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## Egyptian Dystopias of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: a New Literary Trend?

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### Abstract

During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century an increasing amount of narratives termed as Arabic dystopian fiction appeared on the Arabic literary scene, with a greater part authored by Egyptian writers. However, what characterises/marks a work as a dystopia? This paper investigates the dystopian nature of a selection of Egyptian literary works within the frame of the dystopian narrative tradition. The article begins by introducing the features of the traditional literary dystopias as they will be used in the analysis. It then gives a brief overview of the development of the genre in the Arabic literature. The discussion that follows highlights common elements and identifies specific themes in six Egyptian novels selected for the analysis, thereby highlighting differences and similarities between them and the traditional Western dystopias. The article calls for a categorisation of Arabic dystopian narrative that takes into consideration social, political, historical and cultural factors specific for the Arabic in general, and Egyptian in particular, literary field.

*Keywords:* Arabic literature, dystopia, dystopian literature, contemporary literature, Egypt, fiction, speculative fiction.

### 1. Introduction

During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an increasing amount of narrative defined as Arabic dystopian fiction appeared on the Arabic literary scene (BAKKER 2018). Several novels and short stories, termed as dystopias in newspaper articles, on the Web and in blogs,<sup>1</sup> were published throughout the Arab world. This phenomenon deserves some attention, as Arabic fiction has so far seldom made use of dystopian fiction as a form of social or political criticism—authors have usually opted for other devices, such as realism (ALLEN 1995: 65), symbolism and surrealism. Interestingly, a

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<sup>1</sup> See for example ALTER 2016, BYRNES 2011, DHAIMISH 2016, GERINI 2016, GHANEM 2015, HAZELTON 2017, RAMEY 2017.

greater part of this dystopian fiction of the Arab world was written by Egyptian authors (JACQUEMOND 2016: 366). Because of this reason, this paper focuses on Egyptian works by Egyptian writers. The aim of this paper is to investigate the dystopian nature of a selection of 21<sup>st</sup> century Egyptian works. The introduction relates some central definitions of dystopian fiction within the dystopian literary tradition and is followed by a brief account of the development of the Egyptian utopian/ dystopian narrative. The selected Egyptian works are subsequently presented, they are *Yūtūbiyā (Utopia)* by 'Aḥmad Khālīd TAWFĪQ (2009), *Nisā' al-Karantīnā (Women of Karantina)* by Nā'il al-TŪKHĪ (2013), *al-Tābūr (The Queue)* by Basma 'ABD AL-'AZĪZ (2013), *'Uṣārīd (Otaled)* by Muḥammad RABĪ' (2014), *2063* by Mu'tazz ḤASĀNĪN (2016) and *The City Always Wins* by O. R. HAMILTON (2017). The discussion that follows identifies common themes and elements specific for these works and raises a number of considerations about their nature as literary dystopias based on a traditional definition of dystopian literature, thereby highlighting the need of an Arabic and/or more specifically Egyptian characterisation of Arabic/Egyptian dystopian literature.

### 1.1 What is a dystopia?

Definitions of and perspectives on dystopia are numerous and quite varied. Different terms, such as for example anti-utopia or cacotopia, are sometimes used as synonyms with dystopia. One of the more established, and often cited<sup>2</sup> definitions, of dystopia is Sargent's, who stated that a dystopia (or negative utopia) is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived" (1994: 9). Dystopian literature originated in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the developing industrialisation and the emerging socialism started to be perceived as threats for mankind (CLAEYS 2017: 355). However, the term literary dystopia became widely used only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (CLAEYS 2010: 107) as a way to describe a fictional society with social or political negative traits or as a satire of a utopian society. Within the literary field, the term dystopia is traditionally associated with ZAMYATIN's *We*, HUXLEY's *Brave New World* and ORWELL's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,<sup>3</sup> regarded in the field as "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 1994: 20). In this regard, the dystopian literary tradition features a series of elements common to the greater part of the dystopian narrative. Among

<sup>2</sup> See for example in BOOKER 2013: 6, MOYLAN 2000: 155, and THIESS 2013: 32.

<sup>3</sup> ZAMYATIN's *We* is set in the 26<sup>th</sup> century in OneState, a totalitarian regime where vigilance encompasses one's whole life and science and the logics of mathematics constitute the regime's imposed key to one's happiness. In HUXLEY's *Brave New World* humans are genetically bred, collectively conditioned and, if necessary chemically drugged, to be happy and serve an elitarian ruling class. ORWELL's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* brings the communist ideology of the greater good to the extreme: freedom of thought is forbidden and free will is not only discouraged but also punished.

the most relevant is *defamiliarisation*,<sup>4</sup> which implies spatial and/or temporal settings distant from the author's own. This literary technique consists in depicting common and familiar concepts in a strange and unfamiliar setting in order to enhance the perception of the familiar: the focus on a distant thing, place or time intends to provide a fresh perspective on issues that are usually taken for granted. Other recurring elements of the dystopian literary tradition are their political systems, i.e., totalitarian police states, in the form of a dictator or an oligarchy, or failed capitalistic democracies, such as plutocracies. In these fictional regimes, information and historical records are in the hands of the authorities, manipulated not only for propaganda purposes but also to exercise power. Art, culture and language are also exploited as tools of oppression (BOOKER 1994, GOTTLIEB 2001, MOYLAN 2000). Surveillance constitutes an essential instrument to control the individual and has its origins in Michel FOUCAULT's theoretical approach to surveillance as presented in his *Discipline and Punish* (1977/1995).<sup>5</sup> Dystopian fiction is particularly popular nowadays all over the world, for the simple reason that hope for a better future is generally always followed by disappointment: "Dystopias follow utopias the way thunder follows lightning," writes Jill LEPORE (2017) for *The New Yorker*.

## 1.2 Claeys' literary dystopianism

The Western literary criticism field offers a wealth of approaches to literary dystopias, ranging from debates of dystopia definitions in connection with utopian and science fiction literature, to the philosophical motivations of the genre and to the genre's relationship with other kinds of speculative fiction (see for example BOOKER 1994, KUMAR 2010, MOYLAN 2000, SARGENT 1994). For this paper, CLAEYS' categorisation of literary dystopias is deemed particularly suitable for the analysis, as it focuses instead on specific thematic traits characteristic of the dystopian fiction of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, leading to the identification of different types of literary dystopias and themes common throughout several works of dystopian narrative. Within this framework, three types, or variations, of dystopia are identified in general conceptual terms on the basis of the type of fear they inspire and consequently on to what 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, localised malevolence" (CLAEYS 2013: 161), like pogroms, witch-hunts and violent mobs, including any form of repression. The second variation is related to

4 The term defamiliarization, coined by the Russian Formalist Viktor SHKLOVSKIĖ and also translated from the Russian as *enstrangement* or *estrangement*, is used by Booker in his *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, where he states that "[t]he principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporarily 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" (BOOKER 1994: 19).

5 In his work, FOUCAULT (1975-1995) discussed the *Panopticon*, an experimental 19<sup>th</sup> 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" (p. 201).

totalitarianism, identified in the “state terrorism” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (CLAEYS 2013: 162): fear here is also aimed at interfering and affecting personality, with individuality undergoing a change and being eradicated in the name and for the benefit of the common good. The third variation, less related to politics, is more based on the fear of the future and ranges from technological nightmares, such as nuclear warfare, science-fiction scenarios like alien invasions, to all possible variations of the end of the world and secular Apocalypses, such as meteorites, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and the like.

As for thematic components, five main themes are identified by CLAEYS considering the period from the end of WW2 to the present on the basis of the latest Western modern dystopian literature. They are (a) the advent of the nuclear age and the potentiality of total destruction that it implied, (b) environmental threats such as climate change and overpopulation, (c) the overpowering nature of machines resulting in loss of individuality and freedom, (d) the cultural degeneration of liberal, non-totalitarian societies caused by hedonistic consumption and (e) the anxiety caused by terrorism (2017: 447). In addition, two main trends in Western dystopian fiction of the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are singled out. The first concerns a shift from stories set in totalitarian states to stories set in neo-liberal and/or plutocratic governments, i.e., mainly focused on the consequences of wealth and related to “the impact of technology, population growth and environmental degradation” (2017: 488). The second trend, earlier characterised by a general emphasis on the need of the stories’ happy endings and implying a sort of optimism and hope, has later been replaced by an interest in “post-apocalyptic despair” (2017: 489) and explores how society would cope with catastrophes.

A literary Western-based theoretical approach for the analysis of Arabic, and in this case specifically Egyptian dystopian fiction is necessary for two reasons. On one hand, the field of Arabic literary criticism still lacks an equivalent, structured theoretical approach to dystopian literature.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the fact that dystopian fiction as a genre was actually born within the Western literary tradition sets a fundamental starting point for any analysis of dystopian fiction written elsewhere.

## 2. Development of the Egyptian dystopian narrative

The Arabic literary field has no specific term for dystopian fiction and has often used the English word transliterated into *dīstūbiyā* or *distūbiyā*, together with different forms of paraphrases, such as *ʿadab al-madīna al-fāsida* (literature of the corrupted city, as opposed to *ʿadab al-madīna al-fāḍila*, literature of the virtuous city<sup>7</sup>), *naqīḍ al-yūtūbiyā* (the

<sup>6</sup> A current debate within the Arabic literary field argues whether the “traditionally narrow scholarly conception of contemporary Arabic literature” (SNIR 2017: 11) is still only concerned with literary genres recognised by the scholarly establishment or whether Arabic literary criticism is opening up to other “popular” genres such as spy stories, science fiction and children literature. Dystopias do not belong to the scholarly literary tradition.

<sup>7</sup> The paraphrase refers to *ʿArāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila wa-muqāddātihā*, a description of the ideal society by the Islamic philosopher and scholar al-Fārābī.

antithesis of utopia) and *'ālam al-wāqī' al-marīr* (the world of the bitter reality), together with *al-yūtūbiyā al-ḍidd* (opposed/opposing utopia) and *al-mudun al-taḥdhīriyya* (the cities of warning) (BARBARO 2013: 26-27, al-SHĀRŪNĪ 2000: 189).

It has been argued that not only dystopia but also utopia constitute social and/or political criticism, as both utopias and dystopias inherently imply that there is something faulty with the present situation—utopias point at a better alternative, while dystopias show what could happen if things went wrong. In his *Dystopia: A Natural History*, CLAEYS claimed that utopia and dystopia “might be twins, the progeny of the same parents” (2017: 7-8). Because of this close relationship between utopia and dystopia, the novel *Rihlat Ibn Faṭṭūma* (*The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*) by Najīb Maḥfūz (1988) is significant as precursor of the genre, with its character of social and political criticism. In this novel, Ibn Faṭṭūma starts a journey on a quest for the perfect, utopian country, but all the five lands he visits, although appearing at first as perfect, utopian societies, are in reality all dystopias in disguise, as slavery, war or totalitarian political regimes prevent individuality, freedom and democracy.

The later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has also seen the publication of three Egyptian science fiction novels<sup>8</sup> which, although set in futuristic, science fiction scenarios, all tell the tale of failed utopias. The first one is *Sukkān al-'ālam al-thānī* (*The Inhabitants of the Second World*) by Nihād Sharīf (1977), a story about a group of young scientists who build a utopian city at the bottom of the sea in order to flee from a problematic life on the Earth. The second novel is *Hurūb 'ilā l-faḍā'* (*Escape into Space*) by Ḥusayn Qadrī (1981), which tells the story of three inhabitants of planet Earth who fall with their spaceship onto a utopian planet. The third work is *al-Sayyid min ḥaql al-sabānikh* (*The Man from the Spinach Field*) by Ṣabrī Mūsā (1984), set on Earth<sup>9</sup> in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, where people live in prosperity. However, the main character rebels against the dehumanising consequences of the system and departs on a quest for the past. Within the field of literary criticism, these three science fiction novels have been discussed by al-SHĀRŪNĪ in his *al-Khayāl al-'ilmī fī l-'adab al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir* (*Science Fiction in Contemporary Arabic Literature*, 2000), where he concluded that these stories express their authors' concern for the fate of the Earth and their questions about problematic social and political systems. Mūsā's novel is also discussed by BARBARO in her *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (*Science Fiction in Arabic Literature*, 2013), who stated that the novel recalls the Western traditional dystopia of the *Brave New World* kind, with its warning against possible future consequences of scientific and technological development.

<sup>8</sup> Science fiction is often associated to dystopian fiction as a genre. Booker states that “there is a great deal of overlap between dystopian fiction and science fiction, and many texts belong to both categories”. He further claims that “in general dystopian fiction differs from science fiction in the specificity of its attention to social and political critique” (BOOKER 1994: 19).

<sup>9</sup> It is worth mentioning that the name of the planet where the story is set is never specifically mentioned in the novel—the planet is referred to only as “al-kura al-'arḍiyya” (the earthly sphere) (for example MŪSĀ 1987: 118). In her analysis, Barbaro reports that the story is set on another planet (BARBARO 2013: 196), while Campbell points out that the distance and the speed of the planet's orbit, which are mentioned in a dialogue between the protagonist and a friend of his (MŪSĀ 1987: 118), are the same as Earth's, drawing the conclusion that it is indeed the Earth (CAMPBELL 2018: 188).

In this last decade, Arabic newspapers and magazines online have featured a number of articles about the concept of dystopia in general terms, about the dystopian literary tradition and the recent emergence of Arabic dystopian fiction. Among the most thorough is ‘AQIL’s article (2017), which listed a number of works of fiction termed as dystopian and published throughout the Arabic world. The article discusses their origin in the revolutions and/or the disappointments that the revolutions created, their innovative character and their ability to create a parallel world in order for the reader to wonder “what if”. As a matter of fact, the specifics of how the Arab Spring has affected the Arab literary world go beyond the scope of this paper, but it does not go unnoticed that the wave of popular uprisings that challenged the states’ central authorities occurred within the same time frame of the emergence of this kind of fiction in the Arab World. It can therefore be assumed that the uprisings must have contributed, in one way or another, to build the world of literary dystopia that has recently emerged in Arabic literature.<sup>10</sup> However, it is still to be debated whether these works represent a form of social and/or political criticism or rather constitute a way to cope with reality. As MOUNZER points out in her *Apocalypse now: Why Arab authors are really writing about the end of the world* (2019), “Arab writers, disillusioned by the failures of the Arab Spring and the renewed plunge into disorder and authoritarianism, have spawned a new literary movement of late, turning to speculative fiction—dystopian in particular—to make sense of the nightmarish present”.

### 3. Egyptian dystopias: Selected works

The following overview briefly presents, in chronological order of first publication, the six Egyptian literary works of narrative selected for the analysis in this paper. They have all been called or defined dystopias, either by the authors themselves or in articles and reviews in newspapers, magazines and blogs.<sup>11</sup>

*Yūtūbiyā (Utopia)* by ‘Aḥmad Khālīd TAWFĪQ (2009) can alternatively be described as a science fiction failed utopia. The story is set in 2020 in Cairo, where the extremely poor population, also known as the Others, daily struggle for survival. Their poverty is contrasted by the rich and bored upper class that live in Utopia, a separate, walled-in city. Wealthy people take drugs to spice up their existence and raid Cairo city for the mere sport of killing someone and bring back a piece as a trophy. Defamiliarization also happens through biroil, a substance discovered by the Americans in 2010 that has replaced oil as a fuel source. The two main characters indeed reflect a class difference: the Predator or Hunter is a rich, spoiled young man from the segregated Utopia, and the Prey, or Gaber, is a poor but educated young man from Cairo city. Their destinies meet in Cairo city, where the story evolves through slums, spooky characters and bizarre, scary situations.

*Nisā’ al-Karantīnā (Women of Karantina)* by Nā’il al-ṬŪKHĪ (2013) is the story of two families and is set in Alexandria, starting in 2004 and reaching its culmination in 2064. The

<sup>10</sup> See ALTER 2017 and al-QAMMAH 2018 for further discussion.

<sup>11</sup> See Sections 2 and 4.2.



two families are actually two crime organisations set against each other because of family feuds and meaningless disputes. The tale evolves with plenty of murders and betrayals of and by several parties involved, sometimes reminding of epic narrations of adventures and misfortunes.

*Al-Ṭabūr* (*The Queue*) by Basma ‘ABD AL-‘AZĪZ (2013) is set in a non-specified Egyptian big city sometime after a failed civil protest against a governmental bureaucratic authority called the Gate, which manifested itself out of the blue one day. The Gate issues permits, grants authorisations, validates citizenships and generally regulates people’s lives through mandatory paperwork, somewhat taking over the government’s function. However, the Gate has been closed, causing the formation of an endless queue forming in front of it. Several side characters’ stories cross that of the main character, Yaḥyā, who happened to get shot when passing by when the governmental forces were trying to suppress the riots. As the government denies that bullets were fired, Yaḥyā also has to petition the Gate, and therefore wait in the queue, in order to get a certificate attesting his valid citizenship, which will allow him to apply for surgery.

Page | 85

*‘Uḡḡirid* (*Otared*) by Muḥammad RABĪ (2014) is set in Cairo in 2025. The main character is a sniper and a member of the so-called resistance, made of mostly former Egyptian police officers, together with a small number of former army and a few civilians. His mission is to incite civilian rebellion (by attacking and killing civilians) against the Knights of Malta, whose armies managed to occupy most of the country and take control of it.

*2063* by Mu‘tazz ḤASĀNĪN (2016) is a novella set in 2063 in Alexandria. This future version of Egypt, under a foreign military occupation, is actually a happy place, where everybody has a job and access to sex, drugs and alcohol. However, all citizens periodically have to take a citizen satisfaction test—not passing it entails being forever put to sleep. The main character does not pass his test as he is troubled by the memory of his father, who took part in a previously failed revolution and committed suicide, but with the help of a girl he escapes his punishment.

*The City Always Wins* by O. R. HAMILTON (2017) is set in Cairo and is the fictional story of a group of activists from October 2011 to July 2013. The novel seems to rely on the author’s personal experience of the Egyptian uprisings and, as such, hints at the fact that revolutions can lead back to how things were before them. Defamiliarization here is achieved by means of inverted temporal settings, as the novel starts with a first part, set in 2011, entitled “Tomorrow” and ends with events that happened in 2013 and are described in the third part, entitled “Yesterday”.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Types, themes and trends

Within the frame of CLAEYS’ categorisation of dystopian narrative, the first variation was types of stories set in difficult places that dealt with fear of punishment. This is exactly what these three works, *Nisā’ al-Karantīnā*, *‘Uḡḡirid* and *The City Always Wins*, do. The setting of *Nisā’ al-Karantīnā* is a markedly crime-ridden Alexandria and the scene of *The*



*City Always Wins* is the post-revolutionary Cairo, with the brutality and the repressions that characterised it. Even *ʿUṭārid* is set in a violent Cairo, with blood, epidemics and countless murders: many elements, such as parts of the plot and some characters, remind of Dante’s *Inferno*<sup>12</sup>—the reader will for example find out eventually that the place is actually Hell. Two of the selected works, *al-Ṭābūr* and *2063*, can instead be identified with the second type: they are both totalitarian dystopias and evoke fear not only of being punished but also of being annihilated as individual. In both stories, whoever dares to question the current situation experiences difficulties in everyday life, gets “put to sleep” or simply disappears. However, *2063* may also be regarded, together with *Yūtūbiyā*, as dystopian narrative of the third type, which is characterised by a fear of a scary, undesirable future.

As far as the themes of the selected works are concerned, the analysis shows that only three stories deal with one of the themes identified by CLAEYS as shared in dystopian narrative, namely the theme of the cultural degeneration of non-totalitarian, liberal societies, which manifests itself in the form of hedonistic consumption, viciousness, violence, neglect and mass poverty—albeit in different ways. This theme is central in *Yūtūbiyā*, as violence, mass poverty, selfishness and neglect are the result of the division between the very rich and the very poor. Here the former’s pleasures are the latter’s sufferings: the rich are bored with drugs and alcohol and resort to violence for the sake of entertainment, while the poor are compelled to steal from each other and kill each other for the sake of survival. The theme is also central in *2063*, where the liberal society has “gone bad”, as the aims of satisfaction and pleasure have taken over and become absolute priority: citizens are supposed to be always “satisfied” since they are provided with plenty of sex, alcohol and drugs. The degenerated liberal society is a recurring element even in *Nisā’ al-Karantīnā*, where some characters bask in their excesses and where selfishness and neglect are both cause and effect of the excessive violence that pervades the story. In *ʿUṭārid* and in *The City Always Wins* degenerated liberal societies are not the main theme, however they are noticeable and serve as background settings. The elements of violence and death can be observed as a consequence of this degeneration—this is particularly evident in *ʿUṭārid*, with bloody murders and dead sick people, and in *Yūtūbiyā*, where they constitute a form of entertainment for the rich. As for the other three novels, none of the other themes identified by CLAEYS, namely the advent of the nuclear age, environmental threats, overpowering technology and the anxiety caused by terrorism, can be observed, although there are some elements that may be considered as related to them: for example the mobile phones in *al-Ṭābūr*, which do not constitute the main theme of technology but which are indeed an element in the background of the story, as they are instrumental to surveillance and control and therefore represent a threat to their users’ privacy.

Instead, other main themes can be identified as recurring in all the stories. The most noticeable theme, common to all the works, is the concern with individuality and the individual’s loss, or lack, of freedom, intended also as concern for free will. The relevance of individuality is particularly stressed in *ʿUṭārid*, where the members of the resistance wear masks when set upon killing people, as if they do not want to be held

<sup>12</sup> Said claims that the author “borrows the Islamic concept of hell and dramatizes it” (SAID 2019: 202).

responsible for the death of their fellow citizens, and where the sickness that relentlessly spreads among the population consists in facial features disappearing and falling off to the point of obliterating the individual. Although freedom in general is also an underlying motif in most traditional dystopias, in these six works it is notably the individual's lack of freedom per se that is in focus, and specifically the fact that the individual is not free—rather than why. In other words, lack or loss of freedom is not caused by any specific, more or less extreme, ideological collectivism and there is no specific blame to any political alignment. However, it is indeed forces outside the personal sphere of the individual that have the power to limit one's freedom. One of these forces in particular is bureaucracy: it stands out almost as a character in itself and seems to play the main role in all the stories. Bureaucracy limits the individual's freedom either through complex, unnecessary paperwork and mandatory satisfaction tests, like in *al-Ṭābūr* and *2063*, or by means of its authorities, like the army and the police in *Uṭārid* and the unjustified arrests, interrogations and underlying violence exerted by the officials in *The City Always Wins*, or as a consequence of the legislation that created the segregated city of Utopia in *Yūtūbiyā*. It is indeed bureaucratic institutions that manipulate information and historical records, like in *al-Ṭābūr* and in *The City Always Wins*, and have affected the nation's collective cultural heritage—which also stands out as a main concern in these stories. For example, in *2063* the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has emptied its premises of its national treasure of books and artefacts and has become the place where “unsatisfied” citizens are put to sleep forever; in *Yūtūbiyā* national treasures and antiquities have been sacrificed in exchange for a 50-years biroil fuel supply. Bureaucratic language characterises also the messages issued by Citizen Satisfaction Department in *2063* (for example 2016: 12). Interestingly, in *Nisā' al-Karantīnā* bureaucracy is on the side of the “good guys”, as city and governmental authorities try to enforce laws that can put an end to the endless crimes. As for religion, which together with bureaucracy had been identified as another main factor limiting individual freedom in a selection of Arabic contemporary dystopias (BAKKER 2018), it does not seem to play a major role in the Egyptian stories. Arguably, the reason may have something to do with the fact that Egypt is one of the more secular Arabic countries and other religions, such as the Coptic creed, are represented in a significant share of the population. However, even if not a limiting factor to freedom, religion is indeed an element present in some of these works. For example, Muslim religious pilgrimages are mentioned by the Predator in *Yūtūbiyā* as a hypocritical factor on the part of the rich people, who meaninglessly follow the rituals because they are afraid of losing what they have (2009: 52) but who are anyways drinking, raping and generally making money by abusing the poor (2009: 21). It is worth mentioning that in *al-Ṭābūr* religion plays a somewhat more significant part, for example with fatwas that are issued to support the government's actions (2013: 153). In this regard, Stephan Milich claims that religion is “another burden of everyday life, a tool of political manipulation or a means of escape from the much too bitter reality” (MILICH 2019: 156).

When it comes to the two trends identified by CLAEYS in Western dystopian fiction at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is interesting to note that not all the Egyptian dystopias have undergone the shift in settings from totalitarian governments to plutocracies focusing on the consequences of wealth. While some stories do reflect this shift, such as *Yūtūbiyā*, *Nisā' al-Karantīnā* and, to a lesser extent, *The City Always Wins*, some others are still concerned

with despotic, authoritative states, to various degrees, like *al-Ṭābūr* and *2063*—the latter is arguably in-between, as it criticises the negative consequences of wealth, but it is also set in an oppressive, totalitarian state. With regard to the second trend, related to happy endings and, subsequently, a so-called post-apocalyptic despair, it may be noted that only *2063* implies, to a certain extent, some form of hope and optimism, with its open-end and its two main characters leaving on an unknown journey. Finally, plausibly because of its “hellish” nature, a post-apocalyptic atmosphere does indeed permeate *Uṭārid*.

#### 4.2 Arabic dystopias?

The above analysis has shown that the dystopian nature of these six Egyptian works does not entirely conform to the dystopian nature of the traditional narrative presented above: most of the selected works show some elements common to dystopias, specifically by inspiring fear of different kinds, but they are also distant from the traditional dystopian narrative in several, different ways. For example *The City Always Wins*, despite its social and political criticism, lacks the main feature of the genre, namely the warning against a possible bad and gloomy future on the premises of the evolution of the present situation. The novel could rather be intended as post-revolutionary narrative, as it is not about the “what-if”, but about the “what-has-been” or “what-was”. In her “What happens after saying no? Egyptian uprisings and afterwords in Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue* and Omar Robert Hamilton’s *The City Always Wins*,” MOORE explored the kind of response that this kind of novel solicits, claiming that these “literary ‘afterwords’ on twenty-first century Egyptian uprisings are tonally dark, affectively morbid or depressing” (2018: 208). Analogously, it can be argued that *al-Ṭābūr*, as well as *Uṭārid* and *Yūtūbiyā*, are more concerned with their authors’ experiences of social issues and of the uprisings than with dystopian traits. According to MURPHY, these novels “employ narrative strategies of science fiction to interrogate the social and political dynamics leading to and resulting from the uprisings” and they “plunge the reader into a bleak present which is normalized within the science fictional world of the text, functioning not as a warning of what will or might be, but what is set to continue” (2019). Even *Nisā’ al-Karantīnā*, despite its setting in a future Alexandria, is not about the “what-if” but, instead, about the “what-already-is”. In an interview, its author Nā’il al-Ṭūkhī refused the dystopian designation for his novel, claiming that it can be defined a dystopia only because of its settings in a bad place (MUKHTĀR 2017). Al-Ṭūkhī stated that his work, like many others termed as dystopian, is rather about shedding “the fear of addressing politics or political events through literature” and marks “a significant departure from the 1990s, when writers either ignored politics in their works or else wrote ideological tomes” (MOUNZER 2019). According to al-Ṭūkhī, Western critics consider these works of narrative as dystopias because “all they have to go on are the novels in Arabic that have been translated into English, and they know nothing about Arabic literature except that which has been translated into European languages”. He also claims that Western critics “connect the revolution to dystopia, as though searching for evidence of the revolution’s effect on new Egyptian literature [...]: young Egyptian writers are writing dystopia because they are disillusioned by the results of the Arab Spring” (MOUNZER 2019). Clearly, it cannot be denied that the authors’ own experiences and perceptions of the uprisings have played a major role in relation to their works. The proliferation of this kind of fiction may be attributed to its capacity of capturing “the sense

of despair that many writers say they feel in the face of cyclical violence and repression,” so that its authors may have “channelled their frustrations and fears into grim apocalyptic tales” (ALTER 2017). Interestingly, LEBER notes that this kind of fiction as vehicle to express perceptions and frustrations caused by major political events is just another of the many instruments at the authors’ disposal: “Where past frustrations fuelled the prison memoirs and realist narratives of an earlier generation of authors,” this kind of narrative brings instead focus to the uprisings and their developments “by taking a step back into imaginative works” (2017).

However, two of the selected works do warn about a possible gloomy future, intended as a consequence of an evolution of the present situation. One of them is *Yūtūbiyā*. Although written before the revolution in 2009, it tells a tale of class differences in the Egyptian society and hints at a future that may well have been reality if the revolution had not happened. The novel deals with the social and economic conditions that in a few years would be one of the major causes of the street protests and “it also shows, well before the fact, that such protests would only lead to further consolidation of power by the authoritarian regime” (CAMPBELL 2015: 541). Interestingly, *Yūtūbiyā* warns not only against the material negative side of the future: besides poverty, deprivation and hunger, the possibility of a total lack of moral values is also pointed out/underlined. The second story is Mu‘tazz Ḥasānīn’s novella *2063*. In fact, *2063* warns against another, different yet potentially possible future, as it implies that not everybody may be happy when taken care of by the system. Moreover, the novella also highlights some differences between how the Western tradition on one side and Arabs and Muslims on the other understand concepts like individuality and alienation. As ‘AYSHA puts it, “alienation in the Arab way of thinking is not isolation from society, as the Western world thinks, but integration into society and its norms, standards, to the extent that you forget yourself!”<sup>13</sup> (2019a). ‘AYSHA also pointed at several differences between Arabic dystopias and the dystopias of the Western literary world when it comes to concepts like happiness and freedom and claimed that Arab authors are not only “defying doom and gloom, they are also devising their own distinct brand of dystopian literature” (2019b).

It may be argued whether these works of “dystopian” fiction actually represent a real, new trend in contemporary Egyptian literature, as claimed by newspapers and magazines, or whether the term “dystopia” has merely been employed because it is a trendy term, as their designation as dystopias may have a specific sales-oriented purpose—the current popularity of the genre worldwide has resulted in most of them being quickly translated into English in order to be marketed outside the Arabic countries. It is also worth noticing that their designation as dystopias has already been somewhat established even in academic contexts—two examples are the volume *Arabic literature in a posthuman world: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL)*, (GUTH & PEPE eds. 2019), with a whole section on dystopian narrative, and QUTAIT’s (2020) paper “The imaginary futures of Arabic:

<sup>13</sup> The word “alienation” is spelt with Latin letters in the article. The translation of the quote is the author’s own.

Egyptian dystopias in translation,” which deals with the kind of languages used, among others, in *Nisā’ al-Karantīnā*, *al-Ṭābūr*, *Yūtūbiyā* and *‘Uṭārid*. Whatever the case, since a few years back, stories of a bad, gloomy future have indeed started to be popular also among Arabic writers in several Arabic countries. In my essay “Arabic dystopian fiction in modern Arabic literature,” I analysed four works of narrative<sup>14</sup> from three different Arabic countries, spanning over the Arabic world geographically from Algeria in the West through Egypt to Iraq in the East (BAKKER 2018). The analysis showed that these stories are political dystopias, with totalitarianism as their main type, but several deviations from CLAEYS’ categorisation of themes and trends were also identified and a few differences pointed out—in particular concerning the nature of the pursuit of power on the part of the dictators/oligarchies, the absence of a specific political creed and the focus on the relevance of the cultural heritage. In addition, a number of novels, defined as dystopias by Arabic critics, media or the authors themselves, have been written in Arabic and are waiting to be eventually translated for the non-Arabic reading public: “gloomy, futuristic stories have proved popular with readers, and several of these novels have been critical and commercial hits” (ALTER 2016). A couple of examples are *2084 Hikāyat al-‘arabī al-‘akhīr* by the Algerian Wāsīnī al-‘A‘RAJ and *Ḥarb al-kalb al-thāniya* by the Palestinian author ‘Ibrāhīm NAṢRALLĀH, winner of the 2018 IPAF International Prize of Arabic Fiction.

It is now evident that the Egyptian works of narrative analysed in this paper do follow a path quite different from the one of the dystopias of the Western literary tradition. The analysis has shown a main recurring theme, namely the importance of the individual, and has identified bureaucracy as the main element affecting individuality and free will. Moreover, the characterization of these works as dystopias in the traditional meaning of the genre has not always been suitable, considering not only their narrative structure but also their authors’ considerations about them. Because of this, the need of an appropriate, i.e., specialised categorisation of Arabic dystopias is hereby called for. Such categorisation needs to be able to properly take into consideration Arabic, and in this case in particular Egyptian, specific themes and elements because, as shown above, there are similarities with the dystopian narrative tradition but there are also underlying, substantial differences. As a consequence, a traditional approach to dystopian narratives becomes no longer adequate in connection with works that have appeared on the Arabic literary scene in general, and on the Egyptian in particular, during these first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In addition, further research is also needed in order to investigate and comprehend the reasons of the emergence of the genre in the field of Arabic literature. As seen above, a number of articles and papers have, in one way or another, hypothesised and discussed several factors that may have contributed to the appearance of dystopian works on the

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<sup>14</sup> The four works are the following: *2084 La Fin du Monde* by the Algerian writer Boualem SANSAL; the already discussed *al-Ṭābūr* by the Egyptian author Basma ‘ABD AL-‘AZĪZ; and two short stories from the anthology *Iraq + 100: Stories from a Century after the Invasion*, edited by Hassam BLASIM, i.e. *Kahramana*, written in English by ANOUD, and *Operation Daniel*, originally written in Arabic (*‘Amaliyyat Dāniyāl*) by Khālīd KĀKĪ.

Arabic literary scene, and on the Egyptian in particular, but a more comprehensive, structured analysis is becoming more and more necessary. Dystopian narrative, intended as social and political criticism, may be better examined and understood within the frame of a country's specific social, cultural and political factors—which has not been dealt with here on purpose as they go beyond the scope of this paper. Research concerned with specific countries and/or geographical/political areas has already been highlighted by several papers. For example, in her account of “‘Non-Western’ utopian traditions,” DUTTON (2010) points at the variety of cultural factors and world views that have influenced utopian narrative all over the world. As for dystopias, much has been written about Eastern and Central European dystopias (see for example GOTTLIEB 2001), but to the author's knowledge, the field still lacks a similar comprehensive, in-depth analysis of the Arabic dystopian genre.

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