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Revolution or Familial War: Revolutionary Failures in Khaled Khalifa's *Death is Hard Work*

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Since the advent of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the subsequent war, the literary scene in Syria has witnessed the publication of dozens of novels by major Syrian novelists, a genre we can term "the Syrian war novel," which are set mainly in war-torn Syria and which offer an extensive treatment of the war, its progression, and its consequences on Syrians.[1] It is also important to acknowledge that some Syrian war novels and their events take place in Syria and abroad, as internal and external displacement became a major cost of the war.[2] Scholars of Arab studies such as Mohja Kahf have argued that Syrian literature has many silences and omissions, since "contemporary Syrian literature is created in the crucible of a tenacious authoritarianism" (235). Meanwhile, Syrian novelist and critic Nabil Suleiman (Nabīl Sulaymān) asserts that the Syrian war novel has been mostly published abroad and written from the perspective of the opposition to the Syrian state (para. 2), thereby debunking the notion of any possible major omissions or oppressive influence. The Syrian conflict has lasted for over a decade now, and Syrian novelists have taken careful note of that. As Syrine Hout contends, "wars have always acted as stimuli for writers" (1), and the Syrian war is no exception. The vast novelistic production about the Syrian war is perhaps an early

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antidote to any future collective amnesia about the war, as collective amnesia is sometimes implemented as a state policy to move past a disturbing, bloody history.[3]

As we would expect, Syrian novelists have published their work in Arabic, and much of this literary production remains untranslated into English. This body of literature includes several writers, most notably Khalil Sweileh (Khalīl Ṣwaylaḥ), Khaled Khalifa (Khālid Khalīfa) Samar Yazbek (Samar Yazbik), Dima Wannous (Dīmah Wannūs), Nabil Suleiman (Nabīl Sulaymān), Maha al-Hasan (Mahā al-Ḥasan), Fadi Azzam (Fādī ʻAzzām), and Fawwaz Haddad (Fawwāz Ḥaddād), among other novelists and writers. The Syrian war motifs discussed in these literary writings encompass a wide range of issues such as the beginning of the uprising, its causes and development, the war's consequences on ordinary Syrians, and the rise of extremism. For example, in *Taqāṭuʻ nīrān :min yawmīyāt al-intifāḍah al-Sūrīyah* (2012) (*A Woman in the Crossfire,* 2012), Samar Yazbek's journalistic memoir attempts to document the early days of the uprising and the stories of the protestors, as well as their grievances and demands. In *Bayt Ḥudud* (2107), (*Huddud's House,* 2024), Fadi Azzam presents the long-standing corruption of Syrian state officials as a potential cause of the Syrian uprising. Similarly, in *al-Sūriyūn al-aʻdā'* (2014) (*Syrian Enemies)*, Fawwaz Haddad recounts narratives of corruption and brutality in the Syrian military and security forces during the Hama events of 1982. Ḥaddad's fictional work implies that such a haunting historical legacy is one of the reasons the 2011 uprising took place. In *Ikhtibār al-nadamm* (2017) (*Remorse Test)* on the other hand, Khalil Sweileh is less political; his focus is the daily lives and struggles of ordinary Syrians who dodge death and find ways to cope with mayhem since the beginning of the war. Nabil Suleiman's *Layl al-ʻālam: Dāʻish fī al-Raqqah* (2016) (*The Night of the World: ISIS in al-Raqqa*) is similar to Sweileh's depiction of the struggles of ordinary Syrians, except it describes the atrocities that ISIS committed against the afflicted population of the city

of al-Raqqa. While *Death is Hard Work* (2019) (Al-Mawt ʻaml sāq, 2016) tackles these same motifs—the early demonstrations, corruption, brutality, and extremism—Khaled Khalifa also turns to the literal semantics of the term *ḥarb ahlīyah* (civil war) to draw a parallel between the ongoing war in Syria and the family dynamics and dysfunctions of Abdel Latif al-Salim and his children.

In *Death is Hard Work*, Khalifa attempts to understand what it means to undergo civil war. The event is no ordinary or mundane occasion, and the novel is trying to make sense of it. Khalifa's semantic approach is reminiscent of the title of a popular 2017 Syrian drama series "*Azmah ʻā'ilīyah"* (*Family Crisis*)*,* as "crisis" came to signify the war, and the title of the series referred to the trial and tribulations of a Syrian family during the war—the title appearing to parallel and play with the phrase *ḥarb ahlīyah*. Khalifa's novel goes further to describe the war partially as a family or familial war, a conflict between family members, as the word "ahl" is commonly used in spoken Syrian Arabic to refer to immediate family members and relatives. The metaphor is not unheard of in the history of civil wars. David Armitage asserts, for example, that in Roman history civil war "could be thought of as familial" (33) and "fratricide would become the central metaphor of the unnatural dissension at the heart of civil war" (46). Khalifa elaborates on this notion through the Arabic metaphor and draws a comparison between Abdel Latif al-Salim's family crisis and the ongoing war in Syria. As he does that, he observes that in both cases a "revolutionary" mentality underlies the conflictual scene in the country. As such, the strenuous journey Abdel Latif's children take to bury their father is an attempt to bury the very "revolutionary" mindset he stands to signify; for "revolutionary" masks incompetence, escapism and cowardice. Abdel Latif's son Bolbol, the protagonist of the novel, represents an attempt to break away from his father's legacy of sloganeering and big but failed causes. Bolbol's actions advocate a humanist commitment to family as a potential way forward and away from a destructive

family, cultural, political, and partisan ideological heritage that goes back to the 1950s and 1960s.

Abdel Latif al-Salim's story is mostly told after his death, as his children—Bobol, Fatima, and Hussein—transport his dead body to his hometown of Anabiya in the Aleppo countryside to be buried there in accordance with his will. We learn that Abdel Latif joins the uprising that breaks out in 2011, refusing to leave town S in the Damascus countryside, a town he moved to over 40 years earlier. He is supportive of the uprising, repeatedly assuring his son Bolbol that "the children of the revolution [are] everywhere" (48). Abdel Latif is fascinated with the idea of revolutions and revolutionaries, and he reflects on the notion after he participates in the protests and the revolt: "[H]e thought about all the courageous people he had read about in the histories of various other revolutions who had climbed the scaffold without faltering, spitting on their murderers and striding forward into oblivion with total composure and resolution" (88). In fact, he sticks out amongst the protestors, and later insurgents, as "his abundant enthusiasm [about the revolution] made him into an icon" (108). Not only does he admire revolutionaries, but he thinks of himself as one: "he liked seeing himself as a living martyr seeking death at every moment, a man who had truly destroyed the walls of fear" (88). Yet, this rebellious mentality is not without its major flaws. Abdel Latif's figure is revolutionary inasmuch as it seeks to make major, if not radical, changes in Syrian politics and society; He seeks to win the larger war over Syria without fighting and winning the smaller battles in his family first.

Leila al-Shami writes that since 2011 the arts "have become a site of a deep questioning of cultural and social authority and of key notions including individual, community and national identity" (Para.25). In *Death is Hard Work*, Khalifa does not question only the authority of the Syrian state but also that of the cultural and social authority that produced the uprising. Abdel Latif al-Salim's revolutionary mentality hides problematic traits, characteristics that lead to the disintegration

of the family and the weakening of its ties. Abdel Latif has a history of escapism and running away from problems. When, over four decades earlier, his sister Layla refuses to marry a person she does not love, a person who is nonetheless imposed upon her by the family, she "was confident her brother Abdel Latif wouldn't throw her to the wolves of the family" (128), but her brother does not come to the rescue. In protest of this forced marriage, she sets herself on fire on her wedding night, and "not a day had passed without [Abdel Latif] being reminded of his cowardice. His failure to defend her made him complicit in her suicide" (176). As a result of his failure to support her, he leaves his village altogether (105). He is more interested in pretenses than in addressing his reality and that of his family. This is also evident in his relationship with his wife and children: "No one doubted seventy-year-old Abdel Latif's love for his wife. Everything was proof of it: the rarity of their fights, the way they clung to each other—the image of the happy family … that they projected wherever they went" (70). Yet, the reality of this relationship was different: "The image of them tending flowers in the garden in total harmony was a lie," and his wife Um Nabil "had often endured his unjustified rage" (126).

Bolbol recognizes this pretense as he considers his relationship with his father on the way to Anabiya to bury him: "There were many times [Bolbol] would have liked to tell his father that he was cruel to his children and kind only to his students and strangers," and that "the images Abdel Latif presented to the world was paramount; he cared too much about what people said about him" (120). When Abdel Latif's son Hussein gets involved with Russian escorts and drug dealing, Abdel Latif tells him, "He couldn't be both a pimp and his son" (102). Although Abdel Latif wants to help Hussein, he does not have the ability or the know-how to do it. Neither does he care enough to help his son with this ordeal: "When Hussein was in prison, it was his friends who had followed up on his case and interceded as guarantors for his release; none of the family cared to do it" (143). Instead of facing his reality, Abdel Latif resorts

to his fantasies to deal with his problems. In fact, he makes up so many stories about his family and the home village he ran away from that his wife chose to believe that "He was being creative, not that he was simply a liar" (126). The character of Abdel Latif creates a rift between the siblings, as the children lack a positive role model who teaches them how to keep a family together.

Bolbol, Hussein, and Fatima cannot get along well with each other. They get together on this journey to bury their father although in "ten years, the three of them hadn't been gathered in the same place for more than an hour or two during Eid" (22). On their journey, "[H]ere was a real opportunity to talk about whether they could be a family again—but Hussein didn't care, Bolbol actively opposed it, and Fatima was too busy trying to play the role of the noble sister reuniting her family after the death of a parent" (22). In fact, further along the way, "Their silence also made it clear just how little they could stand spending so much time with one another," because "the ties of blood simply weren't enough to sustain the falsehood of family harmony given all the things that now divided them—a lie that in any case disintegrated long before" (120). Abdel Latif has set a bad example for his children, and Bolbol, who realizes his father's flaws, makes an attempt not to follow suit.

Bolbol, who is like Abdel Latif in character, tries to part ways with his father's mentality. We learn that, "Really, all of Bolbol's behavior was an imitation of his father's—an attempt to live longer in his shadow" (46). He is like his father in terms of "idealism" and belief in outdated values. Abdel Latif cannot function properly in (or adapt to) an adulterated world; his world is that of ideal values, free of social or political corruption, opportunism, and oppression for which he criticizes the Syrian state and its officials. Yet sometimes this idealism makes him oblivious to how things are, in favor of how things should be—a weakness that makes it harder for him to handle the real world. When thinking about his father, Bolbol recognizes that his father is like him; weak, dreamy, and delusional, but his conscious

thoughts also show that he is cognizant of his weaknesses, an acknowledgement that would propel him to make different choices in the future. Whereas Abdel Latif's concept of revolution is romantic and idealistic, and much like his character, full of fantasies, Bolbol's conception and views will show a relative change in an attempt to break with his father's old methods. Bolbol begins to understand that his father's romantic/revolutionary mindset is destructive, and that this binary (romanticism-destruction) is applicable at a family and a national level.

In *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*, Armitage undertakes a major study of the philosophical ideas attached to civil wars going back to Roman times and ending in the 21st century. It is an extensive study focused on the conceptual realm that emerged out of a long history of civil wars around the world. In his book, Armitage acknowledges that it is not always easy to tell the difference between civil wars and revolutions, since the lines between the two can often be blurred. Armitage argues that since the era of the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth century there has been a view "that revolution is driven by high ideals and transformative hopes," while "base motives and senseless violence animate civil wars" (121). He adds that "civil wars have been generally assumed to be sterile, bringing only misery and disaster" (122). However, he asserts that the two concepts are not distinct. He maintains that since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the flourishing of civil war research, "a repressed truth was rediscovered: the heart of most great modern revolutions was civil war" (122). In fact, Armitage believes that the case of the Arab Spring and the Syrian war were no exception to this rule, since the uprising that was motivated by ideals such as freedom, equality, and the eradication of oppression turned into extremism and sectarian violence (121). Bolbol reaches a similar realization about the situation in Syria. While Abdel Latif does not accept that his views are idealistic and destructive, Bolbol realizes the nether side of revolution: "When Bolbol made his opinion clear [to his father], saying that

the revolution was over and had become a civil war" (79), "Abdel Latif was done with the conversation, seeing how it would only corrupt his dreams" (80). Idealism can lead to civil wars and the disintegration of society, much the same way Abdel Latif's idealism has led to the disintegration of his family.

Armitage claims that the metaphor of civil wars as familial wars is ancient and goes back to Roman times. He contends that the warring parties recognized their opponents as all too familiar, since they were both citizens of the same state, country or polity (33). This realization led many to view civil wars as conflicts within the same family. This metaphor characterizes the situation in Abdel Latif's family as well. As previously mentioned, Abdel Latif cannot save his sister from the family conflict decades earlier, he disowns his son Hussein for the latter's unethical behavior, he maintains a dysfunctional relationship with his wife and creates a family where the siblings cannot get along well either. Abdel Latif carries within himself a conflictual mindset, and, at best, he cannot resolve conflicts. Yet, this person becomes an icon of a revolution, which later tuns into a civil war. Bolbol realizes some of these serious flaws in his father's character—and, by extension, in his own, since he is like his father—so he sets out to change course and adopt instead a humanist perspective.

Bolbol seems to align himself with a political humanist view rather than a revolution-civil war. In *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution*, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab discusses the *tanwīr* debates, or the Arab Enlightenment debates, that took place in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century. She is more specifically interested in the debates that took place in Syria and Egypt in the three decades leading up to the Arab Spring.[4] She argues that the debates on tanwir that emerged on the eve of the uprising of 2011 in Syria and Egypt "addressed issues of human dignity, liberty, tolerance, reason, education, human rights and democracy" (7). She adds that, "If the tanwir debate in Egypt revolved around the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism, the one in Syria was centered on the

state's unbridled corruption and brutal oppression" (7). She asserts that the purpose of the debate in Syria "is not to reject the state in a utopian or anarchical sense, but to call for a state that corresponds to [the people's] agency" (88). Bolbol does not take up arms in the fight against the Syrian state although, "He was far from neutral in his mind: for example, he could not stop himself from feeling cheered whenever he saw a funeral procession for the regime's casualties pass by" (81). He is pleased to see pain inflicted on the state's tools of oppression because he is unhappy with the practices of the Syrian state—practices he suffers from directly. For instance, the novel is generous in describing the agony of Bolbol and his siblings as they go through the Syrian state's check points. The officers at one check point, for example, "arrest" the dead body of Abdel Latif (28) and ask for a bribe they call a "goods-transit document" (32) to release the corpse, as the body is treated by the officers like goods, stripped of its humanity and not a person with human dignity. The corruption of the state agents which threatens the burial of Abdel Latif is a big cause for concern and anxieties for Bolbol who has no control over the situation. Yet, Bolbol insists on a proper burial for his father to preserve the latter's dignity and humanity.

Insisting on giving his father a proper burial despite the adversity of the journey serves a humanist purpose, but it also indicates a parting of ways between Bolbol and his father's legacy. "Carrying out his father's last wish was an exercise of what little remained of his will" (95-96). For Bolbol, burying his father becomes an issue of "will" and commitment to a cause. If Abdel Latif did not show adequate commitment towards his family, Bolbol attempts to part ways with this legacy by refusing to escape from his responsibility towards his father, despite the extreme dangers surrounding them. As discussed earlier, Abdel Latif does not commit to helping his sister who is in a dire need for his support; instead he runs away from his responsibility towards here. He does not support his son Hussein or help him with his ordeal when the latter goes to jail. In fact, he forbids

anyone in the family from helping him. Even in his relationship with his wife, he is more interested in keeping a façade of a healthy relationship than committing to a harmonious marriage with Um Nabil. Bolbol who realizes the shortcomings of his father, tries to distance himself from this legacy by showing a solid commitment to his family as embodied in the figure of his father Abdel Latif.

On multiple occasions Bolbol's brother Hussein falters and suggests that they bury the father on the side of the road or even toss the dead body out of the van (37), but Bolbol refuses to settle for this solution. When Hussein finally drags the body out of the van to throw it away because "[H]is father didn't deserve all this attention; he had turned Hussein out of the house and never cared about him again" (140), Bolbol gets into a fist fight with Hussein to keep him from discarding the corpse (141). Unlike Hussein, Bolbol does not view his father as worthless and refuses to disown his body. In fact, one of Bolbol's problems with Abdel Latif is that he "did not respect his children's weaknesses because he did not remember his own" (120). To subvert this trait, Bolbol, who knows his own vulnerability, will respect his father's wishes despite the latter's many flaws. Shareah Taleghani subscribes to the notion that "recognizing our mutual vulnerability" is essential for the "construction and protection of human rights" (Bryan Turner qtd. in Taleghani 95), and this is the principle that Bolbol acts upon to preserve his father's dignity and human rights to a decent burial, an approach that also conforms to Kassab's form of political humanism.

If the *tanwir* or enlightenment debates in Syria focused on dignity as a human right, as Kassab asserts, then Bolbol wants exactly that. Honoring the final wish of a vulnerable person on his death bed, and later preventing his dead body from being desecrated, is an act of preserving his dignity. For Bolbol, being flawed does not mean one is worthless or should be stripped of their dignity. At the same time, Bolbol's insistence on honoring his father's wishes despite the latter's many flaws, comes as a result of Bolbol's recognition of his own flaws and vulnerability.

He understands the dangers and implications of a mindset that does not respect human vulnerability. Therefore, Bolbol's attempts to preserve his father's dignity are reflective of his attempts to preserve his own dignity as a vulnerable person himself. He is defending his own basic human rights by resisting his brother's insistence on discarding the corpse. He is doing away with a mindset or a mentality that does not respect human rights or basic human dignity. This burial act, however, is also symbolic of further conceptions.

Not only is Bolbol fulfilling his father's final wish, but he is also performing a symbolic act in which he lays to rest a mindset that belongs to the 1960's and which led to many problems in the country. For Bolbol, Abdel Latif al-Salim is "a collection of slogans borrowed from a past era" (160); he is a person for whom "it is hard to admit [his] emptiness after half a century of delusion" (160). Khaled Khalifa's novel accuses Abdel Latif of carrying the same "revolutionary" mentality the Ba'th Party adopted and propagated in the 1960's. We learn that in the early 60's Abdel Latif and his cousin "would distribute Baath Party leaflets and get thrown in jail; they would face the whip and still hold out" (105). This is an era he actively ushered in with his cousin Colonel Jamil. Yet, Bolbol does not think highly of this era that he imagines himself "telling [Abdel Latif] to his face that he was a . . . man with barely a quarter of a dream to brag of" and that he "wrap[s] [his] delusions in big words about the liberation of Palestine, which [his] generation left to rot" (120-121). Again, for Khalifa, this revolutionary mentality, coinciding with the rise of the Ba'th Party and Arab nationalism in the 1960's, conceals an escape from real commitment to family and society. The novel maintains that since this mentality has the same delusions in common with the Ba'th Party, it cannot be productive; therefore, it must be buried too. It is a dead, outdated mindset, and as the saying goes: *Ikrām al-mayyit dafnuhu,*, "to honor a dead person is to bury them."

This phenomenon of the 1960's was popular on both the social as well as the literary scenes. Alexa Firat credits the Syrian

Writers' Collective in the 1950's with the notion that the emerging genre of socialist realism should have a social function. She adds that for the next two decades the Collective competed over the cultural production in Syria, and along with the notion of *iltizām* (commitment/engagé) it helped create some of the revolutionary romanticism that circulated in the literary and cultural arenas in the country (154-156). Waed Athamneh argues that *iltizām*, "[is] a concept appropriated from Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of literary engagement," and it "had a major impact on Arab intellectual life in the 1950s . . . particularly his call for literature to be engaged with sociopolitical concerns," and that the idea of *iltizām* was even better received after the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 and the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 (19). This attraction to the idea of committed or engaged literature, she continues to argue, translated into "writing solely about Nasserism, Arab nationalism, and the question of Palestine" (20), concepts that became even more popular in the 1960's and beyond. This is an era Abdel Latif describes as one with "the greatest values and elegance" (46). While seemingly an attack on *iltizām* literature, Khalifa's novel is critical of a literary and ideological moment where such big causes are instead used for self-aggrandizement, as a façade to hide incompetence and the lack of commitment. Therefore, Bolbol's attempt to bury his father is an effort to commit to small, manageable causes and to bury a lack of commitment masquerading as one. The novel critiques engaged literature only inasmuch as it can provide an escape for people who otherwise cannot take responsibility for their lives and the lives of their families, let alone for those of their societies.

What I refer to here as a mentality and Athamneh calls *iltizām,* Hamid Dabashi names "ideology." In his study of the Arab uprisings, Dabashi argues that by the end of postcoloniality "I mean the cessation of ideological production in colonial contexts and terms . . . anticolonial nationalism, socialism, and [nativist discourses of] Islamism are the ideological formations that historically have confronted European colonialism and

shaped the modern nation-states that emerged in the former colonial territories" (139-140). However, he adds, in the events of the Arab spring "dignity is an end in itself, caused and conditioned by the revolutionary uprisings" (127).[5] Dabashi's ideas are well-illustrated by the journey the siblings make through the multiple check points to bury Abdel Latif. The many check points (over ten of them) that Bolbol and his siblings must go through to bury the body represent the ideological schools to which Dabashi refers. While some of the check points belong to the Syrian state representing the socialist and anticolonial nationalist discourses, some other check points belong to religious extremists who drive nativist or Islamist discourses home. To bury the old ideology embodied in Abdel Latif, the siblings need to bury the father. However, to get to his burial site, they need to get through the ideological check points that keep them from doing exactly that. What stands in the way of Abdel Latif's dignity, the dignity of giving him a decent burial, are the very ideologies his generation and himself subscribed to and fought to establish. In this sense, Bolbol and his siblings make the journey from and through ideology to achieve dignity for the deceased father, a basic human right he would otherwise be entitled to.

This journey is significant as the dead body/ideology is made to bear witness to the negative consequences of its actions; it witnesses the disintegration of the country, where different parts of Syria are controlled by different conflicting groups. The dead body of the geography teacher Abdel Latif who loves the geography of Syria silently watches the fragmentation of the geography he often taught and loved. Yet, this geography, through its check points, watches him back and curses him by delaying his burial, which in turn leads to the decomposition of his body. The journey through the check points, which takes almost four days, causes the body to decay almost in symbolic retaliation. In commenting on the novel, Max Weiss notes that "the decomposition of Abdel Latif's body is compensated for or at least mirrored in other breakdowns: the dissolution of family

bonds" (285). The decaying body/mentality of Abdel Latif mirrors the breakdown of the family, and by the same token is reflected in the disintegration of the Syrian geography itself. While this journey leads to the burial of Abdel Latif and what he stands for, it also changes Bolbol in his affirmation of new concepts.

The siblings manage to finally bury Abdel Latif in Anabiya after a long excruciating journey in what proves to be very "hard work." After burying his father, Bolbol decides to be called by his original name, Nabīl. Nabil has gone by Bolbol since his college days because his college crush Lamia liked to call him Bolbol. When he reflects on his name after his father's death, he declares that "Bolbol sounded lighter and more human to him, whereas Nabil suggested some well-adjusted man still dreaming of a grand future" (95). However, after his father was buried, Nabil "liked regaining his original name and resolved not to let anyone call him Bolbol anymore" (176). After completing the journey, Nabil forgoes the name he had for so long associated with a vulnerable, weak, and romantic self. Bolbol, the Arabic word for nightingale, a symbol of romance and delicacy or fragility in Arab cultures gives way to Nabil, the Arabic word for noble. He is determined to go by Nabil because he is an accomplished man now that he has lived up to the big burden and responsibility of fulfilling his father's will. His perspective is forward looking because commitment to a seemingly small but important and essential cause is a noble pursuit, and this is what builds a future—not the backward looking ideological position his father embraced.[6] The journey Nabil undertakes and the change he undergoes is reminiscent of *Usṭūrah* or the mythical in Syrian fiction. In her study on the mythical in the Syrian novel, Maysoon Jarf (Maysūn Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Jarf) argues that in Hanna Mina's (Ḥannā Mīnā, d. 2018)) novels such as *al-Yāṭir* (1972) (*The Anchor*), and *al- Shirā' wa al-ʻāṣifah* (1963*)* (*The Sail and the Storm,* 1966), the journey the protagonists take by sea becomes an occasion for "*al-intiṣār ʻalá al-dhāt"* ("overcoming the self") (52). The sea becomes more than a

friend, it has become a purgatory to cleanse the self of its flaws ("*wa aṣbaḥa al-baḥr akthar min ṣadīq, aṣbaḥa maṭharan li-ghasl al-khaṭāyā*") (52).[7] By the same token, the journey Nabil takes through war-torn Syria cleanses him of some of his vulnerabilities or at least it sets him on the right course to shed some of his apparent vulnerabilities.

That being said, Nabil is not a hero after making the journey either, as he does not believe in heroic figures. He is a "well-adjusted man" who gets rid of some of the legacy he associates with his father. If he is ever a hero or a revolutionary, then his outlook is perhaps more in line with that of renowned Syrian novelist Mutaa Safadi (Muṭā' Ṣafadī, d. 2016). In his study, *al-Adab al-'Arabī al-Sūrī ba'da al-istiqlāl* (Arab Syrian Literature Post-Independence**),** Sayf Qintar **(**Sayf al-Dīn Qinṭār) argues that Ṣafadī does not subscribe to the notion of the archetypal or stereotypical hero with the exaggerated qualities found in socialist realist fiction, for such archetypes are "*maḥḍ iftirā' wa kadhib,*" (a lie and a fabrication) (241).[8] For Ṣafadī, the hero of a revolutionary story "*laysa rajulan usṭūrīan muḥāṭan bihālati al-raw'ah wal kamal, laysa qā'idan wala fārisan mudalhaman, wala nabīyan qiddīsan*" (is not a legendary man, surrounded with an air of magnificence or perfection, he is not a leader or a brave knight, nor is he a saintly prophet) (qtd. in Qinṭār 241).[9] Similarly, Nabil is far from a legendary or perfect man. His revolution, if there was ever one, is that of challenging small but essential causes. He does not seek to or even believe in his ability to immediately and radically change the reality of his home country, rather he attempts to dispense with a mindset that thinks it is possible to do so, and even that—as hard as that might be—is a small but necessary step towards future change.

In this sense, Khaled Khalifa and his work are not inconsistent with Zeina Halabi's claim that since the 1990's, Arab novelists and intellectuals have steered clear of the former models of the modernizing intellectual-prophet, political commitment as a literary attitude, and secular nationalism as an

emancipatory philosophy (2). Her assertion is not different from the previous claims by Dabashi and Athamneh either. Halabi stresses that many Arab intellectuals and novelists are disenchanted with these earlier political and literary models that dominated the 20th century, and which promised modernity and espoused complex political causes. By the same token, Khalifa does not wish to be a savior-prophet who is trusted with the task of undertaking and successfully carrying out a political revolution in his literary work. Neither does he want to commit to a political cause. Khalifa contributes by coopting the Syrian uprising as another complex political issue on which he or other intellectuals/novelists should avoid taking a strong position.

Khaled Khalifa realizes that it is difficult to understand what it means to undergo *ḥarb ahlīyah,* so he makes a decent attempt to explain the conflict through the dysfunctions of Abdel Latif al-Salim's family. Khalifa has long been associated with the opposition, yet he does not write to appease or please anyone. He reserves the right to criticize multiple parties in his novel. Khalifa's novel locates the disintegration of both family and country in defeatist, outdated ideologies. Although seemingly revolutionary, this mindset hides behind it cowardice, irresponsibility and escapism. Abdel Latif is a revolutionary figure inasmuch as he wants to effect major changes in Syrian society and win the larger war without fighting and winning the smaller battles in his family and immediate circles. Revolutions of this type become obsolete and destructive, leading to backward looking conflicts that double down on nationalist and nativist ideologies. In this sense, Abdel Latif is not different from the Ba'th Party or other ideological parties, literary movements, and intellectual models that belong to the 1950's and 1960's. A good way forward (or a "corrective movement," so to speak) is represented by Nabil's actions and character. Nabil who recognizes his flaws and detects the seeds of this dated mentality—a heavy burden and inheritance he receives from his father—makes a genuine effort to forgo this societal, political ,and family heritage. His actions emphasize the

necessity of burying this old mentality in favor of a humanist approach that constructs better humans and humane relationships. His propensity to honor family bonds and, by extension, societal ones is the way forward. Although by no means delusional about his ability to effect immediate change, Nabil insists on making a change, though incremental, in the hope this small change can materialize in something effective in the future despite how vague this future looks.

Notes

1- In a 2019 Arabic language article published by the *Independent*, Abdo Wazen calls the literary phenomenon surrounding the Syrian uprising "war literature." He claims that over 50 novels have been written about the war. He refers to the uprising as a "revolution," but he also understands that the literary production by Syrian writers is inseparable from a general, international genre: war literature. "مآسي" الحرب السورية أسفرت عن 50 رواية ... وشكّلت مفترقاً في تاريخ الأدب الحديث | اندبندنت عربية (independentarabia.com). In addition, renowned Syrian novelist and critic Nabil Suleiman, who refers to the uprising as a "great earthquake," a "revolution," and "the Syrian hell," nonchalantly terms this genre "the war novel." Suleiman who terms this literary production "the novelistic flood of the Syrian war," estimates that over 450 novels were produced since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011. الطوفان الروائي في الحرب السورية - الموقع الرسمي لجريدة عمان (omandaily.om).

2- In the previously mentioned article, Nabil Suleiman identifies a few novels that fit this category: *The Drums of War* and *Good Morning, War* by Maha Hasan, *A Summer with the Enemy* by Shahla Al'Ujaili, and *The Berlin Papers* by Nihad Sirees.

3- Collective Amnesia is a common motif in civil war and post-war narratives. In *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, Syrine Hout claims that the Lebanese post-war

public discourse is "characterized by a collective amnesia" (2). In addition, David Armitage asserts that amnesia and forgetfulness as a means to prevent civil wars from recurring goes back to Roman times. For a thorough discussion of this notion refer to his article "Three Narratives of Civil War: Recurrence, Remembrance and Reform from Sulla to Syria."

4- Kassab argues that although Western Enlightenment was not the focus of the Arab Enlightenment debates, notions such as secularism, tolerance, rationality, human dignity, and freedom were common topics discussed in *tanwir* (3).

5- In the introduction to his book *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Asef Bayat makes an argument similar to Kassab and Dabashi. He says, "unlike the revolutions of the 1970s that espoused a powerful socialist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and social justice impulse, Arab revolutionaries were preoccupied more with the broad issues of human rights, political accountability, and legal reform" (11).

6- Elsewhere, in "Three Narratives of Civil War," David Armitage asserts the same concept: "Revolutions were definitively modern, novel, and forward looking; civil wars were archaic, traditional and backward facing, as Arendt and others would argue" (7-8). Published in the anthology titled: *Civil War and Narrative: Testimony, Historiography, Memory*.

7- In the Arabic original: و أصبح البحر اكثر من صديق, أصبح مطهراً لغسل الخطايا

8- In the Arabic original: محض افتراء و كذب

9- ولا فارساً مدلهماً, ولا نبياً قديساً, ليس رجلاً اسطورياً, محاطاً بهالة الروعة ًوالكمال ليس قائدا

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