Defying Kuwaiti Censorship and Addressing the Crisis of Intellectualism: Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam as a Subversive Feminine Dystopian Fairy Tale

Introduction

Triggered by the multiform and multiscale societal crises, the so-called "Arab Spring"[1] was a profound manifestation of the broader realm of global thought in crisis. The legacy of the "Arab Spring" continues to shape political, social, cultural, and literary discourse and movements worldwide. In the wake of the "Arab Spring", many Arab writers have turned to the genre of dystopian novels, either marking a distinct departure from their previous works or publishing their debut novels as dystopian narratives. Most Arabic dystopian novels published post- "Arab Spring", akin to their Western counterparts, portray a world in which individuals are subjected to the authority of a state that suppresses dissent from individuals or groups and exercises an exceptionally high level of control over public and private aspects of life, especially at the ideological level. These governing features are commonly characterised as totalitarianism or authoritarianism, and at times, a combination of both.[2] This article focuses on the Arabic novel *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* (Guardian of the World Surface 2019), authored by the Kuwaiti writer Buthayna al-ʿĪsa (b. 1982). Through close textual analysis, it examines al-ʿĪsa's feminine adaptation of Western

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[1] Referring to a series of pro-democracy protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s, the Arab Spring began in Tunisia in December 2010, leading to the ousting of long-time president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The movement quickly spread to other Arab countries, resulting in significant political change, societal instability and conflict.

[2] The term "totalitarianism" originated in the 1920s when Benito Mussolini used "totalitario" to describe Italy's fascist state. It gained prominence through political theorists during the rise of fascist regimes in Italy, Nazi Germany, and Stalin's Soviet Union. In Chinese, totalitarianism is translated as "极权主义" (extreme use of power), while in Arabic, "istibdād" and "ṭughyān" highlight overwhelming control and exceeding limits. Arendt argued that true totalitarianism sought to establish a supranational state, with only Hitler and Stalin's regimes fitting this definition. However, the term is often generalised and conflated with authoritarianism in political and literary analyses, despite critiques such as Walzer's, who contended that totalitarianism aims to create an entirely new human order, a goal never fully realised, even in Hitler and Stalin's regimes (Young-Bruehl 2002; Walzer 1981; Conquest 1999). Although *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* and other post-"Arab Spring" dystopian novels depict authoritarian or totalitarian tendencies, no Arab regime fully meets the strict criteria for totalitarianism. In this article, "totalitarianism" refers to an idealised form of governance in fiction, while in reality, Arab totalitarianism is understood as a concept between totalitarianism and authoritarianism.

fairy-tale characters within the context of a futuristic, anonymous Middle Eastern state. The article emphasises how these elements subvert both the totalitarian regime and the Symbolic order. *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, as a subversive dystopian fairy tale, not only addresses the issue of book censorship in Kuwait but also mirrors Buthayna al-ʿĪsa's struggle against it.

Drawing upon theories proposed by scholars such as Asa Berger, Michel Butor and Jack Zipes on fairy tales, Patricia Waugh and John Pier's theory on metafiction, as well as insights from Graham Allen and Gerard Genette on intertextuality, I establish parallels between *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* and Western fairy tales, including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, *Zorba the Greek*, utopian and dystopian works such as Plato's *The Republic* (375 BC), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). Through comparative analysis of these Western works and their Arabic counterpart, my primary objective is to shine a spotlight on Buthayna al-ʿĪsa, an outstanding female writer in the Gulf region and the Arab world, who has received comparatively less attention from Arabic literature critics. Drawing on Plato's allegory of the cave, the book censor in the narrative mirrors the first man who steps out of the cave, while the "world surface" he is tasked with guarding through book censorship parallels the cave itself – a limited, carefully orchestrated, stagnant utopia. The censorship laws reflect the regime's intent to stifle intellectual freedom and obscure the truth about the past revolution. Beneath this censorship lies the regime's deep fear of the future, a condition here referred to as "futurophobia". Although the regime relentlessly shields the "world surface" from being contaminated by free thought and the legacy of human civilisation, preventing people from knowing their past or envisioning their

future, the author introduces the subversive power through her recreation of Western fairy tale figures in a Middle Eastern context.

Just like the female protagonist in the novel, who owns a bookstore, Buthayna al-ʿĪsa herself runs her bookstore, Takwīn (Takween; Genesis), which further intertwines her battle with the novel's plot, reflecting her struggle against book censorship in Kuwait. In the Arab world, revolution is often viewed as a male domain, as exemplified by the "Arab Spring", where Arab women's visibility remained limited. However, by framing the novel as a story drafted by a female bookstore owner*, Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* demonstrates that metafictional storytelling can belong to women, revealing their essential role in resisting oppression and addressing the crisis of intellectualism in an increasingly conservative climate post-revolution. The narrative thus offers a nuanced, feminine perspective from the Middle East, where the "Arab Spring" has partly evolved into a cultural revolution that progresses peacefully. Through its feminine-centred dystopian fairy tale with a self-referential structure, *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* underscores the potential for redemption in a world overshadowed by an apocalyptic future.

Book Censorship and the Crisis of Intellectualism

Although the "Arab Spring" may not necessarily lead to a totalitarian state, many Arab writers, when envisioning the future, spontaneously turn to depicting totalitarian dystopias in their narratives. These works often reflect the deepening crisis of freedom, democracy and humanity in the region. Examples of this trend include the Egyptian female writer Basma ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's *al-Ṭābūr* (2013; *The Queue*, trans.

Elisabeth Jaquette, 2016), which examines the encroachment of bureaucratic

despotism into personal life; the Algerian writer Wāsīnī al-Aʿraj's *2084: Ḥikāyat al-*

ʿarabī al-akhīr (*The Tale of the Last Arab*, 2016), which explores the collapse of Arab

civilisation due to global Islamophobia, geopolitical conflict and nuclear war; and the

Kuwaiti writer Buthayna al-ʿĪsa's *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* (*Guardian of the World*

Surface). In 2021, Buthayna al-ʿĪsa was awarded the "Sharjah Award for Gulf

Women's Creativity" for her 2019 novel *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*. As an Arabic dystopian

novel published in the post- "Arab Spring" era, *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* distinguishes itself

from similar works in other Arab nations more severely affected by the revolution.

The primary narrative does not delve extensively into the theme of revolution.

Instead, it uses the past revolution as a backdrop, depicting a time of crisis. I argue

that this distinction likely stems from Kuwait's relatively higher level of democracy

compared to other Arab nations, combined with the growing totalitarian tendencies

within the Kuwaiti emirate in the aftermath of the revolution.

The story space of *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* is set "at some point in the future, in a place

whose name bears no significance, for it resembles every other place" (al-ʿĪsa 2019,

1),[3] imagination, scientific advancements and technology are prohibited, and

individuals are restricted to reading only books adhere to current government

standards. The regime remains anonymous throughout the narrative, underscoring

its enigmatic and compelling nature. The state depicted in this narrative is set in a

post-revolutionary era, as evidenced by a government document titled

"Administration Decision (1.3) for the Second Year after the Revolution - The Book

Censor's Guide to Correct Reading". As revealed in this document, the regime seeks

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[3] Translation mine. تدور هذه القصة في زمن ما في المستقبل، في مكان لا يحدث ذكره أي فرق، لأنه يشبهُ كا مكان آخر.

to permanently erase the truth of the past revolution by banning and burning books containing "old world words" such as "democracy, parliament, internet, information revolution, Twitter, Facebook, smart apps, computers, the peaceful transfer of power, the ballot box, voting, counting votes, protest, rally, march, peaceful demonstration, political reform, coup, regime, army, corruption, bankruptcy, embezzlement, etc" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 56).[4] This can be interpreted as Buthayna al-ʿĪsa's representation of the tendencies and actions of Arab authorities during and after the revolution. As demonstrated in the "Book Censor's Guide", the regime exhibits a deep fear of anything related to social media, drawing a clear parallel between the novel's narrative and the realities of the Arab world during the revolutionary period.

The "Arab Spring" was characterised by the absence of centralised leadership and a heavy reliance on the Internet. The uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia were widely referred to as "Twitter and Facebook revolutions" (Witoszek 2019, 86). Social media also played a significant role in the protests in Kuwait during this period. In February 2011, a group called al-Soor al-Khamis (the Fifth Fence), supported by opposition members of parliament, used Twitter to mobilise Kuwaitis to protest outside the parliament. The group's statement outlined concerns over "the government's crackdown on journalists and political protests" (James 2011), calling for greater freedom of expression. In the aftermath of the "Arab Spring", notable segments of Arab societies openly resist any inquiries into the past due to the fear of revealing uncomfortable truths. Instead, they advocate for an approach of leaving the past behind (Fraihat 2016, 106). However, disregarding the past would allow various

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4 يمنع رقيب الكتب أي كتاب يتضمن كلمات مثل: ديموقراطية، برلمان، انترنت، ثورة معلوماتية، تويتر، فيسبوك، تطبيق ذكي، كمبيوتر، تطاول سلمي للسلطة، صندوق انتخاب، اقتراع، تصويت، اعتصام، مظاهرات، مسيرة، مقاومة سلمية، إصلاح سياسي، انقلاب السلطة، العسكر، فساد، اختلاسات، ونحوها من المفرجات التي تنتمي إلى العالم القديم. Translation mine.

parties to proceed based on their narratives and interpretations of historical events. In the post-revolution era, establishing a unified national memory and a common history necessitates the creation of a narrative that acknowledges the victims, perpetrators and mistakes of the past (Mazzei 2011, 435). In this context, *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* can be read as literary documentation, recording the attempts to bury history and integrating it into the annals of literature. From this nuanced perspective, the novel invites readers to explore not only the imagined futures constructed by al-ʿĪsa but also the unfolding present and the resonances of the past.

Compared to other countries in the Gulf region, even the Arab world, Kuwait is often recognised for its relatively high level of democracy, including free elections, female suffrage and the region's oldest and strongest political oppositions. Despite these democratic features, Kuwait's political system is inevitably constrained by al-Sabah – the ruling family. Legislative powers remain as limited as they were in the 1970s (Brynen, Moore, Salloukh, Zahar, 2012, 73). The al-Sabah family dominates key ministries and controls public resources, maintaining political centralisation. Although Kuwait's press enjoys a degree of freedom, all media outlets must be licensed by the government and are occasionally shut down. Unlike Dubai, which has liberalised its economy and society extensively, Kuwait has become increasingly socially conservative and resistant to similar liberalisations (Brynen, Moore, Salloukh, Zahar, 2012, 70, 75, 77). When the 2010–2011 protests swept across the Middle East, many analysts argued that these uprisings would have limited impact on the GCC states,[5] as monarchies were considered more resilient to popular unrest. In Kuwait,

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[5] GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) is a regional political and economic alliance established in 1981, consisting of six Middle Eastern countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

the monarchy enjoys political legitimacy, with no opposition publicly challenging the

ruling family's authority (Freer 2023, 195). Unlike in many other Arab states, political

violence in Kuwait is rare, whether from the government or protesters (Freer 2023,

195). Nevertheless, inspired by the "Arab Spring", some isolated incidents of

violence occurred, particularly among minority groups such as the Bidun.[6] In

February and March 2011, members of the Bidun campaign turned to social media

to attract international attention to their cause (Freer 2023, 197). They took to the

streets to peacefully demand improved access to state assistance and citizenship.

However, these protests were met with a severe response from security forces,

involving the use of water cannons, tear gas, smoke bombs, and concussion

grenades. Reports indicated that dozens were injured, and many were detained

(Davidson 2015, 136). Fearing foreign interference and pressure, such as that

exerted by Human Rights Watch's investigation that same year, the Kuwaiti regime

responded with superficial measures (A. Cohen, Keinan-Cohen 2019, 117–119).

After Human Rights Watch left Kuwait, the authorities arrested members of the Bidun

campaign associated with the protests (Shultziner 2012, 285). As of July 2023, the

issue of Bidun citizenship remains unresolved (Freer 2023, 199).

The Kuwaiti government appears to have anticipated the potential impact of the

Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions early in 2011. Even before the "Arab Spring"

reached Kuwait, the government had already taken steps to suppress dissent,

including the censorship of social media, the blocking of Al Jazeera, and the closure

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[6] Kuwait sharply distinguishes between citizens and non-citizens. Kuwaiti citizens benefit from a range of social services, including free healthcare and education, with citizenship largely passed through patrilineal descent. Among Kuwait's marginalised groups are the Bidun (short for "bi-dūn al-jinsiyya", meaning "without nationality), who were excluded from citizenship during the state's post-independence registration processes in the 1950s and 1960s. This has left them stateless and deprived of basic rights (A. Cohen and Keinan-Cohen 2019, 107-123).

of *al-Mustaqbal Daily* and the Mubasher satellite television channel[7] in January

2011, spurring additional criticism and suspicion of the government (Davidson 2015,

152, 217). Following the protests and clashes between demonstrators and the

police, the immediate political crisis and concerns of a coup may have subsided

temporarily. Still, a new challenge emerged: heightened censorship of both social

and traditional media, severely curtailing freedom of expression (Human Rights

Watch 2015). In June 2011, two Kuwaiti nationals were tried for using Twitter to

"harm the state's interests" and for allegedly insulting the ruling families of Kuwait,

Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia (Davidson 2015, 217). A year later, in June 2012, another

Kuwaiti, Hamad al-Naqi, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for a tweet deemed

insulting to Islam and the political leadership of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. An MP

even called for the prosecution of those who criticised Saudi Arabia's recently

deceased Crown Prince Nayef on Twitter, referring to them as "screeching crows"

(Ulrichsen 2012).

Against this backdrop, the narrative of *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* unfolds in a post-

revolutionary state where people live under the enduring shadow of the past

revolution. Ironically, they remain unaware of the true events of the revolution, as

both memory and evidence of it have been permanently obscured by the current

regime through book censorship. By exploring the theme of book censorship,

Buthayna al-ʿĪsa engages in cultural resistance in the post- "Arab Spring" Kuwait,

expressing her concerns about the totalitarian tendencies and the threat to

intellectualism in Kuwait and, by extension, throughout the Arab world. The novel's

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[7] Al Jazeera, launched in 1996, is a Qatar-based international news network known for its independent reporting in Arabic and English. Al-Mustaqbal Daily, a now-defunct Lebanese newspaper founded by Rafik Hariri, focused on Lebanese politics and regional affairs. Mubasher is a Kuwaiti satellite channel broadcasting live parliamentary sessions and government activities to promote transparency.

protagonist is a book censor employed in the Censorship Department. His

responsibility is to assess all books to ensure they adhere to the government's

criteria. On the first day of his duty, he receives a message left by the Chief censor

saying:

> We must always remain on the surface of language. On the surface of
> language! Beware of becoming entangled in meaning... Do you know what
> happens to those who fall into meaning? They are afflicted with eternal
> madness and become unfit to live. You are the guardian of the surface. The
> future of humanity rests upon you" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 2).[8]

Books that do not meet these criteria are officially banned and marked for temporary

storage in "muʿtaqal al-kutub" (book concentration camp) called "al-Matāha" (the

Labyrinth) (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 150) used for storing books before being burned on the

Purification Day[9] in the following year. During his work, the book censor becomes

inspired by *Zorba the Greek*[10] and enamoured with the books, transforming from a

censor to a reader – making the most severe mistake as a book censor. The

department's former book censor, who is now a secretary demoted for indulging in

reading, persuades the book censor to join the book-saving plan. The strategy

involves the book censor passing those books that are bound to be banned to the

secretary for concealment. Simultaneously, he receives lists from the secretary and

visits the Labyrinth for book storage to meet the eccentric librarian, who gives him

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[8] يجب أن نبقى دائما على سطح اللغة. على سطح اللغة! إياك والتورّط في المعنى.. هل تعرف ما الذي يحلّ بأولئك الذين يسقطون في المعنى؟ - تصيبهم لوثة أبدية ولا يعودون صالحين للعيش. أنت حارس السطح. مستقبل البشرية يّتوقّف عليك. Translation mine.

[9] It is a government-sponsored annual ceremony, featuring an open-air museum on the streets showcasing various performances such as plays and acrobatics. The exhibition includes a diverse array of products from the past, ranging from electronic gadgets like laptops, cameras, CDs and mobile phones to tempting treats like roasted apples and popcorn. Citizens are encouraged to attend the ceremony, providing them with an opportunity to release their true nature and playfully mock the perceived backwardness and barbarism of their ancestors.

[10] Referring to Alexis Zorba, the central character in the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *Zorba the Greek* (first published in 1946).

the listed books the book censor has requested, which he then delivers to a

suburban bookstore owned by a woman. Each time the book censor brings banned

books to the bookstore, he notices the proprietress clandestinely writing something,

swiftly hiding it upon his entrance. The books are then stored in the bookstore's

basement. In the novel's climax, the book censor's daughter is taken to the

Rehabilitation Centre for being found in possession of the banned book "Pinocchio"

at school. In the Rehabilitation Centre, imaginative children undergo procedures of

brainwashing and personality reshaping. Successful rehabilitation results in altered

personalities upon release from the centre and return to the so-called "normal" life,

while failure results in their death. The parents are subsequently encouraged to have

more children. In desperation, the book censor goes to the bookstore's proprietress

for help, who tells him: "Over the decades, the children in my family were abducted

by the government and placed in those centres, then nothing. No one ever knew

their fate... Every day, we risk everything to penetrate the authority's systems to save

books, research, and other works, to save the memory [...] But we were never skilful

enough to save a child, to save the future. For this and many other reasons, I am

very sorry" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 262).[11] Despite the book censor's persistent efforts to save

his daughter, he faces failure in every attempt.

Leading up to the novel's ending, following his daughter being taken to the

Rehabilitation Centre, he and his wife are accused of inappropriate upbringing, his

loyalty to the government is questioned, and the desperate father takes drastic

actions. He informs his superior about the suburban bookstore, arrests the

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[11] على مدى العقود كان الأطفال في عائلتي يختطفون من قبل الحكومة، ويودعون في تلك المراكز، ثم لا شيء. لم يعلم أحد بمصيرهم أبدا... إننا نغامر كل يوم من أجل اختراق أنظمة الهيئة لأجل إنقاذ الكتب والأبحاث والمصنفات الأخرى، لأجل إنقاذ الذاكرة... لكننا لم نكن أبدا بالبراعة الكافية لإنقاذ طفل، لإنقاذ المستقبل، لأجل هذا ولأشياء أخرى كثيرة.. أنا آسفة جدا. - Translation mine.

proprietress and confiscates books from the basement to demonstrate his loyalty and hope to rescue his daughter. In the process, he finds a manuscript she has written, revealing a documentary novel about his life, which chillingly states that his daughter succumbs to the Rehabilitation Centre's torment and takes her own life. Unable to endure the tragic fate predestined for his daughter, "he gazed at the Purification Day fire, a radiant smile illuminating his face. Then, catching the workers around him by surprise, he broke free from their grip and, in an instant, leapt into the blazing flames just meters from the gate of the Labyrinth" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 313).[12] As Elmeligi puts it, the intensity of the government's actions escalates as the book censor's rebellious spirit emerges and thrives, leading to a discernible pattern of distress, which in turn underscores the tension between the individual's internal journey and the external actions of the government, emphasising the detrimental impact of anti-intellectualism and censorship on a dystopian society (Elmeligi 2024, 123-124). This pattern is also evident in classical Western dystopian novels, such as George Orwell's *1984* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, where a linear timeline, the protagonist's coherent developmental arc, and clear motivations behind each transformation in their actions and character are readily observable. In this sense, *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* closely adheres to the conventions of Western dystopian novels, featuring a central hero who keenly perceives utopia's oppression of humanity and rebels against it.

From Plato's Cave Allegory to Futurophobia

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[12] نظر الرجل إلى نار التطهير، وابتسامة نورانية تشع من محياه. ثم باغت الرجال من حوله، ركض مفلتا من أيديهم، وفي لحظة وثب إلى النار المضرمة على بعد أمتار من البوابة - Translation mine.

Ḥāriṣ saṭḥ al-ʿālam exhibits multiple parallels with many well-known Western dystopian novels. In line with Genette's pragmatic definition of intertextuality, the "actual presence" or "allusion" (Genette 1997, 1-2) to other texts in *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* can be traced to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. These Western and Eastern dystopian works each depict the oppressive control of authority over humanity and intellectualism, as well as the erasure of the past, though in distinct ways. At their core, they reflect a deep-seated fear of an uncertain future – one shaped by imagination and truth. All the story spaces depicted in the three texts can be categorised as a world of monism, echoing Plato's *The Republic*, where the allegory of the "cave metaphor" originates.

Both protagonists of *Ḥāriṣ saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, the book censor and the central figure of *The Giver* Jonas have direct access to the cultural heritage of humanity. The sole distinction between them is that the giver is responsible for keeping the memories and emotions of human beings, while the book censor guards the carrier of them: books. In *The Giver*, Jonas is chosen as the Receiver of Memory during a ceremony where every child is assigned a specific career by the government (Lowry 2022, 61), bearing the responsibility of receiving and safeguarding memories about the past that have been erased from the community's consciousness. But he becomes progressively disenchanted with the community's leadership and ultimately departs as he uncovers the unsettling truth behind its apparent stability, especially after he learns about the release ceremony, during which individuals deemed unfit are executed. A parallel situation arises in *Ḥāriṣ saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, where the reviewer's daughter is sent to the Rehabilitation Centre and faces the possibility of elimination for possessing imagination. Both institutions exist to uphold the stability of the

utopian state and mercilessly eradicate any disruptive elements, even if they are human beings.

The plot of burning books in a dystopian state makes it impossible to explore *Ḥāriṣ saṭḥ al-ʿālam* without referring to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Similar to the government in *Fahrenheit 451*, the leadership in *Ḥāriṣ saṭḥ al-ʿālam* promotes anti-intellectualism, fearing that imagination and critical thinking lead to unrest, disrupting social stability. Much like characters such as Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*, Winston Smith in *1984* and D-503 in *We*, the book censor awakens while working as a government employee, recognising the oppression of human nature and rebelling against it. Like the fireman Guy Montag, initially obligated to burn books then steals and reads them, the book censor does the same. Although the novels' beginnings are strikingly similar, their storylines diverge. Montag escapes government punishment, securing refuge among the Book People who memorise books to preserve their content to ensure the survival of literature and knowledge for future generations. In contrast, although seeking help from the "Book People", the proprietress of the bookstore, the book censor is not saved or protected but has to jump into the book-burning fire like a martyr. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the focus is on cultural losses resulting from the disappearance of books and the societal issues of a media-controlled consumer American society in the 1950s rather than critiquing a totalitarian system or police state (Gottlieb 2001, 94-95). Departing from Bradbury, al-ʿĪsa emphasises the dwindling imagination and creativity caused by the prohibition and burning of books, representing the government's anti-intellectualism and futurophobia, which reminds readers of the cave allegory articulated by Plato.
In *The Republic*, the cave symbolises the imagined world, the chained men inside

the cave represent human beings, and the realm outside the cave is the actual world. The prisoners are chained deep inside the cave with their backs facing the entry of the cave. Behind them, a beam of firelight illuminates a raised walkway where several unbound individuals traverse, carrying wood, stone, and plants on their heads. The shadows cast by these objects form the prisoners' sole perception of reality. Suppose one of them breaks free, turns around and witnesses the firelight. In that case, he will be overwhelmed by dizziness, pain and a surge of emotions, realising that his previous existence was limited to mere shadows in a cave, in stark contrast to the genuine world. Upon completing this upward journey, he "would rather suffer anything than live like that" (Plato 2004, 209-201). Plato employed the cave allegory to encourage individuals to leave the "cave", using contemplation and rationality to navigate the real world and pursue truth. This plea is precisely what architects of totalitarian utopias fear and vehemently reject. The book censor, Jonas, and Montag mirror the man who first ventures beyond the cave; upon stepping out, they find themselves unable to comply with government demands and experience liberation from their past roles as chained prisoners, confined to a partially knowable world. They become insurgent elements within the very utopian society they inhabit, symbolising not only the forbidden past but also the unknown future – the actual world and the history of humanity beyond the confines of the "cave".

As articulated by Plato, in the world that mirrors the cave, the ruler believes that complexity engenders intemperance, and here it engenders illness (Plato 2002, 88). By narrowing the scope of the world people belong to, The Censorship Department ensure individuals only possess binary thinking of oversimplified facts, as articulated by al-ʿĪsa (al-Khaṭīb 2023). Consequently, people develop "a childish belief in

anything that a person is told with authority" (Fromm 2013, 440), gradually losing the ability to think critically and becoming complying/acquiescent beings without past and future. These strategies mould individuals into a uniform shape, eliminate perceived flaws in human history, and consequently quash uncertainty arising from the fear of an unknown future. In this context, utopia, while usually envisioned in a non-existent future setting, remains firmly anchored in the present from its own perspective. Nevertheless, the "surface of the world" in the novel is not as secure as the anonymous regime anticipates. The narrative space, meticulously constructed by "The Book Censor's Guide", subtly harbours a subversive element, reflecting Buthayna al-ʿĪsa's battle against book censorship in Kuwait and her challenge to paternal authority through the incorporation of Western fairy tales and the creation of her own dystopian fairy tale.

Subversive Dystopian Fairy Tale as an Estrangement Strategy

In the Western context, literary fairy tales for children initially served both entertainment and the transmission of ideological values, shaping perceptions of identity, sexuality, manners and politics while reinforcing dominant social norms (Zipes 2006, 35). Writers adapt these tales to reflect and critique societal issues, using them as vehicles for storytelling and engagement with historical or political realities. A shift in narrative perspective can signify not just a refinement of language or views, but a profound transformation in the portrayal of society and reality. (Zipes 2006, 43). The rewriting and adaptation of classic fairy tales may even contain elements of subversive resistance, a concept that is far from new. For instance, George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde and Lyman Frank Baum challenged and

reimagined the classical frameworks established by Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Andersen, highlighting the need to alter and restructure social relations by questioning the arbitrariness of authoritarian rule in their works. This departure from traditional storytelling laid the groundwork for further experimentation with children's fairy tales in the twentieth century, during which many authors began to cultivate what can be termed the "art of subversion" within the fairy-tale narrative (Zipes 2006, 108-109).

In the acknowledgements at the end of her novel, al-ʿĪsa references several well-known Western fairy tales, including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and *Zorba the Greek*. I interpret *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* as a synthesis of reimagined Western fairy tales and Arabic dystopian literature, offering a subversive feminine perspective in which women confront the crisis of intellectualism in the post-revolutionary Middle East. al-ʿĪsa selectively incorporates four characters from different Western fairy tales, namely Alice and the rabbits from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Geppetto from *The Adventures of Pino*cchio, and Zorba from *Zorba the Greek* into her dystopian fairy tale. These parallels can be read as a form of fairy tale intertextuality or hypertextuality, illustrating a literary realm where the essence is shaped by its connections to earlier works (Allen 2000, 108). In this dystopian fairy tale, audacious rabbits navigate the Censorship Department, forming friendships with the book censor's imaginative daughter and guiding him to the suburban bookstore. They dig countless tunnels beneath the earth and pierce the world's surface, as illustrated on the novel cover (see Figure 1). These rabbits symbolise the resilience of certain aspects of humanity that persist even amidst severe censorship to suppress imagination and creativity. The Greek Zorba assumes

the roles of guardian and librarian in the Labyrinth, while the woodcarver Geppetto serves as the secretary in the Censorship Department. Much like in its original form, the character of Geppetto in *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* retains his parental role as he attempts to save books from censorship, feeds lettuce leaves to the rabbits and tells stories to the imaginative daughter of the book censor, who is described as "the only thing uncontaminated in this place (the Censorship Department)" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 119)[13] – to prevent her from succumbing due to a lack of stories. However, diverging from the original narrative, the secretary Geppetto is arrested for reading forbidden books and is not rescued by Pinocchio. His fate remains unknown. In al-ʿĪsa's adaptation, the book censor's daughter, who parallels Alice, tries to view the world from a child's perspective. Her unintentional attempt to mock the rigid and arbitrary rules – including book censorship – ultimately leads to her downfall. With imagination and fairy tales banned and burned, her health deteriorates: "She began to lose weight, her complexion turned strangely pale... She got tired quickly, stretched out, and closed her eyes all the time" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 181).[14] When the book censor returns to the Labyrinth for the final time, not to save but to destroy books, he discovers that her daughter, habitually fearful of the government leader's photo, is subjected to relentless exposure to large images of the leader at the Rehabilitation Centre. One night, evading the night shift nurse's gaze, she deliberately bangs her head against one of the photos on the wall, like "a canary banging its head against a cage" until her demise (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 304).[15] The revelation that the secretary is Geppetto, the enigmatic figure in the Labyrinth is Zorba, and his daughter is likely Alice drives the book censor to madness as he desperately shouts at Zorba, asking where he is

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[13] الشيء الوحيد غير الملوث في هذا المكان. - Translation mine.
[14] أخذت في النحول وشحُب لونها على نحو غريب ... صارت تتعب بسرعة، تتمدد وتغمض عينيها طوال الوقت. - Translation mine.
[15] حسون يضرب جسده بالقضبان. - Translation mine.

going. However, "he did not respond and disappeared beyond the limits of his (the book censor's) vision, and he (the book censor) no longer heard the sound of his footsteps on the ground" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 292).[16] The author does not recharacterize Zorba as much as she does with other fairy tale figures, thereby inviting readers to connect this Zorba to the original Alexis Zorba, a character known for his passionate and free-spirited approach to life. Zorba's presence in the Labyrinth, where he meets the book censor with an ever-cheerful demeanour, contrasts sharply with the book censor's immersion in reading books. If the book censor represents the intellectual and philosophical life of the mind, Zorba embodies the active, physical life of the body. Through Zorba's inclusion, al-ʿĪsa not only advocates for free reading and abstract thinking but also underscores the significance of finding meaning through lived experience, hinting at existential philosophy. Unlike the tragic fates of the aforementioned characters, the rabbits remain unharmed throughout the story. In both the original *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, the rabbits symbolise curiosity, the unknown and change. This narrative thus illustrates a form of dualism: while physical and material aspects of existence may wither under totalitarian rule, the realm of thoughts, consciousness, emotions and cognition remains beyond measure.

As a work of dystopian fiction, *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* inherently carries subversive potential. When combined with a fairy tale narrative, it aligns with Michel Butor's assertion that fairy tales do not exist alongside reality but actively engage with it. They prompt us to transform reality and restore what is out of place (Butor 1973, 352). Western fairy tales typically follow a clear bipolar structure dominated by the

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[16] لكنه لم يرد. لقد اختفى في نهاية حدود نظره، وما عاد يسمع قرع قدميه بالأرض. - Translation mine.

forces of good and evil. The narrative culminates in the hero encountering both benevolent and malevolent creatures, facing a formidable adversary, and ultimately triumphing through the completion of tasks and the successful conclusion of their journey (Berger 1997, 84-87). In *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, however, this pattern undergoes a shift: the hero's journey begins in frustration and ends in an even deeper, more devastating one. The little girl and the book censor's moments of suicide add depth to their character personalities, making them more realistic and multidimensional, in contrast to the stereotypical and one-dimensional characters found in classic Western fairy tales (Lüithi 1986, 11). In this way, al-ʿĪsa's dystopian fairy tale preserves the magical transformations of classic fairy tale elements while subverting traditional narrative structures, thereby seemingly diminishing the power of good. Concurrently, she establishes a subtle connection between the narrative world and reality, using the fairy tale to critique Kuwaiti censorship. Given the stringent censorship in Kuwait and other Arab nations, the dystopian fairy tale and its hypertextuality serve as al-ʿĪsa's strategic means of evading excessive scrutiny by the Ministry of Information in Kuwait.

Fighting against censorship is undoubtedly one of the motifs of this novel. The proprietress of the bookstore, along with the secretary of the Censorship Department and the enigmatic man in The Labyrinth, are collectively referred to as "sarṭān" by the authorities, which can be translated as "crabs" or "cancer cells". Despite facing increasing severity in censorship, they continue to combat it in their unique ways, much like cancer cells that, once present, prove challenging to eliminate entirely. These characters accurately depict the personas of individuals such as al-ʿĪsa and other writers akin to her in Kuwait and other Arab states. Fighting censorship has

long been a political priority for al-ʿĪsa. She actively participated in a movement led

by Kuwaiti authors lobbying for reforms to the country's censorship laws. In 2023,

she published *Sharaf al-muḥāwala: maʿāriku-nā al-ṣaghīra ḍidd al-raqāba* (*The*

Honour of Attempt: Our Small Battles Against Censorship), a documentary narrative

chronicling her struggle against censorship in Kuwait. The book offers a

retrospective examination of Kuwait's censorship history from the 1970s to the

present, highlighting a list of banned books, including *Zorba the Greek* – a work that

inspired the book censor's passion for literature in *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*.

According to laws issued in 1961 and 2006, Kuwaiti writers may face charges and

even end up in prison for publishing content that goes against mainstream ideas

promoted by the authorities, which mirrors the condition for Egyptian writers. Many

scholars and professors in Kuwait have pointed out that Kuwait's previous

censorship system was "absurd, ridiculous, and full of paradoxes". Although Kuwait

ranked first in the Gulf in the "World Press Freedom Index" in 2020, its publications

are still subject to strict censorship by the Propaganda Ministry Committee, and

thousands of books were still banned in 2018 (Al Yousef 2020). The year 2019

seemed promising for Kuwaiti writers, witnessing a positive turn as Kuwaiti law

underwent amendments, easing the censorship of publishing. Due to the impact of

the COVID-19 pandemic, the amended law did not take effect until 2022. Following

this, Kuwait enjoyed a ban-free period until March 2023. However, by July, the law

was revised again, reinstating previous censorship measures. al-ʿĪsa concluded her

book with the poignant reflection that, although it is difficult to imagine Sisyphus

happy, they would continue to try (al-ʿĪsa 2023, 152). In 2016, she also became a

bookseller, founding Takween, a bookshop and publishing house. Given this, the

character of the bookstore owner and manuscript contributor in *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*
can be seen as a fictional representation of Buthayna al-ʿĪsa herself. The novel, in
turn, becomes a call for resilience across the Arab world, urging individuals to adopt
Sisyphus's perseverance and pursue their ideals despite the challenges they face.
As Camus noted, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1955, 98), for it is in
the struggle itself, not in its outcome, that true meaning is found.

Employing a dystopian fairy tale framework as a strategy of estrangement to shield
herself from censorship, al-ʿĪsa critiques Kuwaiti censorship with a sharpness
masked by a layer of euphemism. While one might view this as capitulating to self-
censorship, it is crucial to recognise that in the increasingly repressive climate of the
Gulf, self-censorship has become a survival tactic, a condition shared by many living
under authoritarian regimes (Buscemi 2020, 90). This approach has become a
widely used method among Kuwaiti female intellectuals and activists, particularly in
the post-"Arab Spring" era. Although the regime responded by suppressing protests
and criminalising activism, the revolutionary spirit has not waned. Instead, it has
persisted and thrived through literary and cultural resistance against the regime's
suppression of freedom of expression and, more fundamentally, intellectualism.
Activists in Kuwait have increasingly turned to informal channels for expressing
political dissent, deliberately operating outside official frameworks and avoiding state
sponsorship. The avenues include gardening communities, art collectives, design
forums, itinerant markets, charities and literary groups (Buscemi 2020, 88). This
informality offers flexibility, enabling these civic movements to adapt while evading
government censorship (Buscemi 2020, 84–85). Similarly, al-ʿĪsa's approach
resonates with that of Ebtehal, a Kuwaiti scholar and human rights activist who has

faced death threats for her secular views. Ebtehal avoids overt criticism in her contributions to local newspapers, opting instead to write "between the lines" and trusting her readers to discern the deeper meanings of her words (Buscemi 2020, 88). In this way, self-censorship can serve as an "empowering tool" that allows for the exploration of controversial or sensitive themes, expanding political discourse beyond the confines of formal debate (Buscemi 2020, 88).

Addressing the Intellectualism Crisis through Subversive Feminine Storytelling

In her work, al-ʿĪsa offers a feminine-anchored perspective of storytelling within storytelling that suggests rulemaking and highlights women's potential in navigating crises, both within the narrative and beyond it. As noted earlier, each time the book censor enters the bookstore, he finds the proprietress writing something, which she quickly hides upon his arrival. In doing so, she assumes an "authorial persona", implicitly narrating within the fictional text (Caiani 2007, 96). This third-person authoritative voice signals to readers that something significant is forthcoming. While they are aware that the proprietress is working on a manuscript, its content and purpose remain unknown to them. At the novel's end, when the book censor enters the bookstore, the proprietress greets him with a knowing smile as though expecting him. He subsequently transports the confiscated books to the Labyrinth, where they are destined to be burned on Purification Day. As workers feed the flames outside, the book censor is consumed by anguish. Seeking solace, he retreats into the Labyrinth and immerses himself in books to numb his pain. There, he discovers the manuscript crafted by the proprietress, which chronicles his entire life, prompting him

to exclaim, "I am a fictional character" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 302)![17] Here, the manuscript is revealed to be the story itself; readers realise they have been witnessing not only the narrative but also its process of composition. In hindsight, they understand that each time the book censor goes to the bookstore, they are granted a glimpse into this narrating process. At this moment, the boundary between his reality and representation becomes blurred, echoing Patricia Waugh's assertion regarding metafiction that is built on "the construction of a fictional illusion and the laying bare of that illusion" (Waugh 2013, 43).

According to the manuscript, after the book censor's daring act, the government unexpectedly aligns with his interests, allowing him to visit his daughter at the Rehabilitation Centre. However, the manuscript takes a dark turn in its final pages, revealing that his daughter, unable to endure the treatment any longer, tragically takes her own life. Overwhelmed, the book censor loses control, shedding his clothes and plunging into the raging fire outside the Labyrinth. Shockingly, no human remains are found after the fire is extinguished – "like he never existed. Like he is a character in a novel" (al-ʿĪsa 2019, 313).[18] Through the bookstore proprietress's "deliberate transgression between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Pier, 2016), the narrative employs a sophisticated manipulative technique that reveals the transformative power of women in literary and social contexts, suggesting that they are not merely passive participants in their stories but active architects of their destinies.

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[17] أنا شخصية روائية. - Translation mine.
[18] كأنه لم يوجد قط. كأنه شخصية في رواية. - Translation mine.

Functioning as a dystopian fairy tale narrated by a female character within the text and authored by a female writer outside it, *Ḥāriṣ saṭḥ al-ʿālam* echoes the structure of the Lebanese female writer Ḥanān al-Shaykh's retelling of folk tale *One Thousand and One Nights*, which also weaves stories within stories from a feminine perspective. Al-Shaykh empowers women by granting them a narrative voice, enabling them to tell folktales that construct and reinforce postcolonial feminine power, not only through storytelling but also by engaging with and transforming patriarchal discourse from within. In her version of *One Thousand and One Nights*, al-Shaykh selects 19 stories described as "dark, complex, violent, and about misogynists—men who either killed their wives or their lovers" (al-Shaykh 2016). Through these tales, she highlights women's intelligence, humour, solidarity and resistance against Islamic patriarchy. Women are portrayed not only as victims of male violence but also as active agents who survive, resist and reshape their circumstances. Similarly, in her dystopian fairy tale *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, al-ʿĪsa also demonstrates women's intelligence, ambition and foresight in times of crisis. Departing from al-Shaykh, the female characters in her narrative appear to transcend traditional gender roles. The only two female characters in this story are the proprietress herself and a little girl – the book censor's daughter who remains ungendered throughout the narrative. Wittig argues that "there is no gender but feminine" (Wittig 1983, 64), meaning that, under the conditions of compulsory heterosexuality, the category of sex is always feminine, while the masculine remains unmarked and universal (Butler 1999, 24). This notion is particularly relevant in contemporary Arabic literature, where women are frequently sexualised from a male perspective and confined to specific roles (often relegated to the private sphere of the family, away from the public domain), while male characters can simply exist as

men. In *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam*, this dynamic is inverted. The fairy tale framework and

the young age of the little girl allow her to remain unassigned and unsexed. She

exists solely as an imaginative, resilient child, representing the general and the

universal. In response to the intellectual crisis, both female and male characters

strive to save books and the legacy of human civilisation. However, the female

character, the proprietress of the bookstore, plays a far more pivotal role than the

book censor and the secretary. Within the bookstore, everything operates according

to her will, and outside it, she drafts the book censor's story, transmitting her version

of societal rules, moral guidelines, and cultural values. This allows readers to engage

with the fictional world from a feminine perspective, one that subtly resists not only

totalitarianism but also the patriarchal law and the Symbolic order.

Conclusion

On the "surface of the world", the totalitarian regime imposes universalism and

employs surveillance and censorship to suppress imagination, creativity and

intellectual freedom, leading to a crisis of intellectualism. The book censorship

mechanism aims to implement "herd poisoning" to create "homogeneous

subhumans" – a group that may possess considerable abilities like an individual;

however, they lack independent, realistic thinking and lose any will and judgement

unique to themselves, thus degenerating into irrational and violent beings (Huxley

1958, 36). In the realm of Arabic dystopian novels following the "Arab Spring", the

regime's efforts to mould public thought into a homogenised and conformist entity

ultimately fall short of achieving a perfectly static and harmonious state. In *Ḥāris saṭḥ

al-ʿālam*, the book censor's daughter cannot endure this process of homogenisation

and tragically dies by striking her head against the leader's portrait. Similarly, in Basma ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's *al-Ṭābūr* (The Queue), life under the strict control of the Gate is intended to be orderly; however, reality diverges sharply from this expectation as the queuers engage in absurd disputes and brawls. In contemporary Arabic dystopian literature, it is precisely the methods employed to construct the utopia that foreshadows its demise, signalling a path toward destruction.

As previously explored, originally designed for children, fairy tale itself holds both constructive and subversive power, encapsulating societal expectations and behavioural norms. Drawing upon this immense subversive potential, al-ʿĪsa's dystopian narrative – may be suitable for all audiences, if not only adults – goes beyond critiquing totalitarian tendencies and the repression of intellectual freedom. More importantly, it conveys an ideological aspiration for the younger generation, urging them not to be constrained by monolithic thinking and to engage with the world as it truly is and as it once was. By creating a dystopian fairy tale and reimagining famous Western fairy tale characters, al-ʿĪsa presents a layered narrative in which female characters are no longer incidental to the destinies of male characters, who traditionally imbue women's lives with meaning (Zipes 2006, 42). Instead, these women become ungendered and unsexualised, demonstrating remarkable courage and resilience while playing pivotal roles in confronting the intellectual crisis.

Kuwait's paternalistic and corporatist structure has significantly impacted the women's rights agenda (Buscemi 2020, 86). In her feminine reinterpretation of Western fairy tale elements, al-ʿĪsa, like other post-"Arab Spring" activists in the Gulf,

uses "peaceful means and subdued tones" to convey messages of social change, gradually challenging authoritarian rule and undermining dominant narratives (Buscemi 2020, 91). Through her "subversive symbolic act" of feminine metafictional storytelling (Zipes 2006, 136), al-ʿĪsa underscores the capacity of Kuwaiti women to confront intellectual crisis intensified by increasing totalitarian tendency in the post-revolution era. *Ḥāris saṭḥ al-ʿālam* thus reflects Kuwaiti women's potential not only to confront crises under the current regime but also to engage in policymaking, a sphere traditionally viewed as a male domain in the Middle East and beyond.
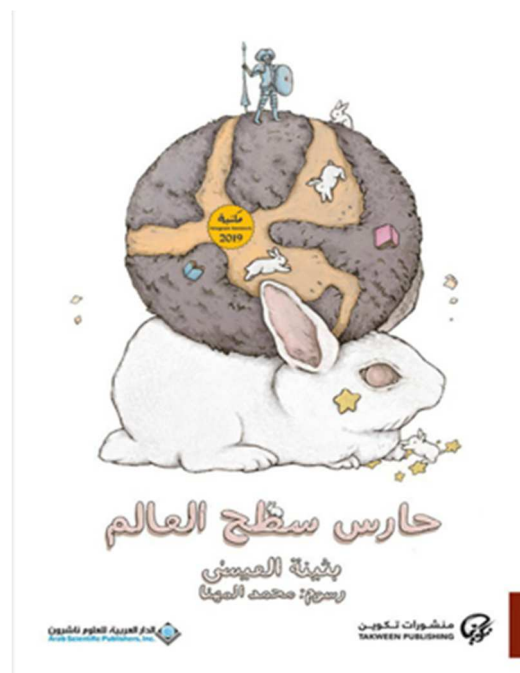
Figure 1: The cover of the novel *Ḥāris Saṭḥ al-ʿālam*. Beirut: Dār al-ʿarabīyya li-l-ʿulūm nāshirūn, 2019.

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