

# EXILE, AFFILIATION AND MARGINALITY IN SYRIA'S LITERATURE: A PROCESS OF UN-LABELLING

ALESSANDRO COLUMBU\*

*The unprecedented wave of protests and the subsequent reaction of the Syrian regime to the popular uprising of 2011 have transformed Syria's field of cultural production exposing disparate political affiliations and giving way to open manifestations of dissent to authoritarianism. This article explores Syria's field of cultural production and in particular the role of writers vis-à-vis the resilience of authoritarian rule and the emergence of large-scale contestation in their country. By looking at the different trajectories of Zakariyyā Tāmīr and Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, two of the country's most celebrated artists, and at the disparity in their levels of public engagement and prominence both in Syria and abroad, this article accounts for the transformations Syrian dissident intellectuals have undergone in the last decade. The analysis proposes an approach that accounts for the complexities that dissident writers face equally inside and outside the country, as well as for the new scenarios that the Syrian revolution has revealed.*

## *Introduction*

After March 2011 and in response to the popular demonstrations led by the civil society movement first and its militarised sectors later on, the Syrian regime has engaged in a ruthless and brutal campaign of counterinsurgency that has dragged the country into a seemingly endless spiral of violence. The regime's response to the demonstrators' and the organised opposition's demands has consistently taken the form of an us-against-them narrative, which demonises any form of dissent as criminal and unpatriotic<sup>1</sup>. One's personal participation in the revolution, as well as the capacity to mobilise public opinion, is often the defining criteria for marginalisation and has frequently been met with incarceration, ostracisation or banishment from the country<sup>2</sup>. This polarisation has inevitably had important repercussions on the

---

\* University of Westminster.

<sup>1</sup> F.L. Sinatora, *Language, Identity, and Syrian Political Activism on Social Media*, Routledge, Oxon-New York 2020, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> See Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country. How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*, Little, Brown and Company, London-Boston-New York 2019; Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back. Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*, Norton, New York 2019; Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution. Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, with a foreword by Robin Yassin-Kassab, Hurst, London 2017.

field of cultural production, making it considerably more difficult for artists to openly express their dissent to the regime's violent policy of counterinsurgency, forcing many of them to leave the country and become exiles, leaving them with few alternatives to preserve their lives and the safety of their families.

The categories of exile and dissident intellectual in the Arab world have traditionally been intertwined with questions of hegemony, legitimacy and political commitment, and the constraints writers and intellectuals have faced as a result of their political affiliations and of the ruthless stance of authoritarian regimes have attracted renewed interest in the years following the Arab spring<sup>3</sup>. In Syria, after the 1970s in particular, intellectuals have faced the dilemma of how to resist an authoritarian and sectarian regime, which has frequently resulted in a stark choice between complicity and exile<sup>4</sup>. The 2011 uprising has represented a watershed in the ways political affiliation and dissent to the authoritarian regime of the Ba'ath (*Ba'ṭ*) party and the Assad (al-Asad) family are conceived and performed. Syrian writers have reacted, actively participated or remained indifferent to the Syrian revolution exposing disparate individual constraints and ideological associations, all of which demands a rethinking of the categories through which to look at the disparities between cultural production at home and in exile<sup>5</sup>.

To ascertain the nature of the transformations involved in this context, this article looks at literary exile, political affiliation and marginalisation from the point of view of Zakariyyā Tāmīr and Ḥalīd Ḥalīfah, two authors involved in considerably different ways in the events of the Syrian revolution. In particular this analysis is informed by the position and mobility (i.e. the possibility to move and travel freely) that writers enjoy, the role of social media in creating presence and impact for authors, as well as by the role that networks of censorship, publication and circulation have played in Syria before and after 2011. Geographical displacement, physical restriction and relocation to an alien environment – as well as ostracisation – have traditionally informed the study of exile, while the role of social media, of the local literary market and of social capital in the home country have received less attention as useful angles to explore exile and political affiliation<sup>6</sup>. This article follows the trajectories of Tāmīr and Ḥalīfah, living

<sup>3</sup> Zeina G. Halabi, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual. Prophecy, Exile and the Nation*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ruocco, *L'intellettuale arabo tra impegno e dissenso. Analisi della rivista libanese al-Ādāb (1953-1994)*, Jouvence, Roma 1999, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Rosa Yassin Hassan, *Where Are the Intellectuals in the Syrian Revolution*, Translated by M. Weiss, in *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age. Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, Edited by M. Weiss; J. Hanssen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 370.

<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Granta Books, London 2000.

respectively in Oxford and Damascus, as two significant examples to explore the changing nature of Syria's literary field and its relevance for the broader issues of exile in authoritarian contexts. The peculiarity of their trajectories testifies for a greater and uncharted degree of complexity of the Syrian literary environment vis-à-vis authoritarianism in the years following the 2011 uprising, demanding an approach that goes beyond the existing terminology and categories and takes on a more nuanced methodology as to how cultural products are imagined, produced, negotiated, distributed and consumed.

*Writers in Syria before and after 2011*

Similar to most authoritarian regimes, since the 1960s the Syrian government too has held a tight grip on cultural production, endorsing and validating certain artists while silencing others. As many, including Weiss, Kahf and Aghacy, have acknowledged, contemporary Syrian literature bears the mark of authoritarian rule<sup>7</sup>; however, at a deeper look, broad generalisations about the Syrian regime as merely an authoritarian monolith that arbitrarily bans dissident novels are of little use, and there is no official evidence to support a view of this regime as practically and unequivocally opposed to dissident cultural production<sup>8</sup>. It goes almost without saying that far from acknowledging the regime's sterile claims of liberality and its supposed regard for culture, this relatively high degree of tolerance that literature enjoyed may in fact be attributed to the little significance attached to fiction and cultural production in contemporary Syria<sup>9</sup>. This complex interplay of allegiance, affiliations and quiet dissent, was in fact – at least until 2012 – a relatively understudied subject which suffered from a relative scantiness of substantiated information available. Miriam Cooke's *Dissident Syria*, the only work devoted to Syrian dissident cultural production, brought to light the peculiarly Syrian reality of *commissioned criticism*, a strategy of manipulation that the Syrian regime has employed to display a

<sup>7</sup> See for example M. Weiss, *Who Laughs Last. Literary Transformations of Syrian Authoritarianism*, in *Middle East Authoritarianisms. Governance, Contestation and Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Edited by S. Heydemann; R. Leenders, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2013, pp. 143-166; Id., *Sight, Sound, and Surveillance in Ba 'thist Syria: The Fiction of Politics in Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan's Rough Draft and Samar Yazbik's In Her Mirrors*, in "Journal of Arabic Literature", 48, 3 (2017), pp. 211-244; Mohja Kahf, *The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature*, in "World Literature Today", 75, 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 224-236.

<sup>8</sup> Politically sensitive novels, for example, are widely believed to have been banned by the authorities, but such claims remain unsubstantiated.

<sup>9</sup> M. Weiss, *What Lies Beneath. Political Criticism in Recent Syrian Fiction*, in *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Volume 2: Culture, Society, and Religion*, Edited by Ch. Salamandra; L. Stenberg, Syracuse University Press, New York 2015, p. 19.

façade of liberality, turning a blind eye to the works of relatively independent artists<sup>10</sup>. Such works addressed sensitive topics and were sometimes funded by the State, which frequently employed them to turn dissident artists into obedient subjects. The little room for criticism allowed through *tanfis* (a colloquial Syrian expression describing pockets of politically dissident cultural production tolerated and even encouraged by the government) had the result of drawing critics of the regime into their clique, while contributing to create a display of pluralism and tolerance to the outside world<sup>11</sup>.

The focus of *Dissident Syria*, however, rested entirely on authors and filmmakers living inside Syria, who resisted under the constraints of a brutal authoritarian regime and in many ways anticipated and prepared the grounds for an uprising that many deemed impossible<sup>12</sup>. Certainly being an overtly dissident artist in Syria was never devoid of intellectual as well as material privations, and the freedoms that expatriates and exiles enjoy stand in stark contrast to the plights of those who have stayed<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, a binary distinction between Syria-based and exile writers can hardly be applied to Syrian literature, a field which by and large coexisted with predominant ideologies and was generally organic to the process of state building in the years immediately following independence<sup>14</sup>. Looking at the confrontation between intellectuals and the regime through a normative conceptualisation that implies a disparity between insiders and outsiders, without attempting to analyse their oeuvre regardless of their place of residence, risks overlooking an entire generation of Syrian artists who were forced or simply decided to leave their country. Despite the manifest differences in fact, globalisation and its capacity to reduce distances today reinforce the necessity to look at literature by Syrian writers in the diaspora as equally possessing the moral authority to express political dissent, not in opposition to writers operating inside the country.

The recent experience of the Syrian revolution has further contributed to expose the inapplicability of this approach, and the rigidity of a categorisation based merely on the geographical location of the author at the time

<sup>10</sup> M. Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2007.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Salamandra; L. Stenberg, *Introduction. A Legacy of Raised Expectations*, in *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Volume 2: Culture, Society, and Religion*, cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Rita Sakr, 'We Would Meet Them One Day, and Call Them to Account for Their Oppression': *Post-2005 Prison Writings in Syria*, in Ead., 'Anticipating' the 2011 Arab Uprisings: *Revolutionary Literatures and Political Geographies*, Palgrave Pivot, Houndmills-Basingstoke, Hampshire 2013, pp. 71-98.

<sup>14</sup> Kamal Abu Deeb, *The Collapse of Totalizing Discourse and the Rise of Marginalized/Minority Discourses*, in *Tradition, Modernity and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature. Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, Edited by Wael Hallaq; Kamal Abdel-Malek, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2000, pp. 344-346.

of writing<sup>15</sup>. Problematising and deconstructing the analysis of Syrian dissident fiction cannot overlook the large numbers of exiles who, as a consequence of the restrictions to which cultural production is subjected in Syria, have come to represent a considerable portion of Syria's artists since the 1970s. By way of illustration, many Syrian writers who still live in Syria have refused to participate or stand in solidarity with the popular uprising that broke out in March 2011, openly voicing their support for the Assad regime, or else remained neutral<sup>16</sup>, whereas others have expressed varying degrees of opposition to the popular movement that seeks to overthrow the Assad regime<sup>17</sup>. In contrast, a wave of young writers has emerged since the early 2000s and have often been forced to leave the country because of their participation in the events of the Syrian revolution with written and filmic recounts of the very first days of demonstrations and sit-ins, as well as with testimonies and short stories published mostly through social media. The novelists Samar Yazbik and Muṣṭafā Ḥalīfah, for example, have been at the forefront of a renewed wave of political activism. Yazbik has published two accounts: the first on the early days of the Syrian revolution and the second on her journey through the areas under the control of the armed opposition<sup>18</sup>. Ḥalīfah's *al-Qawqa'* (The Shell)<sup>19</sup> remains one of the most graphic accounts of the horrors of Syria's prisons<sup>20</sup>. Both had to leave Syria at some point after 2012 to avoid arrest. These and the following examples will show how associating the physical location of artists before or after the revolution with their support or opposition to the popular

<sup>15</sup> This approach, largely based on the concept of “resistance literature”, already showed limited applicability to the Syrian context before the Syrian revolution when the number of writers in exile was comparatively much lower. Originally conceived by the Palestinian novelist and activist Ḡassān Kanafānī, the concept of resistance literature or *adab al-muqāwamah*, later picked up by Barbara Harlow, refers in strict terms to literature written by Palestinians in Palestine under Israeli occupation, and its distinction between *al-adab al-muqāwim* (resistant literature) as opposed to *adab al-manfā* (exile literature) reflected a reality of life under occupation inside Israel on the one hand, and mass migration and expulsion to neighbouring countries of the Arab East on the other.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Critics and Rebels: Older Arab Intellectuals Reflect on the Uprisings*, in “British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies”, 41, 1 (2014), pp. 8-27.

<sup>17</sup> Ḡafrā Bahā', *Muṭaqqafūn wa fannānūn sūriyyūn ḡidda 'l-tawrah. Awwaluhum "Durayd". Mawqif "Liḥām" mutanāqīḡ ma'a kawnihi akṭar al-muntaqīdīn li 'l-istibdād ḡilāla miṣwārihi al-fannī*, in “al-Arabiya”, 14/05/2012, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/14/214117.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Samar Yazbik, *Taqāṭu' nīrān*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2012; Ead., *Bawwābāt arḡ al-'adam*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Muṣṭafā Ḥalīfah, *al-Qawqa'*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2008.

<sup>20</sup> R. Shareah Taleghani, *Vulnerability and recognition in Syrian prison literature*, in “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, 49, 1 (February 2017), p. 102.

movement is often misleading. Attempts to categorise these experiences inevitably lead themselves to generalisations and to a form of tribalism that does not do justice to the vulnerability of their personal condition on one hand, and of the limited spaces of expression writers are granted in an authoritarian context on the other. Their condition remains hybrid and difficult to pin down and label as belonging to one side or the other, particularly during such a bloody period in the country's history.

*The Forefather of the Modern Syrian Short Story*

Zakariyyā Tāmir is arguably Syria's most well-known short story writer. Born in Damascus in 1931 and largely self-taught, he came out as a writer in the late 1950s and quickly acquired great admiration both in Syria and abroad. Between 1960 and early 1980s Tāmir occupied various government roles and he reached the peak of his popularity after the publication of *al-Numūr fī 'l-yawm al-'āšir* (The Tigers on the Tenth Day) in 1978. The stories of this collection have become classics, having enjoyed a large number of translations, and have found their place in the Syrian literary tradition for their suggestive depictions of authoritarianism, as well as because of their overtly anti-authoritarian tone. The title-story can easily be considered Tāmir's masterpiece, the one story all readers automatically associate with this writer, and it is relevant to this day for the allegorical portrayal of the authoritarian state and its ruthless practices of coercion and domination. The story revolves around the eponymous tiger and its forced imprisonment by a nameless tamer, who gradually subdues and domesticates the proverbially proud and untameable animal, starving it and training it to obey the most humiliating commands. Notoriously a proud and invincible animal, the tiger<sup>21</sup> initially refuses to be tamed and chooses to starve rather than obey its new trainer's commands. Pressed by hunger, though, the animal eventually succumbs to its new master in exchange for meat.

Despite the openly political content of his short stories, in the 1970s Tāmir was appointed editor-in-chief of "al-Ma'rifah", the official literary magazine of the Syrian Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. In the May 1980 issue of "al-Ma'rifah" Tāmir published an editorial – vaguely entitled *Qirā'āt* (Readings) – in which he quoted sections from 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī's *Ṭabā'i' al-istibdād wa maṣāri' al-isti'bād* (The Nature of Despotism and the Struggle against Enslavement)<sup>22</sup>:

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps as opposed to its proverbial rival, the lion (*asad* in Arabic)?

<sup>22</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī, *al-Istibdād wa 'l-taraqqī* (Despotism and Progress), in Id., *al-A'māl al-kāmilah li 'l-Kawākibī*, Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, Bayrūt 1995, p. 313.

What is this desire for a poor miserable existence, for a false serenity when your life is nothing but toil and hardship? Are you proud of this patience of yours, or do you get a reward for it?

What is this disparity amongst you, when your lord created you equal in body, strength, nature and necessities?

Didn't God create you free, with nothing but light and wind weighing upon you, yet you've insisted on enduring nothing but injustice and oppression? [...]<sup>23</sup>.

Although this *j'accuse* was originally directed against Ottoman tyranny by a 19<sup>th</sup> century *nahḍah* intellectual from Aleppo, the article earned Tāmīr the ostracism of the Syrian regime which dismissed him from the position of editor-in-chief. Syrian intelligence confiscated all copies of the magazine, and a year later Tāmīr left Damascus with his family moving into self-imposed exile to England. The reasons why Tāmīr decided to leave the country however were numerous, amongst which was a feeling of estrangement he had felt towards the city's environment that made him take the decision «without regret or sorrow»<sup>24</sup>.

The advent of the 1980s after all marked the end of an era and the beginning of an entirely new course in the history of Syria and the Arab East, inaugurating a new epoch for Arab intellectuals<sup>25</sup>. Historically, the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel in 1979 marked the end of a thirty-year period of nationalist fervour punctuated by three wars and nearly uninterrupted political upheaval in the Arab East culminating with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. In Syria, widespread episodes of violence between government forces and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the years between 1976 and 1982, culminated in the Hama massacre of February 1982. The dramatic crackdown of the one-party state on all forms of dissent – motivated by the mid-1970s turmoil, but in continuity with a trend that had typified Syria's political life since independence<sup>26</sup> – consolidated as the figure of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad rose prominently to become the “eternal leader”.

As Rosa (Rūzā) Yāsīn Ḥasan recounts, for intellectuals in Syria the 1980s represent a watershed in the history of political commitment after which the objectives and priorities of intellectuals and political activists –

<sup>23</sup> Zakariyyā Tāmīr, *Qirā'āt*, in “al-Ma'rifah”, 219, 5 (1980), [http://syrbook.gov.sy/old/img/uploads/1/ma3refeh\\_archive\\_pdf20140720134510.pdf](http://syrbook.gov.sy/old/img/uploads/1/ma3refeh_archive_pdf20140720134510.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Ziad Majed, *A dialogue with Zakaria Tamer*, posted on 22/07/2012, <https://freesyriantranslators.net/2012/07/22/a-dialogue-with-zakaria-tamer-2/>.

<sup>25</sup> M. Ruocco, *L'intellettuale arabo tra impegno e dissenso*, cit., p. 172.

<sup>26</sup> K.W. Martin, *The Beginnings of Authoritarian Culture in the Arab World. The Persistence and Resilience of Undemocratic Government in Syria*, “The Institute for Advanced Studies” (2017), <https://www.ias.edu/ideas/martin-authoritarian-beginnings>.



who had hitherto constituted a strong unified front of *éngagés* – took different directions<sup>27</sup>. In her assessment of the role Syrian intellectuals played in the early days of the Syrian uprising and of the origin of today's lukewarm support for the revolution from multiple towering figures in the Syrian cultural landscape, Yāsīn Ḥasan traces it back to this period in Syrian history and to the regime's crackdown on all forms of political opposition. This resulted in a high degree of fragmentation whereby the spectre of Islamist brutality the regime cast in its propaganda earned it the support of supposedly secular intellectuals, ostracising opponents as enemies of the State and driving them to prison or exile<sup>28</sup>. Further confirmation of Yāsīn Ḥasan's recount of Syria's intellectuals in the revolution is apparent in the variety of responses to Tāmīr's decision to openly side against the Assad regime and to support – at least virtually – the Syrian revolution. Since 2012, Tāmīr has participated in the Syrian revolution against the regime of Baššār al-Asad through his Facebook page *al-Mihmāz* (Arabic for “the spur”) where he has – intermittently and gradually more sporadically – very short stories and brief comments satirising the government (as well as part of the organised opposition, particularly the Syrian National Coalition) with metaphors and allegories, mentioning its members, the Syrian President and other key figures explicitly. Echoing the Syrian regime's dismissal of the popular revolutionary movement as a Qatari and Zion-American international conspiracy aimed at destabilising the country<sup>29</sup>, novelist and activist Nādiyā Ḥūst was reportedly «shocked to see Zakariyyā Tāmīr sitting at Qatar's table opposite the French Mandate's flag, [...] while he still earns his retirement benefits from the Arab Writers' Union, despite living in London for decades»<sup>30</sup>.

Looking back at the history of literary exile, Edward Said argued for the creative and unconventional – or *contrapunctual* to use Said's own original terminology – nature of exiles' contributions to the arts. According to Said not only did exiled artist in modern times possess the capacity to create original and remarkable art, but they acted also as key actors in the development and crystallisation of Western intellectual and aesthetic thought. Said's reflections look at exile particularly in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century imperial-

<sup>27</sup> Born in Damascus in 1974, Yāsīn Ḥasan is a renowned Syrian novelist and journalist. She has lived in Germany since 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Rosa Yassin Hassan, *Where Are the Intellectuals in the Syrian Revolution*, cit., p. 370.

<sup>29</sup> Hassān Ma'rūf, *al-Lağnah al-Dustūriyyah... inğāz waṭanī wa tatwīğ li 'l-idārah al-sūriyyah*, in “Mağallat al-Šurṭah”, 609, 9 (2019), pp. 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Amīnah 'Abbās, *Ba'da šudūr kitābihā 'Awrāq min sanawāt al-ḥarb 'alā Sūriyyah. Nādiyā Ḥūst: kaṭīr min udabā'inā la 'alāqat' lahum bi 'l-wāqi' wa mu'zamuhum mā zāla yuğarrid ḥāriğ al-sirb*, in “al-Ba'ṭ”, 04/12/2014, <http://albaath.news.sy/?p=29419>. The flag Ḥūst refers to is the green, white and black independence flag with three red stars that the Syrian opposition has re-adopted as its own.



ism, nationalism and totalitarianism which characterised both European and post-colonial context dramatically. Said's observations prove particularly useful to define the nature of Tāmir as an expatriate writer, rather than as an exile, similar to that of expatriates who «voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons» and «share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions»<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, Tāmir not only was never banned by authorities from returning to Damascus before 2012, but also visited the country regularly between 1981 and 2011, used to write for local newspapers and magazines and appeared in public in the Syrian capital to deliver lectures and talks, all of which make it difficult to label him as an outsider<sup>32</sup>. On other hand, he faced the ostracism of the Syrian regime for his editorials, and was dismissed from his position as editor-in-chief of “al-Ma‘rifah”, which further complicates his classification somewhere between an exile and an expatriate because of the peculiar in-between state of this writer whose works remain deeply rooted in his native city, and who had chosen – at least until 2012 – to live between England and Syria. His online activism and overt support for the popular movement have earned Tāmir the ostracism of both the Syrian regime and its Lebanese ally Hizbullah (*Hizb Allāh*) who have banned him from entering the country temporarily making him an outsider precisely because of his political stance, making it increasingly more difficult for his works to reach Syria's bookshops, particularly his latest effort *Arḍ al-waḥl* (The Land of Misery) published in 2015 which has remained practically unnoticed inside Syria. This however does not cancel out Tāmir's history as a prominent modernist, secular member of the Syrian literary and cultural establishment whose career culminated in the awarding of the Syrian Order of Merit in 2002. His acceptance of the award has been interpreted as a sign of loyalty to the Assad regime<sup>33</sup>. This confirms a degree of ambiguity in his relationship with both the Syrian regime and its broader ideological camp, which further complicates any attempt to categorise his profile employing binary categories even in this polarised post-revolutionary context<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, cit., p. 181.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the talk Tāmir delivered at the French Institute of the Near East of Damascus on 10th November 2008, <https://archive.org/details/zakariya-tamer-realite-lundis-litteraires-ifpo-5>.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Haytam Ḥusayn, *Istīṭān al-ḥawf: al-muṭaqqaf al-‘arabī al-maḍ‘ūr*, in “al-‘Arab”, 08/06/2014, <http://alarab.co.uk/?id=24710>; Mu‘in al-Bayārī, *Zakariyyā Tāmir... al-wisām ṭumma al-ḥiḡā’*, in “Ṣafḥāt sūriyyah”, 06/05/2012, <https://goo.gl/FM26cL>.

<sup>34</sup> Tāmir has denied the political nature of the award, which in his opinion is granted to truly meritorious writers. See F. Galdini; A. Columbu, *On the side of the Syrian People*, in *al-Jazeera*, 30/08/2017 <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/zakaria-tamer-side-syrian-people-170822130848510.html>.

*Exiled at Home*

Throughout the past five decades the literary responses to the longstanding persistence of an authoritarian repressive regime have brought about different ways in which Syrian writers have articulated their resistance. As 'Umar Qaddūr argues in his overview of "new Syrian literature", embodied by new young authors whose works have appeared in the past three decades, whilst the abandonment of grand narratives of nationalism and socialism has become the rule, the concerns of these writers remain fundamentally political, and being "non-ideological" represents in itself an ideological position<sup>35</sup>. In other words, as suggested by Qaddūr, the divorce between ideology and cultural production forms part of a wider process of fragmentation involving the emergence of a plurality of voices and styles, a significant aesthetic transformation which, although devoid of the ideological dimension of the previous decades, retains a political potential in reasserting the role literature can play in an authoritarian context<sup>36</sup>. Brought about by the end of the Cold War, the dismemberment of the Palestinian resistance and the collapse of the secular nation-State, since the 1990s this fragmentation has engendered a rethinking of political commitment. As Zeina G. Halabi has noted, the critique in contemporary novels has been relocated from a logocentric, teleological and secular discourse to one that transgresses the ethos of political commitment and articulates a new vision of a political collectivity<sup>37</sup>.

In the case of Syrian literature, the political significance of such novels published in the past twenty to thirty years, resides in the taboo-breaking and openly denouncing narration of historical events, as well as in equally transgressive representations of the body, female desire and the physical act of love<sup>38</sup>. Their most recurrent themes serve to substantiate the argument of Syrian literature as persistently linked to social, historical and political causes, with a stronger focus on the effects of military authoritarianism on individuals and groups<sup>39</sup>. This "local" tone that Syrian literature has assumed in turn can partially be ascribed to a process of fragmentation, which has made regional and local aspects in fiction emerge more distinctly, transform-

<sup>35</sup> 'Umar Qaddūr, *al-Riwāyah al-sūriyyah al-ġadīdah: zāhirah ibdā'iyah am zāhirah i'lāmiyyah?*, in "al-Ādāb", 57, 9-10 (2009), pp. 98-101.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Zeina G. Halabi, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> M. Censi, *Tra critica sociale ed erotismo, un esempio della nuova narrativa siriana: Ḥurrās al-hawā' di Rūzā Yāsīn Hasan*, in "La rivista di Arablit", I, 2 (2011), pp. 21-38, <http://larivistadiarablit.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2-Censi.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2009, p. 11. See also Mohja Kahf, *The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature*, cit., pp. 224-236.

ing Arabic literature into a more heterogeneous universe of themes, styles and concerns<sup>40</sup>.

A most prominent figure of this group of authors and its most widely known both in Syria and abroad, Ḥālīd Ḥālīfah's works stand out for the openly anti-authoritarian stance. Born in Aleppo in 1964, Ḥālīfah started writing and publishing in the 1990s, and most of his novels have addressed in unprecedented ways the iron fist rule of the Ba'ath party, sectarianism, Islamism, homosexuality as well as the events of the Syrian revolution of 2011. The great popularity and political significance of his three novels – *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah* (In Praise of Hatred, 2006)<sup>41</sup>, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah* (No Knives in the Kitchens of this City, 2013)<sup>42</sup>, and *al-Mawt 'amal šāqq* (Death is Hard Work, 2016)<sup>43</sup> – go back to their highly controversial and taboo-breaking content, as well as their historical relevance in recording, retelling and unpacking the defining moments in Syria's history since independence from a variety of points of view. The narrator of *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah* is a young woman from Aleppo whose family gets entangled in the confrontation between the Ba'athist regime and the Fighting Vanguard (al-ṭalā'i' al-muqātilah) in the 1970s/1980s on the latter's side. In addition to the genuinely feminine viewpoint on events that changed Syria's history for ever, the novel is significant for the use of multiple temporal levels in the narration. The diverse array of characters and settings involved as well as the masterful use of integrating the five senses into the text deliver to the reader an original recount of the events involving the female protagonists' journey from childhood to adolescence, as well as her affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood and subsequent incarceration at the hands of the regime. The politically controversial nature of the novel derives from the openly sectarian orientation the narrator develops and the explicit portrayal of security forces and secret services as members of a specific sect ("the other sect", i.e. the Alawite community), a widely known aspect of everyday life in Syria that is considered the ultimate unmentionable taboo in ordinary conversations in public, let alone in a novel. *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah* follows again the events of an Aleppine family and the impact of authoritarianism, nationalism and modernisation on the lives of the protagonists. Here the narration shifts constantly through numerous flashbacks between multiple temporal levels spanning approximately ninety years between World War One and the early 2000s, recounting the story of the

<sup>40</sup> R. Allen, *Literary History and the Arab Novel*, in "World Literature Today", 75, 2 (2001), pp. 205-213.

<sup>41</sup> Ḥālīd Ḥālīfah, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyyah*, Dār Amīsā li 'l-Našr wa 'l-Tawzī ', Dimašq 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Ḥālīd Ḥālīfah, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Ḥālīd Ḥālīfah, *al-Mawt 'amal šāqq*, Nawfal, Bayrūt 2016.

protagonist's parents and siblings as intertwined with Syria's experience of occupation, war and the gradual rise of authoritarianism. According to the author, the title of the novel itself was inspired by a passage in Akram al-Ḥawrānī's<sup>44</sup> memoirs which quote Syria's first Ba'athist president Amīn Ḥāfiẓ having reportedly said: «I won't leave a knife in the kitchens of this city», following the regime's crackdown on demonstrators which took the streets in the city of Hama in 1963 against the Ba'athist coup that took place the same year<sup>45</sup>. In both novels the other ever-present protagonist is the city of Aleppo, its diverse social composition and the peculiar brutality visited on its citizens by the State. For *al-Mawt 'amal sāqq* Ḥalīfah claims to have found inspiration in his personal circumstances following a heart attack he suffered in 2013<sup>46</sup>. The death of the protagonist's father, amidst the raging battle between the Syrian Army and the opposition factions, acts as the catalyst of the events. Having promised his father to take his body to his hometown for burial, Bulbul recruits his estranged brother Ḥusayn and sister Fāṭimah to fulfil their father's wishes. This simple promise is complicated by the circumstances of the civil war, and the trip that they optimistically believe will take a day soon becomes a nightmarish odyssey as the protagonists are detained, questioned, bombed and imprisoned — all while their father's body decomposes in their van along with the last remaining family bonds between them. The frequent flashbacks to the heydays of the 2011 and 2012 demonstrations in this novel represent highly critical and sensitive content in today's Syria where an official narrative portraying the events of the Syrian revolution as a foreign media conspiracy persists.

The taboo breaking and empowering nature of these novels in the context of the Syrian uprising can hardly be overstated<sup>47</sup>. Their open mention of the regime sectarianism, brutality and cynicism make them stand out for their extraordinary importance and their capacity to expose the narratives authoritarianism has imposed. They fulfil what the Libyan novelist Hišām Maṭar points out about novelistic activity, i.e. «to speak truth to power» and «reminds us of who we are as human beings»<sup>48</sup>. Although the circulation of these novels inside Syria remains somehow restricted albeit not officially

<sup>44</sup> Born in Hama in 1912, al-Ḥawrānī founded the Arab Socialist Party which later merged into the Ba'ath.

<sup>45</sup> Ḥalīd Ḥalīfah “*Awwal ra'īs ba'ṭi awḥà lī bi-'unwān riwāyatī al-aḥīrah*”, in “al-'Arabī al-ḡadīd”, 11/05/2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oKdXQG45LQ>.

<sup>46</sup> Ḥalīd Ḥalīfah at “An evening with Leri Price and Khaled Khalifa”, Mosaic Room, London, 13 February 2020.

<sup>47</sup> A. Monaco, al-Ša'b al-Sūrī Wāḥid (*The Syrian People Are One*): *Syrian Artists and Intellectuals against Authoritarianism*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, V, 9-10 (2015), pp. 93-96, <http://larivistadiarablit.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/87-105-Monaco.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> J. Vericat, *In Light of the Intellectuals: The Role of Novelists in the Arab Uprisings*, International Peace Institute, New York September 2014, p. 10.

banned, it is surprisingly easy to obtain a copy “under the table” in central Damascus’ bookshops and can easily be downloaded from online piracy websites. In addition, Ḥālīd Ḥālīfah has never relocated outside Syria, and in a recent documentary interview realised by Syrian-British correspondent Lina Sinjab he described himself as «exiled in his own country»<sup>49</sup>. Ḥālīfah has also been an outspoken supporter of the Syrian revolution, appearing on both Syrian and Arab media outlet. He personally took part in the 2011 demonstrations and was reportedly beaten by regime thugs (commonly referred to as *šabbīḥah* in the Syrian vernacular)<sup>50</sup>. Despite his refusal to leave Syria, Ḥālīfah has also been equally and perhaps more active in public than Tāmīr. He is based in Damascus but has travelled extensively across Europe and North America to deliver talks on the Syrian revolution and the reality of everyday life in Syria after 2011. Unlike Tāmīr and others, Ḥālīfah has become a public figure both in Syria and abroad, he was a visiting fellow at Harvard for a while in 2015 and has written for English-language media networks such as “The Guardian”<sup>51</sup>. From a strictly literary point of view, on the other hand, Ḥālīfah belongs to the new generation of novelists and writers outlined above whose novels can be read as historical documents to the forty plus year rule of the Assad family and the effects that authoritarianism, mass incarceration, dispossession, exile and war have exerted on individuals and families making him a symbol, although perhaps still far from being the Vaclav Havel-like figure that the Syrian revolution has missed. His remarkable novelistic output and his personal trajectory add further complexity and contribute to reconsider the binary distinction between insiders and outsiders, given the peculiar nature of his work, his first-hand experience of the revolution as well as his stubborn refusal to relocate outside Syria. Staying, leaving, leaving while being able to come back, staying while being able to leave, all these can no longer represent separate circumstances pertaining to one situation or another. They are instead present at the same time as part of each artist’s individual experience and are defined by the intricate process of negotiating one’s artistic integrity, personal safety and connections.

<sup>49</sup> Lina Sinjab, *Exiled at home*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saWJsb MWbak>.

<sup>50</sup> M. Peel, *Syrian Artists Pay Price of Resistance*, in “Financial Times”, 13/07/2012, [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/06d46008-ccda-11e1-b78b-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2d6lX36zk](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/06d46008-ccda-11e1-b78b-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2d6lX36zk). For more information on the *šabbīḥah* see Yasin al-Haj Salih, *The Syrian Shabiha and Their State – Statehood & Participation*, 03/03/2014, <https://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/syrian-shabiha-and-their-state-statehood-participation>.

<sup>51</sup> Khaled Khalifa, *Living in a void: life in Damascus after the exodus*, in “The Guardian”, 22/08/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/22/living-in-a-void-life-in-damascus-after-the-exodus>.

*Conclusions: A Process of Un-Labeling*

The examples of Tāmir, Ḥalīfah and others clarify the need to rethink the terminology and the categories employed to address the complex challenges faced by Syrian novelists in the aftermath of the revolution, and an approach that goes beyond the binary oppositions between insiders and outsiders. Their examples demonstrate how aspects such as physical location, i.e. the differences between writers living in Syria as opposed to those living abroad, cannot suffice to offer a satisfactory idea of the complexities of political affiliation and/or marginalisation of authors and their relationship to an authoritarian regime. Instead, the hybridity of their identity and of their relationship with the literary arena from which they have been uprooted forcibly or marginalised characterises comparatively disparate experience. A leaving home / staying at home dichotomy in other words does not suffice to explain the complexity of their trajectories, and demands a new approach that breaks with the existing frameworks of analysis.

The definitions of insider and outsider, and even the concept of exile as a condition, do not suffice to explain the complexity of contradictions artists, indeed individuals, face and the multiple implications of their actions, the danger being that of too simplistically labelling artists as either dissident or pro regime. No criteria can adequately assist us in drawing a line between artists as members of one group or the other. The events of the 2011-2013 demonstrations and subsequent clampdown on opponents have blurred the boundaries between different definitions and the globalisation of Syria's struggle, together with the displacement of millions of Syrians, demands a process of un-labelling. Sectarian affiliation has represented a widespread – albeit hardly successful – framework to explain the events in Syria, which serves no purpose but that of reinforcing an authoritarian view of artists and Syrian society more in general, Alawite, Christian and Muslim artists having in equal part spoken out against the one minded and brutal character of power<sup>52</sup>. The accessibility of their literary output and their availability inside Syria have also become an obsolete category. The pervasive role of piracy and the ineffectual nature of literary channels of distributions make it all the more difficult to give prominence to a book's availability in Syria's bookshop to ascertain its political significance<sup>53</sup>.

While geographical location, online activism and open support for the revolution or the regime remain significant elements to ascertain one's political affiliation and/or marginality, a variety of extremely complex aspects remain uncharted. The literary market and its system of circulation and distri-

<sup>52</sup> A. Monaco, al-Ša'ab al-Sūrī Wāḥid (*The Syrian People Are One*), cit., pp. 93-94.

<sup>53</sup> Mara Naaman, *Disciplinary Divergences: Problematizing the Field of Arabic Literature*, in "Comparative Literature Studies", 47, 4 (2010), p. 447.

bution play a crucial role adding a further degree of complexity. The two peculiar stories and the questions they raise show the inapplicability of strictly binary distinctions between members of different generations of writers, as well as distinctions between writers based purely on their geographical location. Particularly after the 2011 revolution each individual trajectory and experience warrants a process of rethinking to attain a clearer grasp of the details and peculiarities of Syria's cultural production.