitani “keeps each character locked up in his own consciousness” while Zayni Barakat, the main character, does not “appear in the novel except through the consciousness of the other characters.” She describes Zayni, whom al-Ghitani uses to symbolize the late president Abd al-Nasser, as being simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, so that the novel’s message of irony
comes from the creation “in the consciousness of the characters [of] the feeling that he [Zayni] was continually watching them to the point where they break down” while he manages, historically, to survive “his own military collapse of 1967” (Draz 144). By contrast, *Pyramid Texts* presents the reader with a succession of characters whose consciousness throughout the novel is permeated not by the presence of one main character, but by the presence of the historical Pyramids. In *Barakat*, this scrutiny causes the breakdown of the characters. In *Pyramid Texts*, while the characters also break down, so does the text itself disintegrate. From a spatial and structural perspective, the epitome of *Pyramid Texts* is that at the end nothing endures, not even the text itself, as it dwindles down to three words in the last chapter.

As it gradually changed over the course of his literary career, al-Ghitani’s emphasis on the relationship between past and present, old and new, becomes, as we may infer from his previous comments on Roy’s photographic selection where he finds, reflected in the images of Egyptian tombs, an “Egyptian concern for survival in the face of extinction” (al-Ghitani and Roy 6), an essential determinant of both human identity and human survival. Where in his earlier writing, history was more anchored to specific epochs, in *Pyramid Texts* this approach to history changed. The change in al-Ghitani’s adaptation of heritage in his writing is also expressed in interviews with the writer, such as one by the literary journal *Alif*. In “Intertextual Dialectics: An Interview with Gamal al-Ghitany” (1984), al-Ghitani expresses in this interview his long-time interest in Sufism; however, elements of this tradition do not noticeably emerge until later in his writing career. Conducted in Arabic and featuring a brief introductory synopsis in English, the interview offers an overview of al-Ghitani’s literary experiences since his childhood up to the time of the interview, focusing on the subject of intertextuality in his works and its role in shaping the author’s vision and literary career. Al-Ghitani describes his boyhood and adult
experiences with a wide range of literary, philosophical, political, and historical texts by both Eastern and Western writers. Relevant to my argument in this chapter is al-Ghitani’s interest in “the transformations of a particular place” (72) and in the passage of time (my translation beyond p. 72) (75). One way in which the writer achieved this transformation of place was through his integration of Sufi tradition into his writing.

Discussing his interest in Sufi philosophy in the interview, al-Ghitani explained that he did not identify himself as a Sufi in practice; rather, he considered his vision of the concepts of space, time, and age (era) as being close to that of the Islamic Sufis. Additionally, he found in this ancient tradition the venue through which to express his innermost anguish; indeed, it is this sense of anguish, he confided, that gradually inclined him towards the Sufi path in literary expression (82). For al-Ghitani, the Sufi way not only inspired an exceptional purity and subtlety in language, but it also opened up for him a new way of looking at the world (82). Language for al-Ghitani was not merely a vehicle with which to convey a particular vision; it became that vision (79). This account of al-Ghitani’s personal experience with Sufism sheds light on two important aspects of his writing in *Pyramid Texts*: the increasing obscurity in his language compared to his earlier work, and the humanizing and universalizing message to the modern world conveyed in his text. The reasons why the author opted for this language and this message may very well have to do with his literary evolution after his personal trauma of imprisonment and government persecution as well as his great dissatisfaction with the direction political and literary trends were taking in Egypt.

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37 As mentioned earlier, al-Ghitani was jailed between 1966 and ’67 for his literary and journalistic position against the government and has maintained this oppositional stance over the ensuing decades. The writer is referring here to this incident and also to his father’s recent death (early eighties).
This aspect of al-Ghitani’s more recent work is also very much influenced and informed by Mahfouz’s literary approach in the latter’s later stage of his writing career. In *The Mahfouz Dialogs* (Arabic 2006; trans. 2007), al-Ghitani collects diverse conversations with the late author, along with memories and anecdotes regarding him. On Mahfouz’s later views on literature, al-Ghitani paraphrases the late author as follows:

> We are heading toward a new world, but that world is assuredly not one in which I feel completely at home. I am at the end of a stage, of a life, let me say. What is the total life experience that I have undergone? You will find it reincarnated in the old, by which I do not mean a return to the latter’s values, or a rejection of the new. I mean it in the sense of its being your own private refuge, because you have been at home in it and have understood it. As for the new, that which is still to come, you wish it well and nothing more, because you will never participate in it yourself. (*Dialogs* 105)

For Mahfouz, using “the old” in writing was not only a personal “refuge,” but also a quest “for what is in harmony with your identity” (107). This is clearly where al-Ghitani both builds upon some of Mahfouz’s later literary insights and also enhances his own personal style in writing. In his later work, Mahfouz’s vision changed (as did al-Ghitani’s), and the former desired “to move away from everything that [had] been imposed upon [him]” in order to find a form of writing more in harmony with his identity. Mahfouz used tradition in his writing not in an imitative way, but in such a manner that he remained true to himself (108-09). In a similar fashion, al-Ghitani adopts heritage for his own personal reasons, using it to create a unique writing technique.

Tracing more of the parallels between Mahfouz and al-Ghitani here, we find that for both of the authors in their later literary careers, the need for a safe harbour, for a world that made
better sense to them, manifested itself directly in their writing. It is worth noting here that although al-Ghitani’s *The Mahfouz Dialogs* was written after *Pyramid Texts*, *Pyramid Texts* was translated into English at the same time as the translation of *Dialogs* in 2007. Furthermore, in his introduction to *Dialogs*, al-Ghitani marks the year 1994 “as a turning point in the life of Naguib Mahfouz and in [his] relationship with him, not in terms of the content of that relationship, but in its form and the circumstances surrounding it” (*Dialogs* vii). 1994 was the year when the late author was subjected to a brutal stabbing at the hands of an Islamist fundamentalist. Al-Ghitani links “that fateful day that put an end to all the Master’s customs and habits” to his own past experiences in the sixties. He writes:

I, on the other hand, had intimations of fear due to my experience of the sixties, with their pursuits and fears of detention. I was, after all, part of a generation that had been born into fear and had plunged into clandestine action against the prevailing order, which many of us saw to be wrong – all of which had resulted in an acute sensitivity to security. (ix)

Of course, 1994 was also the year when *Pyramid Texts* came out in Arabic, thus indicating the change in al-Ghitani’s literary career. Al-Ghitani’s *thawra*, as my chapter argues, will be another turning point in the representation of *thawra* in my dissertation. There is an intensely spiritual and artistic *thawra* exhibited in *Pyramid Texts* that is unlike any of the previous *thawras* we encountered in Salih’s or al-Aswany’s writing. Even as *Pyramid Texts* conveys the essence of heritage in a philosophical, meditating fashion, there is much to be learned from the novel’s spatial depictions about the fate of the socio-political in spatial representation. In short, the novel presents a different way of looking at the world; from a parody of history that produced an allegorical novel criticizing Egyptian politics in the sixties (as in *Barakat*), al-Ghitani uses
heritage in * Pyramid Texts* to convey a universalizing, harmonizing view of both the social and the political.

In this chapter, I study past and present spatial representation of the Pyramids in al-Ghitani’s novel to suggest that the work not only offers a new perspective of the socio-political, but that to do so, it unsettles hegemonic representations of Egyptian heritage. For my purpose, I will use the threshold metaphor in this chapter to illustrate three major interconnected themes in *Pyramid Texts*: spatial representation, subjective space, and transgression. For one, the threshold as a specific form of space has its own qualities and significance in terms of spatial rhetoric. Secondly, because the threshold is depicted in terms of human interaction with its space, it becomes a highly subjective space. Thirdly, because thresholds are designated for crossing (whether it is allowed or forbidden), the theme of transgression becomes central in many aspects of threshold spatial discussion. Acts of transgression constitute spatial breaches which both reveal and challenge dominant spatial representations; the social and the political are sharply manifested in such movements. I will also be using the idea of graffiti to punctuate and emphasize certain instances in the novel that suggest transgression. To return to the actors in the text and the recurring question of *thawra*, why must there be transgression in the text, and what does it signify? As with the pressing question of tolerance for Salih and the issue of transgression in al-Aswany’s work, the question here becomes, who or what is to be transgressed and why? For space to be transgressed, there must be a pre-existing hegemonic and even oppressive control over space, manifested through years of authoritative spatial representation. The novel’s use of both historic and modern elements has us question what sort of authoritative representation of Pyramid spaces existed past and present. To explain this, I will turn to some historical and modern representations of the structures which inspired *Pyramid Texts*. 

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Part 1.b. The spatial history of Pyramidal representations

The spatial representation of the Egyptian Pyramids in the novel is not simply a glorification of Egyptian heritage; we have already seen that al-Ghitani’s use of tradition in his works was never without an ulterior motive. Because the novel’s depiction of the Pyramids draws extensively on historical and modern day representations, particularly in terms of space and spatial practices such as travel, transgression, and adventure quests, it is important to have a clear idea of the history of Pyramidal space and representation in this regard. For almost 5,000 years, the ancient Pyramids have towered at the edges of the Egyptian Sahara as the last physical remnants of the ‘wonders’ of the world. The geographical location of the Pyramids has not changed over the years, but the spaces of the Pyramids have. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Doreen Massey argues in *For Space* that we must “recognise space as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey 9). These interactions may be between human and/or non-human participants, and the space produced by them is mainly “open” and dynamic (12); it is a “locus,” rather than a fixed location (137), where everything is on the move, even rocks. In other words, Massey urges her audience to think of space “as a constellation of trajectories, both ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’” (149). It may seem logical at first to assume that as far as space goes, the Pyramid spaces have opened over the years to include numerous interactions, as Massey puts it, ranging from “the global to the intimately tiny.” In reality, however, authoritative representations of the Pyramid spaces have tended to close up that space and deny the possibility of interactions, trajectories, and movement. I argue that the novel’s stance against these authoritative representations resituates Egyptian culture not as an exclusive Egyptian possession, but as an essential component in the configuration of a new socio-political order.
The representation of the Pyramid spaces over the years has very much to do with how
the Pyramids were used and conceived of throughout history. Millennia ago, it was on the
Western side of the Nile, south-West of Egypt’s present-day capital of Cairo, that the 12th
Dynasty kings of ancient Egypt decided on pyramids as their tickets to eternal life. Historically,
as A. R. David informs us in *The Pyramid Builders of Ancient Egypt: A Modern Investigation of
Pharaoh’s Workforce* (1986), the pharaohs’ dreams “brought unprecedented activity and
prosperity to the area” as a massive workforce came together to build, decorate, and oversee the
building of the monuments. A thriving community, its diversely talented members hailing from
Egypt and other countries, soon developed in the busy Fayoum district (David 1), marking the
beginning of an era in Egypt that was to extend for centuries. A *spatial sphere* was thus
constructed, whereby shifting associations between the workers, the Pyramids, and the kings
developed and evolved. Over the years, the human traces of those directly involved in the
construction of the Pyramids have faded. The age of pharaohs may have ended, but not
necessarily the legacy of slavery and hegemony the kings left behind. The designated Pyramid
area is still busy today, albeit differently.

Today, the Pyramids rise to overshadow the poverty and blight of the villages and the
ghettos at their bases, those often bypassed and ignored spaces of Egypt. Today, alongside
Sharam al-Shaykh, Hurghada, Luxor, the Siwa Oasis and other modern or ancient attractions, the
Pyramids tower high as major sources of income in Egypt’s tourism industry rather than as icons
of national heritage every Egyptian citizen may take pride in. As Douglas Kennedy points out
about Egypt in *Beyond the Pyramids: Travels in Egypt* (1988), “Egypt [has become] the stuff of
postcards.” It is a “nation which readily lends itself to the figurative language of tourist
brochures.” It is (with some sarcasm) “the land of the Pharaohs!” (Kennedy 2-3). Indeed, a
Western tourist visiting the Pyramids today might very well rely on information from easily accessible travel brochures to arrange his trip but would be greatly disappointed in the signs of poverty bordering the structures.

The way in which the Ministry of Tourism sells the Pyramids to tourists visiting Egypt tells us a great deal about Egypt’s cultural and economic policies which have both played major roles in hegemonizing spatial representation here. A random brochure depicting Egyptian tourist attractions would provide some interesting details in this context. For instance, if actual size makes a difference in determining which Pyramid to visit, the tallest Pyramid is still Khufu’s, standing at 137 meters in height and “covering thirteen acres!” one travel brochure proudly proclaims. A tourist may also need specific monetary advice. He will learn that the entrance fee to Khufu’s Pyramid is the most expensive – 100 in Livres Egyptiennes – and only a limited number of tourists are allowed in per day. Furthermore, if he wishes to bring a camera into the Pyramid with him, he will need to pay an extra ten pounds. The brochure provides its (mainly Western) traveler with a conversion table by which to convert his money – notably Euros and American dollars – to Egyptian Pounds, but he is also free to use various credit cards to make payments. Like other brochures, this one prepares the potential visitor for various culture shocks by providing information on communication, commuting, and accommodation, even offering some suspenseful hints for those who wish to enter a Pyramid (“If you attempt to go inside the Pyramid, you will have to bend down all the way till you reach the burial chamber!”). Although the brochure dwells on the enormous size of Khufu’s Pyramid and offers a grandiose historical survey of the sites, in introducing the Pyramids and other historical attractions to tourists, it actually presents a highly organized and rigidly controlled space of Egyptian heritage by

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38 From *Egypt Travel Experts: Your Egypt Travel Advisor*, an online travel brochure.
determining what the tourist can or cannot see, what he can or cannot do, and how much he must pay to even take a picture. Al-Ghitani’s novel makes references not only to tourists and travelers, but also to kings, leaders, and common people who each sought to access the Pyramids through different points of entry. For these actors, each threshold or potential point of entry is accompanied by a particular perception of the Pyramids and, subsequently, a different form of representation.

From the perspective of political power, in examining other ways in which the Pyramids have been represented we find that as far as they are landmarks representing potential power, the Pyramids today are perhaps not so different from the monuments of old. However, the Pyramids today are almost as distant from the direct control of the Egyptian government as they are from the grip of the dead pharaohs for whom they were erected. While contemporary Egyptian leaders have used the pharaonic past to promote their greatness in the modern world, their attempts suggest a symbolically multivalent political act the outcomes of which are not necessarily positive or even locally appreciated. As cultural anthropologist Lisa Wynn argues in *Pyramids and Nightclubs* (2007), “the writing of ancient history is an intrinsically political act.”

To ensure political hegemony over the nation’s culture, modern Egyptian leaders attempted in the seventies and into the eighties to harness symbols of greatness such as the Pyramids (Wynn 202). However, towards the nineties control of the Pyramids slipped even further from the hands of the Egyptian government.

The idea that Egyptian leaders today no longer effectively command these ancient spaces is taken up by Petra Kuppinger in *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (2006). Kuppinger explains in her essay “Pyramids and Alleys” that in contemporary Egypt the historical site of the Giza Pyramids has come to elude “merely local control” and cater instead “to global politics and financial interests.”
The expansion of the “global tourism industry” forced upon these ancient sites “[r]ationales of tourism [which] became central for spatial politics and decisions.” As such, those icons of national heritage, Kupinger continues, have become the commodities of “a global tourist economy and wholly dependent upon it” (314). Although Kupinger tends to over-generalize the predicament of Egyptian historical sites with her statement, laying the blame solely on the dynamics of globalization, her argument is still valid to a great extent. For instance, the previous travel brochure with its information intended for Western travelers, its currency conversion table, and its depiction of rates and fees, certainly depicts an Egypt that uses its ancient heritage to cater to the Western world. What we see therefore in the examples of the brochure and Kupinger’s analysis are ongoing repercussions of forms of colonial discourse adopted by Egyptian authorities and manifest in their spatial representation of the Pyramids.

In his novel, al-Ghitani’s focus on the gaze, on the perception and the representation of the Pyramid spaces between ancient and modern times, blurs the distinctions between these spaces and questions hegemonic representations that have persisted from past to present times; the novel transgresses the limitations set by authoritative representations of the Pyramids past and present. A number of trends in authoritative spatial representation of Egyptian heritage have survived colonial times and extended into modern ones; by comparing earlier colonial representations of the Pyramids to modern ones, we understand what the Pyramids come to symbolize in the novel. To begin with, in Egypt’s colonial past, European travelers would often depict what they had seen in historical sites such as ancient Cairo and the Pyramids in such a way as to create in the colonial imagination an exoticized representation of Egypt. Focusing on the ancient and the bizarre, nineteenth-century travel writers more often than not described Egypt through exaggerated and inaccurate details. Visually, in sketches and later on in photographs,
travelers to Egypt also worked at setting ancient Egypt apart from any aspects of modernity. Written and visual depictions of Egypt in Orientalist discourse abound; for my purpose, I look at two essays by Derek Gregory on such representations to show how ancient Egyptian spaces have been controlled by the colonialist gaze. The first essay is “Performing Cairo: Orientalism and the City of the Arabian Nights” in *Making Cairo Medieval: Transnational Perspectives on Space and Place* (2005), and the second is “Emperors of the Gaze: Photography and the Geographical Imagination” in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (2003). I use these essays because they focus on space in discussing written and visual colonial representations of ancient Egypt.

In “Performing Cairo,” Gregory explores the ways in which Western travelers “narrativised” the city of Cairo. Without privileging their stories, Gregory describes their writings as “fictions” which nevertheless “had a substantive reality” (Gregory 2005, 69). By way of example, Gregory shows in his essay how Edward Lane’s travel book *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) “made Cairo visible as not so much a produced space of topographies, streets and buildings as a performed space of costumes, gestures and movements” (73). Inspired by *The Thousand and One Nights* English edition (first published in 1706), Lane uses an Orientalist repertoire of “exacting stage directions” (73) to narrate his supposedly non-fictitious travel account. In so doing, Lane stages modern Cairo as a city “whose spaces are continuously and elaborately performed” (76). His work later on became a recommended must-read for travelers and tourists coming to Egypt from the West; with its emphasis on the “grotesque and the bizarre,” the travelogue excited tourists’ desire to know “what went on behind the closed doors” of Cairo’s cities (77-78), and inspired numerous travelers to write similarly exaggerated narratives. The main effect Lane’s work had on the
conceptualization of Egyptian spaces in Western travel writing was in the way “the space of the text and the space of the city were constantly being folded into one another” (88). As a result, “an Orientalist Cairo was continuously, elaborately performed as a series of spacings” in these texts (92). Lane’s staging of modern Egypt in his writing gives these spaces a theatrical quality for which he, as stage director, is accountable. The Western reader is rendered an exuberant spectator of the fantastic, a breathless voyeur privy to all that is strange, secret, and foreign. As a result of Lane’s staging of space, the actual actors involved in these associations become little more than voiceless puppets whose theatrical presence mirrored the Orientalist gaze. With its various narrative strategies, al-Ghitani’s novel questions and unsettles such representations of space. As I will show, the traveler in Pyramid Texts who attempts to represent (or even “stage” and “perform”) the Pyramid spaces through narration is often exasperated at the end of his narrative.

From a more visual perspective, in “Emperors of the Gaze” Gregory takes us from pen to lens as he meanders through almost one hundred years of visual depiction of the Egyptian historical scene to narrate another aspect of Western representation. This time, Gregory describes how “vision and visuality were [literally] imbricated in [Orientalism’s] colonizing gestures” (Gregory 2003, 195) through a study of photographic representation and its role in “monumental description” and “quasi-ethnographic description” (196). The representation of Egypt first in paintings and sketches and later through the lenses of Kodak cameras “shaped the imaginative geographies of Orientalism and entered into the formation of a colonial imaginary through the production of different kinds of abstract spaces.” The depiction of these spaces transformed the Egyptian landscape into “a series of planes, severe, geometric, empty of human occupation; a vacant space abstracted from the modern world and awaiting its (re)possession by
the forces of European history.” Stripping the subjects from their ongoing history, photographers re-positioned them “into a taxonomy where they were exhibited as examples of a timeless ‘Orient’.” Even the ancient ruins were segregated from “the clutter of villages” for the purpose of rendering the ruins as “the enduring structures of an ancient civilization” (224). The Orientalist camera flattened out the ancient Egyptian landscape into severely geometric planes devoid of human representation. Although *Pyramid Texts* focuses on the representation of the Pyramids, it uses this representation to negotiate the issue of human identity and human behaviour. By no means does the novel exclude the human socio-political role in its depiction of the Pyramids, nor does it eliminate the modern from its representation of tradition.

In colonial times, not only were images of villages and people excluded from this representation, but most other aspects of change and modernity were disregarded in the Western gaze. Flaubert’s travel narratives in Egypt are exemplary in this regard. So entrenched is the Orientalist narrative in the minds of Western travelers and writers such as Flaubert, that it comes as no great surprise that when they arrive in Egypt (1849), their initial experience of it is anti-climactic. For instance, after seeing it in isolation from the modern world in postcards and brochures, Flaubert is dismayed by the “sight of [the Sphinx] … especially when one finds it surrounded by touts and other tourist conveniences” (Flaubert 1972, 50). Upon entering one of the Egyptian Pyramids, he is also disgusted by the amount of graffiti on the Pyramid walls: “One is irritated by the number of imbeciles’ names written everywhere … Almost all the names are modern” (54). Flaubert’s narrative – a posthumously arranged collection of his letters and journal entries – depicts him travelling all over Egypt, enjoying his experiences in brothels, Turkish baths, across the Nile, and at various historical sites. While his accounts are personal, detailed, and highly sensuous, his disdain for the encroachment of modernity and corruption
upon ancient spaces is striking in several instances. Although Flaubert does take into account the symptoms of modernity on Egyptian terrain, it is difficult for him to dislodge the preconceptions he has of ancient Egypt. About the Pyramids, for example, Flaubert imagines that a “courtesan of antiquity” came to build these pyramids “with presents from her lovers” (54). Unwilling or perhaps unable to segregate the ancient from the modern and the mythical from the real, Flaubert chooses to exoticize the images he sees so that any intrusion of modernity becomes a hindrance for him rather than an asset. Al-Ghiti uses the mystical to suspend reality in his description of the Pyramids; however, this is not for the purpose of misrepresenting the Pyramids. While travelers such as Flaubert find modern elements distracting and unwelcome amongst scenes of ancient Egypt, al-Ghiti integrates these modern elements into his representation for the purpose of allowing new associations to develop in these spaces. He uses elements of the modern to illustrate various types of transgression that subsequently present and subvert hegemonic representations such as Flaubert’s.

If the above accounts of Western travelers and scholars point out that the Pyramids have long been misrepresented by the West, this does not excuse the Arab world for its own role in misrepresentation. Here, Wynn juxtaposes Western and Egyptian/Arab perspectives on Egypt to present an account of these variations from an insider’s perspective. Echoing Kennedy’s comment on postcard Egypt, Wynn writes that for “most Westerners, Egypt evokes mummies and Pyramids” (Wynn 3). So much so, she continues, that “it seems self-evident to Europeans and Americans that the pyramids are Egypt’s number one tourist attraction” (3-4). On the other hand, for Arabs visiting Egypt, the Pyramids rank “low on the list of destinations” since Arabs prefer to “engage with a more contemporary imagining of Egyptian culture, one that is grounded in the regional circulation of singers, dancers, and movie stars” (4). While the tourism industry
in Egypt today is primarily a “legacy of empire” guiding “Western tourists to see an ancient Egypt littered with the excavated monuments of a pharaonic past,” Arab tourists mostly bypass that part altogether (6). For Arabs, Egypt is not the cradle of ancient history; it is a more contemporary scene: the birthplace of Arab nationalism, the homeland of writer “Naguib Mahfouz” and singers “Umm Kalthoum” and “Amrou Diab,” etc. (6-7).

Al-Ghitani’s novel uses spatial discourse not only to return the Pyramids to their rightful status in Arab heritage, but, simultaneously, to infiltrate hegemonic representations mainly through its depictions of transgression. If the Pyramids today are postcard-perfect, Pyramid Texts counters the glossy image that the tourism industry promotes in a variety of ways, such as through its juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane. Images of sexual penetration as well as other instances of physical intrusion shatter this portrait-like image. At the same time, the novel does not offer an equally authoritative counter-representation of the Pyramids at all. The interesting contradictions the novel offers are used to open up the Pyramid spaces and liberate them from authoritative representations past and present. Cultural hegemony is no longer allowed; for the individual to be allowed to return to his essence, his essential humanity, he must therefore be free to explore the spaces of tradition as he so desires. This sort of artistic thawra will have us learn from the past in order to envision a more tranquil future.

The representation of ancient Egypt today is not to be blamed entirely on Egypt’s colonial history nor on Egypt’s modern policies; a combination of the two have made it so. The desire to follow the model of Western governance, to keep up with modern changes, and, above all, to please the Western visitor, has led Egypt today to lose sight of its heritage and to ignore some deeply-rooted problems that are only partly related to the global economy. For instance,

39 Kalthoum is a famous classical Egyptian singer; Diab is a contemporary Egyptian pop star.
even while travel brochures will feature five-star accommodations, luxurious means of travel, and other modern amenities alongside a vividly historic description of the Pyramids, more often than not these pamphlets will deliberately gloss over the less desirable aspects of modernization. They will ignore, apologize for, or caution against signs of corruption, crime, poverty, and disease. This attitude towards Egypt’s internal problems has propagated the misrepresentation of Egypt’s ancient spaces and has exacerbated its social, political, and economic problems.

To be fair, the arguments I have made thus far must not be taken to suggest that Egyptians and Arabs lacked interest in ancient heritage. Wynn explains that early Muslims, medieval Arab historians and travelers had a great interest in “the pharaonic ruins” (Wynn 58). Similarly, medieval Muslims often visited the ruins, sometimes even leaving “their mark by way of Arabic graffiti on the monuments” (59). More recently, while the 1952 Revolution “limited Westerners from engaging in Egyptian archaeological work,” the 1960s witnessed a reintroduction of foreign Egyptologists to Egypt because of the government’s call for “international support” in rescuing some artefacts under threat of flooding (63). By that time, however, the rules of the country had also changed to include more Egyptians in the field, and to protect artefacts from Western possession (64). Still, it remains that today the study of Egyptian heritage is yet affected by the fact that very few works are ever published in Arabic (65). Wynn’s argument here shatters some of the assumptions about Egyptian and Arab lack of interest in Egyptian culture. The excavations into Egypt’s past persist to this day, and the historic and the modern still struggle to associate in the same spatial sphere. Not only does al-Ghitani’s novel blend the modern with the historic, but it also uses the Arabic language to cite numerous historical figures who have actually travelled to and studied the Pyramids. In its own
way, the novel emphasizes the Arab role of discovery and excavation of the Pyramids, since most of its characters are Arab or African.

In summary, the historical and modern representations of the Pyramids I have discussed thus far in relation to the novel feed into the subsequent discussion of the novel itself. This chapter looks at how the Pyramid spaces are written in an Arabic work of fiction to recreate a spatial narrative embedded between Egypt’s present and past, a narrative commenting on the subjective nature of space, questioning the politics behind spatial configuration, and using Arab and Islamic heritage to dislodge former representations of the Pyramid spaces. The novel elevates Arabic tradition, not only in terms of the Egyptian Pyramids. Especially in the second half, the novel invites its reader to return to a more spiritual and godly state of being that has very little to do with the Pyramids but which, conversely, uses the Pyramids to attain (or attempt to attain) that condition. This is primarily the influence Sufism has on al-Ghitani’s work. Especially since militant Islam and religious fanaticism have been a source of unrest in the country, al-Ghitani’s call for a return to a state of Islamic harmony away from political hegemony is quite pronounced, as I will show, in that section of the novel. As Amira al-Noshokaty cites him in her article “People of the Truth” (2010): “The status of the Sufis hasn’t changed, it’s the society that changed … In a deeper cultural sense, Sufism in Egypt solves a deep problem with regards to Egyptian culture and the foreign one” (¶ 13-14). I will discuss more of al-Ghitani’s Sufi influence when I reach that section in his novel. I use in this chapter a number of critical and spatial arguments, some of which recur throughout my dissertation. In discussing the nature of space, I will focus mainly on Yi Fu Tuan’s notion of spatial subjectivity to demonstrate man’s constant centrality to space alongside various spatial theories relevant to the particular spatial context in which I am situating my argument. In explaining the social and
the political, I refer to the arguments and terms of theorists such as Cresswell, Stevens, Latour, and Valentine, and reinforce these arguments using additional theorists who bring the social and the political into their own spatial discussions.

**Part 2. Transgression, graffiti, and the threshold**

Structurally and thematically, the Pyramid spaces described in al-Ghitani’s novel and the text itself overlap; the author’s double-fold integration of the Pyramid into his writing has us wonder how best to approach such a text. Since this is a spatial reading, and because the novel resembles a pyramid in structure, the work lends itself to an act of interpretation whereby the place in question (the Pyramid) and the text suggest, as the author pointed out in his commentary on Roy’s work, types of “gradation.” For the writer, the pyramidal form begins on the surface and rises to “the point at which all angles meet, and every element.” Similarly, the life of man has its own “gradation,” expressed in the form of the pyramid (al-Ghitani and Roy 3-4). The actor here develops over the course of time in such a manner that his actions are both determined by and determine the nature of the space he occupies. The way in which the actor acts in and interprets his own space is reflected in the structuring of the text itself. Cresswell explains this relationship between space and text in what follows.

In *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (1996) Tim Cresswell writes that places develop meaning according to the ways in which we exist and act in them. As such, “we are constantly engaged in acts of interpretation” whereby land becomes a text subject to both “dominant and subordinate readings” (Cresswell 13). These readings are what determine the ideology of a space/text, and when an actor engages in a specific spatial behaviour, he “is inserted into a particular relation with ideology” (17). Here, Cresswell’s argument links together text, space, representation, and transgression. For one, as readers, we are constantly engaged in
acts of textual interpretation as we travel alongside the actors in the novel in their journeys. As the characters attempt to access the Pyramids, they are engaged in acts of spatial transgression, acts which present us as readers with different codes of interpretation whereby breaching a space designates the unsettling of a pre-existing socio-political order. We have already seen how representations of the Pyramids past and present imposed upon their spaces a particular ordering that would determine how actors may interact with that space; this reflects, as Cresswell puts it, an ideological ordering. In this sense, according to who is “king” of the Pyramids at the time, the ideology invested upon the Pyramids may be pharaonic, colonial, national, or global. In order to access both the text and the Pyramidal spaces, we must follow the themes of transgression in the novel that lay bare ideological “systems of domination” (Cresswell 21).

Since spatial practices are what provide geographies with ideological significance in the first place, spatial transgression is what will reveal and unsettle these ideologies. For my purpose, I use the act of graffiti and the symbol of the threshold to highlight moments of transgression. Place and text overlap in our case, and here geographical or spatial transgression may also extend, in one way, to transgression in a form of written graffiti. While spatial acts of resistance may provide us with clues to determine how ideologies are challenged or reinforced, there are also textual clues which suggest similar ideological transgressions. In both cases, transgression raises our awareness of political boundaries (Cresswell 23). The transgression of spatial boundaries is expressed in language; language therefore may be used to dislodge or reinforce ideological practices, not only by using political rhetoric, but also by presenting, questioning, and subverting spatial metaphors which determine positions of power. *Pyramid Texts* deals to a large extent with the theme of transgression, using the spaces of the Pyramids
and those of the text to mark boundaries which are continuously tested and in some cases breached.

As a narrative on history, al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts* lays bare many of these boundaries using a process close to graffiti writing rather than excavation through a multi-layered palimpsest. While the palimpsest metaphor has often been deployed to show how narratives may rewrite history to “to tell a story of unified and timeless Egyptian nationalism,” graffiti is more of “an individual act (or tactic), not one which is undertaken by a state or a religious movement or even an academic discipline” (Wynn 214). It is this individualized, personal quality of graffiti which makes it valuable in my study; graffiti is simultaneously “oppositional, reinforcing, and mimetic,” rendering it a useful tool with which to study “the complex map of power relations” in historical spaces (214).

Al-Ghitani’s narrative uses graffiti-like strokes to highlight specific ideologies while at the same time questioning and challenging them. On the topic of graffiti, Cresswell also points out that it “is linked to the crucial where of appropriateness” (Cresswell 40), implying that as an act of transgression, “the question of whose world is being written over” is a question of “geographical hegemony.” This translates into “the politics and aesthetics of moral evaluation” (46). The novel uses various aspects of Arab and Islamic heritage not simply to preserve them, but to present a critique of modern-day Egypt and the Arab world. The novel does not imitate the past, but rather modifies it through constant associations with the present to occupy a new and more open space. It is thus possible to decipher in *Pyramid Texts* graffiti marks that transgress the historicity of the past in order to comment on the present. This moment of association with history through graffiti is very telling; it reintroduces the *human element* into the spaces of ancient heritage, it *personalizes* particular moments in history, and it allows the *locus*
of space to open up and reveal chains of associations that may have previously gone unnoticed. In graffiti-like fashion, Pyramid Texts reveals such moments of association. If we are to determine whether the novel focuses more on ancient heritage or on human involvement with ancient heritage, the theme of human transgression (whether it is spatial or written) answers that question. How we use the notion of transgression in its spatial and written forms helps us to reinterpret the political in al-Ghitani’s novel.

The threshold, a spatial symbol I use throughout this chapter, similarly allows for transgression. A threshold usually designates a point of entry between outside and inside, but it is also a space in its own right, and thus has political significance. In his article “Betwixt and Between: Building Thresholds, Liminality and Public Space” published in Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life (2007), Quentin Stevens discusses the possible uses and ramifications of threshold space. Stevens defines the threshold as “a point where the boundary between inside and outside can be opened” (Stevens 73). Space here “loosens up” to include a variety of movements and social associations. As a space, the threshold has significant symbolic value, but it may also restrict other spaces since its structure is meant to control “people’s behaviour and their perceptions” of other spaces. On the other hand, despite its seemingly constrictive nature, the threshold may also be a “loose space” in that “a diversity of playful social activities” may take place therein. Being both restrictive and emancipative, thresholds are also ritualistic “liminal spaces,” often shaping social aspects of life (73). The ritual quality of thresholds may “create conditions of intensity, transformation, the elevation of status and the blurring of social boundaries and rules.” As such, the threshold space has a highly subjective quality; to recall Tuan’s point, man’s positioning of himself central to a space and his perception of space is what gives space its subjective aspect. The threshold may intensify perceptions, but it
remains a subjective space. Thresholds are the blurred boundaries between the tight spaces of buildings and the looser spaces outside (Stevens 74-75). They are those spaces “between private and public space” and thus may transform our perceptions of other people occupying outside space (89).

Stevens’s description of the threshold space as both loose and constraining and his argument that the threshold space may alter our perceptions of social and political realities provide an interesting perspective from which to study al-Ghitani’s Pyramid spaces. Moreover, in his description of the threshold as a boundary, Stevens accentuates the motion of crossing – hence transgression – from the outside to the inside and vice versa. Such movements in the spaces of Pyramidal thresholds designate particular moments of transgression in the novel whereby the political is created. In *Pyramid Texts*, the political is re-enacted at the space of the threshold when we are confronted in each text or chapter with the image of a threshold as a potential site of transgression. The transgressors are characters whose narratives teeter at the precarious borders between ideologies, unstable borders at which the political is produced. In most of the novel’s texts, different means of accessing the Pyramids are described, but the thresholds of access are often shrouded by mystery and by the ambiguity in the seekers’ perceptions of those spaces. Because access to the Pyramids is often incumbent on the perceptive means and measures of the characters, for each way of seeing the Pyramids and reading history there is also a mode of access, and for each attempt to enter the Pyramids there is a threshold. As the story progresses, the lengths of the texts shorten before petering off into the “nothing” of the final text, signalling the end of the journey and the exhaustion of all thresholds.

My close reading of the novel focuses on specific chapters or texts that best illustrate the author’s use of graffiti and thresholds to dispute spatial representation. While I make occasional
references to other texts in the novel, the sections I will emphasize are: “Anticipation,” “Entry,” “Ecstasy,” and “A Dance” since they best designate the theme of transgression. Considering the various thresholds in all of the texts, we locate different movements of transgression; according to how each actor perceives and represents the Pyramid, there are different outcomes. In “Anticipation,” for example, the view of the Pyramids is from the outside and from different angles. Shaykh Tuhami is apparently gifted with the ability to perceive spiritual connections to the Pyramids through his observations. Initiated by his own shaykh, Tuhami journeys from Morocco to Egypt in search of an historical document which supposedly contains “the explanation and interpretation of all that had proved recalcitrant to him among the mysterious letters that he had apprehended during his long contemplation [of the Pyramids]” (al-Ghitani 25). For Tuhami, the threshold of entry to the Pyramid may only be crossed once he acquires the totality of these historical manuscripts, but he is never able to do so. In “Entry,” physical entry to the interior of the Pyramid takes place as a group of young men “penetrate the opening in high spirits” (31). Although the companions enter the Pyramid, their journey within remains bound to a threshold as they discover that “what they have to resist comes from the inside, not the outside” (40). In “Annihilation,” a young man attempts to climb one of the Pyramids, but he disappears in a flash when he reaches the top (69). The threshold here appears to be at the Pyramidal summit, as that is the point where the climber vanishes. In “Realization,” the Caliph Ma’mun uses science in order to measure the Pyramids by having a professional determine the length and breadth of the structure (73). Baffled at the end of his quest by the absurdity of the results in measurement, al-Ma’mun is unable to use science to represent the Pyramid.

In “Ecstasy,” entry is once more physical as a young couple “crumble into something like and unlike cinders” once they cross the threshold of propriety and consummate their desire for
one another in the Pyramid (86-87). In “Shadow,” “Luminosity,” and “Silence,” contemplation of the Pyramids becomes far more ethereal as myth and reality converge in the liminal space of thresholds bordering shadow and light, speech and silence. What we encounter in the Ninth Text is a wordless dance, whose ghostly dancer sways to a melody universal in the language of its rhythm. The threshold to be crossed here remains inaccessible to all “but he who has suffered enough” (111). In the remaining texts, all thresholds are reduced to mere points (119) before “[all] things” converge into nothing at all (131). Thresholds exist at each and every point of access to the Pyramids, and as the seekers of knowledge continue to be frustrated and defeated at every turn, the final defeat culminates at a terminus point that seems, by virtue of its nothingness, to epitomize futility. I will now turn to the texts I have selected for a closer reading of spatial representation.

Part 3.1 Tuhami from the Outside: Tourist, Traveler, or Toiler?

The account of Tuhami with his ever-changing perceptions of the Pyramids gives us a sense, at the opening of the book, of how the subjective and symbolic qualities of the threshold transform it into a space for the political. My interpretation of this particular text studies Tuhami in one instance as a touristic visitor, in another as a traveler on a mission, and in another as one sent on an arduous, fruitless errand. In the space of Tuhami’s threshold, the shaykh interacts with his space subjectively; he is not the objective, disinterested observer. We do not learn firsthand of Tuhami’s story, but in retrospect, as he narrates it to a young boy who is a native to the city and who first encounters Tuhami when the latter is a traveling book vendor in Cairo. Of entrances to the largest of the Pyramids, Tuhami claims that there are at least three, two of which he “had been on the verge of identifying...and would have done so but for an occurrence that he was unable to describe or even allude to” (al-Ghitani18). By studying the sun’s position and the
alignment of its rays at midday, Tuhami is able to perceive “a straight line, distinct as the blade of a sword,” extending between the pinnacle of the Pyramid and the sun (19). But no matter how diligently Tuhami observes and measures the Pyramids, he would always find differences in his measurements, a “clear variance in something tangible [that] astonished him” (22). He decides that “it is impossible to apprehend the pyramids with the eyes” if one is in close proximity, and if one observes them from a distance, “they do not appear as they really are” (20).

The ambiguity of Tuhami’s statements does not end here; his experience becomes increasingly befuddled as his narrative progresses. As he remains adamantly focused on his mission to observe the Pyramids from different angles and to await any harbinger of news or proof of the legendary documents, he is racked with shudders “as the presence of that dominating, commanding, riddling, encompassing, portentous, self-evident, unreadable, deeply rooted, ascending, still yet moving structure, near in its farness, far in its nearness, overwhelmed him” (25). We notice that in Tuhami’s perception of the Pyramids, as in most representations in the novel, a highly subjective (or personal) element comes to bear on actors’ perceptions to give the Pyramid spaces a mythical (or fantastic) aspect. The mythical element is what gives the Pyramids their symbolic significance, and it is through the combination of myth and reality that al-Ghitani unsettles spatial hegemony. Tuhami’s perceptions of the Pyramids are complex; his reactions to these perceptions are intensely visceral. Physically overwhelmed by his vision of the Pyramids, he claims that his vision alone can never hope to capture their entirety (al-Ghitani 20). On his eighth attempt at observing the Pyramids, Tuhami is astounded by the “clear variance in something tangible” (22). These mythical aspects of Tuhami’s threshold space suspend the reality of the Pyramids and set the stage for the political in his spatial experience. Yi Fu Tuan’s explanation of this aspect of space is important here to explain how Tuhami’s
subjective experience of the Pyramid spaces not only suspends spatial reality but in the process also subverts history.

Space has a subjective nature; no matter how we perceive space, we will always exist in one way or the other at its center and, accordingly, invest it with meaning. In Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, Yi-Fu Tuan explains that in the past and to this day, man’s “biological needs and social relations” have led him to organize his space in such a way as to conform to his physical and social conditions (Tuan 34). To this day, the idea that we exist at the center of every space holds true, since “man is the measure of all things” (34). As such, man’s world view is influenced by how much or how little he knows about his spatial surroundings; hence, spatial myths abound when man is unable to perceive what lies beyond his immediate surroundings (87). Tuan explains that there are three types of space: “mythical, pragmatic, and abstract/theoretical” (17). Our feelings regarding the more “pragmatic” spaces may stem from concrete childhood experiences, which generate in us particular attachments to these places over others (19). On the other hand, there are certain spaces that “lack the weight of reality” because we may only view them “from the outside as tourists” (17); hence we imbue such spaces with much symbolism and they become, for the most part, mythical spaces.

Tuhami never enters the Pyramids; his access is restricted to a visual perception which only increases the ambiguity of his descriptions. Such a perception leads Tuhami to mystify the Pyramids by imbuing them with symbolic and historical attributes that are not necessarily accurate. Tuan explains that while the “organization of human space is uniquely dependent on sight,” other sensory perceptions serve to “expand and enrich visual space” (Tuan 16). Such an enhanced perception of space as evident in Tuhami’s exaggerated narrative gives the quality of his threshold, to use Stevens’s words, “ambiguity, disorder and heightened awareness” (Stevens 257).
Tuhami’s varying perceptions strongly suggest that as a stranger to the lands of the Pyramids, he can only view the structures from the outside and thus has some suspect ideas regarding the secrets the Pyramids hold. The political emerges in Tuhami’s narrative when we view him, in the context of his inaccurate descriptions, as a traveler – possibly even a tourist. In this sense, not only is he denied access to the Pyramids, but he is also fed by the natives (as tourists are) bits and pieces of information which he combines with his own subjective experience to construct his personal account of the Pyramids.

Recalling Derek Gregory’s illustration of colonial visual depiction of the Pyramids, we find in the novel’s emphasis on Tuhami’s reaction to his visual perception of the Pyramids a vague unsettling of colonial representations. It is at the threshold, caught in a subjective interpretation of space, that Tuhami transgresses ideological boundaries of representation. What Gregory calls the “visual cultures of Orientalism” and the “cultures of modern tourism” (2003, 196) are displayed and contested in Tuhami’s narrative. Although he is not a photographer, al-Tuhami’s verbal descriptions of the Pyramids suggest an attempt to reproduce a painting not unlike the inaccurate and inauthentic colonial “paintings” which European travelers produced (197). Just as European travelers sought different angles of light and shadow with which to sketch the Pyramids (199), so does Tuhami consider the sun’s position whilst studying the Pyramids. Tuhami invests much energy in these representations; similar to the French photographer Du Camp who “laboured and toiled to make [his] photos” (200), Tuhami labours and toils to study the Pyramids. However, his depiction of the Pyramids is comparable to Orientalist depictions only to a certain extent; Tuhami’s subsequent frustration after his initial attempts and his failure to discover the Pyramidal secrets through observation and representation displace those earlier representations and serve to counter the Orientalist visual narrative.
Mike Savage’s discussion of the historical touristic city also suggests the idea that Tuhami is a sort of tourist who can only view the Pyramids but can never gain access to their secrets. The novel portrays the Shaykh in a gentle light while he also appears to be caught up in a seemingly endless historical moment: “Between the beginning and the end long years elapsed, years that continue to echo and stretch ahead, like the man’s presence, even though he ceased to be” (al-Ghitani 3). In “Walter Benjamin’s Urban Thought: A Critical Analysis” (2000), Savage uses Benjamin’s notion of “aura” to allude to the sublime quality of historical cities. He explains that for a visitor, the “[visiting of] strange cities disrupts one’s established routines and habits, allows established conventions to be placed into question, and can restore the childhood experience of wonder, fear, and hope” (44). We may use Savage’s analysis of Benjamin to situate Tuhami’s narrative in the more modern context of contemporary tourism, in which “place-marketing” attempts to “reconstruct ‘urban authenticity’” (49). Cultural treasures thus “become auratic,” allowing “the past to be placed in a non-linear relationship to the present” while questioning the practices of modernity (47). While Tuhami is not a modern tourist per se, his quest is urgent because he needs to bring back to his own shaykh something of value: a story of things the older shaykh has never himself witnessed. In so doing, Tuhami tries to do some “place-marketing” of his own. His failure to discover the Pyramidal mysteries and to come up with a final version of Pyramidal representation disrupts his “place-marketing” endeavours and subsequently undermines the authoritative Orientalist representation.

As an Arab traveler, on the other hand, Tuhami’s narrative not only similarly disrupts Orientalist representations of Egypt’s ancient heritage but also rewrites canonical Arab representations. Tuhami’s narrative suggests that there can be no genuine representation of heritage because representation is always subjective. Tuhami’s story may very well be a parody
of Ibn Battuta’s famous quest for knowledge; both travelers come from Morocco, both are
inspired by a shaykh to seek knowledge, both initially commence their journeys with a
pilgrimage to Mecca, and both end up traveling long distances and coming up with stories of
their travels. But while Ibn Battuta is renowned for his fabulously successful expeditions (even
though they also contain several elements of exaggeration), Tuhami’s own story ends abruptly on
a note of dissatisfaction (al-Ghitani 25). Tuhami’s experience is not as rewarding as Ibn
Battuta’s; unlike Ibn Battuta, Tuhami does not have the self-confidence and bravado of a
pioneering hero. He does not feel especially dignified, as not only does he doubt “himself, his
name, whether he really belonged to the town from which he came, or even to that in which he
resided,” but he wonders whether he has not “slavishly” followed his own shaykh to the extent of
abandoning his country of origin (22). Moreover, while the Egyptian natives regard Tuhami
with “awe and respect,” they also refuse to share their secrets or information with strangers (23).

Similarly to Ibn Battuta, Tuhami journeys from the West and initially sets out on a Hajj
pilgrimage; however, on his first journey Tuhami fails to visit the Pyramids. As a result, his own
shaykh severely berates him. Averting his face from Tuhami, the shaykh informs him that he has
little regard for one “who does not aspire, does not yearn, to see hidden wonders with his own
eyes” (al-Ghitani 13). When Tuhami’s shaykh turns his back on him, the latter vows that “from
that moment on, no place where he resided seemed good to him” (13). Indeed, Tuhami feels
challenged
to bring back to his shaykh something the latter had not heard before, something that
those who had gone before, even those who had seen the pyramids with their own eyes
and left detailed accounts of them in their writings, had not known. In this spirit he
pressed onward, passing by villages and cities he had not previously seen, staying as a
Tuhami fails to bring back to his shaykh “something the latter had not heard before,” although he remains in a state of watching and waiting for that which will never come to him. His ceaseless pressing on “in this spirit” suggests what Roxanne L. Euben in *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (2006) calls the “representational practices that arrange human experiences into narrative accounts” (Euben 9).

Euben explores the genre of the travel narrative with less concern for “historical and empirical accuracy” and more concern for how “travelers make sense of themselves and the worlds through which they move” (Euben 9). Opening, and giving an added dimension to, the space in which Tuhami moves, Euben describes how a Muslim traveler (she gives the example of Ibn Battuta) hailing from the “Maghrib” or the Arab “West” would often travel as a seeker of knowledge “to the East to find established centers of Muslim learning” (67-68). Euben’s argument also reflects on the mistrust Arab Easterners have for Westerners with respect to “the worlds through which they move.” Euben writes that for travelers, the contrast between the “Maghrib” and “Mashriq” (West and East) lies in the semantics of the Arabic derivatives of the words Maghrib and Mashriq. While for “Maghrib” some common derivatives are “foreign, strange, and remote,” for “Mashriq,” we have the derivatives of rise (as in sun), dawn, and light up (68). Hence, it is not uncommon for a deep mistrust on the part of Arab Easterners to be associated with travelers hailing from the West based on the latter’s “strangeness.”

On a wider geographic scale, one may extend Euben’s cardinal points from the Arab region to a more global domain. In the context of the Arab world, Tuhami is the Arab of dubious origin, shrouded in mystery and doubt, who travels Eastwards (in the Arab world) in search of
knowledge but comes up empty handed. This interest in the influence of the cardinal points on the experiences of travelers is also taken up by Tuan, who explains how folklore divides the world into North and South, East and West, with “Westward [being] the course of empire” (Tuan 98). In this context, Tuhami is also travelling against “the course of empire.” In both Arab and global worlds, Tuhami is going in search of knowledge but is bringing with him his own unique heritage. Although he is described as educated in the sciences, his knowledge, as Euben would put it, is “what is revealed in the translating practices of the traveler who purveys and represents what is unfamiliar by way of comparison with what is familiar” (Euben 34).

Even as al-Ghitani presents Tuhami’s narrative as being shrouded in mystery in order to unsettle hegemonic forms of portrayal, he infiltrates this narrative (as he does most other narratives in his novel) with colourful and factual aspects of Arab history and culture in order to privilege Arab tradition. As Tuhami tells the village people, “he was a seeker of knowledge and had an interest in the stars” (al-Ghitani 15), but the villagers remain wary of him as a stranger “who came from the Furthest West, where the mysterious sciences, and the ability to penetrate the unseen veils, were to be found” (16-17). These details about Tuhami reintroduce the Medieval Arab interest in astronomy, literacy, and exploration. Tuhami’s narrative also serves to displace the common assumption that only Westerners had an interest in ancient Egyptian heritage; as an African-Arab and not an Egyptian, Tuhami’s travels to the Pyramids remind us of the Arab interest in that culture, thus further questioning the hegemonic control over Egyptology exercised by the Western world. The theme of travel here contributes to the argument of spatial transgression; Tuhami’s threshold space opens considerably here as we trace his movements not only in the tight vicinity of the Pyramid site but in the context of the Arab and global worlds. As
space widens, political implications become clearer as the spatial practices that reinforce ideological representations are continuously tested and unbalanced in Tuhami’s movements.

There is, I suggest, a rather shady aspect in Tuhami’s narrative that has us also question whether he is not, indeed, a slave to his own shaykh. In the process of learning about Tuhami, his origins, and his physical description, we learn more about his relationship to his shaykh, another Arab. The Mashriq/Maghrib dilemma suggested by Euben is further complicated here. I would like to briefly comment on Tuhami’s description in both Arabic and English. Tuhami’s appearance and origins are revealed to us when the novel describes him as being “from Morocco, his origins going back to a tribe that lived in the southern Sahara” and as having a “dark complexion and tight kinky hair” (al-Ghitani 11). In both versions, the adjectives used to describe Tuhami’s complexion and hair are specific to what would be considered as Negroid, although in the translation, the English words “tight” and “kinky” do not convey the image as strongly. In the Arabic text, Tuhami is described as follows: "حدثنا فقال إنه مغربي، تمتد أصوله إلى قبيلة تقع جنوب الصحراء، من هذا سمرته الغامقة وشعره الأكرت، ولد في مدينة قرب الجبال" (Mutun al-Ahram 14) (the Arabic adjectives “akrat” and “aj’ad” are in bold type). Tuhami is also dark-skinned, originating from a sub-Saharan tribe; this detail and the following dissimilarity between the Arabic and the English further complicate his role in relation to his own shaykh.

We learn that in Tuhami’s pursuit of knowledge, he had encountered his own shaykh while the latter was making “a circuit of the lands of the East and entered those of the Blacks” (al-Ghitani 11). Here, in the English translation the use of the word “Blacks” does not convey the specific meaning of the Arabic word “Zinj” with its historical connotations: "دخل أقطار الزنج" (Mutun al-Ahram 14). The word “Zinj” has its roots in Arab history as the name used by Arab geographers in the Middle Ages to refer to the inhabitants of the Western African coast who
were deported by Arabs as slaves from Africa to the Zanzibar (in Arabic Zinjibar) islands in the Indian Ocean – hence the name “Zinj” (Nicolini 2006, 354). The English version’s depiction of Tuhami as a character with an obscure African background does not convey the Arabic original’s suggestion that Tuhami perhaps is or was a slave (or at least a freed one) to his own shaykh. Although we do not know the exact origin of Tuhami’s shaykh, the fact that he frequented the land of the “Blacks” suggests that the shaykh is probably not Black African himself but Arab. It is the description of Tuhami as a Negro and the Arabic reference to the land of “Zinj” that more convincingly offer us these interpretations. While this historical insight into Tuhami’s origins is based more on assumption than fact, it does not detract from its force as a blow against the legacy of Arab colonization of parts of Africa.

In summary, the opening of Tuhami’s threshold has us rethink the associations occurring in that space. To return to the argument of transgression, we wonder what, exactly, is Tuhami transgressing. Euben explains that for the traveler, the task of acquiring knowledge is “an activity that simultaneously discloses and articulates the shifting boundaries and context of other and self” (Euben 34). Who is the “other” here? It is not simply another individual, nor is it the Pyramids. Rather, it is the accumulation of years of authoritative representation reflecting cultural hegemony and political control that Tuhami’s spatial experience serves to unsettle. Cresswell informs us that transgression becomes a “form of politics” when it “serves to foreground the mapping of ideology onto space and place” (9). What is important to note here is that Tuhami’s suspended existence at the margin – or at the threshold – between outside and inside, between East and West, between ‘black’ and ‘white’ both defines and unsettles a number of the hegemonic ideologies of representation, but does not recreate new ones; his uncertainty about what he sees confirms this. Rather, the moment of Tuhami’s transgression is a moment
which “marks the shift from the unspoken unquestioned power of place over taken-for-granted behaviour” (Cresswell 10) without establishing a counter-power. Towards the end of his narrative, Tuhami stays waiting and staring almost comatose at the Pyramid structures. Although he is never able to represent the Pyramids adequately, new narratives that have, for the most part, been overlooked over the course of historical time, emerge in his story.

**Part 3.2 The journey within**

Since it appears that most of the novel’s characters live in one way or the other in the shadow of the monument, this aspect of their existence has us wonder about the interior of the Pyramids, which we first encounter in “Entry,” the Second Text. Yi Fu Tuan informs us that while the construction of architectural monuments of gigantic proportions is usually to inspire awe, there are always people living in the shadows of these monuments (Tuan 108). Tuan warns us that while many magnificent monumental structures have “commanding exteriors,” they usually have “gloomy and crude interiors” (110), not unlike those of the Pyramids, I argue. The visibility of a historical structure on the outside may be related to how and why a nation chooses to reveal its culture to the outside world; on the inside of that structure, however, the nation may conceal another story. Furthermore, on the visibility of these structures, Tuan writes that “certain objects, both natural and man-made, persist as places through eons of time, outliving the patronage of particular cultures.” The extent to which their features “may expand or contract with the passing concerns of the people” has mainly to do with how that “monument transcend[s] the values of a particular culture” (Tuan 162-64). In my discussion of “Entry,” I complicate

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40 Tuan refers to Stonehenge as an example of such a place. While, at one point in the past, it “dominated the mythical and perceptual field” of its builders, today it “is less a place for tourists than for its original builders” (163).
my analysis of space by approaching it from schematic and analogous perspectives to study the
development of the novel from the inside of the Pyramids.

In “Entry,” we once more encounter seekers of knowledge as seven young men enter one of the Pyramids only to be dispersed and never heard of again at the final stage of their journey. Our expectations about the interior of these cultural artefacts at this point are rather uncertain. In “Anticipation,” the novel built up our excitement about entry, but we are not sure what to expect at the start of the second text as the “trustworthy,” “bold,” “daring,” and “ready for adventure” travelers prepare to penetrate the Pyramid (29). While “each looked toward the East, toward the throng” (30), to some of those who witness their departure, the young men “set off equipped with nothing but a terrible desire to know, and to arrive at the borders of the unknown” (al-Ghitani 30-31). Here too is the East suggestive of what is bright and clear (mashriq),
41 before the Westward entry into what is strange and dark (maghrib).42 (Although the English words, East and West, certainly have opposing connotations that might supplement this East/West argument, there are far fewer derivatives to be found in the English of these words.) As was the case for Tuhami, the “terrible” desire for knowledge is what urges the travelers to seek entry of the Pyramid, but had they had any knowledge in the first place, they “would never have contemplated such an undertaking” (29-30); the nature of this undertaking is gradually disclosed to us as the youths proceed inwards.

Using the threshold once more as my point of departure, I will concentrate first on the relationship of the travelers and then on the spatial quality of their threshold. I trace the

41 From the noun mashriq (the East), we can derive numerous adjectives, nouns, and verbs some of which are: “mushriqon,” meaning bright, “shorouq,” meaning dawn, and “ashraqa,” meaning to dawn (of light, knowledge, joy, etc.).
42 From maghrib we also have the following examples of derivatives: adjective/noun of “ghareebon,” meaning strange/stranger, “gharaba,” meaning disappeared, or departed, and “ghurba,” meaning exile.
travelers’ journey into the Pyramid level by level to show how their subjective interpretation of space influences their relationship with one another and gives rise to the political. As I explained earlier, the subjective quality of the threshold space is determined by how actors function in that space; it is also determined by how they relate to others within that space. Stevens depicts the threshold as “a constrained site which gathers people together, channelling their movements, focusing their attention and forcing them into close proximity with others” (Stevens 75). In this regard, although the structural nature of the Pyramid is such that the young men are inevitably kept close to one another upon entry, their degree of closeness changes as they proceed into the Pyramid. “Known for their closeness, the convergence of their passions, and their habit of accompanying each other wherever they went” (al-Ghitani 29), the seven travelers enter the structure together at the first stage of their journey. As we learn more about the interior of the Pyramid, we observe that it “is like a bridge and bridges are for crossing, not for settling on” (al-Ghitani 47).

Its bridge-like quality is suggestive of a threshold rather than a point of destination; in this threshold space we anticipate not only changes in the perceptions of the travelers, but also, to recall Stevens’s explanation of the liminal quality of the threshold, the suspension or inversion of “social roles” and “status formations” (Stevens 74). For instance, at their point of departure the companions agree to place their trust in one of them as their “guide” (al-Ghitani 31-32), but their entry is marked as the “point of separation” between themselves and “a reality that was known and familiar, even if it too contained what was unknown” (34). Due to this separation between reality and the unknown — what Stevens alludes to as the “combining of the ordinarily uncombinable,” or “the bridging of binary oppositions that often define social life” at the point of the threshold (Stevens 74) — the travelers’ subjectivity interferes with their interpretation of
shared experiences and history. For example, at the various stages of their entry, the travelers are in constant need “of someone to remind them of the knowledge he had acquired before passing through the breach,” but the interpretations of the travelers vary from one to the other, because “great is the difference for anyone between what he reads or hears and what he sees for himself and knows” (al-Ghitani 33). Stevens would describe that discrepancy in the companions’ interpretations as a situation wherein “[people], symbols and objects are encountered outside cultural frames of reference and normal instrumental relations” (74), with ‘outside normal’ also being the case Cresswell alludes to in his definition of transgression. Thus the variations in the travelers’ interpretations will extend not only to their common knowledge but also to their perceptions of one another, as we observe during the next stages of the journey.

As trespassers of a threshold, the travelers’ hurried journey through the interior of the Pyramid suggests a number of things. Tuan’s earlier argument about a nation’s showy depiction of the exteriors of its monuments in contrast to the gloomy reality of the monuments’ interiors may also extend to the Pyramidal depiction in Pyramid Texts. We mark specific social, cultural and political changes in the travelers’ relationship to one another comparable to those in the country. More convincingly, however, “Entry’s” depiction of the companions’ journey may reflect al-Ghitani’s personal feelings about the changes in his country. We find in the descriptions of the travelers’ experiences elements of nostalgia, of confusion, and of despair. Beyond the first passage, the close friends begin to see one another as if “for the first time,” and each is certain that the other has undergone an indiscernible change of some sort (al-Ghitani 34). The distinct subjectivity of their experiences becomes more pronounced as they reach a “square room” and one of the seven remarks how this room bears for him “the first gusts of nostalgia and remembrance” where he experiences a pleasant recollection “from the interstices of [his]
memory” (35). Their nostalgic and personal differences move them apart socially as the spatial sphere within which they move widens physically. In the second hall, a wider physical gap separates the travelers, and their experience of “kinship” grows weaker thereafter (36).

Loyalties, too, are changing. But the more the travelers experience doubt and fear of the unknown, the more they concentrate on their leader, “scrutiniz[ing] him more closely than they did the paintings on the walls of the room,” until “[their] submission was total” (39). Stevens explains to this effect that the threshold may cause “conditions of intensity, transformation, the elevation of status and the blurring of social categories and rules” (Stevens 74), and we notice this in the transformation of the friends’ guide from a mere guide to unquestioned and unopposed leader within the narrow Pyramid space.

Feelings of doubt and insecurity, perhaps reflections of al-Ghitani’s own emotions, are strongly emphasized in this section. Into the travelers’ space creeps a gradual oppression, one which initially appears to be a result of the deteriorating quality of air in the Pyramid, but then transforms into an inner oppression manifest in the travelers’ disturbing dreams. In the dividing chamber between the second and third levels of their journey, the travelers experience a drowsiness brought about by the “change in the air, which had become so oppressive that it could lead to the triumph of slumber; any who dozed off even for a second would never open his eyes again” (al-Ghitani 40). But as they do doze off, their dreams are vivid, bordering on erotica and brilliant chimera, for which disquieting unconscious experiences their leader does not offer any advice (40-41). These spatial changes force the manifestation of dream-like experiences which suggest suppressed desires and strangled aspirations, not unlike those experienced by the oppressed citizens of Egypt.
The above vaguely Freudian experience indicates a turning point in “Entry” as the companions approach the final stage of their journey, for at this level personal and subjective space detaches almost completely from lived, actual space. The travelers’ lived space, if we may call it so, blurs as it encroaches the dividing zone between reality and hyper-reality, between alertness and slumber, and between the phases of consciousness that the travelers experience of themselves, one another, and their surroundings. Left to fend for themselves, the friends experience an even greater distance “not merely in space but in the sense each had of the other, for what they had to resist during this ascent was of the inside and did not come from the outside” (al-Ghitani 41). It is at this point that a distinction appears between inner (subjective, spiritual, subconscious) space and outer (concrete, physical, geographic) spaces. As space splits in this way, their leader decides to tie them all to one another; by securing them to one another physically, he hopes to link their fates (41).

Spatial representation may be interpreted here as conveying the author’s thoughts on intellectual oppression and, perhaps, his opinion regarding irresponsible leadership and the directionless trajectory of the socio-political world as he imagined it. Under the guise of unification in the leader’s attitude towards his friends is a covert gesture of oppression and manipulation. Once the travelers are tethered to one another and their number begins to dwindle mysteriously, the remaining companions look to their equally confused leader who nevertheless pushes on, making his own choices without consulting them, being “uninterested in discussion” (al-Ghitani 47-49). A lack of democracy and intellectual freedom are suggested in this scene; not only does the leader seek to homogenize his companions’ experiences, but he also closes up any venues of dialogue between them as he presses onwards. His determined movement in this way supports Stevens’s argument that, as a “site of new stimulations,” the threshold is not meant
to be a space of prolonged dwelling (Stevens 79). Rather, “threshold[s] at all scales are places of movement, but that movement is not as straightforward as we might imagine” (89). What we discover is that in the face of rapid changes, each of the companions struggles with a different interpretation of space that varies according to his sense of threat. Again, the travelers’ feelings about survival remind us of al-Ghitani’s emphasis on survival in his commentary on Roy’s artwork. Each traveler must position himself centrally in relation to the space where he finds himself to ensure his survival. The leader, on the other hand, struggles to maintain and strengthen a unified interpretation of space by imposing his particular interpretation onto that space (Cresswell). In other words, by imposing on the others his particular interpretation of the ancient space, and by persisting in his trajectory without taking into account the confusion, discomfort, or oppression of others, his spatial practices are bound to have negative consequences.

Signalling the end of the journey where the leader finds himself lost and alone because of his insistence on subjecting the others to his own spatial interpretations, the companions separate completely from their leader. Towards the end of the chapter, the remaining companions separate but continue “moving through a pyramidal abyss that led downwards, even below the ground level outside,” before finally descending into a “plunging haste manifested by their leader” (al-Ghitani 50-51). Although the leader believes that he has completed his “circuit,” he can no longer find any of his friends to tell them about his individual experience, for at this point of the journey, he finds himself “utterly solitary, severed, subjected. He is alone” (53). Again, the speed and trajectory of their journey reflect a hasty race for progress, a plunge into change without being prepared for change. Furthermore, in his final moments the leader experiences absolute isolation. He experiences a moment “at this distance within the fathomless depths of
the pyramid [that] brooked no companion” (al-Ghitani 53). Because he has not allowed other associations into his subjective space, his spatial sphere has closed to include only him. Solitude and isolation are the prices to pay for enforcing spatial representation on others. One may wonder at this point if this complete isolation is not the current predicament of Egypt’s former president.

Another way in which space may be interpreted in this text is through the use of spatial schema to designate the disruption of spatial hegemony and ordering. Once more, it is through the travelers’ subjective perception of space that we find the order of space being unsettled. The point of entry of the Pyramid contains a “breach,” then a “rise, like a hallway, which ascends at a slight slope that seems neither tiring nor uneven, and which many imagine, even as they climb, to be level and think will cost them no effort” (al-Ghitani 31). There is a high cost of entry, however, as we have learned; it is first suggested when the young men enter very enthusiastically, but at the point of entry are “forced to bend, the height of the ceiling preventing a person of middle stature from standing upright” (31). Stevens explains that the threshold “is a complex geography of inclines, drops, barriers and smooth ledges which the body can negotiate in many ways” (Stevens 83), and it is precisely this negotiation that Tuan also takes up in his discussion of spatial schema by pointing out that while man forces his own representation on space, he is rarely cognizant of that fact. In other words, the novel informs our understanding of space by representing the entry point of the Pyramid as a complex geographical terrain. It is only when man is lost, Tuan explains, that he notes the absence of this schema (Tuan 36). The strategic aspect of the companions’ entry that would otherwise be taken for granted (for example, the slightly modified physical posture of the travelers when entering the narrow entrance of the Pyramid) is emphasized here and rendered out of the ordinary. Entry of the threshold is as much
ritualistic as it is momentous; the travelers’ negotiation of this space thus cannot remain unchanged.

Furthermore, what “Entry” reveals to us is an acute awareness of the life and the human individuality of each subject, reflecting al-Ghitani’s own emphasis on these qualities. For Tuan, ritual entries are occasions whereby a human marks the presence of his schema on space “on those ritual occasions that lift life above the ordinary and so force him to an awareness of life’s values, including those manifest in space” (Tuan 36). For the travelers, this awareness increases with every step of their journey, until their efforts to make sense of their spatial schemata become laborious and confused. Indeed, during the first stages of their journey, “there was nothing strange in this for them,” but at a later stage, they are far more cautious, and their sense of space and time is thrown off. As one of them says:

[He] was certain that the pyramid had its own, different, laws of time and place, the step having its special measure, the time its distinct rhythm. In the first place, there was no discernible East or West here, nor morning and noon … [W]hat seemed to them to be the elapse of an hour on the inside might be equal to the passing of a month on the outside, or more. This took them aback. (al-Ghitani 34-35)

The young men no longer have a command of space or time at this point. As Tuan informs us, while the “upright position of the body” is “extrapolated onto space,” there have to be specific reference points or “landmarks” that would “conform with the intention and the coordinates of the human body” (Tuan 36). For the young men, these focal points are lost as their bodily postures become difficult to determine: “At the same time that they were fully seized of the idea that they were moving upwards, a certainty also grew that they were suspended” (al-Ghitani 37-38).
The travelers’ loss of spatial schemata is also accompanied by a loss of spatial analogy. For instance, at the second stage of their ascent within the Pyramid, they discover that:

The inner space bore no analogy to the outer … This place was a different place, and its time was a different time. One who imagined, by analogy with what he knew, that a day had elapsed might discover…that an age had passed – at which moment, no longer recognizing landmarks and features and finding nothing familiar but the pyramid, he might turn back again to press on toward a final goal, being, however, precisely as ignorant of the depth at which this lay as were the people on the outside of where the boundaries of the structure ended and the extent of its hidden buttresses. (37)

Not only does the above passage demonstrate the travelers’ loss of the cardinal familiarity of landmarks, i.e., the loss of an imposed schema on space, but it also suggests the loss of analogy between the human body and space/time. Tuan uses the analogy of the human body as a reference point to draw attention to the existence of contrary worlds of social status, with the “upright” position referring to high status, and the “prone” to low (Tuan 37). He similarly contrasts the human’s “frontal space” with his “back space” to allude to “lit” versus “dark” spaces, as well as spaces designating the future (front) and past (back), and the sacred (front) and the profane (back) (40). These analogies become more pronounced as the travelers proceed deeper into the Pyramid, and once more we recall Stevens’s description of the ritualistic quality of the threshold as suspending or inverting “normal, serious social roles, rules and status relations” (Stevens 74). The travelers’ capacity for spatial analogy becomes even more confused and indicative of a shift in their social statuses beyond this point as directions within the Pyramid appear to “have their own altogether distinct criteria, yet to be understood” (al-Ghitani 49).
The confusion, lack of direction, loss of leadership, and distortion of truth reflected in the companions’ narrative suggests an extreme unsettling of authoritative spatial representation. “Entry” suspends reality and skews the representation of space in such a way that spatial hierarchy is no longer permitted. As Tim Cresswell explains, when “there are expectations about behaviour that relate a position in a social structure to actions in space,” these expectations impose a certain ideology upon space that “serve[s] the interests of those at the top of social hierarchies” (Cresswell 3). The idea of being “out-of-place,” for example, depends on how we interpret events within space, using “interpretations [that] have intensely political implications.”

Studying a case of violent racism in an American town in the eighties (one of the three case studies Cresswell uses to develop his discussion), Cresswell refers to the spatial argument surrounding this case to make his own argument about how those in power may manipulate the spatial properties of a place “to make ideological and political arguments,” thus distracting public attention from social and political problems “and reframe[ing] a question in terms of the quality of a particular place” (7-8). The transgression of place may unsettle these semblances of order or organization.

While the leader of the group in “Entry” attempts to impose upon his followers a particular spatial order, by overstepping the fixed spatial boundaries the companions (without their leader) highlight this hegemonic representation of space. At the same time, to continue with Cresswell’s argument, “the effect of place is not simply a geographical matter. It always intersects with sociocultural expectations” (8). The travelers undoubtedly face social and political problems in their journey: they move from cohesion to dispersal, communication to silence, confidence to doubt, and concurrence to disagreement. They go from ascent to descent, from confusion into a state of oppression. Furthermore, it is an oppressive atmosphere that they
experience as their journey becomes increasingly rapid and bewildering, and as their physical progress is too swift to leave room for adequate absorption and contemplation of these changes: “All they could do was descend … All that they could do was move onwards” (al-Ghitani 47). Their excursion into the Pyramid has no final destination; they remain on the threshold, suspended in a state of confusion and despair.

**Part 3.3 Love in the Pyramid**

As noted earlier, the texts I focus on in the novel emphasize the different ways in which the writer uses spatial representation and the theme of transgression to question and complicate spatial hegemony and, at the same time, to offer a different view of the socio-political. From here, I shift to the novel’s fifth text, the third significant example of spatial representation in the novel. In “Ecstasy” the Pyramid threshold is crossed in a far bolder and more daring act of transgression that shatters the sanctity of the historic structure. “Ecstasy” also marks the author’s use of graffiti-like strokes whereby the modern is etched onto the historic; the chapter presents the reader with interesting contradictions between images of the personal and the public, the ancient and the modern. Beginning with a description of the characters, the novel’s fifth text introduces for the first time a main female character, who enters the Pyramid with her male companion. The woman is sociable, to say the least, having numerous associations with government workers, “such as guards, vendors, guides, men from the Antiquities Authority.” Although many men wish to accompany her inside the Pyramid, she declines the offers of all but one “blazingly handsome man.” The novel describes the woman as being “like a foreigner in looks,” but “like an Egyptian spirit” in her wittiness and charisma. Although fluent in Arabic, she does not appear to be a native to the area but is “a roamer,” intent upon “making a journey around the world.” We are not sure about her origins, but her description as one who loves to
travel, observe everything, compare everything, and write all her descriptions down presents her as an attractive citizen of the world (al-Ghitani 81).

At the same time, however, the novel depicts her in contradictory terms; she is both available and not available, both a public and a private person. While she is not “vulgar,” she has an “animal grace.” Her lovely features are a worldwide topic of interest; those features boast a “mouth” like “a rich, soft entrance to an invisible world” and a body like “a garden of erupting curves.” And although something about her instantly “set[s] a limit” to any bold admirer, she rebuffs no one and everyone talks about her (al-Ghitani 81-83). While the description of the woman in the English version evokes images almost as adequately lush and sensual as those portrayed in the Arabic language, the translation misses an interesting play on words to be found in the Arabic description. In *Pyramid Texts*, the men who see her accompanying her handsome friend wish they “might be in his place, to go before and serve her” (al-Ghitani 82); in *Mutun al-Ahram*, “to go before and serve her” literally means to be in front of her or between her arms (yas’a amamaha ‘aw bayna yadayha): "يسعى أمامها أو بين يديها" (*Mutun* 74). The Arabic expression of ‘between her arms’ can either mean to be at her beck and call, which is the meaning the English version goes with in “serves her,” or it can mean to exist in her embrace. The English expression does not convey this double meaning which adds to the sexually charged, problematic description of the young woman. The young man on the other hand is described as being modest with an impeccable reputation, but by virtue of his good looks, sportsmanship, wide connections, and reputable lineage, is extremely sought after by eligible women (83). Although he appears to resist all temptations, sexual and otherwise, he succumbs to the “slim-waisted girl” for no known reason (83-84). Transgression takes place when the woman, a goddess of temptation, succeeds
in tempting the man, an accomplished Adonis of sorts, to enter the Pyramid with her for an explicitly sexual rendezvous.

Nowhere in the novel is transgression more pronounced than in “Ecstasy,” where the dominant narrative of the Pyramids is overwritten in a number of ways. One of those ways, as I elaborate in the next paragraph, is through the use of graffiti as a physical element. As an interesting aspect of comparison to use here for those interested in and familiar with the heavy metal and rock music of the seventies and eighties, the theme of sexuality and graffiti is developed in one of the albums of the British band, Led Zeppelin. In their 1975 album *Physical Graffiti*, the band incorporated various “Celtic, Indian, and Arabic influences” into their music (Welch, 1998, 24) to produce songs with themes traversing sexuality, death, the sacred, and the profane. The music in this album evokes the desert, ancient kings, hallucinations, death, and sex. For instance, in “Kashmir” the “traveler of both time and place” desires to ‘take’ his lover in/to that “yellow desert” where:

43 In their co-authored article “How Led Zeppelin Broke Through the Walls Between Islam and the West” (2007), Mark Levine, a history professor at the University of California in Irvine and a passionate guitarist, and Salman Ahmad, a Pakistani musician and a teacher at Queen’s College in New York, connect the music of Led Zeppelin to South Asian Sufi music. Inspired in different ways by the band, Ahmad created his own rock band (*Junoon*, meaning ‘craziness’ or ‘madness’). He writes: “Zeppelin channeled the Sufi music of South Asia through the blues to create rock ‘n roll at once more spiritual and more hedonistic than any before or since” (¶ 1-7) Levine elaborates on this aspect of the band’s music:

As I studied Arabic music I realized that the band had dug deep beneath the Mississippi Delta, to the roots of the blues in the chants and prayers sung by the Muslim Africans brought to America as slaves. There were hints of the Arabic ruba’, or quarter tone, and Persian koron, or neutral third, which like the unsettling dissonance of so many Zeppelin songs, resolves itself into the most harmonious interval in Western music, the perfect fifth. (¶ 9)

Levine used the band’s inspiring music to “creat[e] conversations between the intellectual and artistic production of the West and the Muslim world” (¶ 10). According to Ahmad, “The interplay between all four musicians linked Zeppelin to the great chain of Sufi-inspired improvisers, from the Gnawa slaves of the Maghreb, across North Africa and the Middle East still to the Qawwali of North India” (¶ 12). Incidentally, not only did Ahmad greatly admire the band, but he also likened them to his other great hero, Ibn al-Arabi. Ahmad writes: “For me, the band’s music validated the belief of another hero of mine, the great Sufi Ibn al-Arabi, that only through a multitude of sources can universal harmony be achieved” (¶ 7). These interesting connections between Led Zeppelin’s music and al-Ghiti’s (also a great admirer and researcher of Ibn al-Arabi’s work) work, particularly in its Sufi orientation and language, are worthy of further research.
All I see turns to brown

As the sun burns the ground.

And my eyes fill with sand

As I scan this wasted land.

In “The Rover” the ‘tripping’ singer has “seen seven wonders” and met ancient “kings.” He sees “the new world risin’ / From the shambles of the old.” Here, too, the singer calls out to his lover “On the dark side of the globe” to join him in sexual union.44

These songs would provide a fitting theme or background for this chapter in al-Ghitani’s novel, as in “Ecstasy” we also have, alongside the sexual narrative, the depiction of an hallucinatory experience that urges the reader to ponder the double-entendre of the text’s title. For one, as a bold act of ‘physical graffiti’, the young couple’s personal and modern narrative is written upon the dominant historical narrative of the Pyramid. Secondly, the couple’s entry of the Pyramid as tourists, narrated as it is in erotic imagery, not only designates the transgression of social boundaries, but also of religious (ideological) ones, since the sexual act is committed within the sanctity of the Pyramid. Finally, the overwriting of space at all these levels is expressed using modern language(s) (Arabic/English), and in images that simultaneously convey the sacred and the erotic. “Ecstasy” is a critical text in the novel since it sums up in seven pages al-Ghitani’s manipulation of history and his brilliant evocation of transgression through his graffiti-like writing technique. Before looking more closely at this chapter, I would like to comment on the title of the text and its connection to the text’s ending (as well as other endings in the novel).

44 The lyrics of both songs are from online sources.
As with other texts of the novel, the ending of “Ecstasy” is neither decisive nor suggestive of any clear closure. While the shortening of chapters is what gives the story its pyramidal structure, there is also a process taking place here not unlike evaporation. Here, the English translation of the Arabic chapter title "نشوة" (nashwa) into “Ecstasy” brings to mind the hallucinatory drug (which, ironically, is not known as “nashwa” in Arabic but goes by an Arabic version of the exact English word “ecstasy”). The title in English seems more fitting here, since our conception of what is real in the novel is befuddled, as though we, too, were as drugged as some of the characters (consider also Tuhami’s trance-like state and the companions’ confusion and hallucination as they progress through the Pyramid). Furthermore, “Ecstasy” marks how the essence of reality continues like a volatile liquid to evaporate as the subsequent images in the novel border more on the hallucinatory than on the real. What this interpretation also suggests is that, like the transformation of the young lovers into mere “essences” whilst their “bodily vessel[s]” disintegrate (al-Ghitani 87), reality is suspended and the boundaries between past and present, real and unreal, blur. While these images aptly capture the nature of the threshold in “Ecstasy,” they also reflect the Sufi language that the author emphasizes in the last few texts of his work.

I use Cresswell’s illustration of transgression in the second of his case studies to strategically situate the past and present elements in “Ecstasy” and reveal the political movements taking place through their association. To illustrate some aspects of transgression in this section of the novel, I compare al-Ghitani’s Pyramid in “Ecstasy” and Stonehenge as Cresswell presents it in his study. Cresswell illustrates how a modern act of transgression on that British landmark puts into question its function as a historical site. In his study, he explains that a group of modern day people (consisting of hippies, travelers, and festival-goers) recently
sought to modify the English nation’s heritage by using Stonehenge rather than preserving it as a historical icon (Cresswell 76). In other words, not only did the travelers seek to alter the Stonehenge space at a historical level by virtue of their transgression as modern individuals into this site, but they also attempted to transform the symbolic nature of that space by using the structure to engage in festive performances. In so doing, they went up against those controlling Stonehenge; a group of intellectuals who, backed by the government, wished to preserve it as “a museum, an exhibit, and a scene for tourists to gaze at from removed observation points” (Cresswell 76). Such “intellectuals,” Cresswell argues, “and those with high cultural capital (usually approximately analogous to those with economic capital)” continue to separate “aesthetic objects’ from everyday life”; in doing so, they create spatial barriers that “[make] the object sacred” (77).

The festival-goers, on the other hand, rejected this separation “as a denial of the spiritual function of Stonehenge,” thus upsetting the cultural elite’s prevalent notions of what passes for “normal leisure” (77-78). The English organization known as the “National Trust” works today to ensure that Stonehenge remains “a place to visit – a tourist attraction for people who normally work” (78). The people who do not agree with this so-called encouragement of the National Trust fall into the category of ‘travelers’, whose lifestyle “has historically met with violent, symbolic, and legal resistance” (84). Cresswell presents two contrasting views on the purpose of Stonehenge: the first view being that of the National Trust organization members who seek to preserve the historical and cultural aspects of the site by emphasizing it as an aesthetic exhibit, and the second being that of the ‘travelers’ who wish to utilize it for their own personal activities. Transgression takes place when the festival-goers overstep those geographical boundaries set by
the elite, whose aim is to distance the ‘travelers’ from the site and render them mere observers or art appreciators.

As a response to the ongoing museumification efforts at the Salisbury scene, ‘travelers’ attempted to challenge the forces controlling Stonehenge by testing not only the spatial boundaries at the site but also the spatial language used to reinforce these boundaries. Cresswell explains that the form of transgression which is a “reaction to topographies of power” can only be effective when it succeeds in destabilizing powerfully “established boundaries and spaces.” On the other hand, transgression is also restricted by the same power-defined geographical boundaries (Cresswell 175). Successful transgression results in social changes that are “grounded in the spatiality of everyday life.” Space is then transformed, since the inherently spatial nature of transgression “combines the social and spatial in a fundamental way” (176). The words Cresswell uses to define the position of the elite controlling Stonehenge convey a particular spatial image that forms a wedge maintaining spatial and perceptive *distance* between the ‘travelers’ and the monument: Stonehenge is to be a “museum, an exhibit, and a scene for tourists to gaze at from removed observation points” (Cresswell 76). Furthermore, the intellectuals wish to separate the realms of the sacred from “everyday realms” (77). By presenting the example of Stonehenge in this language, Cresswell not only emphasizes the spatial aspect of transgression and its correlation to social transformation, but he conveys his ideas using spatial metaphors that suggest another way those in power seek to manipulate space.

Here, we can usefully supplement Cresswell’s focus on spatial transgression by using Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift’s explanation of the politics behind spatial positioning, which shifts transgression to a more linguistic context. In their introduction to *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (1995), the editors explain how the theories on “politics
of position” are clearly influenced by “the degree to which space figures” in these politics. The common spatial metaphors of “position, location, centre, margin, local, global, border, boundary, interstice” become, depending on different theorists’ intellectual positioning, examples from which to draw on in their spatial arguments (16). Using spatial metaphors in order to understand the human subject, theorists have most commonly deployed the metaphors surrounding “ideas of movement and mobility, journeying and travelling” in order to “construct new, more open configurations of the subject” (19). By emphasizing the role of spatial metaphors in political positioning, Thrift and Pile’s argument complements Cresswell’s ideas of spatial transgression.

In comparing the situation at Stonehenge with the one at the Egyptian Pyramid, as we come across elements of similarity in the two acts of transgression, we also trace important developments in the use of spatial metaphors that describe the incident at the Pyramid. For one, as in the case of the festival-goers at Stonehenge, in “Ecstasy” the young people seek to use the Pyramid to engage in a sexual, if also festive, performance (al-Ghitani 84). Indeed, in “a blue shirt, yellow trousers through which the outline of her undergarments could be seen, and red shoes,” the woman’s colourful garments reflect her cheery, festive mood “as she seemed to burst with light” upon entering the Pyramid (al-Ghitani 84). She appears in contrast to the huge and foreboding structure which is as enigmatic as she is, “just like the real nature of the Sphinx, or the talismans of the jinn that guard hidden treasures, or the hidden well-springs of the harm that seized any who violate the secrets of the dead or perform an evil deed in their vicinity.” Simultaneously violating but also reflecting the sharply defined stones of the sacred structure, upon entering it “the outlines of her body were revealed – firm, defined, articulate, provocative, agitating” (85).
But while the images of voluptuous woman and sacred Pyramid initially appear to clash, they gradually merge as the woman transgresses topographical boundaries and spatial metaphors change to reflect a rearrangement of social and political positions. The narrative initially presents her as a seductress (the young man is at first modest and upright while thereafter “the scent of the young woman obliterated everything else in his world, so that he did not care”); it subsequently places her on a par with the man as they both attain “a new state … of incandescence” (86). Her social empowerment with respect to her companion is accompanied by a strengthening of her political position vis-à-vis the Pyramid. Although as a tourist she needs a ticket to have access to the Pyramid, she transgresses the space allotted to tourists as she engages in sexual behaviour with her partner within the Pyramid. The Pyramid, like Stonehenge, is a space culturally and politically dominated by a group of intellectual elites and government officials, but the gradual transformation of the spatial imagery depicting both Pyramid and lovers presents us with a new metaphoric narrative undermining the rigid narrative of the structure.

As the balance of power continues to tilt with the couple’s consummation of the sexual act, the metaphors used to describe the lines of the woman’s body and those of the Pyramid become increasingly indistinguishable and problematic as the Pyramid spaces intertwine with those of the young couple, and man and woman disintegrate into a strange substance. Spatial metaphors change gradually as the threshold image transforms from an obstructed opening to a sexual orifice. At first, the Pyramid’s “opening...or hidden door” is at times invisible, but when it does appear, “it is blocked” (al-Ghitani 85). Soon after, however, we learn of the failure of those experts who have toiled long and hard to determine the circumstances surrounding the opening and closing of that passage even after they “have obliterated long years in study and examination … [and] have fondled every stone and thrust their fingers into every hole and crack”
The narrative’s gradual introduction of sexually charged metaphors alluding to a rough penetration of the Pyramid space does not develop into an anticipated onslaught of sexual images when “the [sexual] encounter commenced”; rather, it is followed by the description of an almost osmotic process whereby “warm sap” interflows between the man and woman, “limbs intertwine,” and “interpenetration” (rather than penetration) takes place (86-87). While the blending of pores and the shifting of positions (87) may suggest a vivid fusion of images where human and non-human spaces blend together in a perfect harmonizing of power balances, these fused-together spatial metaphors burn out at the speed of a match flame. The moment of fusion is short-lived, reflecting a brief movement or an association between multiple human and non-human actors who are unlikely to meet, but when they do, the consequences of their meeting are momentous.

The traces left behind in this final association between human and non-human actors would designate an indication of the political, the effects of which are as difficult to trace as is the cinder-like substance left behind by the two at the end of the chapter. Latour justifies the difficulty of locating the social by explaining that the social is “at once a substance, a kind of stuff, and also a movement.” Whatever the case, as soon as we locate the social, “the social vanishes” (Latour 159). We locate such a “substance” or “movement” at the end of the text, just as the couple vanish into a strange moment cut off from time as we know it:

Annihilated were all the images, moments, sights, and thoughts that they had known.

Their beings no longer extended into and had reality in the past, or were conceivable in the future. They simply became absorbed into a mysterious instant that proceeded from an order of time of which neither had knowledge, an instant that was not before or after, but unconnected to, all else, cut off from all things, foreign to any familiar context. (87)
The brevity of the couple’s moment of fusion is problematic; even more so is this last scene, where the lovers are in closest contact with each other and with the Pyramid. In the above scene, as though they were experiencing a ‘high,’ the couple’s experience borders on the hallucinatory as their sentience is annihilated and they leave behind their “bodily vessels” to become intermingling “essences” which subsequently crumble into “something both like and unlike cinders” (87). The novel elevates the couple’s sexual experience within the Pyramid to a state of ecstasy that goes beyond regular gratification; it is a condition that not only strips them of their sentience, but also propels them beyond past and future into an epoch in time unknown to them (87). Their experience at the threshold certainly takes Stevens’s “conditions of intensity” at the threshold to an entirely new level while it also marks a spirituality of experience which Cresswell’s festival-goers may have sought at Stonehenge.

It is rewarding here to interpret the couple’s transgression as a form of graffiti with the ashes left behind being an indication of their presence and of the act they performed in the Pyramid at one point in time. Graffiti is able to challenge spatial hegemony; as Cresswell notes, “[g]raffiti … challenges the dominant dichotomy between public and private space. It interrupts the familiar boundaries of the public and the private by declaring the public private” and vice versa (Cresswell 47). There is no doubt that the sexual act is a private one, and while the Pyramids are both public and private (public in the sense that they are open for touristic purposes and private in the sense that they are sacred burial grounds), to encroach as tourists upon an area designated for public viewing and to leave therein the marks of an intensely private act is a bold step, not unlike intentionally presenting “a mismatch of meanings” between the sacred and the obscene (38). Cresswell also describes graffiti as “dirt” in the eyes of those who oppose the transgression (38), yet in “Ecstasy,” this form of graffiti left behind is rescued from this miry
To summarize, the theme of transgression in “Ecstasy” is rendered in the juxtaposition of taboo on the sacred. This text questions the use and representation of the Pyramid space in modern Egypt by using a form of desecration which, however, is not really sordid at all. Rather, the sexual act that takes place in the Pyramid is elevated and refined both because it takes place in the Pyramid and in spite of that. Had the couple enjoyed their encounter in any other place but the Pyramid, they might never have attained such a transcendental experience. It is as though in this text, the question of what the Pyramid should be used for is put to the test and ends with the epitome of all human experiences, an ecstatic experience that goes beyond description. The physical/spiritual experience that takes place in “Ecstasy” challenges our conceptions of what is holy and what is cardinal. At the same time, the experience actively involves the Pyramid space with the human element; both Pyramid and actor become, for the briefest moment, one and the same. For those seeking to order space and judge the situation from positions of power, an act of transgression has taken place. For us, we may conceive of transgression otherwise in our spatial reading, as a form of thawra against authoritative representation. We are able to identify different moments of transgression in the novel; with each breaching of the Pyramid space, we notice that the Pyramids’ formidable dominance of the novel is countered by the softening of its lines and the shifting of its boundaries throughout. The importance of “Ecstasy” as a turning point in the novel is not only that it suspends reality further and introduces a more ethereal quality to the novel, but also that it suggests a more noticeable transformation in the Pyramid spaces. The characters’ experiences of the Pyramid spaces from this point on will acquire a far more spiritual dimension that has very much to do with al-Ghiti’s adaptation of the Sufi vision.
These changes will be the culmination of his struggle towards literary transformation and will reflect the height of his ambition to effect political and cultural change in the most unlikely spaces.

**Part 3.4 The endings of all thresholds**

Subjective perception, as I have pointed out, plays a major role in how the actors in the novel see the Pyramids; the varying successes of their transgressions are measured by the extent to which their spaces and those of the Pyramid are altered. In every case where reality is suspended or where a loss of logic replaces common sense, barriers are crossed and the spatial sphere opens. The suspension of reality does not end at any point in the novel; it escalates to its zenith in “A Dance” as the writer’s language, putting music to the novel, convolutes with the movements of a spectral dancer who only appears to the Pyramid watcher “who is patient, who strives, struggles, exhausts himself, and thus becomes empowered” (al-Ghitani 111). The unlikely observer who is able to “withstand yearning and grief, to suppress his sighs,” is rewarded by a “clarity of vision” with which he may see in this dance a coming together of “the edges of the universe” (112). The dancer, with her “universal femininity” that is neither “Arab … nor African nor Persian,” ascends the heavens in a spinning dance which finally transforms “into a setting star, too marvellous to ignore and too mysterious to comprehend” (112).45

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45 I must point out here that especially in “A Dance” and the texts beyond it, the English translation of al-Ghitani’s beautiful rendering of the Sufi spirit in Arabic language does not adequately do justice to the original. Most noticeably, the musicality of the Arabic language is lost in the English translation. The harakat (‘movements’) of the Arabic letters, the feminizing subject pronoun ‘ḥā’ adjoined to the ends of many of the Arabic nouns, give “A Dance” a musicality carefully orchestrated in al-Ghitani’s choice of nouns and verbs. This difference, it might be argued, is even inscribed on the covers of the Arabic and English versions: where the English translation features a picture of ancient manuscripts, the Arabic original has a picture of a woman blowing a horn, perhaps alluding to the spirit in “A Dance.”
From “A Dance” and on, the threshold experiences in the novel transcend reality, passing over into an intensely spiritual realm, suggesting the peak, as it were, of the Sufi experience al-Ghitani is aiming for all along in his novel. Through this experience, the *thawra* in artistic presentation manifests itself most poignantly as the text defies any and all spatial representations. My focus in the following paragraphs will be on the elevation of space in “A Dance” as the threshold momentarily opens up to engulf the entire universe before reducing it to nothing at all. The discussion of space in what follows will also draw on the novel’s language, which al-Ghitani uses not only to enhance the sublime quality in his spatial imagery, but as the personal signature with which he conveys his message throughout the novel. With its Sufi language, the novel’s depiction of spatial representation here suggests both freedom and acceptance: the freedom to pursue the spiritual life, and the acceptance that with this spirituality comes a more harmonious and serene view of the world.

To understand how the novel uses this Sufi language to unsettle histories of hegemonic spatial representation, we must have an idea of what particular Sufi techniques al-Ghitani was interested in, and how he used that heritage to his advantage. The Sufi tradition has its roots in Islamic heritage; in essence, it involves the honing of inner spiritual energy to achieve a sublime proximity to God. According to Ahmet T. Karamustafa, author of *Sufism: The Formative Period* (2007), in Sufism, “the major mystical tradition within Islam … [renunciants] detached themselves from mainstream social life” to devote their energy “increasingly to the cultivation of inner life” (Karamustafa vii, 2). This condition “led to a clear emphasis on ‘knowledge of the interior’…acquired through ardent examination and training of the human soul” (2). The emphasis here is on directing spiritual energy inwards in order to achieve an increased self awareness and inner discipline. Al-Ghitani’s involvement with Sufism reflects an attempt not
only to adapt Sufism to modern times, but to reconcile with modern times by using Sufism. His
literary thawra is a detachment “from mainstream social life” in order to convey a message to the
world, opening wide the dimensions of space to encompass all of humanity before dwindling
back to the starting point - nothing.

Particularly in “A Dance,” the novel uses a certain version of Sufi language to destabilize
the power tropes depicted in earlier representations of Pyramidal spaces. Through images of the
dance, the text universalizes the melodies of the female dancer to include Arabic, African, and
Persian “modes” while also focusing on her “universal femininity” (al-Ghitani 112). With
respect to space, the way in which “A Dance” uses the threshold to challenge ideological trends
can best be described as a flight, on Sufi wings so to speak, to a better place. Whether this
destination is God is never clear, but it is surely a location which no human can ever reach (al-
Ghitani 112). The novel is profuse with the language of an intense longing and desire that
plague the characters throughout; this emotional engagement reflects the writer’s Sufi
inclinations and serves both therapeutic and empowering purposes.

The Sufi language al-Ghitani uses to communicate his own thoughts on space is close to
that of al-Niffari, a Sufi thinker who had much influence on the author. According to
Mohammed Rustom in “Approaches to Proximity and Distance in Early Sufism” (2007), ‘Abd
al-Jabbar al-Niffari, one of the earliest Sufi philosophers (?-965), adopted the Prophet
Mohammad’s view of “ihsan” (benevolence), and used its emphasis on “spatial referents, such as
proximity...and distance” to define man’s personal connection to God (3). Rustom explains how
al-Niffari uses spatial referents in his The Spiritual Halting Places so as to describe in a highly
abstruse language the “spatial barrier between the servant and the served” (8). For instance,
speaking as a divine mouthpiece, al-Niffari writes: “I am more proximate to the tongue of the
speaker when he speaks. Whoever witnesses Me cannot speak of Me. And whoever speaks of Me cannot witness Me” (qtd. 8). What al-Niffari means by this, Rustom argues, is that as long as a barrier exists between man and the divine creator, “there will always be distance, even when there is proximity.” Moreover, the ultimate proximity of God to his subject is unattainable since “[human] articulation can only distance us from God.” Because human language is a barrier, “there will [always] be distance between the delimiter and the Delimited. Silence is the only mode which can capture God’s proximity” (8).

In “A Dance” and in the subsequent texts of the novel, the writer uses a language similar in its obscurity to al-Niffari’s to describe potential encounters with a divine spirit of sorts who appears at specific moments in time to the most ardent and patient of watchers. Only the “empowered can make out her royal features, peer through the opening of her lips, seek shelter in the corners of her eyes, forever trained on the point at which the sun sets” (al-Ghitani 111). Although she is “too marvellous to ignore and too mysterious to comprehend,” anyone “walking his road, or dwelling in his home, may see her with his own eyes so long as he turns with his whole being toward her” (112). While the writer suggests in “A Dance” that the perseverant observer will surely be rewarded by this lovely vision, from the tenth text onwards we realize that this encounter will never happen. We find ourselves in the position of Tuhami: breathless watchers anticipating a sublime revelation of sorts which does not occur.

The novel’s ongoing debate with proximity and distance at the point of the threshold generates a tension which reaches its climax in “A Dance” before dissipating in the last few texts. In “A Tenth Text” we read a couplet: “They seem as ones by a promise bound to meet / Though long are the ages that pass between their trysts” (115). The promise of encounter still exists; dismayingly, however, the time between encounters is now “ages.” In “An Eleventh
Text” there is an even shorter and more obscure couplet: “The beginning is a point / and the ending is a point” (119). Language begins to fail at this point, perhaps because the attempt to delimit the Divine is futile. We may construe the “point” here as a spatial referent, to recall the deictic argument in Chapter 2, manifesting the writer’s human effort to render the infinite sublime tangible, but in “A Twelfth Text,” this human effort finds “extinction” at the “apex” (123), perhaps suggesting that the closest encounter with divinity can be achieved only through death. At the same time, however, just before language completely dies with the closure of the novel, there is also a sense of futility: “All things / are from / nothing” (127), “A Thirteenth Text” informs us. Finally, “A Fourteenth Text” offers complete negation: “Nothing. / Nothing. / Nothing.” (131). Whether this silence, as Rustom suggests about the writing of al-Niffari, is “the only mode which can capture God’s proximity” (Rustom 8) or whether it is a sign of defeat we can never know.

If we are to abide by D. H. Lawrence’s aphorism and trust the tale and not the teller, we will experience much frustration with the novel’s ending, if not the novel as a whole. From threshold to threshold, the seekers of truth in the novel are never rewarded; as readers, we are similarly left in a state of bewilderment, unsure what to find at each point of entry. Nevertheless, each narrative in the novel suggests a new way of thinking about social, political, cultural, and artistic spatial transformations. To use a different perspective on Sufi tradition than I have illustrated up to this point, we might also consider the Sufi author Shaykh Sa’di’s direction in Sufism. In “Sufism and Poetry: A Marriage of Convenience?” (1999), Dick Davis describes the thirteenth-century Persian Sa’di’s Sufism as being “directed toward the world, not away from it.” Although Pyramid Texts appears to drift away from the world, it really seeks to redefine our relationship with it. For Sa’di, Davis argues, Sufism was “a way, not of renouncing our daily
human activity, but of entering into an equitable relationship with it.” The key tenet in Sa’di’s Sufi philosophy is that “we cannot judge another’s inward life or relationship to truth, since the truth and God’s purposes are hidden, and the visible life is a veil hiding the unknown.” No matter how great the yearning for transcendence, we must insist on “suspended judgement” for the truth is inaccessible to us (Davis 13).

Sa’di’s philosophy helps us understand what al-Ghitani is doing in the novel; the Sufi language used in the text is not only to emphasize the nature of truth and man’s personal involvement with God, but also to address a universal humanity as opposed to a segment of the world. In this regard, Pyramid Texts favours obscurity over clarity, subjectivity over objectivity, questions over answers. The novel insists that universal truth remain elusive to all of mankind: Tuhami will never acquire his treasured manuscripts, the travelers will never have the same experiences, the climber will never return to tell of what he saw at the summit, the Caliph will never be scientifically certain of the pyramidal measurements, the lovers will never be able to divulge the intensity of their encounter in the Pyramid, the watchers will never experience the long-awaited signs and patterns of the Pyramids, and even the most patient will never see the dance of the female spirit. No matter how alluring the Pyramidal threshold is, what lies beyond the threshold is a space that cannot be described except by one who has crossed that point of entry. The obscure language of the narrative is a testimony in itself; language can never describe the intensity of these experiences, hence it fails altogether as the experiences reach their zenith.

The same goes for representation; one can never have control over spatial and cultural representations. What we have in Pyramid Texts is the portrayal of thresholds but never the portrayal of what lies beyond, because the moment the spatial experience is narrated and recorded it loses its value. Hence the novel is replete with phrases of hearsay, such as “everyone
talked” (al-Ghitani 29), “it might be said” (41); phrases of uncertainty, such as “it may be” (69), “it is puzzling” (77), “no one knew for sure” (81); phrases of descriptive ineptitude, such as “must remain beyond description,” “both like and unlike” (87), “too mysterious to comprehend” (112); and phrases of negation, such as “nothing / nothing / nothing” (131). Were the text to claim authority of representation over these spatial experiences, it would become another binding link in the historical chain of authoritative representations whose aim is to command space by defining it and enforcing rigid boundaries on it. Authoritative representation reinforces ideologies and sets people apart by expecting certain codes of conduct within particular spaces. It allows those in power to control the meanings and purposes of spaces, thus keeping a large number of people out and allowing a select few into the spatial sphere. The novel’s power lies in its ability to use representation in order to challenge and withstand hegemonic representation. At its peak, the novel uses the universalizing Sufi vision of space and age to destabilize entrenched visions of the structure and purpose of space which have restricted space over the ages. The novel writes, graffiti-like, a new narrative on the pages of history and on the walls of enduring structures in order to show that no space can be owned and controlled, and no historical narrative belongs to some at the expense of others.
Conclusion

Does the spatial journey come to an end with this conclusion, or is it only just beginning? What is to become of \textit{thawra}? The Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, almost of the same age as al-Ghitani, explained in an interview conducted on September 15, 2011 that Arab countries “have been abused and scarred by dictators. Now the pieces have to be picked up slowly. The changes and reforms needed will take a long time” (¶ 2). Emphasizing the need for time and patience, Jelloun pointed out that the impatience of many Arab world youths, such as those of Tunisia, was now fuelling their desire to immigrate “to Europe because things are not changing fast enough for them … How can you tell them to sit back and wait for the change which they fought and risked their lives for? This is very hard” (¶ 4). The seasoned writer also saw that while the Arab \textit{individual} had not been recognized before the thawra, now he has gained far more recognition (¶ 6). He called upon the youth not only to be patient, but also to read more, to understand and appreciate the differences in Arab culture itself and between other cultures better (¶ 20).\footnote{In the interview, Jelloun emphasized the importance of knowing how other people, even dictators, think. As an example, in one section of his most recent work, \textit{Arab Spring: The Recovery of Arab Dignity} (May 2011), Jelloun adopts the perspective of the Libyan dictator Gadhafi in an attempt to “climb into people’s heads” to find out how they think and behave (¶ 24).}

Generations of Arab writers envisioned that in the aftermath of each historical revolution, there would soon be change and closure; however, the beginnings and endings of \textit{thawras} are not easily marked, except perhaps in those spaces that go unnoticed. That is a main reason why the Arabic novel lends itself so well to such spatial readings. As Colla said in “The Poetry of Revolt,” it was the novelists who “got the darker job afterward of detailing regrets and reversals,” but it was also the novel that could best express “how people live and love, aspire and
mourn” (¶ 2-4). What this study has accomplished, I hope, is a re-evaluation of different representations of *thawra* in the Arabic novel using the spatial approach. My use of different theories granted me access to different spaces, each of which represented a different level at which the socio-political could be negotiated and *thawra* could be expressed. Space allowed me to envision human relationships and identity narratives in a diversity of ways; it was an element capable of traversing different mediums.

In my study of *Season of Migration to the North*, I observed how spatial language was used at a macro level in the depiction of both topographical and textual metaphors. It also factored at a micro level, whereby simple words were impregnated with meaning in the textual deixis of the novel. Space also lent itself to the study of textual heteroglossia, whereby a complex web of dialogue captured in its sticky strands a diversity of voices. At a spatial level, these voices and the relationships between them gave a new dynamic to the socio-political, since they carried with them numerous racial and historical nuances. These observations raised important questions about tolerance, identity, conflict, and *thawra*. My reading suggested that *thawra* could be expressed in the complex transformation of space and its energetic socio-political dynamics. The intersection of individual, post/colonial, and post/national spaces generated a new space booming with associations; the issue of what it was to be Sudanese was complicated, becoming a question that demanded that we review our preconceptions about the Sudan.

Spatial representation allows us to discern the multiple forces at work in an author’s text in order to re-envision our future and our values. A cultural study in this regard may definitely point out some of the flaws in a long tradition of spatial representation in the Sudan. Additionally, it opens our eyes to the fallibly human side of the story. One does need to be
tolerant, but tolerance may also be unconsciously condescending. Tolerance may undermine long histories of subjugation, as between the Sudan and Egypt, or within the Sudan itself. It is no surprise that today so many Sudanese critics are preaching for some sort of tolerance. They are calling on the Sudanese to listen to one another with open hearts and minds, to listen to their elders and return to their diverse histories. A great many different historical, modern, local, and foreign elements are thus discerned in a spatial reading that expressly seeks out all these diversities.

From this Sudanese dilemma, I came to the heart of Egypt with a slightly different emphasis in my spatial approach, one more befitting the spatial components in al-Aswany’s novel, since the spatial language of each novel I studied ultimately dictated the most appropriate spatial approach. With *The Yacoubian Building*, looking at the social and the political as *movements* rather than as ready-made constructs proved to be highly productive. As per Latour’s suggestion, the acronym for actor-network-theory, ANT, reflects the behaviour of the insect itself which I needed to emulate; to be an ant, one must do a lot of work and must carry around a huge load. The ant must traverse countless tunnels and chambers with this load; similarly, I had to bear the bulky associations between actors and entities that I traced throughout these social networks in order to determine the movements of the socio-political. However, in spite of the fact that at many times this approach raised more questions than it supplied answers, the task of reassembling the social did indeed prove its value.

In their eagerness to explain the socio-political forces at work in the world, social scientists have often sought to stabilize the socio-political phenomena taking place by making hasty assumptions about them. Their discipline encourages them to take flying leaps from actor to actor, group to group, *thawra* to *thawra*, to come up with definitions that, unfortunately, have
silenced a great many voices and obscured a number of narratives. Because the social scientist tends to forget that the social is such an entangled web of different associations between even the most unlikely elements, he may misjudge the nature of the political. In these situations, the spatial approach proved doubly useful as it removed many of these textual hurdles where space was subjected to specific forms of ordering.

With *The Yacoubian Building*, the combined socio-political theories and spatial approaches I used in my study configured the city and the world beyond it into spatial networks. Alternating between spatial theories of transgression, architecture, social stratification, historical and modern representation, I examined different aspects of the novel. The actor, human and non-human, was scrutinized as being representative both of him/itself and the space in which he/it functioned; mediators and transgressions brought about different spatial and socio-political changes. Other actors were given back their rightful roles where they would otherwise have simply been elements of the subaltern. The narratives of the servants in the novel offered us multiple insights into textual, racial, and historical representations.

Spatial discourse also complicated the relationship between the actor and the group. I dissected the complex motives behind the actor’s movements towards and away from a group, suggesting that groups rarely form for the reasons we imagine, and that the construction and the presentation of one’s identity relies on one’s creation of a narrative with which one may order one’s space and regulate one’s life. However, socio-political movements can also manifest themselves in shattering confrontations with these imagined narratives, moments in which the boundaries of groups disintegrate.

These spatial observations should make us think twice before putting forward any authoritative theories regarding *thawra* or any seemingly unified socio-political movements. In
addition, the complex relations between actors of different social hierarchies, the transgressions of each, the associations each actor brings into the relationship, all suggest that there is no real disintegration of one class and its replacement by another, rising class. Social classes do not simply dissolve; they evolve and transform with the constant influx of intermediary and mediating socio-political associations. Shared socio-political goals are not the only factors that lead to the formation of the group. Similarly, actors are motivated not only by economic, personal, or emotional reasons. Because the actor is constantly bombarded with different associations throughout the course of his life, and because these associations leave traces in their wake, the task of accurately representing the political becomes difficult and often dubious. The associations in the spatial network crowd al-Aswany’s novel, at times overwhelmingly, but they remain a valuable source of information for us.

Cultural representation in *Pyramid Texts* transported us to a whole new level of space; the emphasis in this chapter was on the unsettling of hegemonic spatial representations using the metaphor of the spatial threshold and focusing on the socio-spatial movement of transgression. For al-Ghitani, tradition remained the ultimate gateway from which to access the world in all of its cultural, social, and political aspects. The confused and the fearful, the driven and the driving, the loud and the muted identities in the works of Salih and al-Aswany were dispersed in their novels across crowded spaces, spaces overridden with voices and associations. In al-Ghitani, however, a strange silence descended over space, perhaps because there is hardly any dialogue in the novel, or because we do not view the actors in *Pyramid Texts* from the same perspective that we viewed the actors in the other texts, but from the vantage point of the Pyramids instead. Perhaps the spatial silence exists since we view the actors through the eyes of an author who has grown weary of the constant conflicts, the social and political bickering, the
oppressive stifling of both social and cultural freedom in his country. The opening of space in al-Ghitani’s novel encompasses the entire universe before disappearing into nothing; this could be a final *thawra* against spatial hegemony.

Regarding the constant state of conflict our world is in today, Bruno Latour writes in his recent work *War of the Worlds* that wherever there are conflicts, there are also referees. However, “there remained a slight suspicion that the referee of all the disputes could be biased” (9). But who was this referee? According to Latour, in today’s world, the role of the referee belongs “to only one of the cultures of the world, the one bearing the imprecise name of the West” (9). For Latour, the question of who the referee should be must never be resolved by “replacing intolerant conquistadors with specialists of inter-cultural dialogue.” Instead, “conquerors should rather be replaced by enemies capable of recognizing that those facing them are enemies also and not irrational beings, that the outcome of the battle is uncertain, and that, consequently, it may be necessary to negotiate and in earnest” (32).

In this way, the diplomats of conflicting sides would be forced to negotiate with the other side. They would be encouraged “to learn, along with their opponents, how to practice the much more difficult but much longer-lasting task of cosmopolitics” or “the politics of the cosmos” (50). Perhaps Latour’s argument is in keeping with al-Ghitani’s own views. For the mediating referee, according to Latour, it would be much better to have someone who did not “constitute the unity of the world for anybody else” (30) – someone, perhaps, who would not attempt to hegemonize the spatial representations of any other culture.

The use of spatial discourse to designate, understand, and negotiate social and cultural differences has certainly been effective, but where does one go from here in this spatial study? Spatial discourse has only recently begun to prove its value in literary criticism, and the novels I
have selected for my study are certainly not meant to represent all the ways in which Arabic writing or non-Arabic writing by Arab authors may both engage with and inform (Western) spatial theory. In Arabic fiction, the genres of poetry and drama have much to offer spatial discourse. The way in which the Arabic language of poetry may lend itself to spatial studies, for example, and the capacity of drama to portray authentic Arabic dialects on stage, all offer different venues from which to study space. The works (in Arabic) of Fadwa Touqan, Adonis, and Mahmoud Darwish in poetry, or that of Saadallah Wannous and Ziad Rahbani in drama, serve as a few examples. At a non-fictional level, the extensive studies (in English) on Arab urban development, cinema, geography, topography, and socio-politics, amongst other fields, as to be found in the works of Farha Ghannam, Lina Khatib, Omnia el-Shakry, and Said Sadek (to name only a few) provide refreshingly new arguments and insights into the roles of class, gender, and socio-economics in spatial construction.

The novels selected for this study may, at one level, be seen to both reflect and reflect upon three literary stages in Arabic literature. Each work engages and experiments with spatial politics in a way that reflects the personal philosophy of its author. What each study offers is a different perspective on thawra that complicates the relations between and the movements of social and political entities. From this spatial vantage point, we are able to discern the obscured narratives and silenced voices that often get lost in the ordering of space and in the language of social sciences, not to forget in our conventional understanding of thawra. With each recognition and acknowledgement we make of these participating actors, we are able to identify another space of hope.
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