

FROM HOPE IN A CHANGE TO DISENCHANTMENT:
THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION
IN 'IZZ AL-DĪN ŠUKRĪ FIŠĪR'S *BĀB AL-ḤURŪĠ*

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*The myth of Pandora's box as a metaphor for the situation that arose after the Arab Spring can be applied to the dystopian novel *Bāb al-Ḥurūġ* (The Exit Door, 2012) by the Egyptian writer 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr. The author offers an accurate insight into the country's circumstances, opposing the narrative imposed by the current political agenda and foresees Egypt's tragic future after 2011. Fišīr achieves these outcomes by drawing the protagonist's progressive awareness of his attitude to his private and public life. The protagonist detaches from reality after a clash with the Egyptian harsh conditions. This contribution offers an analysis of two main aspects of the novel: the author's stylistic choices and the representation of the Egyptian revolution and its effects both on the individual and on society.*

The 2011 revolution marked a watershed moment in Egyptian history, bringing an end to the regime of Ḥusnī Mubārak (1928-2020) after 30 years in power¹. The revolution brought to the surface years of discontent with Mubārak's oppressive regime, and ushered in a new era of hope for democracy and political freedom for Egypt. Chaos followed the eruption of political upheavals. In such a context that reflected the extent to which millions of Egyptians had suffered for decades from oppression, injustice, and corruption, there was an urgent need to analyse and produce a discourse that could explain the new condition between change and continuity². In response to this need, which is political, economic, and social at one and the same time, artistic sensibility interacts in various ways with the revolutionary event³.

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¹ For an overview of the Egyptian revolution see, among others, A. Meringolo, *I ragazzi di Piazza Tahrir*, CLUEB, Bologna 2011; F.M. Corrao (a cura di), *Le rivoluzioni arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, Milano 2011; G. Gervasio; A. Teti, *Cercando un altro Egitto. Tra democrazia e contro-rivoluzione*, in "Afriche e Orienti", 1 (2011); M. Campanini, *Storia dell'Egitto. Dalla conquista araba a oggi*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017; Id. (a cura di), *Le rivolte arabe e l'Islam*, il Mulino, Bologna 2013.

² R. Di Peri; P. Rivetti (eds), *Continuity and change before and after the Arab uprisings. Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt*, Routledge, London 2016.

³ A. Buontempo, *The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent: al-Ṭābūr by Basmah*

‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr (Kuwait City, 1966) is an Egyptian writer who was among the first to attempt to depict the realities and aftermaths of the Arab Spring⁴. His work provides a unique insight into the hopes, fears and struggles of the people of Egypt during this period. He was born to Egyptian parents in Kuwait. He returned to Egypt with his mother and siblings when he was two years old, while his father remained in Kuwait to support the family. Fišīr grew up in Manṣūrah and graduated from Cairo University’s Political Science Department in 1987, joining the Al Ahram Centre for Political Studies. He earned an International Diploma in Administration from the École Nationale d’Administration in Paris in 1992, a Master Degree in International Relations from the University of Ottawa in 1995, and a PhD in Political Science from the Université de Montréal in 1998. He served as an Egyptian diplomat until 2011, when he resigned and began teaching Political Science at the American University in Cairo. He has written seven novels in which he could be said to analyse Egyptian society through characters from various social classes. The author shows the reader the characters’ daily challenges, struggles, the dark sides of their worlds, their discontent with oppression, power abuses, and hope for radical change⁵.

Bāb al-ḥurūġ (The Exit Door)⁶, one of the most highly acclaimed Arabic dystopian novels, and his first novel after the revolution, offers a realistic account of the complexities of life in contemporary Egypt and provides insight into the intricate relationships between individuals and their social, economic, and political environment. It was first published as a serial in “al-Tahrīr” newspaper, where Fišīr wrote every day for 68 days until the novel was finished. It was then published in a single collection in 2012. As such, it reflected on a revolutionary process that was still ongoing and whose outcomes were completely unknown. The novel reveals the extent to which the events of the Arab Spring affected the individual’s per-

‘Abd al-‘Azīz and al-Tamāsīḥ by Yūsuf Raḥā, in “La rivista di Arablīt”, V, 9-10 (2015), pp. 40-41.

⁴ Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e “distopismo”*, in M. Avino; A. Barbaro; M. Ruocco (a cura di), *Qamariyyāt: oltre ogni frontiera tra letteratura e traduzione. Studi in onore di Isabella Camera d’Afflitto*, Istituto per l’Oriente C. A. Nallino, Roma 2020, p. 322.

⁵ His novels are: *Maqṭal Faḥr al-Dīn* (The Killing of Faḥr al-Dīn, 1995), *Asfār al-Farā’in* (Pharaonic Journeys, 1999), *Ġurfat al-‘ināyah al-murakkazah* (Intensive Care Unit, 2008), *Abū ‘Umar al-miṣrī* (Abū ‘Umar the Egyptian, 2010), *Ināq ‘inda ġisr Brūklīn* (Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge, 2011), *Bāb al-ḥurūġ. Risālat ‘Alī al-muḥ’amah bi-baḥġah ġayr al-mutawaqqa‘ah* (The Exit Door. Ali’s Message Full of Unexpected Joy, 2012), and *Kull ḥādā al-hurā’* (All This Nonsense, 2017).

⁶ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ. Risālat ‘Alī al-muḥ’amah bi-baḥġah ġayr al-mutawaqqa‘ah*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2012.

sonal and public life in a context in which his fate and that of his country are inextricably linked. The novel highlights the individual's struggle to navigate between conflicting forces that influence his life, with the choices he makes affecting not only himself, but his entire country as well. A central theme of the novel is the collapse of the old order and the emergence of old evils that had been contained by it. The myth of Pandora's box, as a metaphor for what followed the Egyptian revolution, is apt for depicting the representation of the revolution in the novel. The regime kept many Egyptian evils under control for years by lying and hiding them from the public, but this was no longer a viable option in the face of increasing pressure from citizens.

The novel *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* is examined in this article from two perspectives. The first concerns the author's stylistic choices and how he employs them to create the narrative discourse. A second area of investigation is how the Egyptian revolution is depicted and how the protagonist 'Alī experiences it. In the latter case, we will also look at how the revolution affected his relationship with himself and his entourage.

The Author's Stylistic Choices and the Construction of Meaning

There is a close focus in contemporary Arabic literature regarding socio-political issues. Literature is used as a platform to comment on and critique the various political realities present in authors' societies. As Nasser Ismail emphasises, the novel apparently «serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world»⁷. In Egyptian literature, dystopian fiction has become increasingly popular. In these narratives, authors frequently venture into the realm of speculative futures, using dystopian scenarios as a lens to reflect on contemporary events and societal issues⁸.

The anticipation of the dystopic genre⁹ in Arabic literature can be traced

⁷ J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Routledge, London & New York 2002, p. 221, citato in Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e "distopismo"*, cit., p. 321.

⁸ Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e "distopismo"*, cit., pp. 321-322.

⁹ Dystopia originates from the Greek term "dis-topos" meaning "bad place". It involves predicting, describing, or portraying a future state of affairs that contrasts with utopia, envisioning highly negative situations, political-social turmoil, and technological setbacks. The dystopic genre emerged in the nineteenth century in Europe and in the United States, influenced by significant historical events such as the world wars, the cold war, and the advent of the atomic bomb. Additionally, the decline of positivist and socialist ideologies played a role in shaping dystopian narratives. From the 1950s onwards, the specific social and political conditions of Arab countries have led Arab authors to explore the dystopian genre. See A. Barbaro,

back to Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's (1898-1987) play *Rihlah ilà al-ġad* (Voyage to Tomorrow, 1957), characterised by the pessimistic vision of the future. Šabrī Mūsà (1932-2018) continued this trend with *al-Sayyid min ḥaql al-sabāniḥ* (Lord of the Spinach Field, 1982), considered one of the first Arabic novel in the science fiction genre¹⁰. However, the widespread adoption of the dystopian genre across the Arab world awaited the new millennium. Literary expressions of social and anti-totalitarian dystopias began emerging in Egypt post-2005, following the dynamic opposition movement against the regime. The initial decade of the 21st century witnessed a decline in state intervention and editorial censorship, granting writers greater freedom to scrutinise political and social realities in-depth¹¹. Notable examples, such as *Ṭawrat 2053 – al-Bidāyah* (The Revolution of the Year 2053 – The Beginning, 2007) by Maḥmūd 'Uṭmān and *Yūtūbyā* (Utopia, 2008) by Aḥmad Ḥālīd Tawfīq, can be considered precursors to subsequent dystopian narratives emerging post-2011¹².

The events of 2011 marked a period of political and social upheavals across the Arab world, presenting challenges for intellectuals¹³. In Egypt,

La fantascienza nella letteratura araba, Carocci Editore, Roma 2013, in particular the chapter *Šabrī Mūsà (Egitto) e il non-luogo: la distopia nella letteratura araba*, pp. 194-216.

¹⁰ Science fiction remains a relatively recent genre within Arabic literature, with contemporary Arab authors not extensively exploring it. Nevertheless, its antecedents can be traced back to selected stories within *Alf laylah wa laylah* (One Thousand and One Nights), tales of marvels, and fantastical voyages to distant places. According to Ada Barbaro, discussing Arabic science fiction today entails exploring texts that draw upon this classical and oral heritage, which has interacted with the Anglo-Saxon tradition that reached Arab countries through translations or in the original English and French. Arab authors have found inspiration in the Anglo-Saxon model and have forged an original path, even from a linguistic perspective, by inventing new words. One of the most frequently explored themes is the concept of time travel or tales envisioning the future, which confronts Arab writers with a significant challenge rooted in the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition, where Time is believed to be divinely controlled. Many utopian visions eventually transform into dystopian realities, as the quest for temporal control proves ephemeral or comes at the expense of other elements. For further insights into the inception and development of the science fiction genre in Arabic literature, see, among others. *Ibid.*; and C. Comito, *La fantascienza parla (anche) arabo*, in "Arabpop. Rivista di arti e letterature arabe contemporanee", 2 (2022), pp. 49-53.

¹¹ Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e "distopismo"*, cit., pp. 333-334.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 324.

¹³ The reflection on the future appears to be of transnational interest in recent cultural and artistic production. Within the Arab context, there are numerous authors who explore the future from the perspective of the present or project the present

the profound disappointment stemming from the failure of the revolution and the subsequent repression has led many writers to choose this literary genre as a means to express their disapproval of society, portraying a tumultuous future and emphasising the urgent need for change to prevent reality from mimicking fiction¹⁴. Nasser Ismail's emphasis on the contrasting literary impact of two major events in Egypt, often linked due to their significant impact and high initial expectations of change – the Free Officers' coup and the revolution in 1952 and the revolution in January 2011 – is noteworthy. The former resulted in widespread symbolism and narrative experimentation¹⁵. This can be attributed to the fact that during the 1950s and 1960s, the Egyptian state tightly controlled cultural and literary activities, hindering authors from envisioning the future. Establishing a direct link with contemporary circumstances faced obstacles, risking the publication of works and the safety of writers. In this environment, many works depicting future scenarios focused on ontological themes, often concluding with resolutions aligned with societal conditions¹⁶. The revolution in 2011, conversely, experienced a rapid rise of the dystopian genre after an initial phase dominated by autobiographical and documentary works. This transformation reflected the genre's ability to articulate sentiments of discontent, mistrust, and disillusionment that emerged post-revolution¹⁷.

into the future. This phenomenon underscores how the region's distinct political, economic, and social conditions prompt focused contemplation that intertwines with the broader global context. This theme is extensively explored in Issue 2 of "Arabpop. Rivista di arti e letteratura arabe contemporanee", cit., which is entirely devoted to "Future". The numerous contributions within this volume present the complexity and diversity of perspectives that address the relationship with different temporal dimensions, including the past, present, and future. In the section dedicated to literary translation (pp. 10-31), a prevalent theme that emerges is the interweaving of reality and science fiction. For instance, the dystopian story *2063* (2016) by the Egyptian Mu'tazz Ḥasānayn (1991) portrays a future society under the oppressive rule of a regime that has eradicated all forms of freedom, evoking a reflection of the present state of the country. Similarly, the Jordanian writer Hišām al-Bustānī (1975) constructs the short story *Talāṭah fī wāhid* (Three in One, 2021) to depict a future where cultural existence has entirely faded away. In the short story *al-Ḥiṭṭah al-'aẓimah* (The Great Plan, 2016) by Muṣṭafā Tāğ al-Dīn al-Mūsā (1981) from Syria, the portrayal revolves around the inevitable decline of the Syrian population, with the potential solution for survival residing in the creation of an entirely new human civilisation on another planet. Additionally, the Iraqi poet Mayṭam Rādī (1974) in *Kalimāt radī'ah* (Bad Words, 2015) envisions the formation of a new and resilient humanity crafted from clay to endure the ravages of time and war.

¹⁴ Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e "dystopismo"*, cit., p. 324.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

Bāb al-ḥurūġ can be read as one of those works which present an accurate chronicle of the Egyptian revolution through the lens of dystopian fiction¹⁸. The protagonist, ‘Alī, offers a profound retrospective analysis of a revolution through a letter addressed to his son. As a translator at the President’s office, ‘Alī’s passivity haunts him throughout the narrative until a critical moment on a ship loaded with nuclear missiles ordered by Egypt’s President in 2020. For the first time, he resolves not to remain passive, even though this choice jeopardises his loyalty. In a daring move, ‘Alī has already reached out to the Americans, imploring them to intercept the nuclear cargo intended to target the Israeli army, which has taken control of East Sinai in 2020. His message to his son serves as a poignant explanation of his motives, prepared as a final attempt to clarify his actions should he face capture or even death.

‘Alī’s letter begins with reminiscences of his early life in Beijing, where his father served as a military attaché at the Egyptian Embassy. Possessing a talent for languages, ‘Alī excelled in Chinese but was forced to return to Cairo, leaving behind his beloved Chinese girlfriend. He later takes up a translation position at President’s office, where he remains an honest yet passive translator. During the initial wave of revolution, ‘Alī joins the fervour in Taḥrīr Square but remains a spectator rather than an active participant. The revolution reconnects him with two influential friends, ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī, an academic and future Prime Minister known as “The Butcher”, and Maḥmūd Bašīr, a socialist Prime Minister whose rule results in chaos.

The principal political events of the revolution intertwine with significant moments in ‘Alī’s personal life, reflecting a parallel with historical reality. However, a disconnect arises following the Port Said Stadium massacre. Subsequently, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces takes a critical decision to disband itself, opting to establish a civilian presidential council as a response to the deteriorating situation. Regrettably, this endeavour ultimately proves futile due to internal rivalries among its members and the unyielding dominance of the military. The inception of the second revolution arises from confrontations between street vendors and the police in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.

¹⁸ This novel, together with *al-Ṭābūr* (The Queue, 2013) by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1976), *Nisā’ al-Karantīnā* (Women of Karantīnā, 2013) by Nā’il al-Ṭūḥī (1978) and *‘Uṭārid* (2014) by Muḥammad Rabī’ (1978) have been analysed by Nasser Ismail, who sees them as being complementary. In Fišīr and Rabī’’s novels the narrator assumes the role of the anti-hero, belonging to the old regime, and recounts the story from the counterpart’s perspective. Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and Nā’il al-Ṭūḥī construct two parodies to depict their discontent arising from the regime’s persistent efforts to manipulate historical narratives for political purposes. *Ibid.*, pp. 335-336.

Arḍ al-Liwā', an informal neighbourhood. Its core events are also influenced by the Israeli military's actions against Iran.

The rule of the Brotherhood crumbles as the army seizes control, and a military general, who happens to be 'Alī's father-in-law, assumes the presidency. The coup is a direct response to the Israeli invasion of East Sinai, prompted by Egypt's inability to safeguard its borders from assaults by various pro-Palestinian and jihadi groups. In a climactic turn of events, 'Alī senses an impending danger that puts lives at risk due to the military President's nuclear plan. Faced with this critical situation, 'Alī resolves to take action for the first, and potentially final, time. 'Alī's personal life is profoundly impacted by this second revolution. He becomes a victim of assault at his workplace, while his wife, accompanied by her father, had already left the country with their son. Meanwhile, 'Alī slips into a coma as a consequence of the attack. As he grapples with the aftermath, 'Alī witnesses his friends ascending to positions of power while he faces continuous failures. Despite years of tumult, fate reunites him as the translator for the first elected President, who belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood. As a silent observer, 'Alī witnesses the Brotherhood's shortcomings, and their decisions inadvertently lead to the tragic death of his sister and her family. This poignant incident becomes the catalyst for 'Alī's single active decision in the midst of his otherwise passive journey.

Fišīr presents a riveting account of Egypt's tumultuous political landscape, as seen through the lens of the protagonist, 'Alī. The author creates a discourse on the Egyptian revolution, to which the fates of all the characters in the novel, from various social classes, are linked. This approach provides valuable insights into Egyptian society, particularly shedding light on the formerly marginalised individuals who find themselves at the centre of the Egyptian political scene in 2011. The writer provides a high level of detail about the events narrated, especially in the central part of the novel, through the voice of the narrator, who belongs to the old regime but appears to have no power. In some sections, the narrator appears to be writing a report on the events of the revolution. This aspect temporarily diverts the reader's attention away from the novel's main theme, a letter from a father to his son that serves as a confession and a seal to remember what has occurred over the years. The details are so precise that the reader is led to believe that he is reading the story of a man confessing to his son what happened to him before and after the Egyptian revolution, rather than a work of fiction. He realises he is becoming too involved when narrating the facts in such great detail. The story is thus also about the act of narrating itself, an act that focalises on transmitting the intense emotions 'Alī feels while talking about his past and present. Thereafter, he redirects Yaḥya's attention (the addressee of the letter) and thus indirectly the reader's attention,

asking them to refocus on the letter's subject: the explanation of what he has decided to do¹⁹.

It should be noted that the reader interacts with two temporal planes: one is the short journey for the delivery of the nuclear missiles, when the narrator writes a letter to his son trying to complete it in the little time he has available, and the other is the time of the events narrated in the letter itself, ranging from the years 'Alī spent in China to the moment in which he writes. In order for a story to be narrated, it must be situated within a particular time that is distinct from the present, as it is impractical to recount events that have not yet reached their conclusion. This elucidates the requirement for a reasonable temporal gap between the story's time and the time of its narration²⁰. In this context, it is pertinent to highlight that the first temporal plane – pertaining to the protagonist's journey for the delivery of weapons – embodies the present moment, wherein events are currently unfolding and remain incomplete for narration. This constraint arises from the necessity to conclude the letter before the ship's interception, a pivotal moment that will determine the protagonist's destiny. On the other hand, the second temporal plane, encompassing the narration of events, that have profoundly shaped the narrator's personal and professional life, as well as the broader political situation of the country, represents the past and spans a considerable duration. The narrative presents these events without employing flashbacks or flashforwards²¹. Following a chronological order, the narrator traverses his experiences from the years spent in China until the moment of writing, thus converging – at the end – the two temporal planes. It is essential to observe that throughout the narrative, the reader is repeatedly transported between the first and second temporal planes, particularly when the narrator interrupts the account of past events to address his son, engaging in reflection, commentary, and expression of

¹⁹ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., pp. 9-14; 72; 151-152; 273-274; 318-321; 457 *passim*.

²⁰ Todorov excludes from this provision the predictive narratives that usually employ the present or future tense. Cf. T. Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron*, Mouton, Paris 1969, p. 48.

²¹ The concept of order pertains to the relationship between the chronological sequence of situations and events as they occur within the narrative and the manner in which they are presented in the discourse. In reference to Gérard Genette's definitions, it is important to note that the concept of *anachrony* designates discordances between story order and discourse order. There are two forms of *anachrony*, as identified by Genette: flashback or *analepsis*, which involves instances within the discourse that revisit earlier points in the story; and flashforwards or *prolepsis*, which constitutes a type of *anachrony* where the discourse anticipates situations and events in the narrative. Cf. G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, translated by E. Lewin, foreword by J. Culler, Cornell University Press, New York 1980, pp. 33-85.

feelings and emotions. During these instances, the narrator explicitly signifies the interruption of the narrative of past events, speaking from the present moment (aboard the ship destined for an uncertain future). Subsequently, the narrative guides the reader back in time, resuming the narration precisely where it had been momentarily suspended.

To recount what Egypt was before and after the revolution, Fišīr chooses the form of the letter. A letter 'Alī addresses to his son Yaḥyà, in which he relates the events that had occurred over the past 30 years, from the period he lived in Beijing to the time of the writing. In letter dated 20 October 2020 and written in the space of 24 hours, the intradiegetic narrator²² and protagonist 'Alī recounts and explains his choices and his refusals to act, in a plot in which the boundary between values becomes blurred, as if the revolution had reshuffled them too. The author exposes the psychological implications of an extraordinary event such as the revolution, and their effects on the individual, his values, his relationships, revealing a hidden truth that imposes itself on common consciousness in all its force: it is time to change, to make voices heard, to stand up to the despotic power that relegates people to the margins of social life as they do not really have the chance to take part in it.

The narrative technique of time dilation²³, where the author elongates time within the story, is a consequence of emphasising intricate details in

²² The events are focalised through the narrator's consciousness at the moment of narration and not at a time in the past when the events took place. In this novel the narrator endeavours to elucidate the motivations that impelled his actions, reconstructing the events, thoughts, and emotions experienced from his present standpoint aboard the ship as he writes the letter-confession to his son. For focalisation, *Ibid.*, pp. 189-194.

²³ Regarding the duration of narrative, Genette defines four movements: *scene*, characterised by a notable harmony between the temporal span of the story and the extent of discourse. A prominent illustration of this alignment can be found in character dialogues, where the words and lines presented on the page are believed to closely echo the verbal interactions and speech acts of the characters. *Summary* occurs when a longer story event is compressed and covered in a shorter discourse space, resulting in a disparity between discourse time and story time, where the former is shorter than the latter. This narrative pacing is achieved when the discourse provides a condensed overview of an event or a group of events within the story. *Ellipsis* represents the most extreme form of pacing, surpassing even the compressing nature of summary. *Pause* represents the far end of tempo deceleration, where a segment of the discourse time corresponds to no progression in the story time. During this phenomenon, the discourse time continues, but the story time comes to a halt. In *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, the deceleration of the narrative pace occurs when the narrator offers personal reflections on the events narrated and provides highly detailed explanations concerning the political developments in the country during various stages over the years. For the duration of narrative, *Ibid.*, pp. 86-112.

the narrative. This stylistic choice enables Fišīr to manipulate the pace of events, creating a specific effect on the reader's perception of time. During time dilation, certain moments or events are extensively described, while other periods are succinctly summarised. A notable instance of this technique is evident in the narrator's elaborate depiction of events during the revolution and the post-revolutionary period.

Furthermore, time dilation serves to slow down the narrative pace, facilitating a deeper exploration of 'Alī's thoughts and emotions. This occurs as the narrator and protagonist, 'Alī, contemplatively reflects on the events concerning his personal, familial, and political life across various periods, ranging from pre-revolution to the present moment of narration.

Following the evolution of his readership, the author remarks in this context: «I could discern two types of readers following what was being written: there were the readers who usually follow my political column (stopped during the writing of the novel of course) and these were not so interested in the plot of the novel, but looked at it as if it were pure futuristic political analysis, and mostly were very bored with the sections about the stories of the characters and their lives and developments, considering it out of context. In my view, this reduces the whole concept of the novel. The fiction readers, however, were keener on these, and gave reactions, even sometimes advice, about how the characters should behave etc.»²⁴.

Despite the fact that the narrator repeatedly states that he does not have much time available and will try to be concise, he does not provide a summary narration of the events. As he puts it:

Three hours have passed and I am still at the beginning of the story. I want to be brief, but the details call me not to leave them alone. Who will revive them if I do not mention them to you here? But if I tell you everything I want, I won't tell you what I want. I have to hurry up²⁵.

A dilated time framework plays a structural role in the novel by conveying a sense of uncertainty, hesitation, and inability to conceptualise events. This is the major trait of 'Alī the focaliser of the story – he is reticent and unable to make definitive decisions. 'Alī the narrator affirms he is aware of the fact that he is not able to choose which events to tell. Readers are meant to identify with the main character, who is also the narrator. As a result, the reader only sees what is being told from the perspective of the main character. The story is told by 'Alī in the manner in which he lived it, perceived it, and analysed it and the reader shares his difficulties, fears,

²⁴ See the interview with the author by C. Nurtsch, *The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution*, available at: <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-ezzedine-choukri-fishere-the-arab-revolution-is-a-cultural-revolution> (last accessed 16 November 2022).

²⁵ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 72. All translations are mine.

doubts, and uncertainties. His inability to convey his experiences seems insurmountable. The narrator gives the two readers (internal and external) the impression that time is running out and they will never learn the truth about his choice, possibly because understanding the reasons behind it is more important than the choice itself.

Such inability seems to have one single origin: the homogenic culture of the regime and its official truths. ‘Alī decides what he believes to be right after suffering decisions made by others in his private and professional life as well as those imposed on him during his service at the Presidential Palace. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that ‘Alī does not provide an objective and complete vision of reality, but a distorted one and a detached analysis of what is narrated. In fact, the narration is written in the first person, with an internal focalisation, but the narrator can be seen in the final analysis as unreliable.

The protagonist, ‘Alī, appears to be the antihero as he lacks the conventional heroic qualities and attributes, particularly determination and courage. This individual is passive, does not take the initiative, and is unable to deal with his dire situation. His passivity is reflective of a sense of helplessness in the face of his circumstances. As expressed by Nūr, the actress, who decides to end their relationship after the deaths of ‘Afāf and her sister, who had been arrested shortly before²⁶:

She said – after a long hesitation – that she was afraid of my negative attitude. I was surprised, I don’t remember that anyone accused me of a negative attitude before! She added that she feared my humanity would gradually erode under the weight of negativity, which would possibly destroy me completely if I did nothing to confront it. I almost laughed, I thought there was something I did that irritated her, and I didn’t expect that what I did was doing nothing. [...] She answered me that I don’t do anything at all, but I stand in the midst of the tragedy watching²⁷.

His final decision is the only time ‘Alī accepts responsibility for his actions and inactions in the past. It will break the cycle of events, which are differ-

²⁶ ‘Afāf worked for a period at the Presidential Palace as a telephone operator. She originated from Arḍ al-Liwā’, an impoverished suburb in the al-Ġīzah district. Hailing from a very modest family, her father had passed away, her mother worked sporadically to meet the family’s needs, her brother Ḥasan was unemployed, and her sister Mīrfat was still attending school without notable progress. ‘Afāf supported the entire family with her salary. ‘Alī seemed to be somehow attracted to this girl, who was markedly different from the people he was accustomed to. Their relationship was short-lived, as ‘Afāf was dismissed from her job and transferred to an administrative unit in the al-Ġīzah province after ‘Alī accompanied her home in his car one evening after work. They would meet again much later during the protests at Taḥrīr Square.

²⁷ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 280.

ent each time but identical in terms of internal dynamics. With this decision, 'Alī demonstrates his agency to end the repeating cycle of events he finds himself in. After speaking with the Americans, 'Alī decides to hand over the Chinese ship carrying twenty-four nuclear bombs destined for Israeli troops in the Sinai. 'Alī wishes to avoid a nuclear war between Egypt and Israel, which could devastate the entire region. Although 'Alī would have probably faced criticism from his own people, he felt it was the right thing to do. With his decision he avoids a political and human catastrophe. For the first time, he decides not to be passive, despite the fact that his actions may make him a traitor. 'Alī's message is his final attempt to explain that he has considered the risks of his decision in case he is apprehended or killed. We read:

No.

[...] I am not the traitor.

I am not the one who brought the Israelis into the East Sinai.

I am not the one who entered the presidency on the corpses of his citizens and the spears of his enemies.

I am not the one who created and lost a war in order to gain a struggle with his political opponents. [...]

[...] I will not play their game anymore. I will not participate in more mass killing even if it is done under the pretext of liberating the homeland, and I will not flee leaving innocents drowning behind me. [...] I am not sure of the results, I am not our master al-Ḥidr, and I do not know the unseen and what is hidden, but I know that the killing of thousands of innocents is a crime and madness, and I will not participate in it nor let it pass through my hands²⁸.

When 'Alī tells of his decision and the reasons for it at the end of the novel, the narrator's tone shifts. If he appears uncertain, confused, and at times disoriented for the majority of the novel, he appears more convinced and focused at the end. As the quoted extract shows, the sentences become shorter and more incisive. Initially, the reader was accustomed to a narrator who compares various possible alternatives while remembering events and is unsure which choice to make. He is now confronted by a narrator who is completely convinced of his actions. The narrator speaks in the first person and uses the singular subject personal pronoun rather than the plural, which he had previously used frequently. This is especially true when he describes his activities inside the Presidential Palace in the various stages of government during which he and others tried to find a way out of the political, economic, and social crisis. Furthermore, he employs negation extensively to express everything he no longer wishes to be, implying that his attitude has previously made him an accomplice to a series of bad actions.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

The Egyptian Revolution and the Exit Door: Which Relationship?

Fišīr's narrative traces Egypt's history before and after the revolution, and depicts a scenario that could result in negative political, social, and economic outcomes for the country in the future. The author sets the events in 2020 to represent the status quo of his contemporary Egypt (Egypt in 2011-2012), which is not dissimilar to Egypt today. By setting the events in the near future, Fišīr is able to make a point about contemporary Egypt and its potential pitfalls.

This informs the reader of the writer's acumen in an interesting way: the author analyses the state of his country by demonstrating that he goes beyond the discourses that the political agenda would like to impose on public opinion. The author surpasses these accepted discourses and analyses the state of his country from his own, personal perspective. He foreshadows the future in an almost surreal, grotesque, and tragic way, emphasising the relationship between continuity and change that began after the revolt. In 2011 *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* was defined a dystopian novel because it was anticipating the catastrophic outcome of the revolution followed by the regime's return, while today it seems to be a novel of anticipation. It seems that the author himself in 2013 considered his work «a real novel with drama and tragic issues, fundamental questions about freedom and so on», more than a dystopian novel²⁹.

We should remember that the novel was published between 2011 and 2012, when the Egyptian situation was still very unstable and the enthusiasm of the early hours began to wane, despite the fact that people were still eager to begin a radical change. Mubārak's regime was overthrown on January 25, 2011, but the system (*niẓām*) associated with it – of which the armed forces in power had been a pillar – had survived. In fact, the revolt had not yet ended because the transition had not been completed³⁰. As a result, the novel provides a powerful insight into the chaotic and tumultuous events of those years and offers an interesting perspective on how the hopes of many Egyptians were quickly quashed by a difficult political situation.

On this basis, the title, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, is likely intended as a metaphor suggesting that the revolution was an “exit door”, as the novel mirrors the revolutionary events taking place, and represented a tool that could give voice to the revolutionaries' claims. It was envisioned not only to improve

²⁹ C. Nurtsch, *The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution*, cit.; also in Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e “distopismo”*, cit., p. 326.

³⁰ G. Gervasio, *Egitto: una rivoluzione annunciata?*, in F.M. Corrao (a cura di), *Le rivoluzioni arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, cit., pp. 134-135.

people's living conditions, but also to free them from corruption, social injustice, and economic difficulties stemming from social class inequality.

The novel goes into great detail about this. The protagonist is involved in the revolution, meeting people from social classes he was forced to avoid by his family in some ways. This predicament arises from his father's involvement with the presidential circles, owing to his position as a military attaché at the Egyptian Embassy. Consequently, upon his return from China, 'Alī secures a translator role, facilitated by his father's connections. Moreover, at the outbreak of the first revolution, 'Alī is already married to Nadā, Yaḥyà's mother, who happens to be the daughter of an army general. Despite these familial ties to the establishment, 'Alī feels an irresistible urge to visit Taḥrīr Square and personally observe people's demands, perhaps driven by the fact that, as a silent witness, he is well aware of the inner workings of the power circles.

'Alī immerses the reader in the revolt by providing all of the details. As with the revolution itself, the poor living conditions are central to this representation. The regime's high level of oppression is also depicted in this image. To quote the author: «We don't have a democracy? Why are the Arabs so particular? Why don't we have a democracy as everyone else does? Why are we less than the others? We are not. [...] We just want good governance, a functioning society, a reasonable life standard and so on»³¹.

Protests in Taḥrīr Square came as no surprise to those who had been following the Egyptian situation, which had led to people demanding *bread, freedom, and social dignity*³².

³¹ C. Nurtsch, *The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution*, cit.

³² As the author emphasises, in the early stages of the protests spanning from January to February 2011, there was no mention of divisive categories such as “us” and “them”. The discourse refrained from invoking entities like “the West”, “America”, or “Israel”, shifting the focus instead towards resolute demands centred on fundamental principles: freedom, social justice, bread and dignity. Notably, the slogan «'Ayš, ḥurriyyah, 'adālah iḡtimā'iyah» encapsulated the essence of the revolution. *Ibid.* With these words and with songs Rāmī 'Iṣām – who has been considered the singer of the Egyptian revolution – was encouraging the Egyptians during the revolution of January. The revolt gave artists the opportunity to return to the public space after years in which it had been controlled by the security forces, even if it did not last too long after the military forces took over and controlled the so-called period of transition going back to the repression of any opposition and freedom of expression. See A. Alexander; M. Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution*, Zed Books, London 2014; F. Fischione, *Cantare la rivoluzione: musica e parole da un mondo arabo che cambia*, in C. Comito; S. Moresi (eds), *Arabpop: Arte e letteratura in rivolta dai paesi arabi*, Mimesis, Milano 2020, pp. 57-83; Ead., *Le canzoni di Rāmī 'Iṣām: una cronaca musicale della Rivoluzione egiziana*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, III, 6 (2013), pp. 28-48.

A sense of hoped-for change can be seen in ‘Alī’s comment while watching the news of the initial events:

It was impossible to see those scenes and not to understand that something big was happening, something different³³.

And also:

I knew, while I was sitting there, on the morning of January 29, 2011 that it was over, that Egypt had exploded and its domestic problems had surfaced to the world and would never return to what it had been prior to that day³⁴.

It appears that the author is representing what he says about his country’s conditions in January and February 2011, when the political system exploded due to the inability to repress the pressure that had built up³⁵. This same aspect is also present in his work *Fī ‘ayn al-‘āṣifāt* (In the Eye of the Storms, 2012), in which Fišīr analyses the political conditions in Egypt since the revolution, employing the analogy of the perfect storm and forewarning of potentially more turbulence ahead. When discussing this project, he says: «Think of storms, the phenomenon known as the ‘perfect storm’. We have a number of little storms joining each other. What we have been going through as a country and a society is this: the educational system collapsed; there was frustration, basically all of the state institutions were not functioning, as well as many other factors. All this came together and with a little ignition you had the uprisings»³⁶. These events are echoed in *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* as ‘Alī describes his attempt to persuade his father-in-law, an officer in the Egyptian army, of the gravity of the events the elder man was downplaying, by saying:

I tried to argue by reminding him that most people suffered from social injustice and corruption that we are well familiar with and the extent to which it is widespread. The general feeling of humiliation, repression, cheating, absence of hope, the growing failure of the state apparatus, from the burning of the train to the sinking of the ferry, to other things we are all aware of³⁷.

The reader may initially interpret the title “the exit door” in light of the revolution’s promise to eradicate the evils denounced by ‘Alī, as referring to the hopes in the revolution as resolutive of Egyptian evils. Nevertheless, in the subsequent pages the reader encounters a depiction of the country’s state that is far from what he would expect ten years after revolution. It

³³ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁵ C. Nurtsch, *The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution*, cit.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 96.

does not appear that the novel provides an “exit door” if we interpret the revolution as the exit from oppression and social injustice as mentioned previously. The revolution is not associated with optimism; rather, it is associated with sadness and sorrow, as can be read in the following passage:

The second year of the revolution did not bring what was desired. The fear and tension that began to gather on the horizon during the first year grew through the events of Maspero³⁸, then Muḥammad Maḥmūd, then the Council of Ministers, and reached its zenith with the results of the parliamentary elections. Everyone I know was affected by a state of depression that left its traces on our daily lives³⁹.

The character describes a situation resulting from the inability of the political forces to manage the transition phase during the various revolutions that followed one another after 2011. This never-ending downward spiral was not anticipated prior to the outbreak of the revolution. When discussing the novel, the author says he was trying to imagine what would happen if each of Egypt’s political factions took authority and imposed their worldview on everyone else, whether they were conservative Islamists, coalition-seekers, leftists, or even puritan revolutionaries. According to him, each of these scenarios would result in disaster. This can only be avoided if Egyptians embrace a wave of “new politics” that seeks out new solutions⁴⁰. ‘Alī has this to say about the revolution’s specific outcome:

Before a month passed from my conversation with Maḥmūd and ‘Izz al-Dīn, the vortex of the transitional process came to the phase of the confrontation between the Brotherhood and the security services that are holding the matters in the country. We became like those sitting on top of a steep slope, sliding with increasing speed towards the base while watching our fall, angry and amazed as if we were without will in front of an earthly gravity pulling us down without any resistance from us, until what happened and the entire transitional process collapsed in the chasm of direct military rule⁴¹.

³⁸ *Aḥdāt Māsbiṛū*, also known as the events of Maspero, refers to the bloody repression of protesters in October 2011 for the demolition of a church that was deemed to have been built illegally. The tragic event resulted in 24 protesters being killed and 212 being injured. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15235212> (last accessed 22 November 2022).

³⁹ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 121.

⁴⁰ Mary Mourad; Sayed Mahmoud, *Fishere interview: The novelist and political commentator on his vision of Egypt’s future. Ezzedine Choukri Fishere’s latest novel, Exit Door, represents a new genre of futuristic political fiction*, Tuesday 3 July 2012, available at: <https://english.ahram.org/NewsAFCON/2017/46820.aspx> (last accessed: 22 November 2022).

⁴¹ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 126.

The plot emphasises furthermore repeatedly throughout the novel that the period of transition has taken longer than expected. This theme of prolonged transition is explored in depth throughout the novel, showing how society's inability to evolve has caused it to become stagnant and unfulfilled. The narrator poses the following questions about the event:

Was it all a conspiracy from the start, or mismanagement by the Military Council and misconduct by the political forces? We will never know the answer to this question. This matter has passed for eight years, during which conditions have changed more than once, during which I heard many testimonies from people who participated in the events, each with a different account of what happened, its reasons and logic⁴².

Even the government established after the second revolution falls, leaving unfulfilled hopes once more. At the end, as the following excerpt explains, the novel casts doubt on the validity of this revolution because the government changes, coalitions change, and the people continue to suffer the same heinous conditions of injustice, inequality, and repression, as if it were the natural state in which people are forced to exist.

In June, the government of the second revolution formed by the Islamic forces unilaterally (in addition to the Wafd Party) fell after it failed to achieve any of its policies and faced popular unrest and organised protests by the rest of the forces, and the rulers of the Islamic movements themselves turned against it [...]. The third government was formed by a coalition between Islamic forces and some liberal revolutionary currents and some civil and democratic forces⁴³.

In this state of uncertainty and political instability, which ensures a certain negative continuity with the pre-revolutionary period, even personal relationships are called into question, as 'Alī says immediately after the execution of 'Izz al-Dīn:

I sank.

I felt my life was coming to an end. In less than a month, two of my closest friends were killed, in extremely unjust and horrific circumstances, both at the hands of the other, almost. Two women close to them and me were killed and imprisoned in the same circumstances. With them my whole world collapsed, I had no personal life since my relationship with your mother died and I killed my relationship with Nūr. [...] I sank, in my heart and in my eyes, and I think that the curve in my back happened to me in these days. Is there a word to describe feeling suffocated, deeply saddened, and lost all together? Perhaps bereavement is the closest, and with it the feeling that I was deceived, in everything I believed and worked for. And

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

with it the feeling that the world is full of evil, ugliness and inhumanity, and that the rest is vain⁴⁴.

After the failure of the revolt, when conditions were perceived as deteriorating even further, 'Alī feels a sense of emptiness. He is alone and unable to comprehend what is going on. He will have to examine his values and beliefs. He will have to admit that his close friends were possibly not who he thought they were. The cost of the revolution appears to be very high, to the point where 'Alī wonders if the loss he (and Egyptians in general) is experiencing will be followed by peace and democracy. Perhaps the desire to put an end to the long-term sufferings is what drove him to act and make decisions for his country's future, to what he believes is "the exit door". Overwhelmed by the situation, the protagonist makes the most difficult, possibly questionable, and almost paradoxical choice about the nuclear bombs.

The novel presents arguably a disillusioned vision of reality in which, after an apparent calm (pre-revolutionary period), followed by an extreme chaos (the revolution), and a very weak calm (post-revolutionary period), too many hopes were dashed. This appears to necessitate, perhaps even more than in 2011, a new and different stance, which may change the mindset. Fišīr considers the Arab revolution to be a cultural revolution in this regard. «It is about the set of values that people have, the norms and the rules, but also the mentality, how you think and how you link things together», he says. Furthermore, «the real and most important change in Egypt and the Arab world is a cultural change. It is a change in the mentality of people, in how their minds function and how they operate. But again, these things take time and they are done through conflict, trouble and confrontation and then they unfold. So, it is a bit unfair to expect things to happen right away»⁴⁵.

From Detachment to Awareness: 'Alī's Confrontation with Reality

After the initial disenchantment caused by a certain detachment from reality, the protagonist gradually becomes aware of both his own attitude toward private and public life as well as the harsh Egyptian conditions, throughout the narration.

This shift becomes apparent as 'Alī remembers his previous life. His family lived in China, where his father worked as an intelligence officer. 'Alī was gifted at learning languages and excelled in Chinese. He was assisted by the girl he would fall in love with but would have to leave because he would be forced to return to Egypt, where his future was already planned. He didn't even have the courage to tell Dao Ming what was going

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁴⁵ C. Nurtsch, *The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution*, cit.

to happen during their last months together, leaving her to plan their future together until the last day:

Then the day came when I had to tell her the truth, that I was going back to Egypt with my family and I wouldn't be able to stay with her and continue studying like we had planned. Almost thirty-one years have passed since this day, and my heart still hurts when I remember her. I still feel small and vulnerable because of my betrayal of her all the months that preceded it. I feel pain and regret for hurting her that day. I still see the expression on her face in this last meeting as I walk away while she sits motionless on a wooden bench in the university, as if she had turned into a statue of glass waiting to be shattered⁴⁶.

He returns to Cairo and takes a translation job at the Presidential Palace. He spends a year doing almost nothing but traveling from home to work. He is disappointed when he realises that his work is not what he had envisioned, but he does not react⁴⁷.

I spent several days doing nothing in the literal sense of the word, at first, I did not find an office so I kept wandering in the corridors and other people's offices⁴⁸.

Years pass, and he marries Yaḥyà's mother, Nadā, not because they love each other, but because she appears to be the right woman with whom to start a family. He expresses his emotions by saying:

There is one thing I tell you, and that is, don't get caught in the hornet's nest, marry as you like, but avoid these formalities that will smother you without you noticing it. They'll tell you «One night and pass», «appearances to please Mum and Dad», «people will eat our face». Let them eat it and escape with the one you love, on your own way, because if you enter marriage from this door, you will not come out unscathed. Take my word⁴⁹.

While writing to his son, 'Alī retraces the years of his life, a life that appears to have been owned by others up to this point. In fact, during the first

⁴⁶ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 33.

⁴⁷ The author explains that after setting the plot, he started thinking of the possible characters of the novel. He says he needed some kind of characters that could be close to political life, but without any authority. This is the reason why he chose the character of the translator, since he is the only person who is allowed to be present in private presidential meetings and can see everything without influencing anything. He adds that the dramatic tricks he played is hiding the antagonist till nearly the end, keeping him behind other fake antagonists. Mary Mourad; Sayed Mahmoud, *Fishere interview: The novelist and political commentator on his vision of Egypt's future*, cit.

⁴⁸ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

revolution, ‘Alī’s father-in-law decides to deport ‘Alī’s wife and son without informing him. He is frustrated, but he is powerless to act:

On the evening of this ill-fated day, General al-Qaṭṭān called me while he was with Nadā and with you. He asked me to go immediately to catch the military plane that would take them to Athens before the airport closed. I was shocked. I think what shocked me the most was that he took my wife and son without asking me, even though I opposed the idea before. What shocked me the most was that Nadā went with you without talking to me about it⁵⁰.

‘Alī appears to be the last person to be informed of events, despite the fact that he is always present in the space and time in which they occur. He appears to exist in a parallel universe to the others, who frequently act in unexpected ways for him. In this context, it’s worth noting the expressions he frequently uses when recounting these events: shocked (*ṣudimtu*), surprised (*buḡittu, ufāḡi’u*), and astonished (*adhaṣanī*). This demonstrates how he lives and analyses events in a manner that is far from reality.

After Nadā’s departure, he falls in love with Nūr, but he has to lose her in order to find her again.

In January 2017 I become alone, I lost the only woman I had truly loved since Dao Ming. Nūr was gone. She was no longer looking at me. [...] She went away because I lost her. It is true that she left me, but the truth is that I was the one who lost her, just as I lost Dao Ming twenty-five years before her, because I was unable to face myself⁵¹.

‘Alī admits in the final sentence that he is unable to make the decisions he would like to make. He watches life-changing events unfold in front of him without actively participating in them. This is also what happens on the occasion of the execution of Maḥmūd first, and ‘Izz al-Dīn later⁵², when he does nothing to prevent or at least avoid it. He forgets about Ḥasan’s sentence because he is preoccupied with work, and he recalls it after the sentence has been carried out. When Ḥasan was caught, he said:

‘Abduh told me about it immediately after his arrest, the news came to me and I didn’t know what to do. Before I could find the answer, the internal

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.

⁵² It is possible to see a relationship between ‘Izz al-Dīn Fikrī and the author, whose name sounds very similar to the character’s one. Not only that, but the former is, like the writer, a Political Sciences professor. The author himself confirms that saying: «Fikrī started out a copy of me, and through him I was able to make fun of myself a little, and review my own self with freedom and without taking myself too seriously». Mary Mourad; Sayed Mahmoud, *Fishere interview: The novelist and political commentator on his vision of Egypt’s future*, cit.

investigation had referred him to the Revolutionary Court. [...] Then I got busy, and when I came back to the subject a week later, the court's sentence had been carried out.

I will not forgive myself. How did I forget the matter for a week after the verdict was issued when I know very well that this court carries out its sentences very fast⁵³?

‘Alī suffers the decisions of others in the most important and decisive moments of his life, in a conscious inability to act. He writes:

When I look back now at these years, I regret that I let them pass like this, lost. The truth is that every time I think about my previous life, I am surprised that I do not regret something I did as much as I always regret things I did not do, so remember that Yaḥyā⁵⁴.

The phase of disillusionment appears in this final sentence, which is addressed directly to his son. It is the moment when Pandora's box is opened, and he is forced to confront reality in his relationships with his family and his professional entourage. Not only that, but the awareness that develops gradually throughout the novel is linked to both the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods, when ‘Alī realises that he has been witnessing a politics of appearance in which personal interests, particularly within the government apparatus, take precedence over the common good. He realises that he has spent years convincing himself that everything will be fine, but he reaches a point where he can no longer lie to himself.

At the start of the novel, ‘Alī, who does not take a stand and instead prefers to mediate in situations that require a practical commitment, could be viewed with suspicion and detachment. The Egyptian people poured into the square and are likely to do so again, this time with the distinctive instrument of protest – revolt. From this point of view, ‘Alī's decision to deliver nuclear weapons to the Americans appears to be unacceptable. However, viewing the protagonist's message in a different light, ‘Alī appears to be aware that the revolt, while a fundamental tool, is insufficient; breaking the continuity produced by the revolution necessitates more profound, substantial, and fundamental changes, as if something that would break that chain should be carried out, and it is this reason that leads the protagonist to make a paradoxical decision.

If on the one hand, as the protagonist says: «Egypt exploded and it would never have been what it was before»⁵⁵, on the other hand there was and there is a need for an effort to reach beyond personal interests. Once again, it is personal interests that have betrayed and continue to betray

⁵³ ‘Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 347.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Egyptians who have demonstrated that they have the energy to eventually overturn the imposed order.

A Glimpse of Hope: The Message for Future Generations

Although *Bāb al-ḥurūġ* depicts the tragic outcome of the revolution, the final chapter offers a ray of hope, as if, after all the sufferings Egyptians had endured, they had finally found their “exit door” from the tunnel they had been thrown into. In this regard, the writer says, providing a sense of realism: «But ultimately there is an unexpected hope that shows itself in the end and the new comes out of the ashes. I am optimistic, still I don’t think that all pieces will fall in place and everything will be harmonious. Things will be messy, difficult and a bit ugly at times. But this is a healthy struggle that probably we should have been through some time ago and we were kept from it by this authoritarian regime. Now we are having it. I am confident that in a number of years the new will come out of the ashes but there will be ashes I am afraid»⁵⁶. Only young people can build the future. Perhaps it is not by chance that the protagonist decides to write a letter to his son, a young man about to embark on his life and who will soon find himself in the midst of the difficult Egyptian situation. One aspect of the novel that catches the reader’s attention is the relationship, and at times clash, between generations: ‘Alī represents the generation that lived through Mubārak’s thirty-year presidency. ‘Alī’s father, as well as the entire military and political class, represent the generation that, following independence from colonialism, perpetrated a despotic, authoritarian, and repressive government, producing a narrative that relegates people and society to a state of subordination as if it were a natural state. Yaḥyà represents the new generation, the generation born after the 2011 revolution, even symbolically (in the novel, Yaḥyà is a child at the time of the revolt). ‘Alī repeatedly invites his son to listen to his story, but not to blindly follow him, nor to accept what he as a father, and thus theoretically with authority over him, could ask of him. In a broader sense, we can say that it is an invitation to radically change the mindset that affects the individual’s life in relation to the constraints of their environment, as well as the individual’s life in interacting with society and politics⁵⁷. This invitation is strengthened

⁵⁶ C. Nurtsch, *The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution*, cit.

⁵⁷ This aspect is investigated in more depth in his last novel *Kull ḥādā al-ḥurā’*, published six years after the revolution. In this novel Fišīr highlights how Egypt is struggling to find a new way out of the old mindsets. This is the fight of the younger generations and their new culture. The main character, ‘Umar, tells the story of his friends to Amal, an Egyptian American girl who is about to leave Egypt after having spent one year in prison because she had been accused of being part of an illegal foreign organisation. The novel reveals hidden aspects of Egyptian society, especially those related to the 2011 revolution, as well as highlighting the

at the novel's conclusion, when 'Alī writes:

Your share is that we are your family, that I am your father, and al-Qaṭṭān is your grandfather, and this is our struggle. Your share is that your mother and I could not live together. Get rid of all these stories, remember them as the stories of your parents and grandparents, not your own. Your stories will begin, so don't look behind you too much. And remember that your place is here, among these young men who look like you and you look like them. Wherever you go, don't forget that they are here, they need you and you need them, even if you didn't realise it⁵⁸.

Young people, as the future generation, are called upon to act and stand up for freedom and justice. At the same time, they are encouraged to make their own choices. This does not imply denying traditions or family will (whether in personal or public life), but rather acknowledging that times have changed and a different type of response is required. This generation, according to the author, «depends on pragmatic trial and error methods, not ready to blindly follow old traditional methods without questioning, and not satisfied with mediocre solutions, but focused on how to achieve; forward-looking rather than backward-looking. This new method is what will push society forward, constantly allowing self-correction, not letting the old method dominate»⁵⁹.

In the last pages of the novel 'Alī says:

It took us many years to get to this point. And these young people, whom no one taught, who were not trained, and who did not find anyone to emulate, were nonetheless brought up desiring truth, goodness and beauty and launched a revolution such as we have not seen in our country before. But the old people misled them, nine years of wandering, chaos and murder. Despite all this, they are now about, alone, to get out of this abyss. They have learned from their failures and our failures, reviewed their forgetfulness, and reorganised their ranks in another better and more efficient way, and are now preparing to dislodge these old traitors who block the way and get out⁶⁰.

'Alī does not tell the reader (his son and the implied reader) what happens after the ship arrives. The novel's conclusion is left unresolved. 'Alī concludes his letter by saying that he will go prepare for what will happen in

unsolved issues of corruption, violence and terrorism. The novel has drawn the attention of critics because of the author's decision to challenge public morality by openly dealing with sexual relationships, considered by many a taboo. 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Kull hādā al-hurā*', al-Karāmah li 'l-Našr, al-Qāhirah 2017.

⁵⁸ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 482.

⁵⁹ Mary Mourad; Sayed Mahmoud, *Fishere interview: The novelist and political commentator on his vision of Egypt's future*, cit.

⁶⁰ 'Izz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, cit., p. 481.

half an hour. It appears that what will actually happen is no longer important. What matters more is the protagonist's message, which encourages young people to be brave and act for what is right, for the sake of the country, rather than for a single group or faction, as the latter appears to be precisely why the revolution's outcome was tragic.

Conclusions

In *Bāb al-ḥurūġ*, the author imagines a series of events that occur between 2011 and 2020, and discusses important issues that are relevant to both the first and current readers of the novel, questioning the situation that emerged immediately after January 2011. Undoubtedly, the reader's reaction and expectations change in response to his changing experiences and the reality in which he lives.

The novel's dystopian vision may have seemed excessive to the first reader, who was ready for a radical change in the Egyptian status quo after all the currents of protest in the country and street demonstrations demanding the regime's fall. However, only Mubārak's figure and his close circle were removed. The rest of the elites of the old establishment quickly repositioned themselves to try to maintain their privileges, ushering in a new phase of repression that was stronger than the one preceding the revolution, as the novel also explicitly describes.

The same vision no longer appears so dystopian to today's reader, who must contend with a reality in which the centres of power have established a new repressive hold, restoring the country to an enforced stability following the unavoidable chaos of the revolution. In this regard, it is very interesting to see how the author reflected on the benefits and outcomes of the revolution in 2012. It had sparked so many hopes by exposing all the limits and contradictions of years of abuse, corruption, and repression, but it had also betrayed many expectations, most notably freedom of expression, justice, and dignity, as we read in the novel's final pages:

Did not the 2011 revolution lead to the death and to the loss of millions of lives in unnecessary chaos and conflicts without bringing the freedom, dignity and justice that it sought? [...] What is the point, if every attempt to achieve greater freedom, greater dignity and greater justice ends in its opposite⁶¹?

The protagonist eventually recovers from the falsity in which he lived after having got used to the politics of appearances he had been familiar with during many years of service in the Presidential Palace, a place considered the cause of all the evils that the country has experienced and continues to experience.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

Criticism is directed at Egypt's status quo during the author's time, but it is also perfectly applicable to Egypt's current situation, in which so many voices are demanding democracy⁶². The hopes that arose after Mubārak's removal to rebuild a modern and democratic country that values human and civil rights have proven to be illusory. The frequently idealised belief that a homogeneous and united people would unite was unrealistic and simplistic. Decades of repression of political freedoms and expression have obscured the historical ideological divides that emerged immediately after the revolution⁶³. Exactly as Fišīr predicted, it appears that the post-revolutionary era will necessitate even greater commitment to regaining the freedom that was so hard-fought for in the early days of the revolution.

Fišīr has managed to outline the post-revolutionary situation, a period in which despotism and corruption have taken over, with a clear reference to the dramatic events of the post-Mubārak era, through a narrative style mediated by the writer's vision linked to his profession. This is how the author, on the one hand, confronts the reader with the dramatic reality, sweeping away the initial enthusiasm, while also allowing him to question the actual success of the revolt and the road to an "exit door" for the current situation. It is possible that the first reader of the novel, while struggling to identify with the protagonist, asks the text a series of questions about the merits of the protagonist's actions. In some ways, this was both a

⁶² This is the case, among others, of Līnā 'Aṭāllāh (1983), the Egyptian activist who founded, together with the former journalists of the newspaper "Egypt Independent", the newspaper "Madā Maṣr". During the opening lecture of the XV SeSaMO (Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies) Conference held in Naples between 22-24 June 2022, she gave vivid testimony of how the government tries to break the wings of all those who denounce the repression, and how she and the group of journalists she works with propose a type of journalism that is free and disconnected from the system, a journalism that can be a source of information not subject to the chains of censorship. This aspect is analysed by A. Pacifico, *Gli intellettuali e la censura nell'Egitto post-rivoluzionario: il caso di Madā Maṣr*, in "La rivista di Arablit", X, 19 (2020), pp. 65-69. Among those sharing the stance of Līnā 'Aṭāllāh, we can mention the Egyptian film director Nādiyah Kāmil (1961). While discussing her film *Salāṭah baladī* (An Egyptian Salad) with the students of the Arabic culture course of the University of Milan, during the lesson organised by Professor Caterina Roggero on February 23rd 2022, she talked about all the difficulties encountered by her (and by those like her) who produces a different discourse from that desired by the government agenda, and how a type of production like hers can be scary precisely because it is not aligned. She also argued that repression and censorship have not been eradicated, on the contrary they still exist because the government is somehow afraid of what could happen again, because Egypt is no longer what it was before 2011 and it could explode at any moment.

⁶³ Nasser Ismail, *La narrativa egiziana post 2011: un mondo di dispotismo e "distopismo"*, cit., pp. 320-321.

challenge and a provocation, as he touches on a very sensitive topic for Egyptian collective conscience (its relationship with Israel) and the country's future, given that the novel was published only one year after the revolution. The contemporary reader may ask questions about the nature of the "exit door" from the new state of repression that emerged after the revolution, most likely welcoming the invitation to younger generations to act and stand on the side of freedom, justice, and dignity.