Degree Project

Bachelor thesis

Arabic dystopias in the 21st century

**A study on 21st century Arabic dystopian fiction
through the analysis of four works of Arabic dystopian narrative**

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Abstract:

Dystopian fiction as intended in the Western literary tradition is a 20th century phenomenon on the Arabic literary scene. This relatively new genre has been experiencing an uplift since the beginning of the 21st century and many works that have been defined *dystopias* have been published and translated into English in the last 10 – 15 years. In order to find out their main features, Claeys's categorization of literary dystopias is applied and a thematic analysis is carried out on four Arabic dystopian works of narrative, written by authors from different parts of the Arabic world. The analysis shows that 21st century Arabic dystopias are political dystopias, with totalitarianism as their main variation. Rather than on society, their focus is on the individual, and more specifically on personal freedom. The totalitarian constraints are mainly caused by religious fundamentalism and bureaucratic procedures. Surveillance and control over population are implemented by means of religious precepts and bureaucratic constructions, together with, in some instances, control over language and technological devices. Political totalitarianism regardless of a specific political ideology is identified as main theme. The thesis suggests that a Western-based classification framework is only partially suitable for Arabic dystopian fiction of the 21st century and that further research, including but not limited to a specific classification theory for Arabic dystopian fiction, is necessary to properly investigate this new literary trend in Arabic literature.

Keywords:

Dystopia, utopia, fiction, Arabic, Arabic literature, totalitarianism, fundamentalism, language, bureaucracy, religion, freedom.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Utopia and utopian fiction have been extensively researched in the West during the last century[1]. The field has with time also encompassed dystopian fiction, resulting in different definitions of the concept but almost unanimously declaring it a tool of social criticism[2]. Since the end of the 20th century, the term "dystopian fiction" has become very popular due to the proliferation of so called dystopian novels in young adult literature, many of which have been made into movies – some examples are the Hollywood blockbusters *The Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* trilogies. These works have typical science-fiction and/or fantasy traits, their main characters are invariably young protagonists, full with ideals of honesty and justice, to various degrees fighting against the impositions of a cruel society created by adults, and invariably triumphing in the end.

However, the term *dystopia* goes back to the beginning of the 20th century and is usually associated with Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four[3]*, considered in the field "the great defining texts of the genre of dystopian fiction, both in their vividness of their engagement with real-world social and political issues and in the scope of their critique of the societies on which they focus." (Booker 1994b, p. 20).

In the field of modern Arabic literature, the novel and the short story have very seldom used dystopias as a form of social or political criticism[4], as authors have opted for realism for this purpose (Allen 1995, p. 65). In these first decades of the 21st century however, the Arabic literary scene has witnessed a new trend in fiction in the form of dystopian narrative, with

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[1] See for example the research published by Claeys & Sargent (1999), Claeys (2011), Ferns (1999), Kumar (1986), Negley (1977), Sargent (1988 and 1994) and Snodgrass (1995).

[2] See for example the studies authored by Booker (1994b), Claeys (2017) and Gottlieb (2001).

[3] Zamyatin's *We* is set in the 26th century in the totalitarian regime of OneState, where vigilance encompasses the people's whole lifes and where science and the logics of mathematics are the state's imposed key to one's happiness. In Huxley's *Brave New World* humans are genetically bred and collectively conditioned, if necessary chemically drugged, to be happy and serve an elitarian ruling class. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* brings the communism ideology of the greater good to the extreme, freedom of thought is forbidden and free will is not only discouraged but also punished.

[4] Two examples will be briefly discussed in Section 2, namely *al-Saiyyd min Ḥaql al-Sabānakh* (*al-Sayyid min Haql al-Sabanakh*) by Ṣabrī Mūsā (Sabri Musa) and *Ahl al-Safīna* (*Ahl al-Safina*) by Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Allah al-Muʿaqqit al-Marrākushī (al-Marrakushi).

novels and short stories being published in the Arabic world[5], brought to the attention of the Western public by newspaper articles, on the Web and blogs[6].

1.1.1 Transliteration and translations

The transliteration system used is the IJMES Transliteration System. The fully transliterated name or word is given the first time such word or name is quoted and it is followed by an Anglicized form in parentheses if the name or word is subsequently used in the text. All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

1.2 Aim

The scope of this thesis is to investigate dystopian fiction in the Arabic literature at the beginning of the 21st century.

1.3 Research questions

What type of dystopian fiction is the early 21st century Arabic dystopian fiction?

What are the main themes of the 21st century Arabic dystopian fiction?

1.4 Definitions

1.4.1 Dystopia and dystopian fiction

In his study *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature,* Booker defined *dystopia* as "the general term encompassing any imaginative view of a society that is oriented towards highlighting in a critical way negative or problematic features of that society's vision of the

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[5] Examples are discussed under Section 4.
[6] See for example Alter (2016), Byrnes (2011), Dhaimish (2016), Gerini (2016), Ghanem (2015), Hazelton (2017), Ramey (2017)

ideal." (1994b, p. 22)[7]. For this thesis, I am identifying modern dystopian fiction with works like the previously mentioned dystopian classics, namely *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Dystopian fiction is therefore intended as narrative that magnifies central, critical issues for the present society such as authoritarian power, control over individuals and manipulation of information. Thus dystopian fiction serves as a warning for the contemporary society, since it projects into a possible future the consequences of problematic, undesirable trends perceived by the authors as potentially negative.

1.4.2   Dystopia in Arabic terminology

The Arabic literary field has adopted different designations for dystopian fiction in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), such as adab al-madīna al-fāsida (literature of the corrupted city, as opposed to adab al-madīna al-fāḍila (literature of the virtuous city, a term used in the philosophical discourse), naqīḍ al-yūtūbīā (the antithesis of utopia) and ʿālam al- wāqiʿ al-marīr (the world of the bitter reality) (Barbaro 2013, pp. 26-27), together with al-yūtūbīā al-ḍidd (the opposite of utopia) and al-mudun al-taḥdhīriyya (the cities of warning) (al-Shārūnī 2000, p. 189). In some Arabic articles, the English word transliterated into dīstūbīā has started to appear[8]. Because of the lack of unity with regard to the meaning of the various terms in the field of Arabic literary criticism, I have chosen the English designation *dystopia* to encompass the Arabic works.

1.4.3   Arabic fiction

In line with some literary critics' definition (for example Starkey, 2006), I am defining *Arabic* fiction in a broad meaning and I am including literary works of fiction not exclusively written in Arabic. The reason of this extension to fiction written by Arabic authors in other European languages is due to two facts. Firstly, because of their political history during the 19th

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[7] In this definition he gathers all the terms that have been used to indicate "[…] the range of sceptical treatment of utopianism in fiction and film." (1994b, p. 22) such as negative utopia, antiutopia, heterotopia, cacotopia, etc. As charting and defining the differences among these terms exceed the scope of this thesis, too, the same approach to the general term *dystopia* is used in this thesis.

[8] For example in the article "Dīstūbīā "al-Khūīsāt" li-Bāsma al-ʿAnzī" by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Nimr. The article discusses "Khaliyy al-Bāl", a short story by Bāsma al-ʿAnzī set in al-Khūīsāt, a natural desert coastal area in Kuwait under discussion for a tourist development project.

and 20th centuries, Arabic countries have been strongly influenced by Western culture. An example of this situation are the countries of North Africa, where "literature in Arabic was eclipsed by literature in French" (Starkey 2006, p. x). Secondly, many Arab authors have moved to the West and opted for writing in English "for a variety of reasons including personal preference, avoidance of cultural restriction and censorship, and to optimize exposure." (Nash 2012, p. 12).[9]

1.5 Outline

Section 1 introduces the research topic, with background information and definitions. It also states the aim of the research and more specifically the research questions. Section 2 is an overview of the research field and includes a review of the main features of Western and Arabic dystopian fiction in the 20th century. The theoretical framework of Claeys's dystopianism is outlined in Section 3. Section 4 describes the method for the research and presents the selected works. In Section 5 I analyze the selected works according to Claeys's theoretical framework and I identify their variations, concepts, themes and trends. A discussion about the results, and more specifically the themes and the suitability of Claeys's theoretical approach, follows in Section 6. I sum up my research and my results in Section 7, where I also provide some suggestions for further research.

2 Overview of the field

The term *dystopia* originates within the utopian literary tradition and made its first appearance in 1747 (Sargent 2013, p. 10), originally carrying the meaning of a "diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place." (Claeys 2017, p. 4).

Dystopia as a literary genre emerged at the end of the 19th century out of the threats that industrialization and socialism represented for mankind (Claeys 2017, p. 355). The term

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[9] The definition of Arabic fiction is an ongoing debate, for some insights on what it comprises and what can be considered as such, see also Allen (2007) , Khalidi (2016, pp. xvi-xviii), al-Musawi (2003, pp. 1-13) and Tresilian (2008, pp. 9-19).

became widely used only in the 20th century (Claeys 2010, p. 107), to describe a fictional society with social or political negative traits or as a satire of a utopian society.

While utopias are not strictly inherent to the scope of this thesis, their close relationship with dystopias are worth mentioning, as both utopias and dystopias are a manifestation of social criticism. In his *Dystopia: A Natural History* Claeys claims that utopia and dystopia "might be twins, the progeny of the same parents." (2017, p. 7), as utopias inherently imply that the present is wrong and point to a better alternative, while dystopias show what could happen if utopias went wrong and turned into nightmares.

2.1 Features of modern dystopian fiction

By the end of the 20th century, in his *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994b), Booker had grouped the 20th century dystopian narratives into two main typologies, namely the ones criticizing totalitarianism and the ones criticizing democracy, in their political manifestations of dictatorial regimes and bourgeois societies respectively. He underscored the function of dystopian fiction, both as scepticism about the feasibility of an ideal society and, most of all, as social criticism, specifically as a way of pointing at "perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems." (1994b, p. 20). He identified some of its main features, one of them being their spatial and/or temporal settings distant from the author's own. (1994b, p. 19) [10]. Other typical traits are the totalitarian police states, often ruled by a strong, real or fictitious leader or by a sort of oligarchy, together with the manipulation of historical records and the exploitation of art, culture and language as tools of oppression. Finally, the main protagonists are often marginal in society, typically "alienated individuals" (1994a, p. 33), trying to claim their individuality within a social system that treats everyone in the same way.

In her study *Dystopian Fiction East and West* (2001), Gottlieb outlines a list of the main features of modern dystopian fiction. To begin with, she names the relationship between utopia and dystopia, or more precisely a utopian dream that becomes a dystopian nightmare, whether in the form of a despotic totalitarian dictatorship or as failed capitalistic democracy. In addition,

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[10] Specifically, Booker states that "The principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable." (1994b, p. 19).

she mentions "the duality of law and lawlessness," (2001, p.10), as the protagonists face an unjust law system and eventually, in most cases, an unjust trial. Furthermore, she describes these dystopian societies as "a primitive state religion" (2001, pp. 10-11), as they are characterized by an inexplicable force that cannot be overthrown and that dominates the individual's private sphere by means of propaganda and indoctrination. In Gottlieb's list there is also the protagonists' attachment to the past, in the form of records or books or history or diary. Finally, she mentions two typical traits from a more structural point of view of the genre, namely their being at the same time both political satires and tragedies and their setting in a more or less near, hypothetical future.

Another central typical feature of dystopian fiction is surveillance, intended as instrument to control and exercise power over the individuals. Often cited and referred to in the field of literary analysis of dystopian fiction[11] is Foucault's theoretical approach to surveillance as presented in his *Discipline and Punish* (1977/1995). Starting from the need in the 17th century to confine plague and lepers in order to avoid the spreading of the diseases, he compared the authorities' exercise of individual control function to Bentham's *Panopticon*, an experimental 19th century prison design, where the inmates were continuously kept under observation without knowing when they were being watched. According to Foucault, the effect is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (1995, p. 201). In other words, the institution's power, and consequently any form of political government, depends on and results from the ability to acquire information about the activities of the subjects of the observation. This principle is central also in the field of Information Science theory. In their *Fundamentals of Information Studies* (2007), Lester and Koehler write that "information is a powerful and pervasive force in the operation and functioning of society, regardless of where that society is situated in terms of historical time or economic development. …. In current, developed societies, information is used as an instrument of influence and control, in the lives of individual citizens, in the political structure of the country, and in the relationships among nations." (2007, p. 8).

Also instrumental for the exercise of power is control of language. In his research *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias* (1997), Sisk claims that "issues of controlling language inform nearly all dystopian fictions." (p. 11). He describes/explains the

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[11] See for example Booker (1994a), Ahlbäck (2001), Gottlieb (2001), Amey (2005), Attick (2013), Garrison & Grey (2013) and Claeys (2017).

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the *linguistic relativity principle,* according to which it is language that gives shape to human perceptions, so in order to understand a concept we need to be able to frame it in words. The relationship between language and thought is a two-way exchange, which indicates that they influence each other. Therefore controlling language involves manipulating perceptions and thought.

2.2 Arabic dystopias of the 20th century

As for 20th century Arabic utopian literature, it is worth mentioning *Riḥlat Ibn Faṭūma* (*Rihlat Ibn Fattouma*) written by Najīb Maḥfūẓ (Naguib Mahfouz) in 1988 and published in its English translation in 1993 with the title *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, a novel that has not earned much popularity with the Western reading public (Allen 2001, p. 208). In this novel Ibn Fattouma, on a quest for the perfect, utopian country, goes on a journey through five different lands. At first each one seems a perfect, utopian society, but in reality they are all dystopias in disguise, as individuality, freedom and democracy do not exist because of slavery, war or totalitarian political regimes. What is interesting to notice is the religious aspect, which Mahfouz does not fail to take up for each country: each land has its own religion, which is continuously compared to Islam, the religion of the land Ibn Fattouma comes from.

In her study *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (2013, *Science Fiction in Arabic Literature*), Barbaro briefly examines Arabic utopian literature and mentions *Ahl al-safīna* (*The People of the Ship*), a novel written by Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Muwaqqit al-Marrākūshī (al-Marrakushi)[12] in 1934. According to Barbaro, this novel might be considered the precursor of the naqīḍ al-yūtūbīā (2013, p. 51) i.e. the antithesis of utopia, because it criticizes the morals of a decadent society. In his study "The Narrative of the Ship", van Leeuwen analyses the same novel and writes that "the author here shows a futuristic vision, a kind of dystopia, as a warning against the adoption of Western influence, against the depreciation of moral values, against the dangers of foreign domination and against the fragmentation of Muslim society." (2006, p. 19).

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[12] Neither Barbaro nor Van Leeuwen cite this novel in Arabic. Barbaro refers to *La literatura marroquí contemporànea : La novella y la crítica literaria* by G. Fernàndez Parrilla (Barbaro 2013, p. 51). Van Leeuwen states he could not consult the original Arabic text and refers to *Les gens du navire, ou le XIVe siècle : Réforme et politique dans le Maroc des années 1930* by Alain Roussillon and Abdallah Saaf (Van Leeuwen 2006, p. 14). For this reason, the novel by al-Marrakushi is not listed in the References at the end of this thesis. See references to Barbaro and van Leeuwen instead.

Because of its science fiction features, namely space ships and space travels, in her study Barbaro analyses in detail *al-Sayyd min Ḥaql al-Sabānakh* (*The Man from the Spinach Field*), a novel by Ṣabrī Mūsā (Sabri Musa)[13], and claims that the novel recalls the Western traditional dystopia of the *Brave New World* kind (2013, p. 209), with its warning against an undesirable but possible future and the consequences of scientific and technological development for mankind. In this story, set on a distant planet and in a faraway future, people live in prosperity thanks to a perfect System that equally regulates work and all human activities. The main character rebels against the dehumanizing consequences of the System, asks for permission to go back to Earth on a quest for the past but is not allowed to come back to his planet.

Besides Barbaro's study, there does not seem to exist any relevant Western research on the Arabic literary dystopias, intended as a form of social and/or political criticism. Some recent studies have dealt with Islamic utopianism, among them Dutton's "Non-western Utopian Traditions" (2010). In her overview of non-Western ideals of better existence, she mentions the Golden Age of Islam and al-Farābī's design of al-madīna al-fāḍila, but she does not take up any utopian literary work of the 20th century and only discusses the influence of Islamic utopianism in contemporary religious fundamentalism (2010, pp. 234-239), thus implicitly excluding utopian secular thinking in the Arab world.

The term *dystopia* is used by al-Saadi in her analysis of two short stories in her study "Utopia / Dystopia through the Theme of Immigration in Two Arabic Short Stories" (2011). What in her study is termed dystopian is the negative reality experienced by the main characters, as their dreams of happiness and realization have been crushed because the new country did not meet their expectations. Consequently, the two short stories cannot be characterized as dystopian fiction in the definition used in this thesis, since they do not constitute a warning against a possible, future flawed society.

As for research on dystopian fiction in the Arabic world, so far the topic has awaken only the interest of the medias, which are now starting to draw public attention to it as a new literary phenomenon[14]. Arabic literary research has so far focused on utopian fiction. Some interest in

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[13] Barbaro cites the 1987 edition (Al-Qāhira: Al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀma lil-Kitāb) and mentions in a footnote that the work first appeared as serial novel in the magazine Ṣabāḥ al Khayr in 1981.

[14] See for example ʿAqīl (2017) and Mukhtār (2017).

the Western utopian literature was already present at the end of the 20th century. For example, in her article "al-Riwāiyya wa al-Yūtūbīā fī Kitāb Jadīd" ("The Novel and Utopia in a New Book"), Najlā ʿAlām reviewed *al-Riwāiyya wa al-Yūtūbīā* (1995), a work by Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb about the reasons of the appearance of the utopian novel in the Western literature and about how the dream of utopia developed through the writings of some European authors such as Defoe, Swift and Voltaire to Marx, Dickens and Zola (1995, pp. 119-121).

In his volume *al-Khayāl al ʿĀlamī fī al-Adab al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāṣira* (2000, *Science Fiction in the Arabic Contemporary Literature*), al-Sharūnī (al-Sharuni) dedicates a chapter to Arabic science fiction utopias. Starting from some utopian works of the Western literary tradition, he then mentions both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* as examples of Western novels that influenced Arabic science fiction authors writing about utopias and dystopias (2000, p. 189). He continues with the analysis of four novels that, according to him, present their authors' utopian dreams, or rather the fears they have encountered (2000, p. 189). The four novels are *Sukān al-ʿĀlam al-Thānī* (1977, *The Inhabitants of the Second World*) by Nihād Sharīf (Nehad Sherif), a story about a group of young scientists who build a utopian city at the bottom of the sea to flee from the negative life on the Earth; *al-Ṭūfān al-Azraq* (1976, *The Blue Flood*) by Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Salām al-Baqqālī, a similar story about a group of young scientists who build their utopian city in a remote area of Western Sahara, fleeing from nuclear radiations; *Hurūb ilā al-Faḍāʾ* (1981, *Escape into Space*) by Ḥasīn Qadrī, where three inhabitants of planet Earth fall with their spaceship onto a utopian planet, where life is perfect as all citizens are equal; and *al-Sayyd min Ḥaql al-Sabānakh* (1984, *The Man from the Spinach Field*) by Sabri Musa, previously mentioned and described by Barbaro as the most accomplished expression of dystopian, or rather pessimistic, literature in Arabic (2013, p. 196).

According to al-Sharuni's analysis, these novels are clearly influenced by Huxley's *Brave New World,* as in all of them science and technology are governing and regulating human existence. He concludes that these novels' utopias and dystopias express their authors' questions, in the form of possible answers, about the fate of planet Earth and about its problematic social and political systems (2000, p. 223).

3 Theoretical framework: Claeys's literary dystopianism

Because Arabic dystopian fiction, as previously discussed, is a relatively new phenomenon on the Arabic literary scene, the theoretical approach I am using is Claeys's attempt to a thematic classification of literary dystopias, as first sketched in his article "News from Somewhere: Enhanced Sociability and the Composite Definition of Utopia and Dystopia" (2013) and as later expanded in his volume *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017).

My choice of a Western oriented theoretical approach in connection with Arabic dystopian fiction is deliberate and motivated by two reasons, namely by the fact that dystopian fiction was in fact born as a genre in the Western literary tradition and by the lack of extensive research and consequently of an equivalent categorization in the field of Arabic literary criticism, as discussed in the previous sections.

3.1 Variations of dystopia

From a conceptual point of view, Claeys starts in 2013 to identify three variations of dystopia in general terms. The main principle on which he bases these variations is fear and consequently to which extent fear controls the dystopian context.

The first variation deals with the individual's fear of punishment and it is generically a bad or evil space to be afraid of, such as haunted places and prisons, as well as periods of "intensified, localized malevolence" (2013, p. 161), like pogroms, witch-hunts and violent mobs. Any form of repression, including traditional forms of despotism, also belongs here.

The second variation, also concerned with fear, is totalitarianism, identified in the 20th century "state terrorism" (p. 162) witnessed in conjunction with communism, fascism and nazism. Fear here is different, as it is also aimed at interfering and affecting personality – individuality undergoes a change and gets eradicated in the name and for the benefit of the common good.

These two variations are more related to politics than the third one, which is instead based on the fear of the future and of negative, more or less realistic developments of existing situations. These include technological nightmares such as nuclear warfare, science-fiction

scenarios like alien invasions, and all possible variations of the end of the world and secular Apocalypses, such as meteorites, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and the like.

According to Claeys, these three variations of dystopia have in common "their description of societies where human volition has been superseded or eroded by an authoritative imposition of control from outside;" (2013, p. 170), resulting in fear, and more specifically in loss of control over one's own destiny.

Claeys further develops this first attempt of categorizing dystopias in 2017, where he groups dystopias in three, slightly different concepts. The first is the political dystopia, "chiefly associated with the failure of utopian aspirations" (2017, p. 5), and includes several political or politically-related models, for example militarized societies and political despotism. The second and the third forms of the dystopian concept are the environmental and the technological dystopia, both threatening humanity, either with extinction or by domination. This latter categorization is closely related to his thematic classification of literary dystopias described in Section 3.2.

3.2 Modern dystopian literature themes and trends

As for Western modern dystopian literature, that is to say the period from the end of WW2 to the present, Claeys identifies the following five main themes (2017, p. 447):

1) the advent of the nuclear age since 1945 and the potentiality of total destruction it implied;
2) the environmental threats, which first emerged in the 1970's and later became more and more focused on climate change and overpopulation;
3) the overpowering nature of machines, resulting in loss of individuality and freedom, increased surveillance, alienation and eventually artificial intelligence;
4) the cultural degeneration of liberal, non-totalitarian societies caused by hedonistic consumption, with consequences like violence, viciousness, selfishness, mass poverty and neglect and
5) the anxiety caused by terrorism.

In addition, he identifies two main trends in dystopian fiction in the last part of the 20th century and the early 21st century. The first concerns the shift from political collectivist dystopias to plutocratic dystopias, or from stories set in totalitarian states to stories set in neo-

liberal governments. Dystopias, he claims, are now mainly focused on the consequences of wealth and relate to "the impact of technology, population growth and environmental degradation" (2017, p. 488).

The second trend of modern dystopias is characterized by the general emphasis on the need of the stories' happy endings, where the protagonists, after various assorted obstacles, win the battle, beat or overthrow the system and rescue or are rescued, thus implying a sort of optimism and hope. However, notes Claeys, this trend has decreased in the later years and has eventually been replaced by an interest in what he calls "post-apocalyptic despair" (2017, p. 489), both from the single individual's point of view and from a social perspective, exploring how society would cope with catastrophes. In particular, the interest focuses, at the individual level, on whether a post-apocalyptic situation would bring out the best or the worst human attributes, and, at a social level, on the loss of individuality.

4 Method

In order to explore early 21st century Arabic dystopian fiction, I will analyze the key elements – setting, characters and plot - of the narrative of the following two novels and two short stories:

1. *2084 La fin du monde,* written in French by the Algerian writer Boualem Sansal, first published in 2015, in its English translation by Alison Anderson with the title *2084 The End of the World* published in 2017 (hereinafter referred to as *2084);*

2. *Al-Ṭābūr*, written in Arabic by the Egyptian author Basma ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, first published in 2013 (hereinafter referred to *Al-Tabur* by Basma Abdel Aziz), translated into English by Elisabeth Jaquette and published in 2016 as *The Queue;*

3. the following two short stories:
    - "Kahramana", by Anoud, written in English (hereinafter referred to as *Kahramana*);
    - "ʿAmaliyyat Dānīāl" by Khālid Kākī (Khalid Kaki) written in Arabic and translated into English by Adam Talib with the title "Operation Daniel" (hereinafter *Operation Daniel*).
    These two short stories are published in the anthology *Iraq +100 : Stories from a*

Century after the Invasion, edited by Hassam Blasim and published in 2016 (hereinafter referred to as *Iraq+100).*

As the aim of this thesis is to investigate Arabic dystopian fiction, it was essential to select novels and short stories from different Arabic countries. I selected these four works for two reasons. Firstly, they span over the Arabic world geographically, from Algeria in the West through Egypt to Iraq in the East. Secondly, they constitute, at the time of writing this thesis, the most recent dystopian works of narrative brought to the attention of a Western, and more specifically Anglophone, public because of their English translation and publication on the Western literary scene. The fact that these works have been translated into a Western language and therefore made available to the Western reading public is, in my opinion, especially relevant for this thesis, not only because the theoretical framework in this thesis is based on Western dystopian works, but also because dystopian fiction as genre is, as previously discussed, born in the Western literary tradition and popular on the Western literary scene, thus arguably written with the intent of reaching not only the Arabic but also the Western reading public.[15]

It is worth mentioning the fact that my original intention was to analyze Arabic dystopian works in the language in which they are written, this in order to access literary material not affected by Western translation policies[16]. However, because of the works I selected and because of personal limitations[17], among the works considered in this thesis only one novel (*Al-Tabur*) is analyzed in its original Arabic version and only one short story in its original English version.

It is also worth mentioning that Egypt in particular offered a wider choice, with other dystopian works such as *Yūtūbīā* (2009: *Utopia* 2011) by Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq (Ahmed Khaled Towfik) and *Nisāʾ al Karantīnā* (2013; *Women of Karantina*, 2014) by Nāʾil al-Ṭūkhī (Nael Eltoukhy). For the sake of consistency, I chose *Al-Tabur* instead, it being the most recent

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[15] For the same reason, I also opted out the novel *2084 Ḥikāyat al-ʿArabī al-Akhīr* by the Algerian writer Wācīnī al-Aʿraj, as at the time of writing it has not been translated into English yet.

[16] The translation praxis of Arabic narrative into Western languages, and especially what and how Arabic fiction gets translated, is an ongoing and very debated topic, but it exceeds the scope of this thesis. For some contributions see for example Allen (2010), Booth (2008), Rydberg (n.d.) and Shureteh (2014).

[17] At the time of writing this thesis, the *Iraq +100* anthology has been published in English only. I contacted the publisher as I wanted to read in Arabic the two stories written in Arabic. However, I have not been authorized to attach the unpublished texts in Arabic to this thesis. In addition, my French is not good enough to allow me to read Sansal's novel in French, thus making the English translation my only option.

work with the most recent translation into English at the time of writing. With regard to Egyptian novels, I also opted out the novel ʿUṭārid (2014; *Otared,* 2016) by Muḥammad Rabīʿ (Mohammad Rabie). Despite its publication dates in Arabic and in translation, as recent as the ones of *Al-Tabur*, and despite the "dystopian" designation the novel received in the media[18], its plot has more in common with fantasy[19] than with dystopia intended as social criticism.

4.1 2084

The novel is set in the country of Abistan, a fundamentalist and bureaucratic theocracy, in some indefinite future after the year 2084. The Just Brotherhood has the absolute power, God's name is Yölah and Abi is his Delegate, who recorded the divine teachings in the *Gkabul*, the holy book, and who invented *abilang*, Abistan's sacred, official and only allowed language (2017, p. 60)[20].

Ati, the main character, comes home from a sanatorium after tuberculosis and gets reinserted in the system, but he is troubled by forbidden thoughts about rebellion, disbelief and words he does not really understand like "freedom" and "border" (2017, p. 76). With a friend, he starts a journey to Abigov, the heart of Abi's government, looking for the truth about the discovery of a new religious shrine. There he meets Toz, who in reality is the brother of one of the members of the theocratic oligarchy. After a series of incidents and misfortunes, Toz reveals to him the secrets of Abistan, of the Just Brotherhood and of its internal struggles for political power and financial interests. In the end Ati asks to be allowed to leave and search for the Border and whatever is outside the jurisdiction of Abistan:

> I would like Ram to leave me off somewhere in the Sîn mountains, in the Ouâ range… in a place where the Border has one chance in a million of existing. And if, by miracle, it does exist, I'll find it and cross it …. I believe it because Abistan is based on lies, nothing has

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[18] See for example Lynx Qualey (2016) and Ferreri (2017).

[19] Fantasy is generally defined as dealing with supernatural and magical occurrences that have no basis in science, while science fiction deals with scenarios that may be possible or plausible based on science and technology. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines fantasy as follows: "Fantasy, also spelled phantasy, imaginative fiction dependent for effect on strangeness of setting (such as other worlds or times) and of characters (such as supernatural or unnatural beings)". (Fantasy, 2018). For more detailed definition of the fantasy genre, see for example Laetz & Johnston (2008).

[20] Worth mentioning here is the pun on the name *Abistan*, formed by the prophet's name *Abi* and suffix *stan*, indicating a place (for example in "-stan", 2018). The prophet's name Abi is formed by the word *Ab* ("father" in Arabic) and the suffix pronoun *ī* for the first person singular ("my father").

escaped its falsifications, and since it has altered History there's no reason why it might not also have invented a new geography. (2017, pp. 237-238).

4.2 Al-Tabur

The novel is set in a non-specified big city sometime after the so-called Shameful Events, a failed civil protest against a governmental bureaucratic authority called the Gate. The Gate issues permits, grants authorizations, validates citizenships and generally regulates people's lives by means of paperwork:

منذ أن ظهرت تلك البوابة وصارت ضالعة في كل شيء، أصبح الناس في حيرة من أمرهم

ومن أمرها .... ثم صدر منشور رسميّ أوضح اختصاصات البوابة وصلاحياتها، التي

اشتملت على كلّ ما يمكن للمرء أن يفكّر فيه، (2013, p. 41)

> Since the Gate had appeared and become involved in everything, people were confused about where its matters ended and their own began .... Then an official decree was issued, explaining the Gate's jurisdiction and its authority, which comprised everything that anyone could possibly think of,

Since the Shameful Events, the Gate is closed and an endless queue has formed in front of it, with people waiting in line for days and even months. Several side characters' stories cross the main character's, Yaḥyā (Yahya). He happened to be passing by when the governmental forces were trying to suppress the riots of the Shameful Events and got shot. However, the government denies that bullets were fired at all, so medical records are redacted, information is manipulated, new laws and decrees are issued and all means are used in order to monitor, control and steer what people do, say and think. While getting worse and worse, Yahya is also forced to petition the Gate and therefore wait in the queue, as the system requires from him to first get a certificate attesting his valid citizenship in order to apply for surgery.

4.3 Iraq +100

This anthology gathers ten short stories written by Iraqi authors, who were asked by the editor to imagine how Iraq would look like in the year 2103. Some stories are merely set in an

imaginary future and show, to various degrees, science fiction traits[21]; but the two selected ones present clear dystopian features.

4.3.1   Kahramana

Kahramana is a girl who is promised in marriage to the head of the Islamic Empire, in a future where Western forces are attacking the Empire with sterility weapons. On the eve of the wedding she happens to incidentally witness the Mullah's secret homosexual preferences and she flees to the Western-controlled confining state, stabbing him in self-defense. There she applies for asylum but, after a brief period of media fame, she is denied the permit and gets deported back.

4.3.2   Operation Daniel

Operation Daniel is a raid, executed by droids under the rule of the Venerable Benefactor Gao-Dong, the Chinese dictator governing the Kirkuk district, in order to recover and destroy discs and tapes of songs recorded in the old, now forbidden, tongues like Arabic, Syriac, Kurdish or Turkmen. The culprits are imprisoned and eventually 'archived' – a euphemism to indicate the incineration and transformation of the offenders into artificial diamonds, meant to adorn the Benefactor's waistcoats, hats and shoes.

5 Analysis

In this section I analyze the selected works and I identify their variations, concepts, themes and trends according to Claeys's attempt to thematic classification of literary dystopias presented in Section 3.

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[21] A discussion about the distinction between and the boundaries of science fiction and dystopia, however interesting, goes beyond the scope of this thesis. For some definitions and interesting insights, see for example Claeys (2017, p. 290) and Fitting (2010).

5.1 Dystopia variations

5.1.1 2084

Starting from its title, *2084* presents many clear references to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* throughout the novel. For example, the Orwellian 1984 date is engraved on the portal of the sanatorium where Ati is hospitalized at the beginning of the story and, like Orwell's Big Brother's, Abi's portraits are everywhere – on one of them someone had even scribbled "Bigaye is watching you" (2017, p. 30). Big Brother is directly referred to as the "mad dictator" (p. 221) of Angsoc, the only country that fought against Abistan. Another example is *abilang*, the language in which the holy book *Gkabul* is written, the creation of which was inspired by Angsoc's[22] powerful language *Newspeak* (p. 240). In addition, the Just Brotherhood's philosophy in *2084* is based on the three principles of Angsoc's political system in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*[23], with the addition of three of their own, in line with both *Newspeak* and *abilang* in the terse, axiomatic brevity of their paradoxes: "Death is life", "Lying is truth" and "Logic is absurdity" (p. 240).

With reference to Claeys's theoretical concepts of dystopia, and also because of its similarities with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *2084* can be defined as a political dystopia, with totalitarianism as its main variation. In the novel the absolute political power is in the hands of an oligarchy that rules the roost and lords over everything and everybody. However, the totalitarian state in *2084* is not founded, like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *We*, on a political ideology whose purpose and justification are equality and the common good. In *2084*, the state of Abistan is an absolutist, fundamentalist theocracy, where it is religion that governs every aspect of the individual's life - to such an extent that citizens that do not demonstrate absolute faith are stoned or beheaded during festive religious ceremonies. In reality, the religious zeal enforced by the theocracy is not sincere but only an instrument to control people:

> The System also understood that true religion can be nothing other than well-regulated sanctimoniousness, set up as monopoly and maintained by omnipresent terror. …. The life of the perfect believer is an uninterrupted succession of words and gestures to be repeated,

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[22] I think it is interesting to notice the different spelling of the word *Ingsoc*, in Orwell's novel spelt with an initial *I* (for example 1977, p. 36) and in Sansal's novel spelt instead with an initial *A* (for example 2017, p. 249). In Orwell's novel the term comes from *English Socialism*, but the translator of Sansal's novel chose to keep the French spelling of the Orwellian word, derived from the French *socialism anglais*.

[23] "War is peace", "Freedom is slavery", "Ignorance is strength", in *2084* (2017, p. 240) and in *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1977, p. 104)

and it leaves no latitude to dream, hesitate, think, or possibly disbelieve – or even believe. (2017, p. 43).

Interestingly, there are many similarities between Islam and the religion of Abistan. For example, the year 2084 is a date that everybody commemorates. Although nobody exactly knows what it is - the date of birth of Abi or the start or the end or an episode of the Great Holy War - it does remind of the hijra date year 622. Yölah is God, who was given a new name when the Just Brotherhood founded the Apparatus and granted Abi the title of Delegate. Abi is "the father of the believers, the supreme leader of the world" (2017, p. 28) and reminds of the prophet Mohammed, especially because he is the recorder of the divine teachings in the *Gkabul*[24], the holy book, which in its turn reminds of the Quran. Abi is also the creator of *abilang*, the *Gkabul*'s language and therefore Abistan's sacred and official language (p. 60). As such it reminds of the status of MSA in the Arabic countries, since people from different Abistani neighborhoods not only speak it with different accents but also replace it with other languages when they are at home, among family members and friends (p. 134).

As in many totalitarian dystopias, key elements like surveillance and manipulation of information play an essential role in *2084*. Surveillance is implemented by a multitude of civil and governmental bodies and authorities, such as the judges of Moral Inspection, the army patrols, the AntiRegs, the Volunteer Law-enforcing Militia and various Apparatus spies. History records are regularly altered, like the location of Abi's place of birth that is changed every 11 years "by virtue of a secret arrangement on the part of the Just Brotherhood, who organized the rotation of the prestigious monument out of a concern for equity among the sixty provinces of Abistan." (2017, p. 25). The announced discovery of a new holy shrine is of such exceptional importance that it entails "to rewrite the history of Abistan and the *Gkabul* (p. 112). Information is constantly twisted and manipulated in the interest of the oligarchy: one of the clearest examples is the Epilogue, that cites the latest news from Abistan and at the same time warns the reader, stating that "the Abistani media are above all instruments of mental manipulation in the service of the clans." (p. 241).

Bureaucracy also plays an important part in *2084*. Examples of the bureaucratic entities are the Como and the Core[25], together with Abigov, the huge complex housing ministries and administrations like the Ministry of Sacrifices and Pilgrimages, the Ministry of Archives,

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[24] Another pun might be intended here, as the word *qabūl* in Arabic means acceptance, favourable reception.
[25] Como is the Committee for Moral Health (2017, p. 78); Core is the Council of Reformation (2017, p. 80).

Sacred Books and Holy Memories and the Ministry of Virtue and Sin. All these entities are headed and managed by the oligarchy generically referred to the System or the Apparatus, which in this way imposes procedures, regulations and restrictions on the citizens and governs their lives.

Finally, it is worth noting that the environment is not a main concept in the novel, although elements of environmental dystopia are present, such as the setting of the story in the aftermath of nuclear conflicts.

5.1.2   Al-Tabur

Within the frame of Claeys's conceptual classification, *Al-Tabur* can be defined a political dystopia, with totalitarianism as its central variation. In fact, the story develops in the aftermath of two failed uprisings, both protesting against the governing political party that has total power in the country. So whoever at the latest elections voted for the party of the opposition is eventually ostracized and whoever dares to talk about the current economic and political situations in the country not only experiences difficulties in every day's life, for example at work or (2013, pp. 20-21) or to buy bread (p. 19), but also, in some cases, simply disappears (p. 142).

In *Al-Tabur* the political party's ideology is never mentioned and the totalitarian control is executed by the Gate, a bureaucratic institution in the form of an imposing and impenetrable building. The Gate issues statements, laws and decrees and manages the citizens' paperwork, like certificates, permits and authorizations, thus exercising absolute control over everything and everyone. The Gate's bureaucratic power over people increases dramatically during the story, as its doors are closed since the Shameful Events (2013, p. 43), and a long queue has formed in front of them. People are waiting for the Gate to reopen in order to complete one or the other paperwork and comply with the government's increasingly surreal bureaucratic demands. As the queue becomes longer and longer, not to lose one's place becomes paramount, so that people are forced to bring their normal lives to a halt and end up eating, sleeping, socially interacting and eventually trying to make a living while standing in the queue.

Constant surveillance and control are main features in *Al-Tabur*, but there are no descriptions of devices and no explanations about how the Gate sees and knows everything and everyone. For example, stacks of photos inexplicably appear in Yahia's girlfriend's purse,

portraying her in different moments of her life (2013, p. 178), and conversations on mobile phones are subject to the Gate's scrutiny even when the phones are switched off and recorded in the phones owners' files (p. 140). In this surreal atmosphere of constantly being watched, there are also undescribed senior functionaries (p. 67) and inspectors (p. 20), just hinted at and never named or explained, appearing here and there and ordering changes in someone's file or inquiring about the status of someone's paperwork.

Central to the story is the manipulation of information, as files are constantly redacted, medical records are falsified and arbitrary, contradictory laws and decrees are continually issued in the Gate's specific interests, which are focused on denying the evidence of its violent measures and repression of the revolts. The most relevant example, crucial to the story, is the bullet with which Yahia was shot. In fact, his X-rays, taken when he was admitted in the hospital and showing the bullet, inexplicably disappear (2013, p. 145); his medical records are edited so that there is no track of the cause of his wound (p. 51). Furthermore, an official document mysteriously appears in a cabinet at the hospital, stating that to perform surgery in order to extract bullets is a criminal act unless explicit authorization is issued by the Gate (p. 57). Even the very existence of the Shameful Events is denied, when the Gate announces that what people saw happening in the streets was actually just a big film production:

<div dir="rtl">

أضافت الرسالة أن الفيلم يُعَدُّ من أكبر أفلام الحركة في تاريخ السينما على مستوى العالم، كما أوضحت

أن هذا هو سبب اعتقاد بعض المواطنين في وجود رصاص وقنابل وغازات وأدخنة، رغم أنه لا يوجد شيء

على الإطلاق سوى بعض الخدع المعروفة . (2013, p. 239)

</div>

The announcement added that the film was one of the biggest action films ever in the world history of cinema and explained that the film was actually the reason why some citizens thought they were convinced of the existence of bullets, bombs, gas and smoke, even if there had been nothing of the sort except for the usual special effects.

The medias also report biased or false news: through its own TV channel, the Gate broadcasts new laws, decrees and eventually the names of the people whose paperwork will be approved once the Gate opens (2013, pp. 129-130); the national newspaper *The Truth* publishes misleading information about the national telecommunications company market share for mobile phones (p. 142) and journalists that write articles about the queue or the hospitals see their pieces dramatically cut or rejected (p. 204). In this context the Gate regularly spreads false information, for example opinion poll results about how the country is run (p. 81), and issues

laws and decrees, officially declared to be in the interest of the people but in reality aimed at covering up its suppression measures, such as the one shutting down radiology departments all over the country's hospitals and clinics because x-rays devices are found to deliver inaccurate results (p. 108).

Although the government in *Al-Tabur* is clearly secular, it is interesting to notice that religion also plays a significant part. For example, there is a Supreme Sheikh that issues fatwas in favor of the government's actions, like the one forbidding believers to materially or morally harm the country and its people, urging believers not to trust any news without verifying it first and stating that sinners will be absolved if they make seven consecutive phone calls (2013, p. 153). The Supreme Sheikh is also interviewed by the newspaper *The Truth*, where he states that any rumors about allegedly suffered injuries are just lies and defamation and that the true believer, when hit by a bullet, knows that it comes from Allah himself (p. 206). Religion is serving the government also in more informal, somewhat sneaky ways. For example, in the queue there is an unnamed man, who offers the use of his mobile phone in case people want to call their families (p. 62) and holds weekly lessons, preaching about the importance and the legitimacy of the fatwas issued by the Supreme Sheikh (pp. 210-211).

5.1.3   Kahramana

Within the frame of Claeys's theoretical concepts of dystopia, this short story can be considered a political dystopia, with totalitarianism as its main variation. There are no references to political ideologies of any kind, but there is a clear juxtaposition between the fundamentalist state and the secular state. On one side there is the Islamic Empire, a totalitarian theocracy located in the region of Baghdadistan, with Mullah Hashish as the Empire's absolute dictator, his arbitrary announcements about people's duties in the name of Allah (2016, p. 5) and the Islamic precepts, such as for example the feeding of the poor (p. 1), the virtue of virginity (p. 5) and the prohibition of homosexuality (p. 7). On the other side there are the secular Western liberal entities, like the American Annex of Sulaymania, the Nations Union League and NATO forces, with the bureaucracy of their officers (p. 9), their forms and regulations (pp. 3 and 4), their free-spoken TV interviews (p. 7) and the political activists manifesting in favor of Kahramana (p. 9).

Manipulation of information also plays an important part, as the Mullah has the Empire's only media at his complete disposal, a paper newspaper *Akhbar Al Imara*. He uses it first to

announce his wedding to Kahramana, a 16 years-old beautiful girl, then to sentence her to death by beheading, and finally to publish a picture of himself surrounded by six pregnant women, meant to boast his virility and discredit the rumored sterility of the Empire women. He also employs the newspaper to issue orders, like making attendance mandatory to ceremonies and executions (2016, pp. 2 and 6) or announcing that all men have the responsibility to populate the Empire, so they have to have at least three wives each and women have to be either pregnant or breastfeeding at all times (p. 8).

5.1.4 Operation Daniel

According to Claeys's theoretical framework, this short story is also a political dystopia, with totalitarianism as main variation. The story is set in Kirkuk, once a kingdom with its own language, now one of the world's richest City-State in the hands of the Chinese, thus renamed Gao's Flame in honor of its Venerable Benefactor Gao Dong, also known as The Beloved, supreme Chinese ruler of the city. No specific political ideology can be identified, whereas the only interest of the Benefactor is "to protect the state's present from the threats of the past." (2016, p. 107). In this context, instead of being manipulated or falsified, information in the form of historical records is mercilessly and systematically destroyed. In fact, reading or studying history, literature, art as well as the city's older languages and any artifacts related to them have been prohibited (p. 108). The punishment for not surrendering such material is death, euphemistically called being 'archived', which actually means being incinerated, with the ashes transformed into synthetic diamonds destined to adorn Gao Dong's waistcoats, shoes or hats (p. 108). In this totalitarian regime it is possible to identify what Claeys defines the fear of being obliterated, even if the ultimate purpose of such destruction here is not society's greater good but only the dictator's arbitrary decision.

Surveillance is also a key element in the story. It is carried out by government red droids (2016, p. 113) that hover over people, burst into their houses and carry them away if they are suspected of speaking in one of the old languages and/or being in possession of historic artifacts. This is what happens to the main character, Beneficiary no. RBS89 or Rashid Bin Suleiman: during a red droid mission known as Operation Daniel, he is caught in possession of "mere sculptural objects, with interesting shapes – glittering discs or dull cuboids with spindles of tapes inside." (p. 113). These objects, from their description presumably CDs or cassette tapes, are actually recordings of old songs.

5.2 Dystopian themes and trends

5.2.1 2084

Within the frame of Claeys's thematic classification of dystopias, the themes that can be identified in *2084* are mainly the nuclear catastrophe and the environmental degeneration it entailed. However, in *2084* they are not central to the story but only constitute the background. In fact, in *2084* they have already happened and belong to the past, people have survived and learnt by necessity to live with the consequences. The story is set in the aftermath of a series of wars that deployed nuclear weapons, causing destruction and death by the millions, together with drastic environmental consequences, like famine and epidemics, and extreme climate change "radically transforming the geography of the planet" (2017, p. 142). The environment is so damaged that the so-called civil servants, working in the various administrations and ministries, have now to be content with "vegetables that stank to high heaven of polluted earth and stagnant water" (p. 146) and with the government-provided food, that is a gruel that contains secret ingredients like "bromides, emollients, sedatives, hallucinogens and other additives that enhanced an appetite for humility and obedience." (p. 147).

In my opinion, the theme that Claeys presents as the degeneration of liberal societies is also present, although also not central. In fact, the civil servants in a way constitute a sort of society in itself, with, for example, developed addictions to rare and expensive 'drugs' like chocolate, pepper and coffee (2017, p. 147). Moreover, the Just Brotherhood, that is the ruling class, is also a degenerated, corrupted oligarchic society, engrossed in conspiracies and divided in clans, plotting against each other and constantly fighting by means of lies, falsified documents, reports and the occasional assassination (p. 213).

What in my opinion is the main theme of the novel is the main character's quest for the truth, meant as his need of finding out about reality and the real world, of being able to tell truths from lies. In this respect, Ati's discovery of the past of humanity, by means for example of Toz's Museum of Nostalgia, is only a starting point, evidence of a past that he was not aware of at all.

As for the two dystopian trends identified by Claeys, *2084* is consistent with one of them, namely the interest in how societies would cope with catastrophic events. However, there is no post-apocalyptic despair, which Claeys claims as typical of modern dystopias, as people keep

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on living their lives and adapt to the government's impositions. In fact, the obligations that come masked as religious zeal are just ordinary, day-to-day activities, like

> spying on neighbors, telling off distracted passersby, cuffing children, lashing women, joining a dense crowd to run through the neighborhood in a display of popular fervor, swinging his cudgel left and right during his crowd control work at the stadium ceremonies, lending a hand to volunteer hangmen in the course of their duties. (2017, p. 75-76.)

Thus the post-apocalyptic situation of *2084* brings out people's less desirable attributes, so individuality and the freedom to disagree are lost, replaced by religious duties and bureaucratic impositions. Interestingly, this loss is not caused, as Claeys's thematic classification suggests, by the domination of machines overpowering the individual, but by religion. However, the story also shows an aspect concerned with optimism and happy ending, as Ati in the end is told about the conspiracy and allowed by the Just Brotherhood to leave on his quest for whatever he is sure must exist beyond the lies of Abistan.

5.2.2   Al-Tabur

Among the themes listed by Claeys in his theoretical classification of modern dystopias, only the loss of freedom can be identified in *Al-Tabur*, as there are neither nuclear nor environmental threats of any kind, nor references to terrorism and no degeneration of the society's moral values. However, in the novel the loss of individual freedom is not the result of machines overpowering the individual or taking control on people's lives, but is exclusively caused by the bureaucracy imposed by the Gate. The instrument used by the political power is bureaucracy, and more specifically the citizens' need to fill in forms and obtain paper certificates in order to state the obvious or comply with dubious laws. By forcing people to stand in line, the authority manages to limit their freedom to move, to speak, to keep on with their lives in general. At the same time, although not expressly stated in the story, the authority surveys and controls everyone. Because of this, the main theme in the novel in my opinion, expressed quite surrealistically, is the subtle but overwhelming power of bureaucracy for its own sake, or rather the powerlessness of citizens in general once governments elect to use mere paper formalities as instruments to subordinate, control, repress and rule.

As far as Claeys's trends in modern dystopias, *Al-Tabur* does not fall into any of them. Firstly, the regime is a totalitarian one, even if in disguise and in denial. Liberalism may be present, as people, for example, are free to buy as many mobile phones and newspapers as they

want, but their actions are constantly under surveillance and the threat of punishment is constantly present. In other words, although there is no dictator and no political manifesto declaring the government's motives or intentions, the individual is under constant surveillance and not allowed to disagree - deterrents are almost surreal, like the threat of mysteriously disappearing or, like in the case of Yahia's girlfriend, subtle torture and brain-washing in the form of detainment in an empty, silent, totally dark space (2013, p. 175). Secondly, there is no proper happy ending to the story: the bullet is eventually removed by the doctor, but there is no mention of success or failure of the surgery, performed in secret, and no explanation about what the doctor, surprised now by the lack of inexplicable updates, writes in Yahia's file.

5.2.3   Kahramana

Among the themes of modern dystopias described by Clayes, in this short story the theme of terrorism can be identified. In fact, the Islamic Empire's, or rather the Mullah's, ultimate goal is to exterminate the West and their blasphemous customs and conventions: "We will outnumber them and send them all to hell", states the Mullah (2016, p. 8). Terrorism is combined with the environmental theme on the Western forces' side, as from their side of the conflict they have employed sterility gas weapons (p. 9) intended to exterminate the Empire's population. However, in my opinion, neither terrorism nor the environment are the central themes in the story and they only provide a setting for it. What is central in this story is more a sort of fatalism, as Kahramana does not intentionally witness the Mullah's homosexual intercourse and has no saying whatsoever in the decisions about her asylum request and her deportation that are taken for her.

Thus only one the two trends described by Claeys can be partially identified in this short story, namely the setting in a somewhat neo-liberal government. In fact, the story is only partially set in the secular Western state and it is not concerned with the consequences of plutocracy. Furthermore, there is no happy ending, as the freer Western world reveals itself to be firmly settled in its bureaucracy and superficiality, while the fundamentalist Empire, despite its Mullah's wrongdoings, in the end prevails.

5.2.4   Operation Daniel

Among the themes identified in Claeys's theoretical categorization of modern dystopia, the only theme that can be observed in this short story is the power of the machines, that is to say technology in its capacity to overpower humanity. However, this is not the central theme in the story: the technological devices, like the Beneficiaries' wrist bracelets able to receive text messages (2016, p. 107) and the government red droids, are only instrumental to the absolute power of Gao Dong and his rule. In my opinion, the central theme of this story is instead the importance of the individual's cultural history, expressed here also by the existence of undefined groups of rebels, not exactly understanding the words of songs and poems in the old tongues, but willing to fight for them, their languages and their heritage.

Although the story has no proper happy ending, there is indeed a hint of hope and optimism at the end of the story, thus making the story consistent with one of the main trends that Claeys identifies in his categorization. In fact, even if Rashid is in the end imprisoned and eventually 'archived', the story tells of some rumors, allegedly not true, of him singing an old melody while being carried away by the droids and of one gemstone on Gao Dong's boots, emitting vibrating sounds that resemble an old song (2016, p. 113).

6 Discussion

The above analysis of these four works suggests that Arabic dystopias are not environmental or technological dystopias. Instead, the analysis indicates that their main concern is totalitarianism and the totalitarian surveillance state. What I think is interesting to observe is the type of totalitarianism. In fact, in these works there are neither underlying nor manifest political arguments, which were instead central for the dystopian Western canon that had its reason in the criticism of the two political extremes, namely the left, exemplified with communism, and the right, identified in nazism. In two of the four works analyzed here, that is to say in *2084* and in *Kahramana*, the totalitarian states are fundamentalist theocracies, with more or less evident references to Islam but with no reference to any secular political ideologies. Although not expressly being a totalitarian dictatorship, the state has absolute control over its citizens also in *Al-Tabur* but no references are made to political doctrines. This is also true in

Operation Daniel, where the dictator takes no political position and is exclusively concerned with the suppression of people's culture in his own interests.

Rather than on political doctrines, the totalitarianism of these stories focuses on the person's lack of freedom per se, as what is relevant in these works in the end is not why the individual is not free but the fact itself that he/she is not free. The constraining forces seem to be, to various degrees, estranged, alien, almost foreign to the individual and are represented by two specific elements, namely religion and bureaucracy. Religion and religious precepts are indeed the state's instruments for domination on and control of its citizens in the fundamentalist theocracies of *2084* and *Kahramana*; religion plays a relevant part also in *Al-Tabur,* by siding with the government, for example with the fatwas issued by the Supreme Sheikh. Bureaucracy is also a recurrent motive, the crucial means for controlling and dominating people in *Al-Tabur* and an important element, this time a tool in the hands of the West, in the misfortunes of the girl in *Kahramana.* In other words, in these stories the protagonists are not free to be and act as they please not because of leftist or rightwing politic dogmas or in the name of the greater good but because of religious precepts, bureaucratic formalities, laws, regulations and prohibitions in general. In *2084* Ati experiences discrepancies between what he feels and what he is told the reality is; in *Al-Tabur* Yahia physically suffers the consequences of the repression of a revolt he did not even choose to participate in; although Kahramana in the homonymous story tries to be in control of her situation by escaping from her reality, she gets rejected by the West in the end; in *Operation Daniel* Rashid, without even knowing the contents or the meaning of the songs he allegedly is in possession of, is 'archived' - an interesting word choice as it does remind of bureaucratic procedures.

As a consequence, the main characters of these dystopian stories are not like the main characters in the classic Western dystopias, ready to fight or even die in the name of their ideology. In *2084* Ati questions and wonders about his reality in a somewhat naïve way, and in the end he does not take a stand against the political leaders, on the contrary he asks for permission to set out and search the truth. Neither Yahia in *Al-Tabur* is a heroic character, even though he is aware that he is living proof of the Gate's contradictions, concerned as he is with his wound and his pain. The young girl *Kahramana* might strike one as a hero as she stabs the Mullah and escapes, but her intent is her own survival and not an ideological opposition to the Mullah and his fundamentalism. Even Rashid in *Operation Daniel* is no rebel and he just plays with the old artifacts in his possession, without being aware of what they are, their contents and what they represent.

Therefore, it is possible to identify two main discrepancies between Claeys's theoretical classification of Western dystopias and Arabic dystopias of the 21st century. Firstly, both religious fundamentalism and bureaucratic obligations are not taken up as elements of the dystopian narrative in Claeys's categorization of themes and identification of trends.[26] In his conclusions Claeys states that "We no longer fear the political parties lurking behind Big Brother." (2017, p. 496) and points at plutocracy as the main culprit of the degeneration of liberal societies, claiming that "What we fear are plutocratic post-statist orders which abandon most of us to crime, disease, hunger, and global warming." (p. 496). But the dystopian societies in these Arabic stories are not concerned with financial institutions, global corporations, stock markets or the consequences of privatization – even the Benefactor in *Operation Daniel,* himself a tycoon, is not relevant because he is rich but because of his tyrannical prohibitions of the individual's right to his/her identity. Moreover, Claeys forecasts nuclear wars, natural catastrophes, population growth and resources decline as main themes for 21st century dystopias, but only in *2084* it is possible to observe such a post-apocalyptic situation, which is, as already stated above, not a central theme but only a background, the setting for the story.

The second discrepancy in Claeys's theoretical classification concerns the theme of technology, and more specifically the threat of machines' domination over humanity. In his conclusions, Claeys forecasts that technological development and its consequences on free will and individuality will be main themes in 21st century dystopias, but in the 21st century Arabic dystopias considered here technological devices, although indeed playing a role, do not take control over humanity[27]. Instead, they only constitute a part in the plot of the stories, like for example the mobile phones in *Al-Tabur* and the droids in *Operation Daniel* - both representing threats to privacy and constituting surveillance tools – and the nuclear bombs that provide the post-catastrophic setting of *2084*.

However, surveillance and control, which were two of the main features of modern Western dystopias described in Section 2, are central also in the 21st Arabic dystopias. Indeed, only the *Kahramana* short story does not expressly mention any surveillance practice or device,

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[26] It can be observed that religious fundamentalism is not completely new in Western dystopias. An example is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* set in a religious fundamentalist – and neoliberal – theocracy. However, the religion is only the context/background of the story, as the story's main themes are generally identified as women's exploitation and women's rights, see for example Florén (1996) and Shaffer (2007).

[27] As a side note, it might be interesting to notice that this theme, central to *Brave New World* as well, was present in the failed utopias of the 20th century cited by al-Sharuni mentioned in Section 2, especially in *al-Sayyd min Ḥaql al-Sabānakh.*

arguably because of the brevity of the tale and/or the fact that any descriptions or detailed information in this regard are not relevant to the story. In fact, as mentioned in the analysis of the respective stories, people are being watched in both *2084*, *Al-Tabur* and *Operation Daniel* to various, more or less conspicuous degrees, and indeed surveillance is crucial to their theme of lack of freedom mentioned above. Interestingly, increased surveillance is also among the themes in Claeys's classification theory, but specifically as a consequence of machine domination over humanity and not as an instrument of control over population.

Also not specifically discussed by Claeys in his theoretical classification, but still an important player in two of the Arabic dystopian realities of these works, is language and its power to manipulate thought, as Sisk underlined in his *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopia* (1997). In *2084 abilang* is, like its Orwellian predecessor *Newspeak*, created with the expressed intent of controlling what and how people think. In fact, people use it when they suspect they are under surveillance but they do not speak it in the privacy of their own homes with family and friends, reverting instead to their old languages and their own accent (for example 2017, p. 134). In *Operation Daniel* only Chinese, the language of the totalitarian state, is allowed, while old languages like Syriac, Arabic, Kurdish and Turkmen are totally forbidden as they represent an important part of the people's identity (2016, p. 108).

Because of all this, I argue that the five dystopian themes identified by Claeys are indeed present in the Arabic dystopian fiction of the beginning of the 21st century, but they are not central to the stories. The central themes that result from my analysis are instead concerned with the lack of personal freedom, free will and the need of and quest for the truth, together with a sort of fatalism, or rather a sort of forced acceptance when facing circumstances that go beyond one's control, and with the importance of a country's cultural heritage, including its history, its arts and its language. This suggests in my opinion that the focus of 21st century Arabic dystopias, rather than on society, evolution and environment, is on the individual, especially on a personal level but also on the individual as member of a group that shares the same cultural heritage and traditions.

Furthermore, I need to specify that, as my aim is to explore the 21st century Arabic dystopias as they are i.e. their variations, themes and trends, I have intentionally left out from this thesis any reference to their authors, their personalities, experiences and political standpoints. However, it is impossible not to place these works in the context and the timeframe in which they were written, especially because dystopian fiction is per se a form of social and

political criticism. The Arabic political scene has dramatically changed since the beginning of the new millennium, having witnessed revolutions, overthrown dictatorships and political instability of many sorts. Although this thesis is not the place to discuss these changes, I think that it is relevant to relate them to Arabic dystopian narrative, because they suggest two observations.[28] Firstly, it looks like Arab authors are now openly expressing social criticism and concern about the political situation, although surrealism and symbolism still appear to be part of the modern Arabic literary style – *Al-Tabur* and *Operation Daniel* are clear examples of the former and the latter, respectively. Secondly, it could be argued that the political situations resulted from the recent political upheavals present, in the eyes of some Arabic authors, issues that need to be evaluated, hinting therefore at some kind of dissatisfaction or dissent from the authors' side.[29] In my opinion, this new Arabic dystopian literature is both a sign of the spirit of change and of the new social and cultural ideas that have recently crossed many Arabic countries. However, it is also evidence of the disappointments born out of such changes and a depiction of what, in their authors' eyes, are the threats of their social and political realities, i.e. the dangers of religious fundamentalism and the oppression caused by bureaucratic impositions.

For these reasons it can be argued that the optimistic trend initially identified by Claeys in modern dystopian fiction is not always applicable to Arabic dystopian fiction. Moreover, in these four stories there is no trace of the post-apocalyptic despair that Claeys identified as the negative replacement of the optimistic trend. It is interesting to notice however that *2084* offers an interesting view on how society, within the frame of religion fundamentalism, would cope with post-apocalyptic situations, which is indeed one of the trends identified by Claeys.

Finally, a reflection about the language of these works. Dystopian Arabic fiction is nowadays written in English or French and not only in Arabic – *2084* and some short stories in the anthology *Iraq +100* are a few examples. Among the usual reasons cited when the language topic in Arabic literature is discussed[30], in the specific case of Arabic dystopian fiction I would also add a possible lack of interest from Arabic readers and Arabic literary critics. This may be

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[28] The effect of the political changes on Arabic literature is currently under discussion in the context of literary criticism. For example, el-Ariss in his *Trials of Arab Modernity : Literary Affects and the New Political* writes: "The Arab Spring […] is now associated with a new *Nahda*. This association needs to be examined […] as the adoption of new literary and political practices and techniques from which meaning and subjectivity arise." (2013, p. 170).

[29] For example Allen writes that the novel is" […] a most effective mirror of society and the circumstances within which it functions […]" (2001, p. 208)

[30] See for example Starkey (2006, p. x) and Allen (2001, p. 210-211)

caused by the fact that dystopia as a genre is relatively new to the Arabic literary scene, while the Western world with its literary dystopian tradition is potentially more receptive to dystopian fiction. In my opinion this might also be the reason why many dystopian novels written in Arabic get translated into English[31].

7 Conclusion

7.1 Summary

Dystopian fiction, intended as social and political criticism, is an approximately 200 years old tradition in Western literature, but it is a relatively new phenomenon in modern Arabic literature. In fact, with very few exceptions, it only started to emerge in the second half of the 20th century and at that time was mostly concerned with the scientific, technological utopias, often in science fiction scenarios. However, since the beginning of the 21st century a significant number of novels and short stories, defined and described in the medias as dystopias, have been published in English, French and Arabic.

In order to identify the main characteristics and themes of the 21st century Arabic dystopias, I have first reviewed the main features of the 20th century Western and Arabic dystopias. Then, because of the lack of a relevant theoretical approach within the context of the Arabic literary criticism and because dystopian fiction is originally a Western literature phenomenon, I applied Claeys's Western-based attempt to a theoretical classification of modern dystopias and I have analyzed four Arabic works of narrative, namely two novels and two short stories, selected upon criteria of publication date and country of origin.

According to Claeys's theoretical classification, 21st century Arabic dystopias are of the political type, with totalitarianism as their main variation. Instead of being founded on political dogmas or arising from the individual's ideological beliefs, the causes of the individual's lack of freedom in the selected works appear to be forces outside the personal sphere of the individual. These forces are more specifically identified with religion and bureaucracy. I have

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[31] Which works of Arabic literature get translated into Western languages is an ongoing debate, see the already mentioned Allen (2010), Booth (2008), Rydberg (n.d.) and Shureteh (2014).

also identified a special interest for the individual as a main theme, intended as concern for the individual's free will, the lack of personal freedom and his/her cultural heritage.

The analysis also showed that the theme of the overpowering nature of machines, central to Western dystopias, is not a main theme in the selected works. In fact, technology only plays a background role and is just instrumental for the surveillance and control exercised and imposed over the individual. Among the tools for controlling and limiting the individual's freedom, language has also been identified as an important element. With regard to the trends of modern dystopian fiction identified by Claeys, the analysis has shown that Arabic dystopian fiction at the beginning of the 21st century is mainly concerned with totalitarianism and not with neo-liberal societies. Optimism and hope are present in only some of the stories, while post-apocalyptic scenarios, although not a central issue in Arabic 21st century dystopias, are a possibility when exploring how humanity would cope with catastrophes.

7.2 Further research

The results of this thesis suggest that 21st century Arabic dystopian fiction presents only some of the features that characterize modern Western dystopian fiction and that new elements have to be taken into consideration when attempting a classification of Arabic dystopias, thus pointing at the need of a different theoretical categorization approach, more appropriate for the Arabic literary scene. Moreover, as this thesis has thematically examined only four works of narrative, further research should also cover a larger number of dystopian works, published in various Arabic countries, with more in-depth analysis of the single works and with more detailed comparisons in order to highlight their features, concepts and themes. Other main areas of interest may be the reason(s) why dystopian fiction in Arabic literature has only recently been experiencing such an uplift, together with an investigation on how this type of fiction has been received on the Arabic literary scene, both by the reading public and the critical contexts.

Furthermore, it would be important to explore also other factors that have not been considered here, such as for example the authors' personal influence on the stories' themes, characters and space/time settings. In fact, as dystopian fiction fulfills a function of social and political criticism, the authors' personal backgrounds, their experiences and their views on the social and political situations may expose other relevant elements and other features that have not emerged here. The influence that Western dystopian fiction has had on Arabic authors and

Arabic dystopian fiction may also be an interesting research topic, together with comparative literary research among dystopian fiction in other parts of the world.

In particular, this thesis has shown that technological developments and machines domination over humanity do not seem to represent a threat in the context of Arabic dystopian fiction. Instead, individual's freedom is threatened by religious fundamentalism and bureaucratic burdens, which suggests that they indeed constitute a substantial component of people's lives. Therefore, although this might be more a topic for social and/or political studies than for literary studies, it could be interesting to explore in detail the reasons why and the ways in which these two elements influence the individual at both personal and social levels. Within this framework, literature studies joined with social and/political sciences could also explore the instrumental use of fiction, that is to say for example the impact that these works of dystopian narrative have on the Arabic reading public or their function as social and political criticism in the Arabic contexts[32].

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[32] In their article "Building on anticipation : Dystopia as empowerment", Claisse and Delvenne write that "Dystopian authors use fiction as a detour to make a threat more tangible for the reader, who finds him or herself immersed in what is comparable to a thought experiment." (2015, p. 158).

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