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Witnessing, Evidence, and The Body in Contemporary Egyptian Literature About Revolution

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> The delayed defiance that has befallen them will bring them down. They are old, they are decrepit, they are remnants of a dreadful political imagination that is already dead. Brute, banal force and cliché-ridden manipulation of people's religious sentiments are the only means left to them.[1]
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> Hamid Dabashi on the revolutionary power of the Arab Spring protests and the use of violence by regimes

When a state is accused of committing crimes or acting inhumanely towards their own citizens, it becomes essential to be able to corroborate or dismiss these narratives, therefore giving witnessing and evidence significant gravity and indispensability. Still ongoing today, the revolts which began with the 2009 Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring in 2010 have spread from Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia to Libya, Syria, Yemen, and beyond, demonstrating what Hamid Dabashi has characterised as 'delayed defiance long in the making, […] beyond the borders of democratic cliché, remapping the imaginative geography of a liberation that has

[1] Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed Books, 2012), p. 15. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

finally moved beyond and been liberated from any *ethnos*' (Dabashi, p. 16). As Dabashi highlights, these protests marked not only revolt against the governments and systems of oppression which were holding citizens in poverty and disenfranchisement, but also against the colonialism and postcolonialism which had characterised national politics by sustaining the imperial *modus operandi* until this moment. Less than a month after President Ben Ali fled Tunisia, President Mubarak had also fallen as Egyptian citizens denounced the regime and took to the streets and Tahrir Square, marking the beginning of ongoing unrest. As such, in the context of contemporary Egyptian revolution, not only have ordinary citizens become first-hand witnesses to atrocities, as at least 846 protestors were killed in 2011 when conflict peaked, but the evidence which can corroborate their testimony takes shape as both tangible objects, such as bullets, and as other testimony itself, especially in written form.[2] Additionally, the body has the ability to function as visible, tangible evidence, whilst both homing and trapping oral testimony and psychological trauma, which are contrastingly forms of invisible evidence. This demonstrates how the act of witnessing, the materialisation or accessibility of evidence, and the human body are intrinsically linked in the context of revolution. Whilst both *The Queue* and *In The Spider's Room* bear witness to atrocity in different ways, they ultimately demonstrate how oppressors actually confer upon their victims the only authority which can substantially undermine their regimes, expressly by treating human beings as unimportant collateral damage.

This notion is central to contemporary Egyptian writing, as demonstrated in the two texts this paper will engage with. Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* uses multiple narrators to explore the domestic fallout following the 'Disgraceful Events' in an unspecified Middle Eastern city, highly suggestive of the author's home in Cairo, as the Gate's excessive

[2] [Anon.], 'Egypt: Cairo's Tahrir Square fills with protesters', *BBC News*, 8 July 2011 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14075493> [accessed 16 August 2020] (para. 13 of 18).

bureaucracy puts the country and its citizens into an oppressive standstill.[3] The novel primarily follows Yehya's attempt to access the surgery necessary to remove a bullet lodged in his body which could not be removed previously due to the need of a permit. However, as it was on the state's orders that Yehya is shot, and due to the bullet being traceable, the Gate inadvertently creates a much greater threat to the status quo in their victim than if he had simply remained a protestor. Abdel Aziz emphasises this ironic Frankenstein-esque creation of real and imminent threats in various ways, best demonstrated in Yehya's inability to access life-saving surgery, the emphasis on his avarageness, and the ethical complications for his doctor, Tarek. Comparatively, Abdelnabi's *In the Spider's Room* focuses on the experience of Hani, a gay man in Cairo who is persecuted as a consequence of his sexuality and arrested during the Queen Boat affair. This is a slightly different context but since it was published in 2018, it clearly draws on the same political climate. Abdelnabi offers a form and genre-driven discussion about evidence and witnessing as, unlike Yehya and the bullet, Hani does not have a physical sign of abuse on his body. Rather, his injury is predominantly psychological, therefore the text deals with finding ways to reconcile invisible trauma with physical evidence. Abdelnabi demonstrates this struggle through writing and storytelling as metafictional forms, and the role of the spider.

In *The Queue,* witnessing and evidence is central to the reason Yehya's bullet cannot be removed, yet it is exactly the Gate's cruel treatment of Yehya which reveals how significant his wound and the bullet are in their ability to upset the status quo. Permitting the surgery would serve as an acknowledgement of Yehya being shot on their authority, thus making him doubly threatening as the bullet—which is currently in a liminal, mostly invisible state due to being lodged in his body—would become tangible evidence corroborating his narrative. Abdel Aziz

[3] Basma Abdel Aziz, *The Queue*, trans. by Elisabeth Jaquette (London: Melville House, 2016), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

begins the discourse surrounding the surgery with the doctor, Tarek, who claims that leaving the bullet inside Yehya's body 'would never have occurred to him; he was a surgeon with a solid understanding of his work and an awareness of its repercussions' but that he was informed of the necessity of a 'special permit' (Abdel Aziz, p. 41). In this section, Abdel Aziz encapsulates how a legal system has compromised a basic pillar of medical ethics through a 'special permit', determining that:

> […] the extraction of a bullet or any other type of firearm projectile, whether in a clinic or a private or government hospital, from a body of a person killed or injured, is a criminal act, except when performed under official authorization issued by the Gate of the Northern Building.
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> (Abdel Aziz, p. 44)

Moreover, the permit has surpassed in importance both the Geneva Convention and the Hippocratic Oath's promise to 'keep [the sick] from harm and injustice', thus completely undermining the foundations of medical ethics.[4] Moreover, in pointedly stating that Tarek has a 'solid understanding' and 'awareness of [...] repercussions', Abdel Aziz emphasises that an authority higher than the doctor is intentionally and slowly killing Yehya by trapping him in this liminal state (Abdel Aziz, p. 41).

The necessity of the 'special permit' is explained in an official document because 'as a rule, bullets and projectiles may be the property of security units, and thus cannot be removed from the body without special authorization' (Abdel Aziz, p. 45). Here, the Gate not only reveals their belief that the human body is inferior in importance to government property and the sanctity of the regime, but also yet again acknowledges the potential of their own

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[4] William C. Shiel Jr., MD, FACP, FACR, 'Medical Definition of Hippocratic Oath: Classic Version of the Hippocratic Oath', *Medicine Net* <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=20909> [accessed 11 January 2020] (para. 3 of 8).

wrongdoing by clearly being concerned with the concealing and destruction of any evidence. Through the speculative and generalising phrases ‘as a rule’ and ‘may’, Abdel Aziz highlights how the Gate is treating all patients with the same assumption that they could serve as monumental evidence of wrongdoing, and therefore should be left without surgery. This is twofold advantageous, as not only will the ‘bullets and projectiles’ remain intangible and never make it back into the world to serve as physical evidence of the state turning on their own citizens, but the lack of surgery would likely lead to death, thus eliminating the risk completely as the oral testimony would never be released into the public sphere either. This echoes of true events in Egypt, such as in Alexandria where Dr. Mohamed El-Fiki reported that:

> […] when the State and Central Security police forces were shooting at demonstrators in Alexandria, the hospital authorities banned them from listing gunshot wound as the actual cause of death on the death certificates of those who died at Alexandria University Hospital. Instead, death certificates were collectively reported by medical members of the hospital administration as ‘acute failure of circulation and breathing’.[5]

Consequently, it is clear that Yehya functions as evidence of various systems within the state - firstly of a physical act of violence, then of denying access to universal human rights through the abuse of bureaucracy and formality. Ironically, in refusing the surgery, they are indirectly acknowledging that the bullet and Yehya’s body are evidence of something which they want to control and limit. The Gate have thus granted Yehya a significance which otherwise might not have been acknowledged or realised and demonstrates the power conferred onto his body by their abuse.

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[5] Mohamed El-Fiki and Gail Rousseau, ‘The 2011 Egyptian Revolution: A Neurosurgical Perspective’, *World Neurosurgery*, 76 (2011), 28–32 (p. 31). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Similarly, it is clear that Yehya is only empowered because of the injury which the Gate has forced upon him, as he is otherwise strikingly unremarkable. Abdel Aziz highlights throughout the text how weak Yehya is, as he consistently struggles to do even the most mundane and ordinary of things, as his physical weakness after his injury is coupled with his unexceptional normality from before. He is not even able to sit as 'the pain was so bad he couldn't bend his knees to lower his body that short distance to the ground' and routinely shows apathy towards other people (Abdel Aziz, p. 14). His behaviour is characterised by 'shrugg[ing]', being 'oblivious' to others, with a 'head hanging low', and remaining 'immersed in his own thoughts' (Abdel Aziz, pp. 10, 63). Additionally, Abdel Aziz presents Yehya as impacted by the emergence of the Gate in his personal life in the same way as most, as 'the company he worked for had nearly gone bankrupt after it was forced to pay new mandatory fees', thus emphasising how Yehya does not have a particular vengeance, nor privilege, but instead is in the same position as the majority of civilians (Abdel Aziz, p. 32).

In this way, Abdel Aziz frames Yehya as a representative of the masses - simply an individual whose narrative, struck by the one defining feature of being shot and denied surgery, is otherwise no different from any other. Here, Yehya assumes the role of the Everyman, allowing for a universal sense of identity to pervade the narrative as he becomes the epitome of the idiom 'in the wrong place at the wrong time', and it is strikingly clear that the authority which his body has assumed as a piece of evidence could have been conferred upon anyone. Yehya has absolutely no official authority or political power; he manifests an entirely new, unorthodox, and bespoke form of significance. El Said, Meari and Pratt's argument that female revolutionaries make it 'necessary to expand the notion of the political beyond formal institutions and processes, such as elections, parliaments and constitutions' is also applicable here, as although Abdel Aziz is not talking about gender roles, Yehya is definitely a non-

traditional authority figure.[6] Due to his being an ordinary citizen, Yehya's power challenges the institutions to their core, augmented by the ironic fact that he is their own Frankenstein's monster, as they are responsible for creating him. Abdel Aziz continuously paints Yehya as a slightly pathetic image of a revolutionary—barely able to move physically, passive, with no platform, his narrative being just one in a novel composed of several, with no cult of personality or particular charisma. Undoubtedly, this presentation of Yehya is contradictory to the classic image of a strong male leader, who traditionally embodies 'masculinity' through strength, physical largeness, and a somewhat threatening demeanour, all of which helps move the masses to revolution. However, this positions him uniquely not only as evidence of wrongdoing by the state, but also as having the capability of becoming a martyr or a figurehead, and a true man of the people. This Everyman attribute compliments the nameless city *The Queue* is set in, resonating with the Western tradition to see the parts of Middle East as indistinguishable from one another.

Abdel Aziz also utilises the ability of the genres of speculative fiction, utopia and dystopia to allow the text to move between historical, geographical, and political contexts, as well as highlighting how revolutions have utopian, or perhaps dystopian, potential. Dabashi argues that the relationship between the Middle East and 'utopian dreams of change' is founded in its encounter with European colonialism, as they were 'side effects, the by-products, even the unanticipated consequences, of colonialism, extended into postcolonial ideology and state formations' (Dabashi, pp. 158–59). This goes to emphasise how Yehya becomes almost as transcendent as the nameless city itself, embedded in an almost supernatural tradition and appealing to the same sense of universality which suggests that the significance of Yehya's

[6] Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nicola Pratt, *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance in the Arab World* (London: Zed Books, 2015), p. 8.

evidence and witnessing could have happened to anyone, in any place experiencing political turmoil, as he is the epitome of the oppressor accidentally creating a threat in a citizen.

Additionally, it is important to note that whilst *The Queue* primarily follows the story of Yehya, Abdel Aziz frames the text with Tarek's ethical struggles. This form not only reinforces the sense of pervasive bureaucracy by surrounding the narrative with medical forms, but it also highlights how Yehya is not the only figure who becomes an embodiment of wrongdoing, but others such as Tarek cannot offer physical evidence as corroboration. Whilst Yehya appears to be emboldened by his ability to function as both a witness and physical evidence, Tarek is contrastingly presented as fearful of the potential power of his testimony, which is internalised and manifested as shame. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines shame as a 'free radical that […] attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of – almost anything', drawing on the example of 'a prohibited or indeed a permitted behaviour', the prior of which is the situation of Tarek.[7] This intensified sense of importance in relation to his qualm culminates in the struggle between knowing he should do the surgery to save his patient and fear of the repercussions. This crisis can also be explained by Sedgwick as 'the double movement shame makes: towards painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality', as Tarek cannot help but relate to the humanity and suffering of his patient, but due to his circumstance is forced into isolation (Sedgwick, p. 37). This shame permeates Tarek's narrative, as firstly Tarek claims that 'any shame he'd felt because of Yehya had vanished; he had clearly taken the right course of action' in not performing the surgery, however he later admits that he 'was unable to ignore it all,' and was in 'constant turmoil' (Abdel Aziz, pp. 45, 199). Furthermore, upon meeting with Yehya in the queue, Tarek was 'filled with shame', demonstrating how his moral conscience is torn in a battle between shame

[7] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 62. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

at failing his patient and the self-preservation which can only be attached by unequivocally following the rules (Abdel Aziz, p. 206). The tension in this language expresses Tarek's confusion, as it culminates in a private sense of humiliation over all of his actions. Consequently, Tarek ultimately decides to 'gamble everything', much like how Tahrir Square 'formed a sort of political awakening from an apathetic and single-minded focus on getting through their medical training' for young doctors.[8] In stark contrast to Tarek's complacency at the beginning, his active defiance is clearly a response to the Gate's inhumane treatment of Yehya and their impediment to his own work, demonstrating how shame is 'the place where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally' (Sedgwick, p. 37). The connection between the witnessing, tangible and intangible evidence, and shame experienced by medical professionals is drawn on by Hamdy and Bayoumi in the argument that 'the ordinariness of human indignities is what led the protesters, and the doctors alongside them, to occupy the streets and to demand change and ultimately to sacrifice their lives through extraordinary acts of defiance' (Hamdy and Bayoumi, p. 239). Tarek's decision to side with Yehya despite the personal risk to himself highlights a potential inversion of traditional survivors guilt, which Sedgwick argues is connected to shame, as his defiance is in itself evidence that the regime is unstable and had not 'infiltrated every aspect of people's lives' to the extent which it appeared to (El-Fiki and Rosseau, p. 31). This is reflected in the way Abdel Aziz concludes the final section of *The Queue* with the image of a newly determined Tarek, whose authority is rooted in his ability to testify about Yehya's injuries, the impossible bureaucratic system, and how the Gate interfered with medical neutrality and access to universal human rights, all of which is only possible due to the bodily harm done to Yehya by the Gate (Abdel Aziz, p. 214).

[8] Sherine F. Hamdy, and Soha Bayoumi, 'Egypt's Popular Uprising and the Stakes of Medical Neutrality', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 40 (2015), 223–41 (p. 225). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Contrastingly to *The Queue* which explicitly deals with ideas of evidence and explores in detail the intricacies of bearing witness for both Yehya and Tarek, *In the Spider's Room* examines these topics through Hani's attempt to heal from invisible trauma. This is perhaps best demonstrated in Abdelnabi's use of writing and storytelling as a form of evidence and catharsis. Throughout the novel, there remains a fundamental lack of certainty over whether there is an omniscient third person narrator, or if the narrator is Hani, or even perhaps if we are reading the product of his writing after his psychotherapist encourages it because 'you may have lost your ability to speak but you can still write'.[9] However, despite the incertitude of who our narrator is, it is clear that in order to work through his trauma Hani translates what he has witnessed into physical evidence through the act of writing. Much like Tarek, Hani's narrative is also filled with shame - internalised and put onto him by society - and his resistance to writing links to the 'narcissistically dangerous' possibility of shame if Hani rereads or revises his writing and finds 'dead, indifferent, or even distracted eyes' staring back at him (Sedgwick, p. 39). Additionally, Tomkins argues that this experience would 'reduce further exploration or self-exposure', thus could actually be self-destructive.[10] Whilst Hani begins writing on the recommendation of Dr. Sameeh, storytelling plays an important role in Hani's life before his trauma too. Abdelnabi highlights this by beginning the text with the stories about Hani's grandfather, which is framed in language such as 'it is said that,' 'they say,' 'I imagine,' 'I assume' and 'I can see him now' (Abdelnabi, pp. 4–7). Through the stories of Hani's grandfather and by steeping the novel in the metafictional language of storytelling, Abdelnabi outlines how important it will become in this novel as a form of evidence.

This also highlights the distinction between writing and verbal storytelling as formal devices, a differentiation rooted in the difference between visible and invisible evidence and

[9] Muhammad Abdelnabi, *In the Spider's Room*, trans. by Jonathan Wright (Cairo: Hoopoe, 2018), p. 22. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[10] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader,* ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 135.

testimony. Hani only begins writing when he is no longer able to orally communicate, suggesting a hierarchy of preference which prioritises sounded word, even though the stories about his grandfather emphasise the unreliability of this medium. Contrastingly, writing is more permanent and 'durable' according to Walter J. Ong, offering a more reliable testimony to historical moments.[11] In tracing the history of script and writing, Ong argues that 'a script is more than a mere memory aid' such as 'a notched stick, rows of pebbles, other tallying devices such as the quipu of the Incas', because unlike *aides-mémoire*, script 'is a representation of an *utterance,* of words that someone says or is imagined to say' (Ong, pp. 82–3). Therefore, the particular merit of writing is that 'a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text', which is an important quality in a piece of evidence which is bearing witness to a historical moment (Ong, p. 83). Perhaps due to this permanence and finality, as well as the aforementioned potential for shame, writing originally leads Hani to 'prevaricate' as he tries to 'put off the confrontation' (Abdelnabi, p. 21). However, Hani ultimately finds '[his] way to these notebooks, which started to proliferate in the drawers of the dressing table, like silent witnesses in a case where no one knows who the final verdict will favor' (Abdelnabi, p. 235). In characterising Hani's notebooks as 'silent witnesses', Abdelnabi reveals the potential significance of these written testimonies not only in explaining and working through his trauma, but also functioning as evidence of a historical moment in a tradition typified by figures such as Anne Frank, Friedrich Kellner, and Victor Klemperer. Abdelnabi epitomises the irony of Hani's oppressors, directly leading to his evidence and testimony assuming a physical form, rather than the oral form he appears to prefer and as such being elevated and granted immortality, as it is all a consequence of his body experiencing 'transformational hysteria' due to their treatment of him (Abdelnabi, p. 229).

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[11] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 139. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Another way in which Abdelnabi presents Hani as dealing with the conflation of witnessing and psychological trauma is through the spider. The spider follows Hani throughout the novel, appearing at moments of desperation and functioning as a witness to his suffering. The spider as a coping mechanism may be understood better through Sara Ahmed's explanation of how phenomenology compliments queer studies because it prioritises the idea that 'consciousness is always directed "toward an object"', thus emphasising 'the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds'.[12] Likewise, the spider is not only the object which Hani is directed toward, but also functions as a reassuring crutch in its persistent nearness, especially in moments of crisis, as after being 'disorientated', as Ahmed and Fanon would say, the spider functions to re-orientate the body (Ahmed, p. 157). Abdelnabi first introduces the spider when Hani is struggling to distinguish a dream from reality:

> The first massive black spider appeared. I don't know where it suddenly sprang from, but it headed toward me, and behind it marched two others, then five and then I could no longer count the vast army of spiders [...] I screamed, but no noise came out, and I woke up to see the terrified faces of my fellow detainees.
>
> (Abdelnabi, p. 10)

As the emergence of the spider, or spiders, is aligned with Hani's inability to make noise and the events leading up to this horrifying moment, this passage sets up the relationship between moments of trauma, Hani's silence, and the spider. Although that in this instance Abdelnabi presents the spider as 'massive' and scary, the spider also offers a figure who can bear witness

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[12] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

to Hani's struggles whilst imprisoned, as his 'fellow detainees' are evidently 'terrified' in their own right thus cannot understand or bear testimony to Hani's experience.

The next appearance of the spider is in a 'suffocating fit' during which Hani is contemplating suicide, as he is 'tempted to [...] put an end to everything and find relief' (Abdelnabi, p. 22). Unlike in the beginning, Hani now describes the spider as 'little' and 'my only friend' (Abdelnabi, p. 22). Now witnessing Hani's struggle to reintegrate into society, the spider is recharacterised as comforting, as it is functioning to re-orientate him. This shows how the spider is beginning to symbolise Hani's inability to find people with similar experiences who he can relate to. Abdelnabi presents the spider not only as proof of wrongdoing (as a symptom of mental breakdown which occurred due to the arrest), but also of the state purposefully encouraging deeply impenetrable divisions in society and isolating vulnerable individuals. Similarly, after being reunited with his old clothes shortly after being released from prison, Hani sees 'a black spider so small he might just have been born', hiding 'quite still in the corner of the wardrobe', who he talks to 'without moving [his] tongue or lips' (Abdelnabi, p. 64). Hani's closeness with this spider is highlighted through their similar physical experiences, as they are both mute, physically overwhelmed by the world around them, and on the floor by the wardrobe. This creates a sense of kinship which Hani is struggling to find in humans who, contrastingly, 'hardly recognized' him (Abdelnabi, p. 65).

Abdelnabi highlights the spider's function as a continuum, as it is this which reminds Hani and the readers that all of the events and traumas within *In the Spider's Room* are part of a singular history of dangerous patterns, rather than arbitrary or isolated events which is how history is often presented by oppressive regimes. Through the figure of the spider, we are able to draw lines—echoed in Abdelnabi's language which refers to webs—throughout Hani's life. Psychoanalytically, the spider draws together the irony between how imprisoning and oppressing Hani has actually forced him to begin working through his trauma. The spider thus

reinforces the importance of witnessing and consolidating physical evidence of wrongdoing in a physical form, as this is the most significant and permanent way to reveal abuses of power.

Theodor W. Adorno claims that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', and these texts offer insight into why readers want literature about trauma—because they bear witness to and provide evidence of historical moments whilst emphasising that there is a shared humanity which becomes dangerous when ignored.[13] In light of this, both Abdel Aziz and Abdelnabi's texts present unique stories about anomalies in tightly controlled regimes, yet they also strive to connect these stories with wider events. *The Queue* reflects images and events from across the 'Middle East' and specifically Egypt, yet is set in an undetermined place, which allows it to remain a universal story, whereas *In the Spider's Room* draws directly from the historical Queen Boat and the Cairo 52. In this way, despite being unique, the stories of Hani and Yehya are gifted an Everyman quality, as their testimony comes to bear witness to atrocities committed on a mass scale, not just against two individuals. Rather, these characters function to demonstrate how it is the regime itself that creates its own worst enemy and greatest threat, providing ordinary citizens with the ability to bear witness, testify, and provide evidence in a multitude of forms, directly through treating human beings inhumanely. To conclude, it is clear that literature which emerged from Egypt since 2009 should serve as a reminder, whilst witnessing revolutions around the world in current and recent history, that when a regime neglects to recognise the humanity of those whom they oppress, that shared humanity between the oppressed becomes the driving force and uniting factor within the revolution.

[13] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p. 62.

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