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Modernity and Gender Representations in the Short Stories of Zakariyyā Tāmir: Collapse of the Totalising Discourse of Modernity and the Evolution of Gender Roles

A Ph.D. dissertation submitted by
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The University of Edinburgh, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies
2017
Declaration of Originality

I declare that this thesis is my own original work, and that it has not been submitted in any form for any other degree or professional qualification. I certify that anything taken from or based upon the work of others has its source explicitly cited. Parts of the findings in Chapters Four and Five of this research have appeared in:


Alessandro Columbu
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Abstract

Born in Damascus in 1931 Zakariyyā Tāmir is widely considered one of the most significant figures in the contemporary literary scene of Syria and the wider Middle East. This thesis addresses his literary trajectory and the ways in which representations of masculinity and femininity have changed throughout his career by situating the stylistic and thematic transformations in the context of major historical and political events in Syria and the region. Applying an approach that relates literary transformations to a rapidly changing political context, the research elucidates how the changing configurations of gender roles in Tāmir’s works can be understood in the context of what Kamal Abu-Deeb has described as a process of political and ideological fragmentation affecting the Arab East since the mid-1970s.

Dividing Tāmir’s works into two periods (1958-1978 and 1994-2014) to connect them to the different historical conditions in which they appeared, this study examines the significance of masculinity, patriarchy, sexuality and female identity in relation to the collapse of the totalising discourse of modernity. The research scrutinises the ways in which this process has engendered a multiplication of voices and roles in his short stories. Employing Connel’s theory of hegemonic masculinity the study addresses the ways in which the mutually informing nature of masculinities and femininities in Tāmir’s stories channels compliance and/or subversion to patriarchy and patriarchal authoritarianism.

In the first part, this dissertation puts into conversation Tāmir’s early works written in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the modernist trend. The organic relationship Arabic literature enjoyed with the project of national liberation is reflected in the fundamentally male-centred nature of the stories, leaving female characters at the margins of a progressive
and existentialist struggle for emancipation from authoritarianism, patriarchy, religious tradition and exploitation. While examples from the very early stories show the significant presence of a genuine concern with the sexual dimension of female characters, episodes expressing a more openly political stance also exhibit a tendency to instrumentalise the female body in order to denounce the pervasiveness of the authoritarian state.

The second part, devoted to the analysis of Tāmir’s latest works published since his self-imposed exile to the UK, looks at the emergence of prominent female characters openly expressing their sexual desire, simultaneously assessing their subjectivity and acting as decisive actors that shape the male protagonists’ masculinity. The analysis reveals how the works of this period retain a significant political charge, and brings together the appearance of original female characters and the correlated emergence of weak model of masculinity. In addition, stories typified by pessimism, as well as by extensive resorting to elements of Arab popular tradition, serve as illustrations of a peculiar form of Arab postmodernism which has appeared in Tāmir’s stories lately.

Note on transliteration:
For the transliteration of Arabic terms and names I follow the IJMES (International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies) guide. In the case of direct quotations from translations by others I report the IJMES transliteration of names conveyed in the quotation between parenthesis.
Chapter One: Introduction, theoretical framework and methodology

1.1 Background

The intimate relationship between modern Arabic literature and social and political developments in the Middle East has been widely addressed and acknowledged by numerous scholars. Works that explore this relationship abound, and it is uncommon to come across studies that completely overlook the tight bounds between contemporary literature in Arabic and the historical events in the region.\(^1\) In Syria – the country at the core of my analysis in this thesis – literature, political trends and historical developments have been intimately connected and inseparable, to the extent that some consider this relationship and the way politics and history reverberate in novels, plays and short stories the main trait that characterises Syrian literature.\(^2\) However, whilst cultural production from other countries of the Arab East has received considerable attention from European and North American academia, Syrian literature was until very recently a generally unexplored subject. Particularly in the context of specific conceptualisations attached to gender roles that the works by authors from the Syrian Arab Republic

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put forward, and the implications in the social and political context, a relative scантiness of resources is still the norm.³

This work aims at filling this void in the study of contemporary Arabic and Syrian literature by analysing representations of masculinity and femininity in the works of the Syrian Zakariyyā Tāmir (b. 1931, from now on Tāmir), an author widely considered the forefather of the modern short story in Syria, as well as an innovator in terms of both style and content in the broader field of Arabic literature.⁴

Born in Damascus in 1931, Tāmir is a renowned Syrian short-story writer, columnist and the author of numerous books for children. He grew up in the central al-Baḥṣa district of the Syrian capital and received formal education until the age of 13 when he was forced to leave school to work as a blacksmith. Together with a number of other authors coming from peasant and working-class backgrounds that appeared in the Syria during the 1950s and 1960s, Tāmir emerged as a short-story writer in the second half of the 1950s when he began publishing his works in al-‘Uqūd, a Damascene literary magazine. In this context his self-taught, unusual literary figure gained prominence in the Syrian literary scene with works that since the outset have been characterised by a close focus on the vicissitudes of solitary individuals, and their struggle against social constraints.

Tāmir’s first collection, Ṣahīl al- jawād al-abyaḍ (The neighing of the white steed)⁵, was published in Beirut in 1960 and since then he has

³ An exception to this is represented by Samira Aghacy, Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).
published ten compilations of short stories, three collections of satirical articles and numerous articles and essays in Arab periodicals. He gained international acclaim as a writer in the 1970s with his two most celebrated collections, *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq* (Damascus of fires)⁶ and *al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ʿāshir* (Tigers on the tenth day)⁷ which are both characterised by vivid and evocative allegorical depictions of life under dictatorship and authoritarianism. Patriarchy, intergenerational conflict, female sexuality and masculinity are also amongst the most recurrent themes his works.

In the early 1980s, during a period of political turmoil in Syria, the state’s censorship of his satirical articles and a general feeling of estrangement from the environment in Damascus were amongst the factors that triggered Tāmir’s unexpected decision to leave Syria. In 1981, he left Damascus and moved to London with his family, where he worked for various literary magazines of the Arab diaspora. A 16-year-long literary silence followed Tāmir’s relocation to England, and he did not publish any original collections of short stories in the period between 1978 and 1994. The author’s reticence to discuss details of his personal life during the many conversations I have entertained with him have made it difficult to ascertain the reasons for this interruption. One reason for this interlude can probably be referred to the new professional profile that Tāmir developed as he transferred from Syria to the United Kingdom, becoming a full-time editor for Arabic magazines in the United Kingdom. In the early 1980s he worked for *al-Dustūr* as a managing editor, and in the mid and late 1980s he was culture editor for *al-Taḍāmūn*. In addition, in the late 1980s and early 1990s Tāmir worked as managing editor for *al-Nāqid* and for the Riad El-Rayyes publishing house as culture editor, magazines and publishing houses considered to have played an important role in the development

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of the Arabic literary scene in the 1990s. For five years between 1989 and 1994 was a daily columnist for the Arabic London-based newspaper *al Quds al-‘arabī*.8

It was only in 1994 that Tāmir returned to the scene with *Nīdā’ Nūḥ* (Noah’s Summon)9, a compilation of thirty-six new short stories followed by *Sa-nadḥak* (We Shall Laugh)10 in 1998, *al-Ḥiṣrim* (Sour Grapes)11 in 2000, *Taksīr Rukab* (Breaking Knees)12 in 2002 and *al-Qunfudh* (The Hedgehog)13 in 2005, all of which were published for the Lebanese London-based Riyad el-Rayyes Books. For the same house, he has also published *Hijā’ al-qatīl li-qātilihi* (The victim’s satire of his killer)14 a collection of satirical articles that appeared in 2003. He has lived in Oxford since the late 1990s and until 2011 he visited Syria every year. Since 2012, Tāmir has participated in the Syrian revolution against the regime of Bashār al-Asad through his Facebook page *al-Mihmāz* (Arabic for ‘the spur’) where he publishes very short stories and brief comments not only satirising the government and the opposition with metaphors and allegories, but also mentioning its members, the Syrian president and other key figures explicitly. His last book is *Arḍ al-wayl* (The land of misery)15 a collection of satirical articles published for Jadawel in 2015.

The main objective of this thesis is to articulate the relationship between the major social and political developments in Syria and the thematic as well as stylistic transformations that Tāmir’s works have undergone. It scrutinises changing representations of male and female protagonists asking how they relate to the political context, how they have been

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affected by concurrent historical events, and which kind of gender role models they project. Although Tāmir’s stories feature commonly in general overviews of Syrian literature and are frequently anthologised, the political dimension of themes such as sexuality and gender roles, figuring prominently in his works, still represents a widely unexplored field of examination.

1.2 Research aims and questions

Looking to fill this void this analysis follows a theme-based, chronological, interdisciplinary methodology and borrows from a variety of authors to form a conceptual framework in investigating gender roles in Tāmir’s oeuvre. I situate his works within the context of both the major developments in contemporary Arabic literature, contemporary Middle Eastern history, as well as Arab and Syrian nationalist and authoritarian political discourse and practice exploring to what degree his short stories channel compliance and/or subversion to nationalist neopatriarchal authoritarianism. For this purpose, the research addresses the multiple configurations that the male and female protagonists of Tāmir’s stories have assumed throughout his career to reveal their conformity or subversion to a patriarchal conceptualisation of gender roles. The suggestive, politicised and committed anti-authoritarian nature of this author’s oeuvre is widely acknowledged; however, the implications of a style that denounces authoritarian violence and oppression have not been addressed from the point of view of gender studies. This study seeks to explain the advantages and limitations of a style that makes extensive use of bodily and sexual

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connotations, simultaneously transforming and reinforcing normative conceptualisations of gender identities, exposing unconcealed sexual desire, breaking certain taboos, and emphasising others. In particular, the focus is on representations that tackle or reinforce masculinity and femininity as performing two strict, separate and polarised subjectivities.

This research looks at the developments and transformations in Tāmir’s career to set out a series of questions that will be addressed throughout the next five chapters. Chapter Two serves as an introduction to the writer’s biography as well as a review of the secondary literature devoted to the political dimension of his works. The objective of the chapter is that of outlining how the politically committed and the anti-authoritarian nature of his stories has evolved throughout Tāmir’s career in order to answer a series of questions about the author’s production and his role in the literary field: Which elements of novelty and originality did Tāmir’s stories bring about in Arabic literature when he appeared on the literary scene in the late 1950s? Can we describe Tāmir as a committed writer as understood by his generation of writers of fiction? In what ways did his writing conform to or disrupt the predominant literary trends in Syria and the Arab East? Did this writer put forward a form of committed fiction in line with the demands of the literary field? How did the committed nature of Tāmir’s work evolve in parallel with the literary debates happening in his country? The second part of Chapter Two introduces aspects that will be examined in detail in the last two chapters, exploring the ways in which the works of Tāmir’s latest period have retained a significant political charge. What are the main stylistic transformations in the stories Tāmir has published in exile as compared to the stories of his early period? In the context of the rule of a persistent authoritarian regime and its increasing presence in the life of citizens and intellectuals, what are the strategies that characterise the works of this writer in this period? Has diaspora
represented a break from political engagement for Tāmir? Or has diaspora afforded him a new way forward? Has the Syrian revolution allowed this writer to express his views more overtly or has his position changed as a consequence of the uprising?

The third and fourth chapters deal with stories from Tāmir’s first five collections (Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyad, Rabī’ fī al-ramād (Spring in the ashes)\(^{17}\), al-Ra’d (The thunder)\(^{18}\), Dimashq al- ḥarā’iṣq, and al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ʿāshir) which appeared between 1960 and 1978, investigating the ways in which a predominantly modernist, anti-patriarchal and emancipatory ideological tone was reflected in the form of the stories as well as in the roles performed by male and female characters. Examples from the first five collections are subjected to an analysis of different configurations of gender roles, which brings into view the relationship between the modernist character of the first works, the changing representations of male and female protagonists, and their underlying conceptualisation of sexuality and bodies. How are ideology and commitment reflected in Tāmir’s representations of male and female characters? How did modernism impact the form and structure of the short stories in this period? What are the roles usually assigned to male and female protagonists in this period and how do they reflect a specific ideological stance? In addition, the second, third and fourth chapters address the extent to which this predominantly modernist and ideological approach to writing gradually changed in Tāmir’s works since the early 1970s and the ways this was reflected in both the form and the content of the stories published between 1970 and 1978. Moreover, this research aims at addressing the implications of sexuality, the body and the different connotations attached to female and male protagonists in stories that denounce the invasive and impudent nature of the state and its representatives. The third and fourth

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chapters also address the transformations in the approach to the patriarchal family and the authoritarian state. The focus on the family – a recurrent theme in Tāmir’s stories – seeks to address the extent to which we can interpret the asphyxiating nature of the patriarchal family as represented in Tāmir’s stories as an allegory for authoritarian oppression and control. What are the political, historical and stylistic elements that engendered transformations in the representations of female sexuality in Tāmir’s work as well as a satirical or cathartic representation of patriarchy that has the potential of exploring masculinities in their multiple configurations? How do his stories denounce the emasculating nature of patriarchal authoritarianism and of authoritarianism as an intensification of patriarchy? How are his works revealing of patriarchal masculinity as a strategy of domination that weighs equally heavy upon men and women? In which ways does a critique of the oppressive authoritarian state impact the representations of male and female protagonists?

Finally, the last two chapters focus on the works published by Tāmir between 1994 and 2002 (Nidā’ Nūḥ, Sa-naḍḥak, al-Ḥiṣrim, Taksīr Rukab). The fifth chapter takes further the analysis of female characters, bringing forward the themes addressed in the fourth chapter to scrutinise differences and commonalities in their representations of female sexuality between Tāmir’s early and latest stories. In doing so, the chapter elucidates the political dimension of a more equal approach to the sexes and transgressive representations of female sexuality in Tāmir’s latest work, with a focus on female performances of sexuality. What do Tāmir’s representations of female characters entail in the context of contemporary Syria, under the rule of a supposedly progressive albeit authoritarian regime? What significance does this trope have to gender hierarchies and roles? To what extent does representing female sexuality disrupt authoritarianism at the level of narratives and ideology? How do the numerous episodes concerning
female sexuality find coherence in defying the patriarchal/authoritarian sexual organisation? To what extent does the development of these representations throughout Tāmir’s career contradicts or is an indication, or even an anticipation of the retreat of progressive nationalist ideologies and the changes witnessed in the field of cultural production? Has a feminine anti-patriarchal subjectivity emerged as a consequence of abandoning ideological commitment which used to characterise cultural production in the Middle East? If so, what are the characteristics of this new female subjectivity, and how is it mirrored by new configurations of masculinity as embodied by male protagonists?

Overall, the dissertation analyses feminine and masculine identities as mutually informed. Hence the sixth and final chapter closes the circle by returning to the study of male characters, seeking to determine the extent to which the emergence of strong and omnipresent female characters has affected the representations of male protagonists. The main purpose of the last chapter is to investigate the transformations that the most recurrent representations of masculinity in Tāmir’s latest stories display in the context of ideological and political fragmentation. Moreover, the chapter asks how the multiplicity of voices and themes brought about by the process of fragmentation has challenged a polarised notion of gender roles. In which ways has the collapse of a largely male-centred totalising discourse impacted the representations of male bodies and male sexuality? How do the stories of this writer contribute to a conceptualisation of masculinity that is essentialist or determined by social and historical conditions? In what ways have the transformations of the male body and of masculinity as represented by Tāmir retained a significant political dimension in relation to the persistence of patriarchal authoritarianism? What are the new configurations of male subjectivity and male sexuality that have arisen
in relation to the transformations of femininity and female sexuality in the stories?

The nature and the significance of a number of transformations that Tāmir’s style underwent will be analysed and considered giving relevance to the recurrence of roles, traits and characteristics attached to male and female protagonists, and not their mere occurrence. The different chapters quote or paraphrase multiple episodes that appeared at different times, to substantiate the main argument linking representations of femininity and masculinity to political and historical trends and transformations.

The chronological analysis of formal and thematic developments in Tāmir’s writing in relation to historical and political transformations divides the textual corpus in question into two main stages, the first one covering a time span of approximately twenty years from 1958 to 1978; the second, addressing the stories that appeared between 1994 and 2002. This division deliberately leaves out of our analysis the numerous collections of short stories for children, including Tāmir’s latest collection of short stories al-Qunfudh which have been published in the form of compilations and in local Syrian magazines.

The decision to divide this author’s oeuvre into two periods is motivated by a variety of reasons: first, the disparity between the historical periods in which different collections appeared. Second, this decision takes into consideration the events surrounding the author’s personal life in the period between the end of the first period and the beginning of the latest one, since in 1981 Tāmir left Syria and migrated to England where he has resided to the present day. The fundamental reason for this demarcation, however, is aligned with the main objective of this research, i.e. articulating the relationship between stylistic and literary transformations in the works of this writer and the major social
and political transformations that Syria and other countries of the Arab East have witnessed, and which will be discussed below. Such an approach must address the transformations that have traversed the literary and political dominion in Syria and the broader Arab East. To situate the stories in the context in which different political articulations for representations of masculinity have emerged, this research makes reference to the main historical events that Syria and the Middle East have gone through in the last decades. Highlighting these events will allow us to situate Tāmir’s stories in the context of Syrian political history to appreciate their relevance in an authoritarian and patriarchal context, helping to substantiate the reading proposed.

Whilst studies of contemporary Arabic and Syrian literature that connect aesthetic and thematic transformations to historical events pinpoint their chronological demarcation between the pre- and post-1967 writings, Tāmir’s stories cannot easily be grouped in the same fashion. The dramatic peak of the Six-Day War of June 1967 marked an unprecedented setback in the history of Pan-Arabism with the defeat of the tripartite alliance between Syria, Jordan and Egypt by the Israeli army. The episode is known in the Arab world as al-naksah (Arabic for setback) and, in hindsight, represents the beginning of an era of decline for Arab nationalism. Six years later, Syria alone was to face another trauma in the October War of 1973 (normally referred to in Syria as Tishrīn, Arabic for October) that marked the definitive loss of the Golan Heights to Israel. The gradual transformations undergone by representations of masculinity and femininity in this period have to be scrutinised against the backdrop of the aftermath of the 1967 and 1973 wars and defeats, as well as of authoritarian patriarchal discourse and

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19 See for example Roger Allen, “Literary history and the Arab novel”, World Literature Today, (2, Spring, 2001), pp. 205-213; Others however, have also stressed the oversimplified nature of this demarcation. See Starkey, Modern Arabic Literature, p. 139.

the dramatic emergence of president Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad on the Syrian political scene, as well as the cult of personality that came to surround his figure, particularly after the 1973 war.

Undoubtedly, in a field with such robust bonds with the Arab nationalist cause as contemporary Arabic literature was in the 1960s, no author or critic could have possibly been indifferent to events of such magnitude and long-lasting impact. Yet, on closer inspection, in tracing the development of Tāmir’s stories chronologically in relation to the major historical events in Syria and the broader Arab East caution is warranted. The fundamental role local literary magazines played in showcasing young writers is an important aspect of Syria’s literary market that some of the most important contributions on Tāmir’s work have overlooked.\textsuperscript{21} The role of institutions like the Lebanese magazines al-Ādāb or Shi‘r for cultural debate in the Arab East can hardly be overstated, and it was precisely in the pages of such outlets that Tāmir made his first appearance as a young writer on the Arab literary scene. His very first publication “Rajul min Dimashq” (A man from Damascus) appeared in al-Nuqqād, a Damascene literary magazine renamed al-Nāqid after 1960, followed the next year by “al-Ṣayf” (The summer) again in al-Nuqqād. By the time his first compilation of short stories (Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyād), appeared in 1960 all the stories contained in it had appeared at different times between 1958 and 1959 in al-Ādāb and al-Thaqāfa. The publication of Tāmir’s second collection in 1963 (Rabī’ fī al-ramād, Spring in the ashes) followed a similar pattern: out of eleven stories, seven appeared between 1960 and 1962 in a variety of Syrian, Lebanese and Egyptian magazines. The same is also true for some of the stories from al-Ra‘d, which appeared

in 1970 where almost every single story in it had already appeared in the Arab Writers’ Union official periodical al-\textit{Ma‘rifā} between 1967 and 1969. Closely aligning publishing dates with concurrent historical events is particularly problematic in Dimashq al-\textit{harā’iq}, which was published in Damascus in 1973 but contains episodes that appeared as early as 1960 in al-\textit{Ādāb}, displaying developments and transformations that cannot be clearly situated in the context of the post-1967 defeat.

The following chart, based loosely on the table included in Soraya Botrous’s \textit{Les Influences Occidentales sur la nouvelle en Syrie Depuis 1946} (Western influences on the Syrian short story after 1946)\textsuperscript{22}, illustrates in detail the dates of original publication for Tāmir’s short stories between 1958 and 1978. The chart also indicates the collection in which each individual short story appeared, highlighting sometimes a time-lapse of a decade between the stories’ original publication and their appearance in a particular compilation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal/magazine</th>
<th>Short story’s title in Arabic</th>
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<th>Magazine</th>
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<td>Rabī’ fī al-ramād</td>
<td>April 1960</td>
<td>Rabī’ fī al-ramād (1963)</td>
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<td>Ḥaql al-banafsaj</td>
<td>July 1960</td>
<td>Dimashq al-harā‘iq (1973)</td>
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<td>Shams šaghīra</td>
<td>December 1961</td>
<td>Rabī’ fī al-ramād (1963)</td>
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<td>Jankīz Khān</td>
<td>March 1962</td>
<td>Rabī’ fī al-ramād (1963)</td>
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<td>Ibtasim ya wajha ha al-mut‘ab</td>
<td>February 1959</td>
<td>Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ (1960)</td>
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<td>al-Ādāb</td>
<td><strong>Qaranfula lil-āsphalt al-mut‘ab</strong></td>
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Overlooking this peculiarity of the literary market in Syria inevitably leads to overgeneralisation and cause-effect explanations charged with fallacy and inaccuracy, and the historical impact of events – important as they may have been – must not be overstated when looking at the stories of this first period. More often than not, looking for example at aspects and transformations in the stories of these collections as being in a direct relationship with the major events that Syria witnessed in those years can be misleading. For example, to interpret aspects of a story from *Rabī’ī fī al-ramād*, which appeared in 1963 in the aftermath of Syria’s 1962 secession from the United Arab Republic, as the echo of that particular event or of the consequences of that experience fails to notice that the story might have appeared to the public prior to the publication of the compilation. Moreover, considering that Tāmir started writing and publishing short stories in literary magazines as early as 1958 this aspect attains greater criticality with the collections published in the 1970s, because the time span during which the single stories appeared becomes much wider. The historical and political context in which such stories, in their form and content, were imagined, produced and negotiated must not be inferred simply from the individual collections’ date of publication. This research looks at the collections Tāmir published between 1960 and 1978 not only as separate artistic units signalling the impact on literary production of given occasions, but situates the individual stories in different contexts at the time of publication.
The second period of Tāmir’s oeuvre on the other hand, marks further fundamental formal transformations that serve to substantiate the choice to divide his works into two separate periods. Thirteen years of literary “silence” followed Tāmir’s relocation to the United Kingdom in 1981, during which he did not publish any collections of short stories. His latest collections appeared in the period between 1994 and 2002 and contain only original stories that have not appeared in any other literary outlet, and are distinguished from his early works for being attempts to display a more manifest degree of homogeneity in the themes addressed. While for example Nidā’ Nūḥ’s and and Sa-nadḥak’s stories possess a more manifest focus on Arab historical tradition in contrast with a present typified by pessimism, in al-Ḥiṣrim and Taksīr Rukab the role of sexuality and the changing nature of masculinity emerges more prominently. Given the greater focus that this research puts on the gendered dimension of Tāmir’s writing, in the last two chapters this will be reflected by the larger number of excerpts quoted from specific compilations like al-Ḥiṣrim and Taksīr Rukab in which these subjects are addressed more extensively.

1.3 Theoretical framework and methodology

Above all, the framework for this analysis borrows from studies that address the political significance of literary works employing two main strands, one broadly applicable to cultural production regardless of its geographical location, the other one with a closer focus on the history of contemporary literary output from the Arab East. Firstly, this research looks at the short stories of Tāmir as works of art whose multiple dimensions, collective and political, individual and atypical, male and female, reflect the specificity of Syria’s experiences of modernisation, nationalist ardour, neo-patriarchal authoritarian rule, defeat, occupation, and ideological fragmentation in the decades between 1960 and 2002, i.e. the period during which the works under
analysis appeared. Employing a theoretical approach that can be loosely defined as Marxist, but in its multiple and diverse configurations, borrowing from Terry Eagleton’s and Raymond Williams’s contribution to the study of fiction and its social dimension, this project examines the relationship between the formal transformations that Tāmir’s short stories have undergone and the ways in which representations of masculinity and femininity have evolved in relation to historical events. Williams’s approach looks at fiction as possessing the distinctively unique capacity to observe social experience that has not yet become delineated in rational expository discourses. In this vein, this dissertation explains these transformations in style and content as signalling a slowly but steadily changing world-view and a declining nationalist ideology, not as a separate superstructure detached from consciousness and relationships, rather as social experience that is interrelated with “structures of feelings” – to employ Williams’s definition – concerning the lived experience of men and women. This approach proves particularly useful for this endeavour to connect linguistic and strictly literary analysis of Tāmir’s writing with changing representations of gender roles as social and historical experience and their implications in relation to nationalism, patriarchy and authoritarianism. This approach looks at the form and content of Tāmir’s works as intimately interconnected, giving consideration to the way the form of Tāmir’s stories, their structure and style have been historically determined by the content they have embodied throughout his career.

In doing so, I employ a variety of secondary resources to zoom in and observe the works of Tāmir in the context of contemporary Arabic literature. First, my analysis draws on the concepts of ideological

18 Williams, Marxism and literature, p. 128-135.
fragmentation and of collapsing totalising discourse introduced by the Syrian literary critic Kamal Abu Deeb in his analysis of the relationship between the major political transformations and cultural production in the Arab East since the 1970s. In his essay “The collapse of totalizing discourse and the rise of marginalized/minority discourses” Abu Deeb brings together the socio-political transformations that have taken place in the Arab world since the 1970s, and newly emergent literary modes of expression that have blossomed across the region. In particular, Abu Deeb focuses on the relationship between modern Arabic literature and the nationalist, socialist and emancipatory ideologies that dominated the political landscape of Syria and the Arab East in the decades following the Second World War. Central to Abu Deeb’s argument is the detailed account of the characteristics of two trends of literary production in Arabic which have emerged in different historical conditions: the first – called modernist, or ḥadāthī (from the Arabic ḥadātha, for modernity) – being organic to nationalist, socialist and emancipatory ideologies; the second, exemplified by a number of works showcasing the crisis of ideology and authority, which began in the early 1970s until today. The trends in Arabic literature in the decades between the 1980s and 2000 have been interpreted by Abu-Deeb as the result of a process of fragmentation on a political and ideological level, and as the consequence of the collapse of the totalising discourse of modernity (ḥadātha). Up until the 1970s cultural creation had derived its vitality from a collective project whose failure and collapse has engendered a variety of new styles and themes,

including a shift to a female viewpoint in the focus on specifically feminist issues.  

Although Abu Deeb does not make mention of Tāmir’s short stories in his essays, this thesis argues that this author’s oeuvre exemplifies the radical transformations that the collapse of totalising discourse has brought about in contemporary Arabic literature. Tāmir’s early collections of short stories first appeared at a point in history in which the influence and impact of the emancipatory ideologies of nationalism and socialism on the cultural output was at its peak. The rest of his works on the other hand appeared between the 1970s and 2000s, the three decades during which the transformations Abu Deeb analyses have manifested more significantly. Abu Deeb offers two radically different ways of theorising this process and its effects on cultural production, either as a fragmentation of all concepts of unity and singularity, or alternatively as a breeding ground for the emergence of a variety of voices and points of view. Hence, following Abu Deeb’s approach, this study argues that the fragmented and apparently uncommitted nature of Tāmir’s writing – first detectable in his 1970s works – has brought about transformations and a proliferation of themes and voices, with new configurations for femininity and masculinity, asking to what extent this has engendered transgressive subjectivities for males and females which subvert a patriarchal worldview on gender roles, desire and sexuality. 

For this purpose, the approach to the study of gender roles and representations of masculinities and femininities as mutually informed conceptualisations and its application to contemporary Arabic literature represents a crucial reference point. The concept of hegemonic masculinity proposed by R W Connell provides the theoretical framework to approach the changing representations of gender roles in 

26 Ibid., p. 351.
relation to the historical and political context. Introduced by Connell in 1987 (and subjected to numerous reformulations) and loosely based on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as a study of the power relations at play within gender roles, the theory of hegemonic masculinity questions the social, political and cultural dynamics that underpin patriarchy i.e. the “dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”

The model of hegemonic masculinity represents a normative way of performing one’s masculinity that reinforces men’s superiority in society. However, Connell’s ideas – far from normatively presenting men as a monolithic social group – examine patriarchy and the privilege that men derive from it in a variety of ways, including hegemonic, complicit, marginal and subordinate masculinities, stressing possible transitions from one dominant position to another. Borrowing from Gramsci’s interpretation of class relations, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the “configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy.” The strength of Connell’s theory lies in explaining complicit forms of masculinity affiliated with non-overtly dominant practices. Although they do not entail openly misogynist behaviours, complicit practices nevertheless reinforce patriarchy by indifferently accepting the existing organisation of gender roles. In addition, Connell notes that subordinate masculinity forms reinforce hegemonic masculinities through seemingly transgressive performances which nevertheless throw normative understandings of gender roles into relief.

Besides, the concept of subordinate masculinity introduces the idea that

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29 Ibid., *Masculinities*, p. 77.
30 Ibid., pp. 76-81.
31 Ibid., p. 76.
32 Ibid., p. 77.
33 Ibid., pp. 79-80.
hegemonic masculinity performs its dominant position through men in relation to women, but also onto other men.34

Connell’s theory has proven an extremely successful and controversial contribution to the study of gender. Since the late 1980s it has been applied in fields as diverse as education, criminology, sports, geography, law and feminism.35 While applying Connell’s theory – formulated in Australia and tested in various Western contexts – to literature, as well as to a context like Syria might seem problematic, given the notable cultural differences between the two settings, this approach has been implemented successfully by Samira Aghacy’s in Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967, particularly in its focus on the local peculiarities that literary production from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq display. In line with the arguments proposed by Abu Deeb, and with a similar approach to the relationship between nationalist discourse, historical events and literature, Aghacy’s study proposes a closer look at the new configurations that gender roles have acquired in contemporary Arabic literature. Similarly, my dissertation situates Tāmir’s works also in a specifically Syrian context by situating the significance of their aesthetic transformations within the framework of Syrian literature. Literature by authors from the Syrian Arab Republic has developed a set of themes that have become “typical”, and mostly ascribable to the nature of the authoritarian regime that has dominated its political life since the 1970s.36

This peculiarly local character becomes relevant in the light of three further subcategories that Connell’s theory of masculinity puts forward. While initially framing hegemonic masculinity as based on “the global

34 Ibid., p.78.
35 Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept”, pp. 833-834.
dominance of men over women”\textsuperscript{37}, in its most recent version the theory considers masculinities at three different levels: the local, the regional and the global:

1. Local: constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities, as typically found in ethnographic and life-history research;
2. Regional: constructed at the level of the culture or the nation-state, as typically found in discursive, political, and demographic research;
3. Global: constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media, as studied in the emerging research on masculinities and globalization.\textsuperscript{38}

Particularly in its local and regional configurations the concept of hegemonic masculinity becomes relevant to the Syrian context that is the object of this analysis. Looking at the interaction of these two levels Connell highlights the intimate connection and mutually informed nature of local (familial) and regional (national) patriarchy, adding to the argument proposed by Hisham Sharabi and Halim Barakat about authoritarianism as an intensification of patriarchy, linking the rise of authoritarianism-cum-patriarchy to failed projects of modernisation. According to Sharabi, common to most regimes in the region is “the transideological model of authority”\textsuperscript{39} and the employment of a patriarchal discourse that serves to reinforce authoritarianism as the unquestionable provider of unity and harmony. On the other hand, Barakat’s analysis of the Arab contemporary family situates the most widespread patterns of familial structures at the intersection between

\textsuperscript{38} Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept”, p. 849.
politics and religious beliefs, arguing that authoritarianism derives its legitimacy from the widespread organisation of the family as male-centred. In particular, Barakat emphasises the role of the patriarchal family as the primary source of identification and political orientation for the individual, shaped by the dominant figure of the father, whose dominance reproduces the same rituals and coercion typical of authoritarianism.\footnote{Halim Barakat, 	extit{The Arab World – Society, Culture, and State}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 97-118.}

The Asad regime in Syria has employed familial metaphors extensively to construct a cult of the leader that functions as the source of identification for all Syrians, and demands loyalty from his children-citizens in exchange for protection.\footnote{Mordechai Kedar, 	extit{Asad in Search of Legitimacy – message and rhetoric in the Syrian press under Hafiz and Bashar}, (Sussex Academic Press, 2005), p. 21.} This rhetoric in turn is based on traditional icons of loving, austere fathers as the centre of families, and on widespread standards of family that are patriarchal and pyramidally hierarchical. Lisa Wedeen has analysed in detail the semiotic implications of the ideological representations of Syria as the metaphorical family in connection with political atomisation and authoritarianism under the Asad regime.\footnote{Lisa Wedeen, 	extit{Ambiguities of domination: politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 49.} Wedeen shows how this transposition of the familial into the national in contemporary Syria has been constructed in peculiar ways so as to reinforce obedience without necessarily eliciting genuine veneration for the supreme figure of the dictator. By emphasising the harmonious and fraternal nature of public life in Syria, the state narrative stresses the centrality of the patriarchal family as “natural”, and of the father as the benevolent and wise leader of his children. The two levels of familial and national identification processes are intertwined in a narrative that appropriates the existing patterns of familial loyalty and obedience, projecting them onto the leader. The one-minded organisation of the patriarchal family, is
reproduced in a dictatorship, accompanied by the silencing of dissident views, stripping the individual of agency and concentrating all legitimacy and responsibility on the father/leader. Whilst the Syrian political realm is characterised by such ambiguities, literature possesses the potential to influence the political mentality and foster change by unmasking contradictions, and to elicit questions and doubts by challenging the certainties of an imagined reader. My objective here is to show how literature challenges these narratives and how Tāmir’s works in particular put forward a satirical or cathartic representation of patriarchy that has the potential to unmask specific ambiguities.

To explore the effects of hegemonic masculinity on both men and women, and its institutionalisation through patriarchal authoritarianism it is necessary to introduce two further categories of practices organic to Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity: the processes of authorisation refers to mechanisms supporting men in retaining power as a group, while marginalisation refers to practices preventing women or a certain group of men from obtaining power. These practices prove particularly useful in examining the relevance of episodes featuring female characters and female sexual desire. As Sharabi shows, patriarchy promotes a normative conceptualisation of femininity that attempts to naturalise the female roles as mothers, sisters and child-bearers, while obscuring sexual desire. In the context of Arab and Muslim societies the relevance of transgressive female sexual behaviour has been famously addressed by the works of Nawal el-Saadawi (Nawāl al-Sa’dāwī) and Fatima Mernissi (Fāṭima Marnīsī) perhaps the founders of contemporary Arab feminist thinking in their reflections on the patriarchal perspectives towards the role of women and female sexuality. In their pivotal works al-Mar’a wa al-jins (Women and sexuality) and Beyond the veil, el-Saadawi and Mernissi

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43 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, p. 33.
44 Ibid., p. 32.
pioneer a scientific approach to female sexuality in Arab and Muslim societies which stresses the subtle relationship between the repression or the concealment of the female’s sexual drives, and the preservation of an order that gives centrality to the male.\textsuperscript{45} Mernissi’s analysis of female sexuality as \textit{fitna}, or a source of disorder, demonstrates how women openly expressing their libido are framed as a considerable challenge to the institution of patriarchy, with deep religious and political implications, concluding that women’s sexual instincts are fundamentally understood as a threat to the worldly order. Although the significance of the term \textit{fitna}, embodied by women, encompasses various positive and negative connotations, in the context of the relationship between men and women as regulated by Islamic jurisprudence, it represents a vital threat to the male’s stability and well-being.\textsuperscript{46} In addition to el-Saadawi and Mernissi’s studies, other studies with a focus on the traditional models of masculinity and femininity in the Middle East have substantiated this approach, and have established how the construction of gender roles was closely linked to notions of honour and shame. In this traditional conceptualisation of femininity chastity and purity are the defining traits of the ideal model of woman.\textsuperscript{47} Such observations on how “Islam” or “the Arab World” view the relationship between the sexes are certainly of help to this research, as they provide a useful framework for the numerous cultural connotations of many of Tāmir’s stories dealing with female sexuality. Connecting the relevance of these views to neopatriarchy with studies looking at the relationship between gender-motivated fiction and political change in parallel with the historical events in Syria, allows us to grasp the


\textsuperscript{46} Mernissi, \textit{Beyond the Veil}, p. 27.

political implications of the textual corpus in the context of literary and ideological developments.

The paucity of resources on different conceptualisation of masculinity and femininity in Syrian literature, has represented a significant limitation for the scope of this research, making it necessary to draw inspiration from studies with a focus on contexts and works that are not necessarily Syrian, Arab or Islamic. Hence, the fourth and fifth chapter rely also on an approach to female sexuality, patriarchy and authoritarianism similar to Mary Beth Tierney-Tello’s in her analysis of South American women writing under dictatorship, a work that offers many an insight into the implications and the potential of deconstructing a unifying and naturalising vision of gender and desire.\textsuperscript{48} Tierney-Tello’s work’s relevance resides in its focus on a separate, distant context (South America) which nonetheless was characterised by socio-political dynamics that are similar to Syria in the patriarchal and gendered dimensions that authoritarianism had attained, and seeks to clarify the potential of literary works that address authoritarianism as an intensification of patriarchy. Far from being merely a weakness or an expedient dictated by necessity this choice enriches this research and contributes to further substantiate the argument of the significance of this writer’s works. Particularly bringing into view the parallels between Syria and countries of South America proves useful for deconstructing a normative approach that relates patriarchy, authoritarianism and sexual bigotry to Arabic and Islamic cultural elements and they add a further element of nuance, connecting patriarchy to authoritarianism as political theory and practice regardless of its geographical setting.

These approaches to literature, history, gender and ideology are brought together into an analytical framework which looks chronologically at the developments in the representations of male and female characters to ascertain the changing relationship between the works of this writer and prevalent state ideology. However, as Eagleton has suggested, this outlook by no means regards literature as a mere reflection of ideology, but rather explores how literature is at the same time within ideology and outside of it; how literature distances itself from a certain worldview while illuminating the reader about the effects of that worldview on the lived experiences of men and women.49 Analysing Tāmir’s works in terms of the historical conditions that have produced them, this research looks at the relationship between the forces of patriarchy and authoritarianism and the lived experiences of individuals represented by the stories’ protagonists; it explores gender roles as performed by Tāmir’s protagonists as both the reflection and transgression of norms and hierarchies; it investigates how the stylistic and formal strategies employed by this writer signal his affiliation to a predominant worldview and a form of subversion to it.

Chapter Two: Literature review: situating Zakariyyā Tāmir’s oeuvre.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as an introduction to the political significance of Tāmir’s oeuvre, situating his short stories in the context of transformations in the field of cultural production in Syria. Starting with a review of the relevant secondary literature, this chapter establishes the centrality of Tāmir’s figure against the backdrop of a new literary sensibility in the mid-20th century, and discusses Tāmir’s writings in relation to the concept of literary commitment (īltizām) in Syria and the broader Middle East between the 1950s and the 1980s. In addition, putting Tāmir’s works in conversation with the literary debates happening in Syria in those decades, particularly with regard to socialist realism, the first part of this chapter elucidates their novelty in contemporary Arabic literature, and serves as an introduction to the relevance Tāmir’s works have attained in Syria since an early stage. Examples from debates that Tāmir’s style elicited in literary magazines and newspapers will be addressed in parallel to details about his personal life as well as relevant excerpts from his short stories and from the author’s own contributions to the debate. Similarly, the second part reviews secondary literature relevant to the second period of Tāmir’s career. Taking into account notable differences between these two periods, the second part investigates the transformations in the relationship between literary production and social and political developments in the region, particularly new forms of commitment in Arabic and Syrian literature. Tāmir’s stories from this period have attracted a similar degree of attention, as has the issue of dissident or committed literature in Syria; however, the number of contributions in Arabic is significantly smaller and studies of his latest stories have appeared mostly in Europe and North America.
2.2 First part: The literary debate in Syria and the Arab East 1948-1978

Zakariyyā Tāmir was born in the al-Baḥṣa neighbourhood of Damascus on 2 January 1931. Recounting his upbringing in a recent interview Tāmir described the environment he grew up in as “proud of its ignorance” because no one in his household read. In 1944 at the age of 13 he was forced to leave school to provide for his family by working as a blacksmith in a factory in the neighbourhood, as well as in a variety of other manual professions. Despite being a personality deeply rooted in his native city, who rarely left Syria and had little knowledge of foreign languages, since a young age Tāmir was exposed to both Arabic and European literature in translation.50 An indication of his early exposure to European authors can be found in one of his very first stories, “Qaranfula lil-asfalt al-mut’ab” (A carnation for the tired tar) in which one of the protagonists mentions “We’re all crazy. Dostoevsky is a fool, Sartre is an idiot who doesn’t love the sun, Rimbaud is a rude child, Tchaikovsky is a sad frog, Lorca is a dark nightingale, Kafka is a cockroach and James Mason is a drum”.51 Tāmir’s first short stories were published in the late 1950s in Syrian and Lebanese literary magazines al-Nuqqād, al-Ādāb, and al-Thaqāfa, but his beginnings as a writer were difficult and it was only thanks to the moral support provided by Sāmī al-Jundī at the time the United Arab Republic’s Minister52 of Information and Propaganda that he pursued his ambitions as a short-story writer.53 In 1960 the Palestinian poet, critic and translator Salma Khaḍrā’ al-Jayyūṣī encouraged Tāmir to collect the stories that had previously been published in local magazines into a

51 Tāmir, “Qaranfula lil-asfalt al-mut’ab”, al-Ādāb, (11, 1959), p. 40; Tāmir, Sahīl al-jawād al-abyād, p. 108. All translations from Arabic are mine unless otherwise noted.
book. Khadrā’ al-Jayyūsī proposed his stories to Syrian poet Yūsuf al-Khāl, editor of the magazine Shi’r, who decided to publish his first collection Ṣāḥīl al-jawād al-abyād immediately afterwards. In 1961 the first public recognition for his work came from al-Ādāb, which awarded his story “Thalj ākhir al-layl” (Snow late at night), later included in his second collection, the prize for the best story. In the years between 1957 – when the first story by Tāmir appeared in al-Nuqqād – and the late 1970s, heated debates on the role of literature and intellectuals characterised the field of cultural production in Syria and in the broader Arab East. Outlining the historical events and the predominant literary trends in the Arabic speaking world in those decades is necessary to determine the degree of originality Tāmir’s works present, as well as to ascertain this writer’s peculiarities in relation to literary commitment, a concept central to the intellectual debate at the time.

In the first two decades after the end of World War II, a variety of historical and political factors, both specific to the Arabic-speaking context and the consequence of external influences, resulted in the rise of social realism as the predominant literary trend across Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. The defeat of the Arab armies in 1948, resulting in the loss of Palestine, and Arab nationalist enthusiasm had contributed to the spread of a conceptualisation of cultural creativity that considered literature as organic to the struggle for emancipation of the Arab nation. The establishment of the State of Israel in particular, and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land affected the entire region more directly on a political level, but the trends in cultural production too represented a reflection of this event, still referred to, to this day, as the nakba ‘the catastrophe’. As Edward Said noted in his analysis of formal transformations that the Arabic novelistic tradition underwent in the years following 1948, those events

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exerted an unprecedented degree of pressure on cultural production and its impact cannot be underestimated.

To say that 1948 made an extraordinary cultural and historical demand on the Arab is to be guilty of the crassest understatement. The year and the processes which it culminated represent an explosion whose effects continue to fall unrelentingly into the present. No Arab, however armed he was at those and later moments by regional or tribal or religious nationalism, could ignore the event. Not only did 1948 put forth unprecedented challenges to a collectivity already undergoing the political evolution of several European centuries compressed into a few decades: this after all was mainly a difference of detail between the Arab East and all other Third World countries, since the end of colonialism meant the beginning and the travail of uncertain national selfhood. But 1948 put forward a monumental enigma, an existential mutation for which Arab history was unprepared. 55

The issue of Palestine and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to neighbouring countries represented one amongst other major aspects which shaped the direction of the cultural establishment. The Palestinian cause however was certainly not the only issue that fostered the cultural debate and cultural production in the Arab world in the 1950s. Literary criticism, freedom of expression, the relationship with the West, the role of the Arab cultural heritage (al-turāth), the role of Islam and religion in general were but a few of many controversial subjects that stirred the debates taking place largely in local literary magazines such as the Lebanese al-Adāb. The influence of social realism on literary commitment in the 1950s and 1960s, and

the social and historical developments that motivated this trend are exemplified by the experience of the Lebanese monthly periodical established by the novelist Suhayl Idrīs in 1953, which promoted *al-adab al-multazim*, ‘committed literature’. The establishment of *al-Ādāb* – as Idrīs explained in the editorial note to the first issue – fulfils a widespread need amongst young Arab intellectuals for a periodical dedicated to the mutually influential relationship that literature entertains with society.\(^{57}\) *Al-Ādāb’s* trajectory in the decades from its establishment until the 1980s epitomises the variety of concerns that contributed to shape the literary field in those years. Arab nationalism, in a variety of interpretations (humanist, socialist, revolutionary), functioned as the overarching ideology that motivated the efforts of magazines like *al-Ādāb*,\(^{58}\) as well as organisations like the Syrian Writers’ Collective. The latter was established in Damascus in 1951 by a group of eight Syrian writers with an overtly socialist realist agenda and motivated by the desire to encourage works by Syrian writers, whose numbers were at that time smaller than their Lebanese and Egyptians counterparts.\(^{59}\) Both *al-Ādāb* and the Syrian Writers’ Collective represented prominent cultural institutions in Syria and the Arab East between the 1950s and 1970s, landmarks that assist us in situating Tāmir’s early oeuvre. On the one hand, *al-Ādāb* served as a fundamental platform for writers of essays, short stories and novel excerpts, and Tāmir published many of his early short stories in the pages of this magazine between 1958 and 1962. On the other hand, the Syrian Writers’ Collective, established in Damascus in 1951, adopted an understanding of commitment similar to *al-Ādāb’s* in fostering a

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\(^{56}\) This monthly periodical is still published to this day and its full archive is available on [www.al-adab.com](http://www.al-adab.com). Significantly, its slogan has remained remindful of its initial mission: “*akthar hadātha wam, ashadd iltizām wam*” (“more modern, more strongly committed”).


generally committed notion of literature, but gradually transitioned to play a fundamental role in spreading a peculiarly Marxist notion of commitment: socialist realism.\textsuperscript{60}

The 1950s being a period of intense political upheaval in Syria and across the Arab East, Syria alone witnessed six coups and joined Egypt, now led by Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s Free Officers’, in the United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1962.\textsuperscript{61} The political orientation Tāmir assumed in this period as a young writer, and whether or not he joined the Syrian Communist Party remain a subject for discussion. In his introduction to his analysis of Tāmir’s stories ‘Abd al-Razzāq ‘Īd claims that the state of disenfranchisement and poverty he had experienced, and the desire to associate himself with the local writers and intellectuals, pushed Tāmir to join the party – which according to ‘Īd played a fundamental role in the establishment of the Syrian Writers’ Collective – but was expelled in 1956.\textsuperscript{62} With regards to his affiliations, in an article published many years later in \textit{al-Ta\ hashed}, \textsuperscript{63} and revived in 2016 on his Facebook personal page,\textsuperscript{64} ‘Tāmir recounts his affiliation to the Arab Writers’ Association \textit{(Jam‘iyat al- Udabā‘ al-‘Arab)} an organisation established in 1958 for the specific purpose of counteracting the activities of the Syrian Writers’ Collective, the latter described by Tāmir as inspired by the ideals of Khālid Bzkāsh (leader of the Syrian Communist Party from 1930 until his death in 1994\textsuperscript{65}) and Andrei Zhdanov (Stalin’s emissary of cultural affairs). In turn Tāmir describes the Arab Writers’ Association as “a group of stray wandering writers who despised any form of literary or social constraint, who had dreams

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{63} Zakariyyā Tāmir, “Laysa bi-wāzīr wa-lā bi-shā‘ir”, \textit{al-Ta\ hashed}, (232, 1987), p.66.
\textsuperscript{64} https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1166362166783621&id=222667394486441&comment_id=1166392723447232&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%22%7D.
\textsuperscript{65} Dīb, \textit{Tārīkh Sūriyya al-mu‘āṣir}, p. 83.
to change the world and to change literature to elevate humanity, to encourage free creativity and to destroy old prisons erected in the name of refined writing”.

The Arab Writers’ Association however was to remain a short-lived experience, and the Syrian authorities closed it down following the establishment of the United Arab Republic in 1958.

Following his first publications and success, Tāmir took up a position in the Translation and Publication Department of the Syrian Ministry of Culture (1960-1963), and in 1963 he published his second collection Rabī’ fī al-ramād through the Ministry’s publishing house. In 1969 Tāmir participated actively in the establishment of the Arab Writers’ Union in Syria and he occupied the position of deputy chairman of the organisation between 1973 and 1975. His third collection of short stories, al-Ra’d, came out in 1970 followed by Dimashq al-harā’iq in 1973, both featuring short stories that appeared at different times in al-Ādāb, as well as in the Syrian Ministry of Culture’s literary magazine al-Ma’refa, of which he was editor-in-chief from 1978 to 1980 and in the Arab Writers’ Union’s official organ al-Mawqif al-Adabi of which he was the editor-in-chief from 1972 to 1975.

2.3 Tāmir’s early works and innovation: the short story’s ideological mark

A common feature of the secondary literature on Tāmir’s trajectory is the inclination to cast his oeuvre as an exception. Sabry Hafez and Șubhî Ḥadīdī, the two critics that have offered the most extensive contributions to the study of Tāmir’s short stories, have oftentimes described his style as uncommon, original and transgressive. Linking the thematic originality of his stories to concurrent historical events Hafez has addressed the stylistic and structural innovations that Tāmir’s

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works introduced into the Arabic short story. In his study of the modern Arabic short story Hafez employs a categorisation of the different periods and trends that is more detailed than Abu Deeb’s, distinguishing between authors that the latter summarises all together under a general “modernist” label. Instead, Hafez recognises significant differences between writers who expressed their modern sensibility through various stylistic choices, such as the realist, the socialist realist, or the romantic, dissecting the historical and ideological contexts that acted as crucial drivers in the emergence of these different styles. When Tāmir appeared on the literary scene, Egyptian and Lebanese short-story writers had represented the most significant examples of stylistic maturation of the genre and its ramification into different sensibilities, mostly realist and romantic. In Syria, short-story writers such as Sa‘īd al-Ḥūrāniyya, Fu‘ād al-Shāyb, and ‘Abd al-Salām al-‘Ujaylī – in turn strongly influenced by a generation of writers from the 1940s and of the 1950s, namely Yahyā Ḥaqqī and Yūsuf Idrīs from Egypt and Tawfīq Yūsuf ‘Awwād from Lebanon – had paved the way for the modernist sensibility that emerged in the 1960s, embodied by the more complex and sophisticated literary style of authors like Tāmir.

The impact of pioneering works of local Syrian contemporary literature on Tāmir is undeniable. Their portraits and most importantly their anti-colonialist and socialist political ideas inspired Tāmir in a way that reading their works pushed him to compose his own stories, something the author himself has acknowledged, justifying his literary endeavours with a desire to enrich the range of stylistic features and themes that the genre had hitherto addressed. Through the introduction of new techniques and themes Tāmir’s works in this period innovated the Arabic short story in terms of both style and content, consolidating the

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modern sensibility and surpassing the sentimental and realist forms. Through the stream of consciousness and the exploration of the inner self they brought onto the stage two major elements of innovation: lonesome, disenfranchised characters as their protagonists and an extremely brief, photographic fashion of writing that would later become Tāmir’s trademark. These innovations reflect a changing reality moving gradually towards a sense of estrangement and uncertainty, of questioning and examination. Stylistically, the feeling is captured through snapshots characterised by brevity and by the point of view of characters that – in Frank O’Connor’s definition of the modern short-story’s archetype – represented those “submerged population groups”. Unlike the novel and its protagonists’ capacity to engender the readers’ affinity, O’Connor argues for the short story’s tendency to be populated by non-heroic and estranged characters at the margins of society. This retreat into the inner space of the character signalled a further degree of development for the Arabic short story, a transformation which affected the political dimension of the text greatly, distinguishing Tāmir’s style from everything that had been published in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab-speaking world. In addition, elements of fantasia and dream, whose boundaries with reality are often blurred and confounded, endow Tāmir’s short story with a further element of stylistic originality, breaking the traditional boundaries between life and death, past and present, reality and imagination.

The individualist orientation in Tāmir’s style is the most remarkable trait of his writing in this period. Many of his first stories possess an autobiographical tone, as well as aspects of similarity with the works of French existentialists – which had been introduced and made popular

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71 Ibid., p. 317.
in the Arab world by literary magazines. In *The experimental Arabic novel*, Meyer argues that the rise of existentialism in the Arab world served as the foundation for the transition from realism to modernism.\(^7^4\) By providing a series of examples from the Egyptian Ṣun‘Allāh Ibrāhīm’s *Tilka al-rā‘iḥa\(^7^5\)* (The smell of it) Meyer argues for the impact of Camus’s writings and their influence in shaping a modern literary sensibility. The influence of the French existentialists on Arab litterateurs in this period was undoubtedly remarkable, exemplified by Bourhan Ghalioun’s opinion that “it was Camus, and not Marx, the one intellectual that influenced revolutionaries the most in the Near East after 1950”.\(^7^6\) Their influence is manifest also in the inspiration that Sartre’s magazine, *Les Temps Modernes*, provided to *al-Ādāb*’s founder Suhayl Idrīs.\(^7^7\) Like Sartre, *al-Ādāb*’s founder and contributors saw writers as part of a project in which action and morals are intertwined, and freedom is the fundamental principal to generate change.\(^7^8\)

### 2.4 Tāmir and the debate on commitment and socialist realism

Tāmir’s protagonists’ individualism, the strong presence of symbolism in his stories, and the affinity to French existentialism contradicted in a variety of ways the principles of socialist realism that had become prominent in Syria in the 1950s through the efforts of the Syrian Writers’ Collective. Refusing to respond to the demands of socialist realism according to which fiction must deliver a powerful message on society and class struggle, the cruel reality of exploitation, hardship and disenfranchisement against which Tāmir’s forlorn protagonists grapple

\(^{7^8}\) Ruocco, *L’intellettuale arabo tra impegno e dissenso*, pp. 79-84.
is countered instead by an alternative universe of dream and imagination that they construct. As Alexa Firat notes, socialist realism in Syria advocated a specific conceptualisation of literary commitment, rejecting contemporary literary and philosophical tendencies such as existentialism, Freudianism, and symbolism on the basis of their European origins, and because of their incompatibility with Arab nationalism and class struggle. In addition, the cultural debate was influenced significantly by Russian socialist realism.79 This approach to literature, in the way it was articulated in Russia in the 1930, and adopted by founders of the Syrian Writers’ collective, associated aesthetic strategies that did not serve the social function to a bourgeois or imperialist point of view.

Building on O’Connor’s conceptualisation of the short story and his analysis of the genre’s ideology, Sabry Hafez also stresses the disparity between the short story and the novel in Marxist terms highlighting the former’s inclination to explore human loneliness, incomprehension, ridicule and injustice. While the novel – in Benedict Anderson and Walter Benjamin’s theorisation – seeks to create a sense of community and belonging around protagonists that the reader can identify with, the short story takes the reader into the unexplored quarters of that community and deals with those individuals which the novel’s larger portrayal overlooks.80 It does not come as a surprise then that the champions of socialist realism in Syria between the 1950s and 1970s devoted their outpourings of accolades to a novelist like Ḥannā Mīna (b. 1924), while criticising Tāmir’s short stories. Both members of a new generation of writers hailing from an urban working-class background that emerged in the 1950s, Mīna always considered himself a socialist realist,81 and his novels enjoyed the praises of the socialist realist critics for their capacity to represent the vicissitude of the Syrian

79 Firat, “Cultural Battles on the Literary Field”, p. 158.
80 Hafez, The Quest for Identities, p. 27.
people under the French mandate\(^{82}\) with a focus on the hardships endured by the proletariat. In his introduction to Mīna’s 1954 novel al-
Maṣābīḥ al-zurq (Blue Lights),\(^{83}\) Shawqī Baghdādī – a founding member of the Syrian Writers’ Collective – celebrates this novel for its capacity to narrate life in Latakia and in Syria through the portraying of ordinary people’s lives during the Second World War. Baghdādī’s view is echoed in Aḥmad Muḥammad al-‘Āṭīyya’s al-Itīzām wa al-thawra fī al-adab al-‘arabī al-hadīth (Commitment and revolution in modern Arabic literature)\(^{84}\) and Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb’s ‘Ālam Ḥannā Mīna al-riwā’ī (Ḥannā Mīna’s novelistic world)\(^{85}\), which extol Mīna’s realistic depiction of the nation through the depiction of the working class. On the other hand, Tāmir has never tried his hand at the novel, but being himself a member of the working class born to a modest background his very first stories in particular possess strong autobiographical connotations and are sometimes told in the first person by a nameless narrator. The main difference with Mīna’s style however does not only lie in the degree of realism in his portrays of working-class experience – which features prominently, especially in Tāmir’s first collection – but more fundamentally in the genre’s predisposition to singularity and marginality to the detriment of the collective experience. The criticism Tāmir’s early works attracted in the cultural debate in Syria in the decades between 1958 and 1978 emerges prominently in the heated debates that his stories provoked in Syria in those years. A style displaying elements that contradicted the demands of socialist


realism, and a seemingly individualist divorce from class struggle, earned Tāmir the harsh criticism of some of his contemporaries. The relevance of Tāmir’s literary output and the controversy that these elements of novelty stirred at the time is manifest in the prominence afforded to his writing by two texts that appeared in Syria between 1974 and 1977: *al-Adab wa-al-idyuūliyā fi Sūriyya 1967–1973* (Literature and Ideology in Syria 1967-1973) by Nabīl Sulaymān and Bū ‘Alī Yaṣīn contains an entire section on this writer, providing a detailed critique of his third collection, *al-Ra‘d;* and *Ma‘ārik thaqaftiyā fi Sūriyya 1975-1977* (Cultural battles in Syria 1975-1977), whose second part is entirely devoted to a series of contributions on Tāmir’s work by Syrian literary critics. In an essay in the latter collection, “About the world of Zakariyyā Tāmir’s” by the young writer and critic Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb, Tāmir’s literary style and themes are criticised for their lack of commitment and their “nihilist retreat” visible in self-focused protagonists who are “not interested in social battles, and attempts to withdraw from the battlefield, dreams of perpetual sleep and death”.

In the eternal and universal conflict between the two abstract concepts of individual and society –al-Khaṭīb argues – Tāmir’s characters choose to withdraw from the battlefield and to isolate themselves in a world of dream and imagination. By dissecting and criticising the ideological shortcomings of each individual collection published by Tāmir between 1960 and 1973, condemning his writing for failing to impact and foster change, al-Khaṭīb’s article exemplifies the cultural atmosphere in which Tāmir’s first writing appeared. For al-Khaṭīb Tāmir’s divorce

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87 Ibid., p. 211.
from political Marxist and nationalist commitment becomes manifest particularly in the removal of the episode (ḥāditha), and characters who dream of perpetual sleep and death refusing to engage in social battles at the centre of the stage. In fact, al-Khaṭīb sees Tāmir’s early stories as uncommitted and nihilist, infested with individualism, embodied by protagonists who isolate themselves and long to attain bread and sexual satisfaction without having to deal with the outside world. And even in stories in which the protagonist loses prominence, to the advantage of the episodes and the subject addressed – a transformation al-Khaṭīb detects firstly in Tāmir’s Rabī’ī fī al-ramāḍ – the protagonists do not seem to benefit from this change, no empowerment is achieved and the characters remain largely helpless in the face of a harsh environment.\footnote{Ibid., p. 169.}

Compared to its predecessor (Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyad, whose stories are usually told by the narrator in the first person) Rabī’ī fī al-Ramāḍ for al-Khaṭīb represents a major turning point with regard to the main theme in Tāmir’s short stories: the conflict between the individual and society. However, although in this collection modern tools and systems of torture and killing do appear, there is not a significant change in the nature of Tāmir’s protagonists, whom al-Khaṭīb considers largely “negative” (silbīyya) for their refusal to take part in the on-going battle against authoritarianism. In al-Ra’d, the conflict between specific actors inside society begins to crystallise with its most recurrent protagonists, a trademark of Tāmir’s later stories: policemen and helpless civilians. In this collection, the policeman acquires epic and pseudo-philosophical traits, representing those forces, already present in the previous collections, that oppress the individual. In this context, the police officer can be interpreted as a symbol of the outside world, of society at large as perpetually opposed to the individual. Considering the social atmosphere in which Tāmir wrote his stories, the police officer can also be interpreted as a metaphor of the authoritarian Ba‘ath
regime. “But who is this policeman?” – asks al-Khaṭīb – “Is he just a policeman? Or is he a metaphor for the ruling authoritarian regime? Or is he perhaps a metaphor for those forces eternally opposed to the individual?”.

To exemplify what he considers the author’s nihilism and uncommitted style, al-Khaṭīb proposes an interpretation of an excerpt from Tāmir’s “Alladhī ʿahrqa al-sufun” (The one who burnt the ships).

The first day hunger was created.
The second day music was created.
The third day books and cats were created.
The fourth day cigarettes were created.
The fifth day coffee shops were created.
The sixth day anger was created.
The seventh day birds were created and their nests hiding on trees.

And on the eighth day interrogators were created, and they descended upon the cities accompanied by policemen, prisons and steel chains.

Tāmir’s own special reinventing of the Book of Genesis, according to al-Khaṭīb, exemplifies the author’s abstract view of the oppressive force of the state as detached from the historical conditions that produced it.

Whilst he acknowledges that the stories do possess a specific political significance, al-Khaṭīb’s criticism takes this story as a crucial example that illustrates the author’s universalisation of oppression embodied by the policemen, removing it from the specific context of contemporary authoritarianism. “Because” – al-Khaṭīb continues – “although Tāmir’s stories denounce oppression and abuses, they are also, somehow,

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92 Ibid., p. 171.
93 Tāmir, al-Raʿd, p. 19.
saying that oppression and abuse are eternal. In this way, the author escapes the clutches of a bitter reality, and embarks on a more bitter journey through which he aims to destroy life in its entirety.”

Socialist realism’s idea of the literary output as a message bearer with a clear role in the struggle against the dominance of petty bourgeoisie, and its view of the author as “the artist in uniform” met since a very early stage with Tāmir’s unreserved opposition. In particular, in his 1972 interview with the Syrian Ministry of Culture’s literary journal al-Ma’rifā, as well as in an article published in the al-Ba’th newspaper (quoted below), part of the heated debate stirred by al-Khaṭīb’s observations, Tāmir started clarifying a position on commitment in literature that was closer to Sartre’s conceptualisation of engagement in literature. Himself a champion of politically motivated literature, Sartre called for a high degree of autonomy of the artist by making a distinction between committed and tendentious art: the former being concerned with fundamental attitudes, rendering the author’s stance ambiguous to the eyes of socialist realists; the latter, intended to generate specific transformations in society, displaying a more overtly partisan style.

In the Arab World a similar approach to commitment in literature – which albeit animatedly debated was hardly ever put into question – was first promoted by the Egyptian Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, who illustrated his understanding of the writer’s engagement in the pages of al-Ādāb. After all, Ḥusayn is considered to have been the first Arab intellectual to translate Sartre’s ideas into Arabic, and the first to have introduced the concept of commitment (iltizām) into the literary debate, although advocating for the freedom of the artist from the

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95 Ibid., p.172.
97 Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature?, (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).
99 Verena Klemm, “Different notions of commitment (iltizām) and committed literature (al-adab al-multazim) in the literary circles of the Mashriq”, Arabic and Middle Eastern literature, (3:1, 2000), p. 57.
chains of ideological obligation. In Tāmir’s response to al-Khaṭīb’s observations, we can notice the hardening of the debate, but also more relevantly the manifest disparity in the conceptualisation of literature and the aesthetic autonomy that Tāmir claimed as a writer, a notion affiliated more closely with the general trends proposed by Sartre, as well as by *al-Ādāb* and Ḥusayn.

Literature in our nation is indeed a poor devil, and if it could take the shape of a human being in the flesh, it would choose that of a beggar sitting by the door of mosques and churches with his head down, wearing shabby clothes. Writers who are devoted to their environment and to a kind of literature distant from the spasmodic and loud zeal, are indeed the orphans at the reconciliation table.

One of the reasons for this despicable situation is the emergence of a clique of critics and litterateurs (*udabāʾ*) that claims to be the only honourable and fully aware group, the only repository of scientific and objective thought, which in the name of the present situation and its problems disregards all new literary output, with harsh categorisations and judgments that remind me of a butcher that prefers to drink blood over vodka. This groups snipes its unappealable sentences indiscriminately at writers that it considers reactionaries, because they don’t criticise colonialism, or traitors of the working class, because they talk about music, and cats and flowers. As if music, cats and flowers were members of the central intelligence. Or even writers that it considers shut off from reality because they don’t touch on *fedayyen* (*fidāʾīn*)patriotism.

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100 Badawi, “Commitment in contemporary Arabic literature”, p. 34.
This group is constituted by people with different interests and trajectories. Some of them have no literary background, they are more into economics and in putting forward their ideas they rely on the constitution that guarantees freedom of speech. Others are writers who’ve written extensively using a variety of pens, but have produced nothing but drug information slips. Others were writers in the past, then they fell asleep for ages, and suddenly woke up and came out of their tombs, expressing their loathing of anything written during their hibernation. The only thing uniting these people is their superficial view on literature and its role. Literature in their opinion is designated to liberate Palestine, Arabstan and al-Andalus; for them it’s up to literature to combat illiteracy and spread awareness amongst the citizens, and it’s responsible for the persecution of the black population of South Africa.

The same concerns with the rigid tenets of socialist realism and its widespread influence amongst Syrian literary critics underpinned Tāmir’s interview with al-Ma‘rifa, in August 1972, in which he laments lack of interest from Syrian literary critics in the formal aspects of literature. The entire interview revolves around the state of literary criticism in Syria and in the Arab world. The text’s political message and its affiliation with specific ideological trends is, according to Tāmir, all that Syrian critics would focus their efforts on, thereby reducing the text to a mere didactic container of ideological approaches, and their critique to instructions on how to address this or that issue afflicting Syrian and Arab societies. While Tāmir maintains that commitment to the causes of his own society should be a must for every writer

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101 With the term Arabstan (‘arabstān) the author here is referring to Iran’s Khuzestan Province, where a sizeable Arabic-speaking community resides.
104 Ibid. p. 110.
aspiring to exert any degree of impact on his/her environment, however he laments that literary criticism in the Arabic-speaking world requires writers to deliver “national liberation, education of the masses, to build factories, dams, hospitals and parks”. The interview also illustrates Tāmir’s attention to the autonomy of structure and form, signalling his role in the self-conscious search for styles and techniques that suit content and meaning, a quest that was characteristic of a mature modern sensibility which his works have contributed to achieve. In what seems like a tailored interview designed specifically to allow him to counter the attitude of Syrian socialist realist critics – examples of a style of “vulgar Marxist” literary criticism – Tāmir denounces not only their lack of focus on form but especially the excessive emphasis devoted to interpret the political attitude of authors, heedless of the fact that “we are deceiving ourselves if we believe that a literary work written and published in a country where seventy percent of the population is illiterate, can change the political and social life of the country. It is up to political organization and not to romantic literature to change the present situation”.

Sulaymān and Yāsīn’s Literature and Ideology in Syria 1967-1973 also exhibits an exhortative approach to literary production similar to al-Khaṭīb’s, as well as a rigidly ideological and prescriptive approach in their critique of Tāmir’s stories. This study appeared in 1974 with the explicit intent of addressing the political stagnation which had affected the country since the 1967 setback, to scrutinise its multiple reverberations in literary production between 1967 and 1973. The authors aspired to identify those works that addressed the struggles of the working class, and the issue of national liberation in Syria and in the wider Arab World. In the essay “al-ra’d alladhī la yumṭir” –

105 Ibid. p. 112.
106 Hafez, “the modern Arabic short story”, p. 317.
107 Eagleton, Marxism and literary criticism, p. 16.
109 Sulaymān and Yāsīn, al-Adab wa al-idyiylīyyā, pp. 5-10.
majmū‘at qiṣas” (The thunder that does not bring rain – a collection of short stories) the authors respond to Tāmir’s harsh denunciation of the state of literary criticism in the country in his 1972 interview with al-Ma‘rifa, and proceed to dissect the stories of al-Ra‘d individually, exposing each episode’s ideological shortcomings and the petty bourgeois point of view of the author as the collection’s main flaws. The strictly Marxist yardstick with which the authors approached this work makes them condemn the author’s retreat into the world of dreams, fantasia and individual isolation as a betrayal of his class origins, as uncommitted stories that signal the authors abandonment of realism in favour of “anarchy”. They condemn Tāmir’s bitter view of society as nihilist, his suggestive style and his disregard for the boundaries of time and space, life and death representing for them the perfect literary device to put forward a pessimistic message.

He doesn’t have the tiniest piece of regard for the necessities of an underdeveloped country going through a transitory phase where the state centralises power leading sometimes to dreadful consequences. He attacks, rejects, destroys, yells, as if that was his way of achieving pleasure.

The criticism Tāmir was subjected to at home, confirms the independent outlook and unconventional approach to nationalist and revolutionary engagement put forward in his works. At the same time however, al-Khaṭīb’s, Sulaymān’s and Yāsīn’s essays cannot be considered representative of an entire field of authors and critics. Their essays stirred an animated discussion between a number of other actors in the Syrian literary scene who exposed their approach as superficial and excessively ideological, ultimately failing to recognise the

110 Ibid., p. 212.
111 Ibid., p. 214.
112 Ibid., p. 213.
innovations that Tāmir’s style had brought about. These diverging reactions hint at the decline of a genre – socialist realism – that had hitherto exerted considerable influence on both fiction and literary criticism, shaping the field of cultural production through institutions, publications and events. Such contributions demonstrate the strong influence of the Soviet socialist realism understanding of commitment on prose fiction in Syria, and how Tāmir’s originality fundamentally broke with the dominant ideologically motivated literature already in decline at the time his first collection was published.

2.5 Tāmir’s commitment and ḥadātha

As these examples reveal, literary commitment has always been of major concern to Tāmir. As an engaged and committed writer, particularly in the early period of his career he strived to articulate a form of commitment which achieves the emancipation and freedom of the individual through valuing the aesthetic over the thematic, refusing strict ideological guidelines. Nevertheless, however heated the debate and strenuous in his stance, Tāmir’s claims for the autonomy of the author and his emancipation from ideological constraints did not signal in this period an abandoning of the prevalent concerns of the era, what Abu Deeb defines as consensus. The term “prevalent concerns”, is better understood as the project from which literature derived its vitality, a vision of the Arab World and its relationship to its past, present and future characterised by nationalist and revolutionary ardour, a desire for emancipation and regeneration. The most significant transformations in Tāmir’s writing become more visible if situated in a chronological framework that is closer to the one proposed by Abu Deeb. His essays serve as a theoretical bridge that will help


articulate the relationship between historical events – not restricted to the 1967 debacle – that have affected cultural production from the Arab East greatly, contributing to great transformations in style and content, particularly with regard to ideology, gender roles and nationalism. Committed literature, social realism and socialist realism, albeit with important differences, were part of the consensus, the totalising discourse, the unity of intent and ambition that Abu Deeb describes and that is central to this research. The aspirations of the various actors in the cultural debates in this period, regardless of their Marxist, nationalist or peculiarly Sartrean agendas, were part of an overarching project that aspired to exert great influence on society, to foster change and modernisation, to channel the aspirations for national liberation and class emancipation. When Tāmir appeared on the scene, literature by and large drew extensive inspiration from this vision, and his very early short stories of the 1950s and 1960s, although not subscribing to the prescriptive orientation of socialist realism, were an integral part of this project. The sense of unity was exemplified formally by stories structured mostly around one male protagonist, and by a central subject and location.

2.6 After hadātha: Fragmentation and the abandoning of totalising ideology

The literary and artistic output of the post-modernist period, on the other hand, has emerged as an inevitable consequence of modernism’s destructive charge and at the same time as a call into question of its values and aspirations. It is typified by doubt, anxiety, and self-critique, replacing the confidence of the previous period, as well as by the emergence of the female point of view, which appears no longer as an element in the struggle for modernisation of society as a whole, but as an exclusively feminist viewpoint. The process of modernisation of society that a number of Arab countries in the Middle East underwent
contained inner contradictions – Abu Deeb argues – associated with the ideological disintegration and fragmentation that the region has witnessed since the 1970s. In particular, the unifying ideologies of the post-war period had put forward a totalising, uniform vision of society that emulated European models in order to catch up with the progress European countries had achieved.  

This spirit began to decline in parallel with the historical events in the area, not only the defeats in the 1967 and 1973 wars against Israel, but also a series of broader transformations that irreversibly altered the inclinations of cultural production from Syria and the wider Arabic-speaking world irreversibly. In particular, Abu Deeb enumerates a number of important aspects connected to the process of fragmentation: the attitude to Israel, the conflict within the Palestinian resistance movement and between the Palestinian resistance movement and Arab regimes, rising inequality and class conflict, the rivalry between the cities and countries historically considered “central” (Egypt and the Ottoman Bilād al-Shām) and the peripheries (the Gulf and North Africa), the civil war in Lebanon, the rise of Gulf monarchies and of Islam as a major force in the political arena.  

If we combine the traits of the ḥadāthī project – continues Abu Deeb – putting together, say, Adonis’s view of ḥadātha as creating new structures and destroying old ones, and the view of ḥadātha as rupture, critique, transcendence of old visions, advocacy of secularism, we can easily see that the quest for modernity by necessity carried within it the seeds for fragmentation. It carried the seeds of destruction of a world which appeared to have been unified by history, religion, and language, by a sense of identity solidly Islamic or more specifically Arab-Islamic.  

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116 Ibid., p. 338.
117 Ibid., p. 344.
By the early 1970s the form of Tāmir’s writings – akin to poems and novels published in the same period\(^\text{118}\) – displayed the signs of fragmentation in collections containing a large number of stories divided into a series of sub-stories and sub-paragraphs, sometimes bearing different titles, addressing a variety of subjects and plots, embodied by various protagonists with no apparent unity of time and space. This aspect emerges firstly in \textit{al-Ra’d}, where the same stories that Sulaymān and Yāsīn dissected so meticulously while looking for the author’s class point of view, displayed the signs of stylistic transformations that possess crucial political connotations, and that Ulrike Stehli-Werbeck considers elements of a postmodern spirit beginning to exert its influence on Arabic writing.\(^\text{119}\) The degree to which Tāmir’s works can be considered postmodern, particularly in the context of postmodernity in contemporary Arabic cultural production, will be discussed in more detail in the last two chapters; however, it is their political relevance that makes them stand out in the stories of this period, against the backdrop of the cultural battles raging in Syria at the time of their publication. The Book of Genesis episode quoted above, together with numerous other stories from that same period, shows the elements of fragmentation of the text, intertextuality and a multiplicity of voices becoming systematic in Tāmir’s latest period. The fragmented nature of the text signals the author’s distancing from the idealist forms of writing advocated by the champions of socialist realism, but is nonetheless charged with strong political connotations, as it draws figures and symbols from the Arabic tradition to address the stringent issues of rising authoritarian coercion.

This becomes particularly manifest in \textit{al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshir}, a compilation of stories central to the developments and transformations

\(^\text{118}\) Abu Deeb, “Cultural creation in a fragmented society”, pp. 175-176.
in this author’s oeuvre because of the formal changes it introduced as well as because of its overtly political tone. The stories of this collection have become classics, having enjoyed the largest number of translations,\(^\text{120}\) and have found their place in the Syrian literary tradition for their suggestive depictions of authoritarianism. The title-story of this collection, can easily be considered Tāmir’s masterstroke, the one story all readers automatically associate with this writer. This story does not display any of the abovementioned stylistic transformations, but it is nonetheless relevant in this period for a more manifestly blunt language signalling the shift from Abu Deeb’s “consensus” to the urge to address the increasingly invasive nature of the authoritarian state and its ruthless practices of coercion and domination. The episode revolves around the eponymous tiger and its forced imprisonment by a nameless tamer, who gradually subdues and domesticates the proverbially proud and untameable animal, starving it and training it to obey the most humiliating commands. Notoriously a proud and invincible animal, the tiger\(^\text{121}\) initially refuses to be tamed and chooses to starve rather than obey its new trainer’s commands. Pressed by hunger, though, the animal begins to compromise with its new master in exchange for some meat.

[...] On the eighth day, the tamer said to the tiger: “I will deliver the beginning of a speech, and when I finish, clap as if you like it.”

“I will clap” said the tiger.

So the tamer began his speech: “Oh citizens…we have on many occasions clarified our position on the defining causes of our time, and this resolute, honest position will not change no matter how the enemy powers conspire against us, and with faith, we will be victorious.”


\(^{121}\) Perhaps as opposed to its proverbial rival, the lion (*asad* in Arabic).
“I did not understand what you said” the tiger responded.
“You must like everything I say and clap enthusiastically”
“Forgive me,” said the tiger. “I am ignorant. Your words are great, and I will clap as you wish.” And the tiger clapped.  

Within a few days, the tiger has become submissive and weak and is compelled to convert to vegetarianism in order to survive.

[...] And when the tiger’s hunger grew, he tried to eat the hay. He was shocked by the taste and backed away in disgust. But he went back, and gradually became accustomed to it. And on the tenth day, the tamer, his students, the tiger and his cage disappeared, and the tiger became a citizen, and his cage a city.  

One could propose numerous interpretations for this story, without running the risk of overreading: for example, if we read it as a reaction to the rise of authoritarianism, the tiger metaphorically represent the fate of citizens living under a tyrannical power that dominates, imprisons and starves them until it gradually subdues even the most proud and rebellious. On the other hand, the closure suggests that the process of taming the tiger could be interpreted as a metaphor for the construction of a safe, civilised society – suggested by the closure in which the tiger becomes a “citizen” – as opposed to the forest the tiger used to live in. Be that as it may, the story is praised for its highly poetical and intense form, as well as for the evocative content, and is usually regarded as Tāmir’s masterpiece.

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122 Tāmir, al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshir, p. 79.
123 Ibid., p. 80.
Whilst authoritarian practices such as arbitrary arrest have been present in Tāmir’s work since the early 1960s, the stories of the mid and late 1970s gathered in this collection address despotism and its practices more extensively. It is perhaps this aspect that has earned it its wide popularity in a country dominated to this day by a one-party regime. The relevance of this story resides also in its allegorical recourse to the world of animals as the literary device to represent authoritarianism and its material as well as intellectual grip on society allegorically, an element present in the Arabic literary tradition since the works of the 8th-century Persian translator Ibn al-Muqaffa’. The recycling of images belonging to the classical tradition signals the rediscovery of turāth (Arabic for heritage) as a repository of literary devices and its reframing as a means to address contemporary issues. The rekindling of past tradition since the late 1970s marks the beginning of the transition from hadātha to a stage of questioning and fragmentation, to become a systematic feature in Tāmir’s collections in the 1990s and 2000s.

2.7 Second part: The end of illusions and exile

At this crucial point in Syria’s contemporary history, Tāmir was at the peak of his popularity after the publication of al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshir in 1978, and occupied the position of editor-in-chief of al-Ma’rīfa, the official literary magazine of the Syrian Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. In the May 1980 issue of al-Ma’rīfa Tāmir published an editorial – vaguely entitled “Qirāʿāt” (Readings) – in which he quoted sections from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī’s Ṭabāʿī al-istiabdād wa maṣāriʿ al-istiabd (The nature of despotism and the struggle against enslavement)124.

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What is this desire for a poor miserable existence, for a false serenity when your life is nothing but toil and hardship? Are you proud of this patience of yours, or do you get a reward for it? What is this disparity amongst you, when your lord created you equal in body, strength, nature and necessities? Didn’t God create you free, with nothing but light and wind weighing upon you, yet you’ve insisted on enduring nothing but injustice and oppression?  

Although al-Kawākibī, a 19th-century intellectual from Aleppo, had directed his invectives against Ottoman tyranny, Tāmir’s choice of this extract for an editorial was enough to earn him the ostracism of the Syrian regime, and his dismissal from the position of editor-in-chief. Syrian intelligence confiscated all copies of the magazine, and a year later Tāmir left Damascus with his family and moved into self-imposed exile to England. The reasons why Tāmir decided to leave the country however were numerous, amongst which was a feeling of estrangement he had felt towards the city’s environment that made him take the decision “without regret or sorrow”.

The advent of the 1980s after all marks the end of an era and the beginning of an entirely new course in the history of Syria and the Arab East, while also inaugurating a new epoch for Arab intellectuals and specifically for Tāmir. Historically, the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel in 1979 marked the end of a thirty-year period of nationalist fervour punctuated by three wars and nearly uninterrupted political upheaval in the Arab East culminating with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. In Syria, widespread episodes of violence

between government forces and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the years between 1976 and 1982, culminated in the Hama massacre of February 1982. For Arab intellectuals, these years marked the beginning of a period characterised by exile and marginality, at the tail end of thirty years of political engagement, coinciding with the loss of autonomy of thought to the overwhelming and invasive presence of the authoritarian regimes.\(^{128}\) In Syria, surveillance and censorship had been monopolised by the State before the 1980s, however up to that point intellectuals had managed to carve out spaces for discussion that disappeared with the consolidation of the Asad regime, limiting the choices to courtesanship, imprisonment or exile to Europe.\(^{129}\) The grip of the one-party state on all forms of dissent – motivated by the mid-1970s turmoil, but in continuity with a trend that had typified Syria’s political life since independence – was consolidated, and the figure of President Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad rose prominently to become the “eternal leader”.\(^{130}\)

Tāmir’s relocation to the United Kingdom was followed by a long period of literary silence, and increased journalistic activities. In the 1980s and 1990s, Tāmir transitioned from being a literary editor and short-story writer to becoming a full-time commentator in Arabic in the pages of magazines like \textit{al-Nāqid}, \textit{al-Dustūr}, \textit{al-Taḍāmun}, and newspapers such as \textit{al-Quds al-‘arabī}.\(^{131}\) The style of these contributions has remained that of the satirical article, addressing the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab world. Most of these articles have been collected into two collections, \textit{Hījā’ al-qatīl li-qāṭīlihi} and \textit{Arḍ al-wayl}.

\(^{128}\) Ruocco, \textit{L’intellettuale arabo tra impegno e dissenso}, p. 172.
\(^{130}\) Wedeen, \textit{Ambiguities of domination}, pp. 33-66.
\(^{131}\) al-Ṣamāḍī, \textit{Zakariyyā Tāmir wa al-qīṣṣa al-qāṣīra}, p. 27.
Nidā’ Nūḥ, the collection that inaugurated the second period of his career, appeared in 1994 for the Lebanese Riyad el-Rayyes Books, followed by Sa-nadḥak (We Shall Laugh) in 1998, al-Ḥiṣrīm in 2000 and Taksīr Rukab in 2002, all published by Riyad el-Rayyes Books. In 2002 he wrote a regular column in the London-based al-Zamān newspaper and in 2006 in the Syrian government-controlled daily al-Thawra. In March 2015 he received the Mahmoud Darwish Award for Freedom and Creativity awarded by the Palestinian Darwish foundation. Earlier awards include the Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais Cultural Foundation’s prize for Stories, Novels and Drama in 2001, the Syrian Order of Merit in 2002, the Cairo First Short Story Prize in 2009 and in the same year the Blue Metropolis Literary Prize.

A scrutiny of the secondary literature available on this writer in Arabic cannot fail to notice the disparity between the vast amount of contributions focussed on Tāmir’s early period, and the scantiness of studies addressing his latest works. The passionate debates on commitment and socialist realism in his works of the 1960s and 1970s, as discussed in the first part of this chapter, do not find adequate equivalents addressing his latest works published between 1994 and 2002. And although criticism of his works in the form of essay and literary accolades continues to see the light in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, their focus rests surprisingly on his early works,

134 The awarding of the Syrian Order of Merit in 2002 and his acceptance of the award has earned Tāmir the sharp criticism of some of his contemporaries who have interpreted it as a sign of his loyalty to the Asad regime. During informal conversations with Tāmir throughout these years he has always denied the political nature of the award, which in his opinion is awarded to truly meritorious writers. See for example Haytham Husayn, “Istīṭān al-khawf: al-muthaqqafl‘arabī al-madhūr” (Settling fear: the paranoid Arab intellectual), al-‘Arab, 08/06/2014, retrieved from http://alarab.co.uk/?id=24710 on 08/06/2014; Mu’in al-Bayārī, “Zakariyyā Tāmir… al-wisām thumma al-hijā”(Zakariyyā Tāmir… the decoration, and then the satire), Şafḥūt sūriyya, 06/05/2012. retrieved from https://goo.gl/FM26cL on 12/06/2014.
largely ignoring his latest collections of short stories and satirical articles.

In *Zakariyyā Tāmir: masāmīr fi khashab al-tawābīt* (Zakariyyā Tāmir: nails in the coffins’ wood)\(^{135}\) – a collection of twenty-five essays by Syrian and Arab scholars, poets and authors published by the Arab Writers’ Union in 2011 – the focus of the contributions ranges from the more formalist to Marxist approaches, but the time span most essays cover is limited to the early and most celebrated works. The same applies to other works published recently in Syria\(^{136}\), which all seem to indicate the diminished interest in this writer’s relevance in the context of a changing social, political and, more importantly, literary scene. An exception to this trend is Fayṣal Darrāj’s essay “al-Ru’b wa al-kitāba ‘inda Zakariyyā Tāmir” (Horror and writing in Zakariyyā Tāmir) which explores Tāmir’s latest works in parallel with those of the playwright Sa’dAllāḥ Wannūs.\(^{137}\) Darrāj’s essay fits the theoretical framework of this research in the way it understands Tāmir’s literary trajectory and the transformations in style and content that his latest works display as the result of the disenchancement of an entire generation of Syrian “committed” authors. This approach is particularly useful to grasp changing representations of gender roles as part of a wider process of fragmentation suggested by Abu Deeb.

In return, the interest that Tāmir has elicited in Europe since the mid-1970s, on the other hand, enhanced by the translation of a number of his collections into European languages, has encouraged analyses of his


latest works within the framework of Arab postmodernity and the persistence of authoritarianism, a variety of approaches that fits Abu Deeb’s insights on the consolidation of a process of fragmentation and multiplicity. Although Abu Deeb cautiously avoids labelling fragmentation and the collapse of the totalising discourse of consensus as postmodern, others have addressed the distancing of Arabic literary production from the didactic and rigid tenets that typified commitment up until the 1960s as a postmodern phenomenon. In his introduction to *Arabic literature: postmodern perspectives*, Pflitsch argues that unmistakably postmodern trends have come to typify Arabic literature in the past four decades typified by the “end of illusions” of modernity: the distancing of writers from ideology, the frequent removal of the novel’s setting from the homeland to faraway locations, the combination of a variety of styles and the recourse to intertextual devices that borrow from the Arabic traditional *turāth*. Yet, the disengaged attitude of specifically Western postmodernism and its divorce from any edifying, moral or functional spirit has proven incompatible with the aspirations of contemporary Arab writers, whose concerns by and large remain rooted in the political and social struggles in their countries of origin. The persistence of authoritarianism, the lack of individual and collective rights, the complicity between apparently different, opposing conservative and patriarchal forces of Islamism and nationalism, the unresolved Palestinian issue, just to mention a few. These as well as numerous other stylistic and thematic elements remain to this day central to cultural production in the Arab world, even in its postmodern configuration.

In the specific context of Syria, the literary responses to the longstanding persistence throughout the past four decades of an authoritarian, repressive regime have brought about different

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approaches to studying the ways in which Syrian writers have articulated their resistance to this situation. As ‘Umar Qaddūr argues in his overview of “new Syrian literature”, embodied by new young authors whose works have appeared in the past two decades such as Khālid Khalīfa, Samar Yazbāk, Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan, Manhal al-Sarrāj, ‘Abīr Isbir, whilst the abandonment of grand narratives of nationalism and socialism has become the rule, the concerns of these writers remain fundamentally political, and being “non-ideological” represents in itself an ideological position.140 In other words, as suggested by ‘al-Qaddūr the divorce between ideology and cultural production can be interpreted as the part of a wider process of fragmentation that has brought about significant aesthetic transformations, including the emergence of a plurality of voices and styles. Although devoid of the ideological dimension of the previous decades, this style retains a political potential in reasserting the role literature can play in an authoritarian context.141

The political nature of these novels resides frequently in a taboo-breaking and openly denouncing narration of historical events, such as the 1976-1982 turmoil in Khalīfa’s Madīḥ al-Karāhiya (In praise of hatred)142, or in equally transgressive representation of the body, female desire and the physical act of love in the works of Yazbek and Ḥasan.143 And while this is not the place to debate whether the transgressive nature of these novels proves the existence of a truly new Syrian literature, it shall suffice to point out – as Max Weiss has done – that their most recurrent themes serve to substantiate the argument of Syrian literature as persistently linked to social, historical and political

causes. What typifies Syrian literature in this context – according to Mohja Kahf as well as Aghacy – is a stronger focus on the effects of military authoritarianism on individuals and groups. This “local” tone that Syrian literature has assumed in turn can partially be ascribed to the same process of fragmentation Abu Deeb has described, as well as to the watershed of the 1967 war, which made regional and local aspects in fiction emerge more distinctly, transforming Arabic literature into a more heterogeneous universe of themes, styles and concerns.

2.8 Writing in exile: The “silent” Syrian literature between subversion and compliance

In her overview article on contemporary Syrian literature “The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature”, Kahf begins by provocatively stating that there is no such thing as Syrian literature. The multi-ethnic and heterogeneous human landscape of the country, its recent history and the historic, religious and cultural bonds that Syria shares with the Levantine region and the entire Arab world, make it arduous to articulate a distinct, unified character for writers of fiction from the Syrian Arab Republic. Yet, in the political events that have shaped this country since independence, through coups, revolutions and wars one can find the common feature we need to analyse Syrian cultural production, “to become aware of patterns and to experience aesthetic pleasures otherwise undetectable”, or in other words, to appreciate its value. Unlike countries such as Egypt, for example, whose geography and history possess a more recognisable cohesiveness, when looking at Syria one is usually at pains to find a unifying pattern without

146 Aghacy, Masculine identity, p. 11.
considering the recent political events. For this reason, Kahf argues that theorising the existence of a Syrian literature cannot be separated from the distressful history of this country since its independence and the bloody consequences that the fierce struggle for power has had on its socio-political environment. Building on a quick overview of the historical landmarks following Syria’s independence from France in 1946, paralleled by a summary of its major literary figures including Tāmir too, Kahf proposes a reading according to which what typifies fiction authored by Syrian writers is its silence, its reticence to speak out and denounce major events, such as the Hama massacre of February 1982. The events of February 1982 in Hama, where the showdown between the Fighting Vanguards and the Asad regime left large sectors of the city destroyed, led to the death of between 5000 and 20000 people.\footnote{149} Kahf maintains that, as a consequence of the iron-fist constraints on cultural production in Syria leaving practically no space to denounce state violence and corruption, “Syrian silence on Hama, and on political repression under the Ba’ath in general, is not hard to explain, given the plight of Syrians under authoritarian rule”.\footnote{150} The atmosphere of terror that the Ba’ath regime has imposed on the country for over forty years has given rise to a particular genre of novels, plays and short stories typified by silence around the unmentionable.

A pattern emerges from Kahf’s overview that describes Syrian novelists and writers as somehow inevitably locked into unwritten demands, expecting them to articulate aesthetic representations of the historical landmarks that are crystallised in the collective memory of this country. Hence, the essay in other words creates expectations and standards of dissident cultural production as the site of representation of the unmentionable, and of anything state-censorship in Syria attempts to

\footnote{150} Kahf, “The silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature”, p. 229.
keep secret. This urgency to depict the unmentionable has given rise to “new levels of creative development” and “sophisticated ways to express their art and their truths”\textsuperscript{151} that would apparently not have surfaced under different historical circumstances.

Together with Kahf’s insightful albeit brief article, miriam cooke’s \textit{Dissident Syria}\textsuperscript{152} represents another rare example of a study of Syrian dissident cultural production, as well as one of the very few works with a “Syrian” focus. Cooke convincingly refutes the idea that any example of politicised cultural production can be considered as a powerful weapon in the hands of what Vaclav Havel in his analysis of post-totalitarian Czechoslovakia called “the powerless”.\textsuperscript{153} Rather, since the early 1970s in fact Syrian artists and writers have been by and large co-opted by the State, which in Syria controls every aspect of cultural production from editing to actual publication. Occasionally, censors have turned a blind eye to the works of relatively independent artists, like, for example, the poet Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ.\textsuperscript{154} The little room for criticism allowed through the state policies of \textit{tanfīs} (a colloquial Syrian expression describing pockets of politically dissident cultural production tolerated and even encouraged by the government) had the result of drawing critics of the regime into their clique, while contributing to create a display of liberalism and tolerance to the outside world.\textsuperscript{155}

Undeniably, writers and artists operating in such a closed environment such as Asad’s Syria have experienced enormous difficulties in expressing their views openly, a situation that in turn has pushed

\textsuperscript{151} Kahf, “The silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature”, p. 230.
\textsuperscript{154} cooke, \textit{Dissident Syria}, p. 72-77.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 73.
numerous intellectuals to leave the country. The unyielding system of cultural censorship in place since the 1960s has relentlessly asphyxiated cultural production, but as the Syrian filmmaker Usāma Muḥammad noted in an interview (quoted in Kahf’s article), it has not managed to castrate artistic creativity.

There are two responses to the censorship rules: one, to make bad art and talk about nothing; and two, to say what you want to say and make art. The trick is to find one’s own language that is indirect, so one can make films about political power, religion, sex and violence in a metaphorical - and often more powerful – way.156 (my italics)

A narrative style characterised by allegories and restaging (or izāḥa in Arabic) of the unspeakable, is not necessarily a strategy that authors are forced to resort to in order to get their message across and avoid censorship. More than just an artistic loophole to escape a tight system of control that allows little room for criticism, this strategy can also be an evocative and “more powerful” stylistic device that, restaging reality in exaggerating and suggestive fashions – as Tāmir famously did in “al-Numūr ḥī al-yawm al-‘āshir” – enhances the imagination of the reader and creates an alternative to the single-minded narrative of authoritarianism. In other words, the alternative view brought about by fiction emerges not only in the content – as Tāmir himself argued repeatedly in the debates with the champions of socialist realism – but also in the form and the style of the writing. Also, not only have the claims of a “silent” Syrian cultural production been made obsolete by a new wave of courageous novelists that have emerged since the early 2000s, but even in the works of a member of the older generation like Tāmir, a deeper analysis is necessary to dig out the aspects that openly

channel the frustration against oppression and abuses, and that ultimately can serve as a response to authoritarianism as political thought and practice.

Similarly to Kahf’s, cooke’s approach appears overly rigid when dismissing the contribution of Syrian writers in the diaspora as devoid of the moral authority to express political dissent, as opposed to the works of writers operating inside the country.\textsuperscript{157} Being an overtly dissident artist inside Syria under Hāfīż al-Asad was certainly not devoid of intellectual as well as material privations, and the freedoms that expatriates and exiles enjoy stand in stark contrast to the plights of those who have stayed. This research seeks to challenge the underlying assumption and the normative conceptualisation of the inside/outside opposition, central to cooke’s argument, which overlooks an entire generation of Syrian artists who were forced or simply decided to leave their country, without attempting to analyse their œuvre regardless of their place of residence. This analysis seeks to tackle the binary distinction between writers inside and writers outside Syria, and the idea that writers living outside the country have lost the moral authority to call themselves resistant or even dissident. Cooke’s approach shows the shortcomings of applying to the Syrian context a theoretical framework known as "resistance literature", originally conceived by the Palestinian novelist and activist Ghassān Kanafānī. Kanafānī’s idea of \textit{adab al-muqāwama} (Arabic for resistance literature) refers in strict terms to literature written by Palestinians in Palestine under Israeli occupation, and his distinction between \textit{al-adab al-muqāwim} (resistant literature) as opposed to \textit{adab al-manfā} (exile literature) i.e. literature written by insiders vs. outsiders,\textsuperscript{158} reflected a reality of life under occupation inside Israel on the one hand, and mass migration and expulsion to neighbouring countries of the Arab East on the other.

\textsuperscript{157} Email conversation with miriam cooke. 16/05/2015.
However, this distinction, later picked up in Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature*,159 has limited applicability in Syrian literature, a field which as we have seen in the first part coexisted with predominant ideologies and was generally organic to the process of state building in the years following independence.

In addition, the remarkable contributions to art and literature made by intellectuals living in exile even beyond Syria and its borders, famously examined by Edward Said in his essay "Reflections on exile",160 cannot be too easily dismissed. Said’s observations prove particularly useful to define the nature of Tāmir’s voluntary dislocation to England in 1981, rather than as an exiled artist, similar to that of expatriates who “voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons” and “share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions”.161 Indeed, this can be a nearly accurate description of the situation of an expatriate writer like Tāmir who, not only has never been banned by authorities from returning to Damascus, but also visited the country regularly from the 1980s until 2010, has written for local newspapers and magazines and has appeared in public in the Syrian capital to deliver lectures and talks,162 all of which make it difficult to label him as an outsider. Although Tāmir maintains that his exile to England was self-imposed, as we have seen he faced the ostracism of the Syrian regime for his editorials, and was dismissed from his position as editor-in-chief of *al-Ma’rifa*, which further complicates his classification somewhere between an exile and an expatriate. However, for the purpose of the chronological analysis of the developments in his writing, it suffices to point out that labelling this writer as an outsider presents a number of

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161 Ibid., p. 181.
162 See, for example, the talk Tāmir delivered at the French Institute of the Near East of Damascus on 10th November 2008 https://archive.org/details/zakariya-tamer-realite-lundis-litteraires-ifpo-5.
contradictions. For this reason, cooke’s approach does not apply to Tāmir’s career, if at all, because of the peculiar in-between state of this writer whose œuvre remains deeply rooted in his native city, and who has chosen to live between England and Syria.

2.9 The Syrian revolution: Syria speaks

This research contributes to problematising and deconstructing the analysis of Syrian dissident fiction as a genre that can only claim validity as long as it is written and published by “heroic” insiders. This approach dismisses too simplistically the universe of exiled writers who, as a consequence of the restrictions to which cultural production is subjected in an authoritarian context like Syria, have come to represent a considerable portion of Syria’s artists since the 1970s. The recent experience of the Syrian revolution has also exposed the inapplicability of this approach, and the rigidity of a categorisation based merely on the geographical location of the author at the time of writing. Numerous Syrian artists belonging to Tāmir’s generation who still live in Syria have refused to participate in the popular uprising that broke out in March 2011, and have openly voiced their support for the Asad regime, or else remained silent bystanders. Engaged novelists such as Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, Ḥannā Mīna and Nādyā Khūst, once the champions of commitment to socialist realism, as well as actors like Bassām Kūsā and Durayd Laḥḥām, popular in Syria for their anti-regime portrayals in films like Nabīl Mālīḥ’s al-Kumbārs (1993) or plays such as Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ’s Kāsak yā Waṭan163, have remained in Syria until the present day or have expressed an unwavering opposition to the popular movement that seeks to overthrow the Asad regime.164

164 Jafrā Bahā’, “Muthaqafūn wa fannānūn sūriyyūn ḥidda al-thawra” Retrieved from https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/14/214117.html on 5th December 2013.
This pro-regime stance stands in stark contrast with the new wave of young writers and artists that have emerged since the early 2000s, and have often had to leave the country because of their participation in the events of the Syrian revolution with written and filmic recounts of the very first days of demonstrations and sit-ins, as well as with cartoons and short stories published mostly through social media. By way of illustration, the novelists Samar Yazbik and Muṣṭafā Khalīfa, for example, have been at the forefront of a renewed wave of political activism, and have been forced to leave the country. Yazbik has published two accounts: the first on the early days of the Syrian revolution and the second on her journey through the areas under the control of the armed opposition. Khalīfa’s *al-Qawqa‘* (The Shell) remains one of the most graphic accounts of the horrors of Syria’s prisons. The cartoonist ‘Alī Farzāt, known for drawing satirical cartoons for years targeting the Syrian regime and security apparatus, was abducted and severely beaten by masked men believed to be regime thugs in August 2011, and has since lived in Kuwait. Filmmaker Usāma Muḥammad has lived in Paris since 2012, and is famous in Syria to have directed in 1987 what remains the most politically controversial Syrian film ever made (*Nujūm al-nahār*, Stars in Broad Daylight, 1987), an explicit recount of the Asad clan’s political trajectory and rise to power. His film *Silvered water, self-portrait* (2014), contains a graphic recount of the atrocities perpetuated by security forces in Syria and was included in the special screenings of the 2014 Cannes film festival.

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169 Some of Farzāt’s cartoons are reproduced in Wedeen, *Ambiguities of domination*, pp. 134-143.
In the trajectory of a member of the older generation like Tāmir, a deeper analysis is necessary to reveal the aspects that openly channel the frustration against oppression and abuses, and that ultimately can serve as a response to authoritarianism as political thought and practice. He has remained to this day an engaged writer, and as he put it himself during one of the interviews I have conducted with him, echoing the novelist ‘Abd al-Rahman Munīf’s idea that intellectuals in the Arab world “must resist”171, “in developing countries writers cannot produce literature for entertainment or leisure, unless they have a heart of stone or are blind and cannot see what is around them. They cannot ignore people that around them lead miserable lives, deprived of their freedom, their dignity and justice as if they were born only to be humiliated and die”.172

Already in the late 1990s and early 2000s collections by Tāmir, a number of stories address the never-changing character of power and politics in Syria not only through allegories, through a vocabulary that pokes fun at the apparent harmony and stability of the country173 in a very explicit manner. Taksīr Rukab in particular epitomises the novelty of Tāmir’s latest works, as it combines ironic and unconventional representations of female sexuality with an explicit and transgressive denouncing of authoritarian practices, perhaps representing a sign of the “gradual transformation of Syrian authoritarian culture”174 that Max Weiss has suggested. More than any other in Tāmir’s oeuvre, this collection needs to be situated in its historical context, to comprehend

171 Quoted in Pflitsch, “The end of illusions”, p. 28.
173 “Safety and stability” has long been one of the main slogans of the Syrian Ba’athist government, reinforcing its claim of having bestowed stability and political continuity to a country that had witnessed nothing but instability and an endless series of coups before the Ba’athist revolution of 1963.
its singularity and to grasp its implications in the broader field of Syrian cultural production. Published in 2002, it came out ideally at the intersection between the two Syrias, that of Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad and his iron-fist rule, and the country his son Bashār inherited. In June 2000, in the aftermath of Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad’s demise, the Syrian parliament reduced the mandatory minimum age to run as president from 40 to 34 years old, with the explicit intent of allowing Bashār, to become the new president. Following the Syrian constitutional procedures, a referendum was held in July 2000 in which Bashār al-Asad won an unrepeated 97% of preferences receiving, at least formally, the official investiture of the Syrian people. Many saluted Bashār al-Asad’s “election” as a new era that could lead Syria to the establishment of a civil society, but the new president soon revealed a political identity in continuity with his father’s authoritarian legacy. Various examples from this collection reveal a boldness of language and representations that Syrian fiction is not accustomed to, and that perhaps came as a reaction to the illusory opening of civil society inside Syria in the early 2000s. In the following story the protagonist Ali al-Tayyeb (ʿAlī al-Ṭayyib) functions as the epitome of the ordinary citizen. His “baffling illness” does not only serve as a pretext to depict a reality of disappointment and frustration, but hints very explicitly at the draining effects of life under an authoritarian, paralysing government.

ʿAlī al-Tayyeb woke up from a coma that had lasted several years and transformed him into an ugly old man whose back was bent and whose skin was baggy, one who walked wearily leaning on his cane with a shaky hand and skinny fingers. When he came home from the hospital he had entered as a young man powerful as thunder, he welcomed many of his relatives, who

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176 Ibid., pp. 92-97.
had rushed to his house to congratulate him on having been saved from a very baffling illness. [...] Then he asked many questions that had nothing to do with their lives, and their answers were quick and to the point.
The sun still rose every morning, and one full day was still a day and a night. Summer was still long and hot and winter long and cold.
The President of the Republic still held his position. He had not been replaced, nor had he changed. He had become increasingly more healthy and youthful, and had resolved to walk in the funeral processions of all his citizens as well as those of their children and grandchildren.177

The story goes on to enumerate the unchanged list of ministers and the privileges they enjoy from their positions. What has changed though, are all the enjoyable things ‘Ali al-Tayyeb used to know before his coma. His favourite coffee house, his favourite poet, his favourite actress, a courageous journalist had all disappeared or changed their professions and personas to adapt to the zeitgeist. “He asked about a river and was told it had dried up. ‘Ali al-Tayyeb then closed his eyes and tried to get back into his coma but his efforts were not successful.”178 The depiction of the president as looking “healthier and youthful” is nothing but an ironic depiction of the continuity between the old and deceased father and his young son who has taken up his legacy. The irony and the dark humour underlying the stark contrast between a mummified and privileged political establishment on one hand, and the decay of society on the other, successfully bring up two repressed narratives elucidating a reality of abuse: the hereditary nature of power, ironically interpreted by the president ‘looking younger and

178 Ibid., p. 153.
healthier’, and the long murderous record of the Syrian regime and its president who has ‘resolved to walk in the funeral processions of all his citizens as well as those of their children and grandchildren’.

Today, at the age of eighty-six, Tāmir is fully committed to the cause of his fellow Syrians’ uprising against the regime of Bashār al-Asad. In January 2012 he started a Facebook page, called *al-Mihmāz* (in Arabic ‘The Spur’) where he publishes very short stories and brief comments not only satirising the government with metaphors and allegories, but also mentioning its members, the Syrian president and other key figures specifically. *Al-Mihmāz* came at a crucial time for Syria, when prominent intellectuals have found themselves compelled to take sides in a revolution that has now deteriorated into a civil war turning Syria into an international battlefield. Tāmir’s social media activism, his position and opinions then, have become particularly relevant since the Syrians took to the streets demanding freedom and civil rights. He describes it as a necessity, reflecting the urgency of expressing his political position publicly in order to dispel all doubts about his persona and his stance:

I started believing there was a meticulous execution of a carefully assembled plan that aims at associating certain people with the Syrian Revolution, while side-lining the positions of key Syrian figures in the fields of culture, literature, arts and politics. In short, I found myself deprived of every chance to express my position supporting the Syrian revolution, which I regard as the obvious position, and an extension of my fifty years of writing.179

Tāmir’s enthusiastic, although virtual, participation in the uprising then, does not only make his current position clear as an intellectual in the

179 Ziad Majed, “A dialogue with Zakaria Tamer”.

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context of the Arab Spring and the Syrian revolution; rather than serving to dispel all doubts about his relationship with the Syrian political establishment, his Facebook activity also represents a peculiar, unforeseen stage of his literary trajectory through which he has channelled the widespread dissident, anti-establishment feelings that the 2011 revolution has revealed. In the same abovementioned interview, one of the very few he has released in his life, the author discusses the events in his country and reveals his controversial opinion about the revolution:

The Syrian revolution surprised me, but it did not at the same time. This contradiction is due to my belief in the non-existence of a Syrian citizen that supports this brutal regime. However every Syrian citizen has a dual personality, one a covert personality that hates the dominant regime blindly, despises it and wishes its swift demise, and the other personality is overt, publicly supporting the regime, heaping praise on it and obeying all its directives. 180

The similarity between Tāmir’s description of the average Syrian citizen’s contradictions, and Wedeen’s analysis of silent compliance to the discourse of the Syrian regime, embodied by the Asad family is striking. Wedeen’s study of Syrian political language and strategies of domination, discusses how Syrians deal daily with the demands of the authoritarian regime, displaying loyalty but ultimately acting as if they believed the preposterous claims of immortality of the leader, his almighty nature and his steadfast battle against the “Zionist enemy”. 181 However, while the implications of Tāmir’s digital experience cannot be addressed in detail as representative of the trajectory of contemporary Arabic literature in recent years, given the propagation

180 Ibid.
181 Wedeen, Ambiguities of domination, pp. 73-75.
of digital literature that has brought about structural and linguistic transformations\textsuperscript{182}, it shall suffice to point out the undiminished relevance of political commitment for writers in Syria, exemplified by the controversy stirred by his activism and by the author’s necessity to clarify his stance. Tāmir’s recent engagement with the events reveals commitment – with one side or the other – as a stringent necessity for authors in Syria, in opposition to an authoritarian regime that attempts to manipulate and control the cultural production and intellectuals.

Tāmir’s decision to openly side against the Asad regime and to support the Syrian revolution has resulted in a variety of responses: on one hand being perhaps the only writer of his generation to have publicly expressed his enthusiasm for the revolution has earned him the criticism of Khust who was reportedly “shocked to see Zakariyyā Tāmir sitting at Qatar’s table opposite the French Mandate’s flag, […] while he still earns his retirement benefits from the Arab Writers’ Union, despite living in London for decades.”\textsuperscript{183} On the other hand, a younger generation of artists have welcomed the unexpected decision, and the Creative Memory of the Syrian revolution celebrated his symbolic participation in the revolution with a stamp – part of the Stamps of the Syrian revolution series created by ‘Ammār al-Beyk – quoting one of his Facebook posts.\textsuperscript{184} Dispelling all forms of ambiguity and confirming his commitment, the back cover or Tāmir’s latest collection of satirical articles introduces the reader to the unchanged view on

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The Syrian regime has repeatedly dismissed the popular revolutionary movement as a Qatari-led international conspiracy aimed at destabilising the country. The flag Khūst refers to is the green, white and black independence flag with three red stars that the popular movement has re-adopted.

\textsuperscript{184} Available in \url{http://ziadmajed.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/blog-post_3737.html}.  

literary production and its role in a context dominated by authoritarianism.

Words are unfortunate, and doomed. They don’t feed the hungry, don’t provide shelter to a displaced family, don’t pull a prisoner out of jail, don’t chastise a murderer, they don’t overthrow oppressors… They don’t grant parks to the children, schools to the illiterate and hospitals to the ill, they don’t have weapons and gunfire to encircle the tyrants’ castles, but they are unique in exhorting the oppressed to demand their lost liberty, and to die for the cause of freedom.185

2.10 Conclusions

This overview of the secondary literature on Tāmir, and the different ways in which the political significance of his works has been interpreted exposes how the range of themes addressed by most scholars and critics looking at his short stories exclude gender and sexuality amongst the repository of refrains that typify Tāmir’s stories. The focus of most of the secondary literature remains on the textual strategies and the themes Tāmir employs to express his anti-authoritarian stance; however, the significance of gender roles as performed by his stories’ protagonists as a product and a reaction to authoritarianism has not been addressed. Analysing Tāmir’s disenfranchised protagonists as victims of society, patriarchy and authoritarianism, for example, Emma Westney proposes a broad categorization dividing characters into two main groups: those wielding power and those stripped of power, further dividing the latter into three

185 Zakariyyā Tāmir, Arḍ al-wayl, (Bayrūt: Jadāwil, 2015), back cover.
subgroups: the café man, the historical hero, and the child.\textsuperscript{186} Interestingly enough, female characters do not feature on this list, and the focus rests exclusively on men as represented in positions of subordination in relation to the subgroup of power-wielding characters represented by fathers, policemen, judges, teachers, kings and men of religion. Throughout the next chapters, we will scrutinise different configurations of masculinity and femininity in relation to patriarchy and the authoritarian state, to fill this void and demonstrate the political relevance of the gendered dimension of Tāmir’s stories. In particular, I aim at both validating the anti-authoritarian stance his stories put forward and deconstructing their language to determine their conformity or subversion to a patriarchal worldview. By looking at patriarchy and dynamic configurations of masculinity and femininity as represented in Tāmir’s stories, as well as at the changing representations of masculinity and femininity this research also challenges the binary opposition between state censors and supposedly dissident authors bringing into view the capacity fictions possesses to redress the balance and challenge or reinforce an authoritarian vision, especially one that attempts to naturalise systems of signification. For this purpose, literature reproduces, interiorises and ultimately transforms the univocality imposed by the discourse of authoritarianism into a multifarious view on the human condition. Contrary to Kahf’s conclusions, the dissident potential of Tāmir’s works in fact lies not, or not only in “the horrified silence”\textsuperscript{187} around which his episodes are built. More significantly, the political content of his stories is detectable in the openly realistic or allegorical representations of authoritarian practices, in the denouncing of tyrant and indoctrinating fathers as actors of male-supremacist and familial oppression and atomisation that


\textsuperscript{187} Kahf, “The silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature”, p. 233.
undermine the unifying assumptions of authoritarianism, as well as in the transgressive representations of female sexual desire.
Chapter Three: Changing masculinity: Ideological fragmentation and the early transformations in the representations of the male.

3.1 Introduction

In her introduction to *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967*, Samira Aghacy addresses gender roles in contemporary cultural production from the Arab East, lamenting the paucity of works focusing on the subject from the point of view of men.\(^{188}\) The number of studies investigating fiction authored by female writers from the Arab world and female agency as represented and articulated in their works remains considerably greater than works addressing the changing nature of the male and the models of masculinity. Amongst the works Aghacy quotes, some of which provide significant insights and detailed historical accounts of the changing nature of sexual desire like Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arabs*\(^{189}\), the focus remains usually on homosexuality and its different representations, overlooking works in which a changing model of heterosexual masculinity has surfaced, containing relevant political implications.

This chapter aims at offering a further contribution to this understudied aspect, looking at patriarchy and gender roles in Tāmir’s oeuvre and in particular the development of representations of masculinity situating these themes in the territory of Arab nationalist discourse in contemporary Syria, as well as in modernist writing and authoritarianism. The chapter explores the development of the male character from the ideological ḥadāthī period into the early post-ideological period of the 1970s. The fragmentation of the totalising discourse of modernity provides the primary framework to examine the

gradual disintegration of a strong model of masculinity and explore its implications for the representations of both the body and gender.

The present analysis addresses patriarchy as a multi-layered system of domination weighing upon women and subordinate men equally, both inside and outside the household, to explore the effects of patriarchal authoritarianism on the subordinate male individual, as a victim of the emasculating state. It examines how these institutions are presented as the microcosm of social disenfranchisement and as the perpetuator of the individuals’ alienation, of males and females indiscriminately. As Aghacy argues, Arab masculinity cannot be considered as essential and ahistorical, but rather as a social construct inextricably connected to socioeconomic and cultural configurations, and “cannot and must not be isolated from their historical context where both men and women suffer under social and political oppression”.

Aghacy’s work informs this chapter as it highlights the role of fiction to deconstruct univocal conceptualisations of hegemonic/non-deviant masculinity as organic to nationalist and authoritarian discourse. Borrowing from Aghacy’s approach and employing Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity this chapter explores how Tāmir’s stories channelling different forms of dissent to past tradition, patriarchy, inequality and authoritarianism reinforce configurations of gender practice that reveal a *complicit* form of hegemonic masculinity and implicitly reinforce patriarchy i.e. “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”. In this vein, quoting examples from Tāmir’s early collections published between 1958 and 1978 the analysis discusses the disparity in the language employed to represent male and female characters.

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190 Aghacy, *Masculine identity*, p. 3.
Drawing inspiration from Georges (Jūrj) Ṭarābīshī’s reflections on the relationship between nationalist ideology, patriarchy and masculinity in Arab cultural production this chapter looks at sex, the body and gender roles as inseparable from historical and political aspects. It addresses ideology, nationalism, authoritarianism and patriarchy as elements shaping the subjectivity of Tāmir’s male protagonists. Focusing on the essentially male character of nationalism that Ṭarābīshī\(^\text{192}\) and Massad\(^\text{193}\) have analysed, allows us to examine the ways in which Tāmir has interpreted the highly polarised standards of behaviour that patriarchy dictates for the male and the female, and the inextricable link between gender roles and nationalist discourse. In addition, a chronological analysis of masculinity explores the development of this trope in the stories of the 1970s as displaying the first signs of fragmentation after the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel. The analysis examines stories published in the early and mid-1970s displaying characters typified by a weakened and perturbed masculinity as the first signs of the collapse of the totalising discourse, as suggested by Abu Deeb.

The last part addresses how in the 1970s representations of authoritarian brutality and patriarchal tyranny evolved in relation to the historical situation, exploring stories that bring together patriarchy and authoritarianism as emasculating actors oppressing the male individual. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity informs the analysis of this aspect through its conceptualisation of the interplay of masculinity with authoritarian arbitrariness that transforms men from dominant to subordinate.


3.2 “Rabī’ fī al-ramād”: Ḥadātha as destruction of the old order

Whilst certainly Tāmir’s stories in this period stand out for their focus on individual rather than collective matters in a period when socialist realism was the dominant trend, and for their original use of language mixing prose and poetry, stories he originally published in the late 1950s and early 1960s display elements that allow us to situate them in the predominant ḥadāthī mood. What Abu Deeb defines as the modernist – or ḥadāthī – project for Arab culture and society, represented an endeavour to operate a rupture with past Arabic and Islamic tradition to transform the future with a secular, emancipatory, nationalist and (frequently) socialist worldview. It possessed a strong political dimension, common to the entire Arab-speaking world, closely interlinked with the nationalist quest for the liberation of Palestine and resistance to Western colonialism. Novels, short stories and poems characterised by love, violence, blood and death and a decisive rupture with the past, embodied frequently by religious and patriarchal tradition, as the necessary elements to achieve the breakthrough to modernity and to reach a freer future, are the trademark of the ḥadāthī trend.¹⁹⁴

The title-story of Rabī’ fī al-ramād (Spring in the ashes) epitomises many of the motifs that are central to the modernist period that Abu Deeb defines as ḥadāthī. Underlying the writings of the modernist period is a notion of the past as “a corpse, a burden, a wasteland which needed blowing up and gutting down; not necessarily in order to destroy it in its entirety, but in order to refashion and reforge it, assimilating the dimensions of creativity to be found in it into a new history, a history which can extend into the future and help shape it as a glorious time of fulfilment.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Abu Deeb, “The collapse of the totalizing discourse”, pp. 344-345
¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 343.
This is exemplified impeccably by the title of the story (the spring as an allegory for rebirth, and the ashes as a symbol of a dead past upon which nonetheless the process of revival is built) which in itself contains significant indications of the concepts that Abu Deeb associates with the ḥadāthī cultural project of that period. The story, published originally in al-Thaqāfa in 1960, begins by introducing the reader to a nameless city’s environment and population, situating the events clearly in modern times (where all people must carry identification documents) and charged with evident Arab-Islamic connotations, pointing clearly in the direction of inequality, religious hypocrisy and patriarchy as its dominant social features.

Once upon a time, there was a little town, built among wide green fields, which were irrigated by a river of abundant water. All the people carried in their pockets a piece of thick paper, on which was written a name. Some of its people were rich, some were poor. […] Rich and poor equally paid great respect to the dead, when a funeral passed men would stop, with grief and fear shining in their eyes […]. When they opened their mouths to snatch the first bite of food they would say ‘in the name of God the compassionate the merciful’, and at the end of their meal they would mumble ‘praise be to God the king of creation’. If a girl sinned sexually, her head was cut from her body, at once with a large-bladed knife.

The core of the story revolves around a nameless male protagonist “who desired avidly to become a flower, a bird or a wondering cloud”, who led a spiritless life until he decides to buy himself a woman.

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197 Tāmir, Rabiʿī fī al-Ramād, pp. 81-82.
But he was tired of living alone in a silent, melancholy house, and saw, one ash-grey moment, that he would buy himself a wife, a wife who would be a companion and whose voice would clean away the rust which clung to his days. So the man went to the nearest market and chose a woman with two large eyes which were sinking into their sockets with a grief mingled with particular mystery. The man paid her price saying to himself, ‘Perhaps she can kill the hedgehog which weeps in my blood’. 198

The protagonist later introduces himself as Shahriyār to his recently bought spouse, who in turn reveals herself as the other well-known protagonist of the One Thousand and One Nights Shahrazad. As they kiss for the first time and are soon to get intimate he hears a call to arms, and descends onto the streets to engage in a bloody battle. As Aghacy points out, a narrative that assigns polarized roles to men and women is typical of nationalism, an ideology embodied by the fidā’ī fighter depicted as fully committed to the cause of freedom in contrast to corrupt regimes. 199 The male hero, charged with the values and connotations of the ḥadāthī worldview, embodies the stringent necessity for death and destruction in order to achieve change and an “existence forged by man and free from divine intervention”. 200 Clearly, the protagonist impersonates the positive and courageous ḥadāthī hero, who is romantic in his worldview but remains entangled in a struggle against the surrounding environment

It is only through bloodshed and destruction of the old order that the city embodies, that the protagonist eventually accomplishes the final breakthrough, necessary for the creation of a new existence founded on love. This process is presented entirely as a male-led enterprise, to

198 Ibid., p. 83.
199 Aghacy, Masculine Identity, p. 56.
which the female remains marginal, accessory of the male’s individual and collective emancipation, and deprived of any sort of agency. Her role remains that of a shallow personality that lets the man take action and perform the fundamental battle whilst she is first bought at the local market as an object, then implores the man not to leave her when the battle beckons. In the final scene she appears as a different woman, a helpless Eve in a Tāmirian Garden of Eden.

- “I’m hungry” she said, hiding her face behind her palms. The man left her and started looking for food. He was delighted to come across an apple tree, whose branches were full of mature fruit. He picked some up and took them to the girl. He observed her with compassion as she ate them voraciously. He felt again the desire to become a flower, a bird or a wandering cloud.
- “Was this girl’s name too Shahrazad?” he wondered.

The closure sees the two protagonists walk towards the destroyed city, holding hands with love and affection while the sun shines upon them, encapsulating the optimism and hope in a brighter future that the quest for regeneration and modernisation involved. The episode’s structure and setting possess also a further degree of relevance specific to the political context of Syria for the centrality attached to the city as the embodiment of past tradition. Whilst associating the city with the traditional order might seem a contradiction from a modernist point of view, this aspect needs to be situated in the specific context of Syria’s social and political context in the years following independence. The struggle for power consisted largely in a long confrontation between urban politically conservative forces and the revolutionary drive embodied by what Hanna Batatu in his extensive examination of the

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201 Tāmir, Rabī’ fi al-Ramād, p. 87.
country’s power struggles in the post-independence period calls “Syria’s peasantry”. 202

3.3 “Rahīl ilā al-bahr”: Hadātha as the quest for purification

The elements of originality, rupture and freshness in terms of style and content are numerous, and Tāmir’s stories of the early period represent simultaneously a break with and a continuation of the pioneers of modernism in Arabic literature since the mid-20th century. These stories unmistakably display elements that signal the influence of this style and of the great degree of optimism and fervour that typified Arabic literature in the decades following independence up until the 1960s. In particular, the first collections of short stories that Tāmir published in the late 1950s and early 1960s maintain a strong modernist and “committed” stance in their exploration of the individual hardships in a rapidly changing society going through momentous transformations. National independence, urbanisation and inequality, industrialisation and alienation, traditional patriarchy and conservative sexual social mores, the growing presence of the state in the lives of individuals, failed political experiments, war and occupation form part of the set of concerns that Tāmir’ short stories address extensively.

Another story from this period, published originally in al-Ādāb in 1960 and included only thirteen years late in the compilation of short stories Dimashq al-harā‘iq, exemplifies the frequent presence of the images Abu Deeb illustrates as typical of the modernist period. “Rahīl ila al-bahr” (Exodus to the sea) is both an example of the modernist themes that dominated the period of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as of the rich symbolism that Tāmir’s stories displayed in this period. The story is one of the longest in Tāmir’s career (38 pages), and remains an exception in the oeuvre of an author whose stories are renowned for

202 See Batatu, Syria’s peasantry, pp. 131-175.
their brevity and photographic nature. The story also displays a greater variety of unmistakably hadāthī characteristics, and addresses a wider range of themes. The story opens with the male protagonist’s statement of desire to travel, symptomatic of his desire for destruction and rebirth, the rejection of the past and the present embodied in his derisive attitude towards religious tradition.

One day I said to my mother: “I shall travel”. But tears did not cross her face, not did it display any sign of sorrow. She asked me dully: “Will you come back rich?” And when my father came back in the evening, he threw a sharp glance at me and asked me: - “What are you reading?” - “The noble Qur’ān, obviously” I replied immediately. - “Go on, read the sūrat al-tawba” said my father as delight appeared on his face. I quickly proceeded reading: - “Arsene Lupin burst into the room wielding his big pistol and shouting: ‘hands up!’”. My mother laughed, as my father shouted angrily: - “Shut up!”. I continued reading passionately: “The thieves stepped back frightened, whilst Lupin burst out in a cold contemptuous laughter” My father snatched the book from my hands, and threw it away in a dark corner where shoes and wooden sabots laid. “God will chastise you”. I was overwhelmed by sadness and thought to myself: Let God chastise me until I die then.

The following morning, I left the house.203

From this moment, the story portrays the adventures the protagonist goes through to attain his freedom, symbolised by the eponymous sea,

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the source of renovation that Ḥasan strives to reach through an intense series of episodes, settings, encounters punctuated by the recurrence of his request to the array of characters he encounters to point him in the direction of the sea (“‘ayna al-bahr?” where is the sea?). The constant repetition of the word “sea” — which recurs seventy times throughout the story\(^{204}\) — highlights the centrality of the concept which guides the protagonists’ actions to attain the purification from an unjust existence. The distress that typifies the episodes of murder, rape, enslavement and humiliation that the protagonist traverses, and the quest for freedom that these images symbolise, reflected the overall mood of a specific period in contemporary Arabic literature motivated by a strong desire for change, and that in Tāmir’s stories is personified exclusively by male characters.

In another story from the same period, “al-Jarīma” (The crime) the family joins the authoritarian state against Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, a name the author borrowed from an historical figure known to have murdered the French general Jean-Baptiste Kleber in Cairo during Napoleon’s first *Campagne d’Égypte*. The victim of an arbitrary arrest at the hands of the local police, the protagonist is taken to the nearest police station because “on the sixth of June the accused saw a dream in which he killed general Kleber”.\(^{205}\) Al-Ḥalabī denies the accusations and pleads innocent, but is executed after the chief of police summons three unexpected witnesses, al-Ḥalabī’s parents and sister, who testify against him and confirm the police’s accusations. It is significant how in this period, more than just Kafkaesque rebellion against the family as a traditional institution and a desire to escape, the author expresses deep rancour towards parents through episodes in which the misery brought about by family members on their children and siblings is


\(^{205}\) Tāmir, *Rabī’ fī al-Ramād*, p. 32.
connected to the authoritarian state’s arbitrariness or contributes to the perpetuation of its oppressive practices.

This uncompromisingly pessimistic depictions of the detrimental, even decapitating effects of the family’s inextricability at the core of human relations, through which Tāmir’s writing opposes the unquestionability of the patriarchal figure, was a peculiar trait of the early modernist story during his beginnings. In the stories of the late 1960s this theme remains central but undergoes important transformations exemplified by a conspicuous corpus of surreal representations that explore dream and fantasia. Later in his career, Tāmir’s style starts showing the first signs of change, and a markedly more surreal tone that often resorts to hyperbolic representations of the family as an oppressive institution, depicting unlikely encounters and dialogues between the protagonists and their deceased parents, who continue playing an active and usually egoistic part in their children’s lives even after their death. The protagonist of “al-Ṣaqr” (The Falcon) from al-Ra’d, but published originally in 1968, is a prime example of this conflicting relationship, in which parents perform the role of a burden on their children’s lives, and in which the family’s authority represents the cause of disquiet. As he recites the first surah of the Qur’ān over his deceased father’s soul “pretending to be scared, sad and broken-hearted”, the protagonist hears his father shouting at him that he should stop smoking. The protagonist stubs his cigarette immediately but his dead father shouts again, asking him whether he got married.

Stubbornly I insist and tell him that I don’t want to get married and I don’t want to be a father, so he starts shouting angrily again and I say to him:
- “Don’t be upset, father, it will harm your health.”

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I rush out of the cemetery whilst my father is still shouting, and I go home where I find my girlfriend lying in bed with her eyes closed. I had asked her to wash my socks but she claims to be tired so I slaughter her with a firm hand.207

The compressed unit of time and space in which the episodes take place puts dramatic emphasis on the connection between the assertive and unquestionable authority of patriarchal figures and the misery the protagonist brings about in his family. The narrator seems anxious to stress the inextricable cause/effect relationship between the marital misfortune of the protagonist, and his background of patriarchal traditions and institutions, which he cannot escape even after his father’s decease. A strain of pessimism characterises these depictions, and the hero seems to have no alternative but to succumb to the almost immortal resilience of patriarchal figures and traditions.

Hazarding a symptomatic reading of Tāmir’s bitter resentment against family in these early episodes, perhaps one could interpret the recurrence of such negative representations as the unintended response of the author’s subconscious to an unhappy familial situation.208 However, as a public figure, unlike many other Arab authors and intellectuals, Tāmir has always kept his private life separate from his literary career. Celebrated personalities from a variety of backgrounds and countries of the Arab Middle East and North Africa have recounted in their writing their struggle for emancipation from stern patriarchal figures.209 The vivid unfolding of their harsh childhood under the

207 Tāmir, al-Ra’d, p. 13.
authority of unaffectionate fathers by prominent contemporary Arab authors like Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Ḥanna Mīna, Muḥammad Shukrī and Yūsuf Idrīs offer constructive insights into the relationship between these authors and their fathers\(^\text{210}\), but in the case of Tāmir, perhaps because of his introvert personality, the details of his upbringing in 1930 and 1940s Damascus remain uncharted. To substantiate this claim it may be useful to quote one of his Facebook posts in which, perhaps not inadvertently, the author recalls what seems a very distant relationship with his parents.

My personal concerns

My father was not killed by barrel bombs, he died in 1966. My mother was not killed by a barrel bomb. She died in 1990 and I only learnt of her departure several years later (my italics). I am an 83-year-old kid. Barrel bombs have not killed me, and I am still a word-shooting gun. My father, my mother and my brothers are all the Syrians killed by barrel bombs. They are my extended family, and their souls will still be wondering on the Syrian land, and the Syrian night demands a harsh punishment for its killer.\(^\text{211}\)

3.4 “Al-Qabw” and “al-Badawī”: Hadātha as the revolt against patriarchy and exploitation

This anti-patriarchal element of the ḥadāthī period is intimately linked to the strong autobiographical dimension exemplified more manifestly by stories such as “al-Qabw”, (The basement)\(^\text{212}\) published originally


in *al-Thaqāfa* magazine in June 1958, and included later in *Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyad* in 1960. The basement of the title, an image that recurs frequently in Tāmir’s oeuvre as a symbol of poverty and disenfranchisement, is where the nameless protagonist lives with his mother, a place of deprivation and despair that he constantly seeks to escape through imagination and daydreaming. The autobiographical element becomes manifest in a variety of stories from this period, but perhaps this story is the most striking example because, although he remains nameless, the narrator/protagonist informs the reader he was born in 1931 like the author.

While sitting in a café separated from the street by a glass wall, my friend suggested I avoid reading books. The midday sun that was inundating the street was as beautiful as an attractive female body and I said to him: - “I was born in 1931. My mother hasn’t died yet. The whole world is miserable.”

The original use of poetic language and suggestive images distinguishes Tāmir’s writing in this period, particularly in the stories involving the description of the female body and of the feelings its view elicits in the protagonist. The combination of the ḥadāthī tone with the evident influences of surrealism and existentialism contribute to the focus on the affliction of the male protagonists relegating the female as the means to escape from a harsh reality. The language usually describes insignificant actions with attention to detail but with little suggestiveness, almost as mindless activities. The contrast between the monotonous tone employed to describe these seemingly mindless actions and the explosion of metaphors and evocative images that overflows the language as soon as women appear, further amplifies the differences between the representations of male and female protagonists.
After wandering aimlessly through the roads of the city, the protagonist returns to the basement to find his mother waiting for him. The entire scenery of the basement produces in him an overwhelming sense of despair, and a disgust that cause him to regurgitate, collapse onto his own vomit and drift into a dream. The dream scene that follows is particularly relevant for its fashion of representing female characters not as multidimensional social actors, but as bodies to be enjoyed and accessories to the protagonist’s alienation. The scene takes place in a hall filled with music, a theme usually associated with the female body, where a woman invites the protagonists to dance. The following excerpt exemplifies the suggestive poetical connotations the language displays in the illustration of the female body and its sexual charge.

She looked lovelier than a crimson sky. I shivered every time her lips opened, revealing a smile whose seductiveness penetrated me like a fine spray of perfume. A river of hot blood awakened, storming a young boy under vicious white lights. A wild desire to sip the wine of the mad deity harboured in her body overwhelmed me. My mouth touched upon the naked flesh of the shoulder and started slowly savouring a kind of pleasure that gave me heaps of inebriating shudders. Suddenly I was astonished by a disgusting change. The flesh started to decay, crumble and drop in small fragments that smelt awfully. This transformation bewildered me, I stepped back frightened and went towards the door, which I kicked open and got out, a long cold laughter following me.213

While men have agency in their struggle against social constraints, or helplessly succumb to injustice and deprivation, female protagonists possess diametrically different characteristics. First, women occur considerably less frequently in these stories, with most episodes

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213 Ibid. p. 51
enacted exclusively by male characters in which women appear only as the protagonist’s mother, and never as victims of the patriarchal order. In stories where female protagonists do play a role, the accurate description of their bodies’ attractiveness is charged with poetical connotations, intensifying the impact that the appearance of female protagonists on the scene has on the male protagonist.

The strong disparity in the representations of male and female characters in the ḥadāthī period is epitomised more manifestly by “al-Badawī”. As I have briefly pointed out in the introduction, the importance of dating these stories to their original publication cannot be overstated. The character of the protagonist and the denouncing of material and intellectual deprivation is better understood in relation to the period from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. As it is the case with multiple stories from his first five collections “al-Badawī” too had already been previously published and was only later included in Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq, which appeared in 1973. Tāmir published this story originally in al-Ādāb in October 1962 and the text contains minor modifications in its 1973 version, which however do not affect the text’s structure. The only relevant difference is in the female protagonist’s name Samīra, which in the 1973 version replaces the original Samīḥa. This name recurs frequently in his stories; for example, in “Wajh al-qamar”, a story relevant for the originally female point of view on sexuality it proposes, the name of the protagonist is Samīḥa. In “al-Qabw” too, while walking through the city the protagonist suddenly remembers “Samīḥa, the girl who used to love me innocently and genuinely”. Considering that as we have seen, “al-Qabw” contains a significant autobiographical element, this name perhaps also had a referent in the author’s personal life at the time of writing.

However, it is also necessary to point out that the thirteen-year time span that separates the story’s original publication in *al-Ādāb* from its incorporation in *Dimashq al-ḥarā’iq* compels us to situate this story in Tāmir’s very early period to which the stories analysed in this section belong. The ḥadathī character emerges again prominently in the desire for freedom and emancipation from the constraints imposed by the traditional patriarchal family. Yet, the story also possesses a further element of originality in its existentialist attitude to love and death, as well as in the textual strategies it displays. The story – the longest in Tāmir’s career, consisting of approximately forty pages – begins with the protagonist Yūsuf (also a recurrent name for the stories’ male protagonists) taking part in a funeral march “because he did not have anything else to do”.216 Yūsuf akin to most of Tāmir’s protagonists in this period is a male factory worker living in a dark small basement, previously used for firewood storage, the symbol of his disenfranchisement. After attending the funeral of an unknown woman called Layla, he returns home to his basement, and again the narrative technique proceeds almost mindlessly in its description of everyday actions and gloomy thoughts, which prepares the female protagonist’s entrance.

He inserted the copper key into the lock and turned it, he opened the door and went in, closing the door behind him. In that moment, he was overcome by the feeling that he was distant from the world, estranged from the white roaring day coursing through the streets.

…

he stretched on his narrow bed made of steel and stared at the ceiling, which was of a pale shade of white, similar to the block that covered the grave. The dead woman’s name was Layla, a

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young woman in the prime of her age, now she’s alone in the
darkened grave, whilst the sky is blue, the sun shines and the
trees are green.

...  
Soon he was thinking that his basement was nothing but a grave.

Suddenly he heard something moving in the courtyard and a
new day glared deep inside him. He sprang up and approached
the window. There was Samīḥa, the landlord’s daughter,
picking jasmine flowers from a tree planted near the window.
He observed her with voracious eyes. Her black hair was
hanging over her shoulders, and her eyes looked defiantly. She
was standing on the tip of her toes trying to pick the jasmine
from a high branch, which allowed Yūsuf to see her white
thighs.\textsuperscript{217}

Residents of the same building, Yūsuf and Samīḥa engage in a
complicated love relationship. Their conversations and encounters are
surreptitious and characterised by an inescapable fear of being
discovered by Samīḥa’s family, who would not approve of their
relationship. Patriarchal tradition and class differences hinder the love
story between Yūsuf and Samīḥa: the former is a factory worker
estranged from his family for sleeping with his brother’s wife Faṭrna;
the latter is the daughter of a nouveau riche, the owner of the building
whose basement Yūsuf currently occupies. Their relationship and the
obstacles it faces function as the point of departure for the exploration
of the protagonist’s inner universe, and his reality of alienation and
solitude. The female protagonist Samīḥa is but one of the elements of
his desires, something Yūsuf is deprived of, just as he is deprived of
light by his damp basement, and of freedom by his superior at work. As
Ṣubḥî Ḥaḍīdī has noted in his detailed analysis of the style and language

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., p. 22.
of this story, through the stream of consciousness the narrator brings
together a variety of elements symbolising the protagonist’s alienation
and desire for freedom, love and death. The narrator constructs these
parallels through a style that attaches specific connotations to the
characters of Samīḥa, her father and the owner of the factory where
Yūsuf works. Colours in particular possess a strong dimension
functioning as elements of contrast between life and death, affluence
and poverty, freedom and oppression, love and aloneness. Whilst white,
yellow, and light colours in general symbolise life, marriage and
freedom, black and dark colours suggest exploitation, death, solitude,
poverty. The descriptions of Samīḥa’s body and of the feelings her
presence elicits, are characterised by whiteness, lightness and a
connection with the white jasmine and the sun.

The sun was about to set. Samīḥa stood there for a while, immersed in the yellow light of the sunset, then she bent down and said: “isn’t the sun beautiful?”

To his eyes Samīḥa looked somehow linked to the sun and the white jasmine. She was remarkably attractive, in such a way as though the scent of jasmine condensed and materialised in the form of white hot flesh.

Similar colours employed to highlight the connection between death and poverty, can be found in the symbolic commonalities between the grave that Yūsuf sees at the funeral and his basement. Furthermore, the denunciation of class segregation and sexual deprivation is rendered through opposed symbolisms and the hierarchical position between

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Yūsuf’s basement and Samīḥa’s family flat situated above him on the ground floor. Thus the narration, shifting frequently between a nameless third person narrator and Yūsuf narrating his story himself in the first person, collapses together the different elements that make up an oppressive reality. However, the female characters still enjoy a significantly reduced degree of agency and do not actively shape the protagonist’s masculinity, which is defined by the patriarchal family (his and Samīḥa’s) and his working-class background that prevent him from accomplishing his dream of marrying, having children and raising a family. The feeling of disparity between him and Samīḥa reaches a peak when the two eventually meet secretly in the basement at night, only to discover an incompatibility rooted in their differences, which ultimately reveals the impossibility of their love.

3.5 Questioning masculinity and killing patriarchy: The crisis of masculinity in the stories of the 1970s

The two defeats of 1967 and 1973 (known in Syria respectively as al-naksa, Arabic for setback, and Tishrīn, October) marked a watershed for nationalist ideology in Syria and the wider Arab Middle East. The loss of areas that were sacred (Jerusalem) and historically part of the Syrian territory (the Golan Heights) denoted the beginning of a long period of crisis for the Pan-Arab ideology, a dream of unity that faded out, losing momentum and credibility. In some respects, Tishrīn was the beginning of a new era for the Middle East, exposing Arab nationalist regimes’ political inefficacy and for Arab nationalism the mid 1970s marked the beginning of its decline. The 1970s began with the death of the pan-Arab leader Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and the Black September events in Jordan, when the Jordanian army clashed with Palestinian militias and expelled the Palestine Liberation Organisation;

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the 1973 *Tishrīn* war was followed by the disintegration of Lebanon in the civil war from 1975 onwards; finally, the recognition of the Israeli state by the Egyptian government in 1978 marked the end of a decade that undermined Arab nationalism and its emancipatory hopes almost irreversibly. Yet, in the aftermath of the two wars, the sense of deep frustration and helplessness contributed to reinforce the power of militarised and authoritarian regimes like Asad’s; regimes that in their rhetoric claimed the role of the leader as a manly “combatant” promised to provide relative stability to a region that had been profoundly traumatised by the Arab defeat of June 1967.

As Patrick Seale commented in his detailed biography of the late President Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad, although politically catastrophic for Arab nationalism the October War of 1973 marked the rise to prominence of Asad on a national and regional level. While on one hand literary history shows the decline of the Arab nationalist trend and the rise of a multiplicity of voices in cultural production, in the years following Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad’s rise to presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic in the 1970s the revolutionary language of the Ba’ath witnessed significant transformations. Especially after the October 1973 war, the Syrian political vocabulary was enriched with familial metaphors, which in turn derived their coherence and intelligibility from the actual lived understandings of gender and power in Syrian families as patriarchal and male-centred. As Wedeen also recounts, “representations of the October War not only emphasised Asad as national patriarch, but also stressed his masculinity or manliness. Books and articles make explicit reference to his masculinity. Ḥāfīẓ al-Asad own speeches invoke manliness to refer to male protection and national defence.”

These transformations of the language of politics and nationalism, together with the lasting impact of the events of the 1967-1977 decade, compel us to situate Tāmir’s works of this period in a different historical and theoretical framework. Although the gendered metaphors remained constitutive elements of Syrian and Arab nationalism even long after 1967, the naksa represented a damper for Arab nationalist fervour, and a watershed of such magnitude that a similarly optimistic, unifying tone seldom resurfaced in Syrian and Arabic literature.224

Male characters had occupied the centre of most stories since Tāmir’s very first collection, but the more realistic tone and the evidently engagé style resulted in episodes charged with great symbolic and heroic connotations, with little emphasis on sexuality and masculinities. With the 1970s the evolution of Tāmir’s style is manifest in the appearance of more nuanced protagonists, which remain usually male-centred, yet render justice to a changing political and social reality that conveys a more nuanced approach to social issues. The denunciation of alienation and privileges remains a central concern for this writer, but it is in this period that gender roles and sexuality come to the fore. In Arḍ ṣulba ṣaghīra (A small hard earth)225 the first signs of new and more complex masculinities emerge in the two protagonists’ disquieting attitude towards the female body and sexuality, as well as in the connection between their sexual deprivation and eventual turn to homosexual desire. The story equals an ambiguous snapshot of a friendship turned love relationship, albeit portrayed through a timid allusion situated in a context of ethical sternness. The two protagonists, ʿAḥmad and ʿIṣām, share the same room as lodgers in the house of a widow, whose attractive body they enjoy peeking at from their room’s window whilst she does the laundry. The boys get easily aroused at the sight of the landlady’s uncovered thighs as she is engrossed in her work,
ostensibly heedless of the boys’ attention. The protagonists’ sexual imagination, however, is not one of love and affection, or even of lust for the object of their desire, but rather of violence and forced sexual intercourse. They dream at length of creeping into her room at night and tearing off her clothes, of gagging her mouth and enjoying her immobility. The two boys’ desire for the female body seems so strong that even the prospect of ending up in jail for rape does not seem to deter them from their plan, although it remains at the level of words. Once the landlady has completed the laundry, the two protagonists decide to leave the house. Yet, before emerging from their room ʿAḥmad thoughtfully knocks on the room door to warn the women in the house of their presence and that women ought to conceal themselves. Outside, as they leave the house walking the protagonists come across a pretty girl looking agitated, who suddenly disappears from their sight when a handsome man in fancy clothes pulls up in a car and takes her away.

The two friends looked at each other and their faces went gloomy.
- “Where shall we go?” – asked ʿAḥmad. Streets, cafes, restaurants and cinema theatres hit his imagination. The world seemed to him a cage with steel bars, and he didn’t know what to say. Suddenly ʿAḥmad burst out laughing and asked:
- “Is the earth round?”
- “No, it’s not!”
- “Yes, it is”.
- “It’s not...”.

They went silent again. They went down to a loud street, and made their way to a small restaurant. They ate monotonously, then went to a café they frequented, had tea and played cards keenly. ‘Isam lost. They returned home as the sun was about to set, and lay down
next to each other on one bed, whilst the other bed remained empty.\textsuperscript{226}

Whilst the episode does not explicitly depict a homosexual relationship this subtext can be inferred from the story’s closure. Be that as it may, the story represents a significant development in the representations of male sexuality through the dyadic nature of the protagonists, which clearly alludes at something more than a simple friendship. The stark disparity between the heroic and manly gestures of the protagonist of “\textit{Rabī’ fī al-ramād}” and the attitude towards women that men display in this story, signal the beginning of a process of fragmentation and crisis. The absence of episodes about homosexual desire, and same-sex intercourse in this period, and the timid reference to this theme in Tāmir’s early works remains in line with the general reticence of Modern Arabic literature to address the subject. As it is hard to imagine that an insightful observer of his environment as Tāmir is might have been unaware of the reality of homosexual relationships, it is safe to explain this reticence – at least in the early period of his career – with the normalisation of male-female sexual relationships that modernity brought about in the Middle East. As Lagrange explains, while in classical Arabic literature the theme of male homosexuality was pervasive, contemporary fiction tends to obscure its nature and usually employs same-sex relationships to express malaise and decay.\textsuperscript{227} In this story, the structure and imagery reinforce an idea of same-sex intercourse as a sign of disquiet, exemplified in the morbid approach to sex of the two protagonists, their social alienation as well as by the coincidence between the two boys’ retreat to their bed and the twilight, an image often used by Tāmir to connote violence and humiliation.

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid, p. 134.
Homosexuality and its implication for the changing representations of masculinity will be addressed more extensively in Chapter Six. Here, it shall suffice to point out that this example and other stories of the same period capture a sense of male vulnerability and weakness, a process of questioning masculinity that has become characteristic of Tāmir’s latest works. A different approach to masculinity and patriarchy also appears manifest in new forms of resistance to paternal authority, culminating in the act of parricide. Whilst in the very early excerpts quoted above the father/son relationship is articulated through a less symbolic and more realistic killer/victim dichotomy, the 1970s mark a transformation in Tāmir’s style that subverts roles and responsibilities, refusing, even just by representing it, to accept the logic of patriarchy.

The first example, “al-‘Ā’ila” (The family) from *Dimashq al-ḥarā‘iq*, the protagonists, all members of the same family, stage a compact and very intense series of episodes that hint at the fragility of familial relations. In this collection, significant transformations in both style and content signal the maturation of the author’s writing towards a more nuanced view on masculinity, patriarchy and authoritarianism, and a multifarious set of protagonists. Upon returning home ‘Abd Allāh searches for his keys in his pocket but cannot find them; his back bent, and his legs shaking he knocks on the door and an attractive young woman whom he does not recognise, but who claims to be his wife ‘Ā’isha, opens the door for him and invites him in. ‘Abd Allāh looks at her in astonishment and asks to see his wife, but is laughed at by a the young woman claiming to be ‘Ā’isha. Immediately after entering the house the protagonist witnesses his little son breaking his little sister’s head with a hatchet for stealing his ball. In a surreal twist to a story where two different temporal levels seem to overlap, and in which the protagonist finds himself caught in an unknown world, the victim suddenly comes back to life to humiliate him and his despair at her death.
Suddenly the girl burst out in a long derisive laughter.
‘Abd Allâh asked her: “So you are not dead. Why are you laughing?”.
- “Look at the mirror. You are crying and your tears are mixing with your mucus”.
‘Abd Allah looked up, the sky was one grey luminous cloud. He closed his eyes and leaned back onto the wall. He heard whispering voices.
“He died and brought peace to himself and others”.
He heard his son say: “He’s left us nothing but debts.”
He heard his daughter say: “What shall we do now?”.
He heard his wife say: “We must hurry up and bury him.”
He heard his son say: “I’ll dig a grave.”
He did not attempt to call for help but gave himself up to the earth which, dark and heavy, was piled upon him.228

Instead of merely condemning the unaffectionate authoritarian father, the story represents a more nuanced attempt at looking at the father-wife-son triangle from the point of view of the helpless father. As Cohen-Mor notes in her study of familial relationships and constructions of masculinity in the Arab Middle East, the father-son relationship is characterised by varied and multifarious patterns. Whilst depictions of the father-son bond and of the oppression brought about by the former onto the latter tend to focus solely on the son and his individual plight and quest for emancipation, the father and his attempts to negotiate between the expectations of masculinity and his individual aspirations are usually overlooked.229 From a number of similar other episodes, the family as a broader institution comes under attack in

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228 Ibid., p. 252.
229 Cohen-Mor, Fathers and sons, p. 7.
Tāmir’s oeuvre, exposing it as a hypocritical social construct of appearances and false commitments.

The connections between patriarchy and authoritarianism become more evident as a more active role, charged with clearer political connotations, is assigned to the children in contrast with the overwhelming presence of fathers in earlier episodes. The protagonist of “Lā...” (No...) (originally published in 1973 in al-Mawqif al-adabī) is a nameless old man who, sitting in his courtyard is dozing off half-dreaming of himself becoming a feared and respected king, and of a burning child asking his heedless mother to succour him. Suddenly his seven sons walk into the courtyard carrying wood planks, hammers and a saw, awakening the old man who inquisitively asks them about their plans. The sons ignore their father and his reprimands until the old man falls asleep again and wakes up to find out that his sons have made him a coffin.

- “What have you made? Have you made a coffin?! Which one of you is planning to die?”
- “The coffin is for you”.

[...]
- “Do you know what you’re doing?” shouted the old man “you kill your father? What have I done to deserve this treatment?”
- “You taught us to bow our heads” said the first son.
- “You taught us to kiss the same hand that slapped us” said the second son.
- “We are scared of a woman’s clothes” said the third son.
- “We turn into old socks at the sight of a woman’s knee” said the fourth son.
- “You instructed us to sleep when the tempest is raging” said the fifth son.
- “We don’t have a past, nor a present or a future” said the sixth son.
- “We don’t dare to raise our heads to the sky” said the seventh son.
- “I’m still alive though!” protested the old man.

His sons did not pay attention to their father’s yelling, and proceeded to nail down the coffin’s cover, then they burned every piece of cloth in the house that could potentially be used as a white flag, and they took the coffin to the graveyard.230

Whilst in the very early realistic representations of honour killings, paternal violence and distrust amongst the members of the same family children and especially daughters are depicted as the helpless victims of an absurd traditional institution, condemned as the repository of hypocrisy, these two collections come as the turning point in the subject/object reversal of the characters. Bestowing agency onto the victimised children, and arming them with material weapons, the narrator overturns the logic of realism that seems to purportedly represent “reality” for the purpose of denouncing injustice. The subject/object swap between parents and children transforms patriarchal rule, which is still nonetheless the target of demonisation, into the object of the offspring’s revenge, exposing the subtle complicity between the male-centred family and submissiveness to authoritarianism. This hidden interplay between the alienating obedience demanded by fathers and helplessness in the face of political tyranny emerges clearly from the list of accusations the children address to their father who taught the boys to kiss the hand that slapped them and to sleep when the tempest is raging. Linking also sexual incapacity and political inaction (“We turn into old socks at the sight of a woman’s knee”), both consequences of emasculating paternal tyranny, the

episode broadly denounces family as the source of atomisation and helplessness. Without considering the allegorical implications that we could infer through mere speculation, for example interpreting the elderly father as an allegory for the dictator with the children playing the part of the youth in revolt, parricide is sufficient to clarify a political stance that views family uncompromisingly as a fundamental link in the chain that ties down the desire for emancipation.

The connection that the narrator makes between patriarchy and authoritarianism reminds us of the theory of hegemonic masculinity in its local and regional dimensions. Although devoid of any literary descriptions of major events that consolidated the Asad regime’s power throughout the years, exposing the family as the repository of disharmony and resentment challenges the certainties of the imagined reader, clarifying the ‘structure of feeling’ represented by the firm connection between neo-patriarchy and authoritarianism. What these representations achieve is also a multiplication of views and meanings, subverting the claims of patriarchal authoritarianism through characters that can be empowering and putting the possibility of rebelling to patriarchy into act.

3.6 “Fī layla min al-layālī”: The denouncing of the authoritarian state and the gendered dimension of oppression

In addition to the changing representations of the patriarchal family, the stories of the 1970s contain a further degree of maturation in the exploration of gender roles, and in the way in which they reveal the relationship between the increasingly authoritarian state and the undermining of the male protagonist’s masculinity and dignity. The surreal condition of helpless male citizens under the capricious rule of

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231 Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept”, p. 849.
an authoritarian regime had been a central aspect of Tāmir’s writing since the outset and since the early 1960s the humiliating practices of the state upon the individual, as we have seen in Chapter Two and will see again in Chapter Six, have remained paramount in his latest stories too. The emergence and the recurrence of this theme in Tāmir’s early works must be situated in the context of the increasingly overwhelming presence of the state and of security forces in the lives of individuals that Syria witnessed after independence, a phenomenon in turn paralleled by the rise of nationalist and military regimes led by elements of the rural and petty bourgeoisie.\(^{232}\) The late 1970s and the consolidation of authoritarianism are usually associated in Tāmir’s oeuvre with *al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshir* and in particular with the title-story of this collection, which in turn has come to be considered Tāmir’s masterpiece for its allegorical representation of authoritarianism. In fact, the collection contains stories with a significantly stronger focus on arbitrary arrest, torture and humiliation, of particular historical significance in the context of the consolidation of the authoritarian regime led by Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. The title story however illustrates only one aspect of his production in this period and the denouncing of authoritarian pervasiveness and strategies of domination assumes a variety of configurations. In the realm of gender and the body in particular the desire to tackle this issue presents important developments. In the stories of this period masculinity begins to acquire new connotations, and while the authoritarian father exerts his patriarchal authority on his wife and children inside the household, he becomes the victim of state patriarchy and tyranny outside. The transformations of the male protagonist and the gradual disintegration of a strong masculinity come frequently as the consequence of authoritarian and arbitrary practices performed by representatives of the State upon the male citizen.

\(^{232}\) Abu Deeb, “Cultural creation in a fragmented society”, p. 164.
Abū Ḥasan, the protagonist of “Fī layla min al-layālī” (One night) is a middle-aged man with a great sense of pride in the respect and consideration that he enjoys in his working-class community, a man whose belief in his own integrity the narrator describes at length, putting particular emphasis on the relationship between the model of masculinity that he embodies and on his working-class, suburban background. Reminding us of the two boys’ story analysed above, the narrator seems eager to stress a tight relationship between social disenfranchisement and emasculation.

As the night’s black blanket falls upon the city, Abū Ḥasan wanders off from his dull neighbourhood, with its curvy dark alleys, its skinny people, its shabby houses stuck next to each other, and its café which looked like a coffin made of worn wood. And as he emerges to the broad roads, he is stunned by the racket, the fast cars, the pretty people and the multi-coloured, bright lights around him. He walks slowly, in stupor, his back straight and his head held high. His face is creased, but he is very proud of his thick moustache which attracts the curiosity and astonishment of many of those who look at him. Indeed! You’re Abū Ḥasan and you deserve the admiration and the respect that you get. You are a great man. Your dagger is a strike of lightning coming before a downpour of blood. Your heart is made of silver, and your hands of mountain rock. You’re unlike any other man. When you’re joyful you’re like a green orchard. When you’re angry, death carries its empty casket and awaits the victim’s corpse. You’re a loyal lover. No cheating. No lies. No hypocrisy and no flattery from you. […] You’re in your forties, but when your

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233 This story appeared for the first time in 1976 and was later included in al-Numār fī al-yawm al-‘āshir. Zakariyyā Tāmir, “Fī layla min al-layālī”, al-Ma‘rifa, (168, February 1976), p. 82.
body meets that of a woman’s, you remain in her blood until her death. You drink arak as though it was water and don’t get drunk. You engage in bloody fights as though you were smoking a cigarette by a river bank. You enjoy the secret respect and admiration of every man, woman and child in your street. When a woman from your neighbourhood argues with her husband, she doesn’t go to her family’s house to whine, she comes to you confident that whatever injustice has befallen her will certainly be unravelled. [...] Never in your life have you bowed to humiliation and degradation.234

Abū Ḥasan smiles proudly and happily as he carries on walking slowly amongst men without moustaches, and women who walk haughtily and elegantly with their head held high, pretty and perfumed like expensive dolls. Look, look Abū Ḥasan. Men look like women, and women look like men. But you’re indifferent to all this. That’s life. Nothing is eternal and every era has its men and its women.235

With its focus on Abū Ḥasan’s working-class, suburban background the episode also denounces inequality and segregation, exemplified in the urban population’s contempt for the protagonist’s complexion and thick moustache. The baffled looks that two pretty young girls direct to his thick moustache make Abū Ḥasan all the more satisfied with his appearance, which he considers the visible mark of his manliness. As soon as he realises the girls are laughing at his appearance, he gets upset and speeds up his pace, turning into a side road.

You?! You’re Abū Ḥasan! You don’t shy away like a little girl when someone mocks you. What a time we live in, where dogs bark at their owners.

234 Tāmir, al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshīr, p. 47.
235 Ibid., p. 48.
Abū Ḥasan imagined the two girls getting kidnapped and forced to dance naked in a room full of men with thick moustaches and voracious eyes.236

As he walks aimlessly through its fancy streets, his estrangement from the modern bourgeois city becomes manifest, especially in his reaction to the unusual manners men and women around him display, signalling the emergence of models of masculinity and femininity alien to him. In contrast, the narrator goes on exalting Abū Ḥasan’s moral qualities and virtue, describing him as a true gentleman, almost from another era, embodying an idealistic model of masculinity that has the thick-grown moustache as its status symbol, elevating him almost to a mythical status.

He remembered a pretty woman from his neighbourhood who used to say to him: “Marry me, and I will be your servant”. But one morning wails emerged from her house, wrapping the entire neighbourhood and its people in black. Abū Ḥasan didn’t walk behind her coffin. He hid himself in his room, and buried his face in the pillow, unable to cry. His hoarse laments rose now and again raucous, sadder than a mother’s weeping for the death of her daughter.237

Particularly, the narrator succeeds in conveying the image of a gallant male protagonist with the composure of a true gentleman striking a balance between strength and sensibility, courage and compassion. The narrator intentionally idealises the protagonist and indulges in the glorification of his integrity, outlining Abū Ḥasan’s profile in a way

236 Ibid., p. 48.
237 Ibid., p. 49.
that makes the next episode the more relevant and surprising for the reader.

Suddenly, he heard a sharp cry for help, and saw a man running in his direction. He heard people yelling that he was a thief, urging everybody to catch him. When the man running came close to Abū Ḥasan he tried to grab him, but the thief dodged him skilfully and resumed his running, without retrieving what had fallen off his hands.

Abū Ḥasan picked it up. It was a woman’s handbag. He looked at it and said to himself: “What would people say in my neighbourhood if they saw me carrying a woman’s item?”. Those who’d been chasing the robber came up to Abū Ḥasan, accompanied by a chubby police officer. “I’m sorry” said Abū Ḥasan, “that devil was like mercury and escaped from me”.238

To his great surprise and perhaps due to his appearance, Abū Ḥasan is accused by the woman and the passers-by of stealing the handbag. Police conduct him to the police station where the story begins to address arbitrary arrest, torture and the emasculating practices of the police in a graphic and explicit language.

The chief of police remained silent at first. Then he threw an inquiring look at Abū Ḥasan and said to him in contempt: “Please… it’s your turn, let’s hear your eloquence. What’s up? Did you swallow your tongue, you crook?”
- “I’m not a crook” said Abū Ḥasan.
- “So who are you?” said the chief angrily, “perhaps a mosque sheikh without us knowing?”
- “I’m a man” said Abū Ḥasan “and men don’t rob women”.

238 Ibid., p. 49-50
The chief sprang up from his chair and approached Abū Ḥasan.
- “Blimey!” said the chief mockingly “you’re not just a crook, you’re an impudent one too”.
- “I didn’t steal the handbag” said Abū Ḥasan “I saw it falling from the thief’s hands and I picked it up”.
- “Listen, denial won’t do you any good” said the chief to Abū Ḥasan “you better confess what you did now, or you will regret your mother brought you to life”.

Abū Ḥasan clutched his moustache with his left hand:
- “May this be a woman’s moustache if I’m lying”.
- “To hell with your moustache” said the chief “I don’t have time for banter. Speak now or I’ll smash your head”.

Abū Ḥasan’s face turned red as he retorted:
- “The man who smashes Abū Ḥasan’s head is yet to be born. Ask people from my street and you will find out who’s Abū Ḥasan”.

The chief grew furious and said:
- “You dog… confess or I’ll beat you and your neighbours with my shoe!”

Abū Ḥasan’s mythical figure gradually shrinks before the readers’ eyes, as he becomes the victim of the urban population’s discredit and discrimination, and he is beaten and humiliated by the police officers who take great pleasure in undermining his sense of self-esteem and his most incontrovertible principles. The gradual process of the protagonist’s emasculation at the hands of the police continues with fierce beating and torture, including the infamous bastinado method of punishment which consists in severe beating of a person’s soles. The petty crime he is accused of makes the police’s reaction and punishment the more grotesque and surreal, emphasising the arbitrariness of the

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239 Ibid., p. 52.
state’s treatment of the individual.

The chief approached Abū Ḥasan with a smile, holding a pair of scissors in his hand. “Now you will pay for your insults, and you will see what a half-man is capable of.” Abū Ḥasan was terrified and tried to get away from the officers’ hold as the scissors got closer to his moustache. He was unable to move as they held him and he screamed begging them:
- “By God, I’m innocent!”
- As the scissors got ever closer to his moustache he was gripped by fear and screamed again: - “Please!”
- “Say that you stole the handbag and you won’t get hurt”.
Silence reigned in the room for a moment, then Abū Ḥasan murmured:
- “I stole the handbag from the woman”.

The chief of the police station laughed, and said in disdain:
- “How long will this country have people like you?”

The scissors descended on Abū Ḥasan’s moustache and operated patiently and with great satisfaction whilst he let out a long, hoarse scream.²⁴⁰

It is significant in fact how the process of the undermining and emasculation of the protagonist happens in the context of his estrangement from his rural environment and as a consequence of his aimless roaming in the city, represented as a place embodying values in contradiction with the protagonist’s semi-mythical virility. The relevance of this episode in the context of this chapter resides in the gendered connotations that the narrator attributes to the denouncing of authoritarian practices. The gendered dimension of the episode,

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 54-55.
revolving around the degradation of Abū Ḥasan’s masculinity, signals the transition of this theme from a markedly realistic style exposing the state as the oppressor and the average citizen as a victim, to a more mature fashion of representing oppression. Here, the denouncing of the same practices is accompanied by the detailed characterisation of the protagonist’s personality, as well as by the exposing of the state’s grotesque practices. The centrality of the male body and its emasculation at the hands of authoritarian regimes is particularly relevant in the late 1970s when this collection appeared at the time of the consolidation of a regime under which “men themselves are targets occupying a feminine position in relation to the regime apparatus, which is clearly identified as masculine”.241

This feminisation as a form of humiliation of the protagonist is exemplified perfectly in the following passage of the same story, in which after being subjected to intense beating and renouncing his inestimable moustache, Abū Ḥasan is forced to state that he is not a man. He is a woman.

- “Leave him” said the chief to his men. Then, turned to Abū Ḥasan and said: “get up and stand on your feet”.
  Abū Ḥasan gathered what remained of his strength in order to be able to stand up and followed the chief’s instructions. “Pick up you shoes” said the chief to Abū Ḥasan. Quietly groaning in pain Abū Ḥasan obeyed again, and stood up with his back bent, holding a shoe in each hand.
- “Say Abū Ḥasan” asked him the chief “are you a man or a woman?”
- “Of course I’m a man” replied Abū Ḥasan.

241 Aghacy, Masculine identity, p. 95.
“Liar. You’re a woman. Go on. Say that you’re a woman. I will be furious if you don’t admit that you’re a woman. And you do know what happens when I get angry”.

“I am… a woman” said Abū Ḥasan in an inaudible voice.

“I didn’t hear you” said the chief “Speak up! Do you think you’re whispering into your girlfriend’s ears?”

“I’m a woman” said Abū Ḥasan in a loud voice, looking down.

The chief laughed boisterously and added: “Be grateful that we’re not homosexuals242 here”, and the officers in the room burst out laughing.243

The significance of Abū Ḥasan’s emasculation resides in how it employs the protagonist’s self-image and gradual breakdown to deconstruct a conceptualization of patriarchal masculinity as ahistorical and unified, exposing it as a fragmented experience “both commanding and impotent, heroic and cowardly, central and marginal”244. The humiliation the protagonist is subjected to exemplifies a process through which the authoritarian state performs what Connell defines as practices of authorisation and marginalisation,245 i.e. the process of interplay of gender with the arbitrariness of the authoritarian state transforming men from dominant to subordinate. The process of emasculation Abū Ḥasan goes through exposes the changing and varying degrees of privilege inherent to masculinity, particularly through the gradual collapse of the manly protagonist through his departure from his popular environment (al-ḥāra al-sha’biyya) and his crossing into urban territory first, as well as his subsequent arbitrary

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243 Ibid., p. 56-57.
244 Aghacy, Masculine identity, page 3.
245 Connell, Masculinities, p. 80.
arrest and ultimate humiliation in front of the chief of police. However, while these stories certainly demonstrate greater awareness of the multi-faceted reality of gender roles and represent successful attempts at deconstructing patriarchal masculinity, the language and the structure of most stories remains anchored in a deeply male-centred language. The role women play is almost exclusively that of a symbol, of an accessory to the male’s subjectivity, or the repository of the male’s honour, an aspect that will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

3.7 Conclusions

Above I have examined changing representations of masculinity and patriarchy in Tāmir’s early works, situating them in the territory of modernism, nationalism, ideological fragmentation and authoritarianism.

Although they do not possess a strong ideological connotation multiple examples from Tāmir’s debut on the literary scene display thematic and formal elements that allow us to associate them with the hadāthī mood. As Abu Deeb illustrates, this trend was organic to the nationalist and socialist emancipatory discourse that was rampant in Syria and in the Arab Middle East. It features frequently in Tāmir’s early works, in which the overwhelmingly predominant presence of male protagonists and the marginality and objectification of female characters testify to deep-seated patriarchal connotations within Arab nationalist discourse. Tāmir’s early stories, particularly those published in the late 1950s and early 1960s, exemplify this inextricability between the bodies of male and female protagonists and the predominant nationalist and emancipatory tone with its quest for sacrifice and destruction. It is essential to emphasise this aspect, as well as the generational and
ideological affiliation of Tāmir’s, to fully grasp the transformations that his writing has undergone ever since.

The stories in question are shaped by the transformations that cultural production in the Arab East witnessed across the 1960s and 1970s decades, transformations that can be ascribed largely to the historical events of those years: the rise and fall of totalising emancipatory ideologies charged with male-centred connotations, the defeats and decisive blows to these beliefs, as well as the rise and consolidations of authoritarian, invasive regimes. Whilst the stories of the 1960s in fact reflect the organic relationship that cultural production entertained with nationalist, socialist and emancipating political thought, the 1967/1973 defeats, and subsequent questioning of the abovementioned ideologies, brought about the first signs of a more nuanced and multifarious view of masculinity and patriarchal tradition. The higher degree of unity that most stories enjoyed and the organic relationship between these works and the modernist consensus entail significant implications for the representations of male and female characters, a dimension that gradually changed in the stories of the late 1960s and early 1970s, later collected in al-Ra’d and Dimashq al-ḥarā’iq.

In Tāmir’s early period the tight relationship between the ḥadāthī thought and literature, as laid out by Abu Deeb, manifested itself in male characters who were both heroic agents of destruction and change, as well as helpless victims of patriarchal authority. In this chapter, I have shown how Tāmir’s writings transitioned from a realist style that denounced sexism and the family as the site of oppression and atomisation, as his works turned to a more mature surreal strategy successfully articulating the relationship between patriarchy and authoritarianism. Whilst patriarchal rule was often represented as undisputable and immortal in the earlier episodes, as early as the mid-1970s the uncompromising rejection of patriarchal institutions
developed into one of Tāmir’s most effective literary tropes. The turning point of this development lies in the subject/object reversal between fathers and children that bestows agency to the children, while challenging the centrality of the patriarch and subverting the double-edged logic of realism. In a society asphyxiated by the unquestioned authority of a dictatorial regime, whose structure and hierarchy in turn replicate the patriarchal family, the empowering nature of such episodes lies in the potential they possess to imagine alternative and unthought-of possibilities and to upturn the systems of signification that patriarchal authoritarianism seeks to naturalise.

In contrast, the last part has analysed the transformations that characterise Tāmir’s *al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshir* particularly with regard to the gendered configurations that the denouncing of authoritarian practices acquired. The performance of violent and emasculating practices on helpless citizens at the hands of the authoritarian state exposes the duality of patriarchal masculinity as a form of political domination affecting women and men equally. These few episodes quoted are only apparently “silent” to authoritarianism and its abuses, but setting their characters and the relationship between them against a backdrop of the events in Syria in the 1970s reveals their subversive potential.
Chapter Four: Neo-patriarchy and female sexuality in the stories of the ḥadāthī period

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the central role male characters played in Tāmir’s early stories in the context of the ḥadāthī movement, and their struggle against the patriarchal family, social disenfranchisement and authoritarianism. This chapter looks at these themes from the point of view of female characters in the same period.

The first part introduces the gendered dimension of Arab nationalism, to which the ḥadāthī project was organic. For the purpose of further illustrating Tāmir’s early works affinity with the predominant ḥadāthī tone, the first part brings into view relevant examples expressing an anti-patriarchal stance with a markedly male-centred style, stories in which female protagonists have very little textual presence in the text and serve as accessories of the male’s quest for love and freedom. In the second part, the analysis turns to the implications of a more female-centred style that emerges in relevant, albeit infrequent stories from Tāmir’s early period, with a focus on the original style and language that stories with an existentialist outlook on the individual present, and at the ways in which they project a female point of view on patriarchy and female sexual desire. This allows us to examine the representations of the female body and of female sexuality in Tāmir’s stories, and their development in his early works of the 1960s and 1970s. Motivating this focus on female eroticism is the desire to scrutinise the socio-political value of this trope, in the context of concurrent historical events of Syria, analysing its relevance in a patriarchal context as described by Sharabi.246

246 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, pp. 32-34.
To carve out the degree to which these representations transgress a patriarchal worldview, the analysis draws on Mernissi’s and Saadawi’s works. Both authors have exposed the implications of women expressing their sexuality in the patriarchal system that – while being multifarious and diverse – in its normative approach to gender considers female sexual urge a source of instability, or *fitna* in Arabic, for the privileged position men enjoy. As in the previous chapter, the third part analyses stories published in the 1970s which denounce the emergence of a pervasive and oppressive authoritarian state and its effects on the individuals to explore the role female characters possess, drawing inspiration from Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity. This approach leads us to explore how the concepts dominant, complicit and subordinate masculinity emerge through the representations of female characters.\textsuperscript{247}

4.2 Background: Neo-patriarchy and the role of the female

As we have seen in the previous chapter, exploring the relationship between patriarchal familial structures and political tyranny elucidates the subversive potential of literary works and their significance in a neopatriarchal authoritarian context. Gender roles, and the way the patriarchal order shapes the relationship between the sexes return in this chapter, which looks at Tāmir’s early episodes addressing female sexuality in the context of modernity, ideology and authoritarianism.

Feminists and progressive thinkers in the Arab World and elsewhere have widely studied the intertwined relationship between authoritarianism, gender and patriarchy, and the implications of this correlation. By way of illustration, Ilkarracan analyses the way nationalist and supposedly secular ideologies have dealt with women’s

\textsuperscript{247} Connell, *Masculinities*, pp. 76-81.
sexuality, stressing how this relationship has often been contradictory. On one hand nationalist and progressive forces have pursued a secular and socialist agenda, encouraging women’s participation in the social and political life; on the other, the degree of emancipation and equality the modernising enterprising has achieved has been the object of discussion. That same modernising enterprise reproduced the same gender hierarchies, patterns and power relations of traditional patriarchy that it sought to defy, reinforcing a patriarchal conceptualisation of the female’s role as mother and of her sexuality as confined to its reproductive function. According to Sharabi, this contradictory approach resulted in the so-called neopatriarchal state, which appears as a continuation of the traditional institutions that the modernising and progressive ideologies of its foundational period sought to overthrow through modernisation. Narrowing the focus to look at Syria specifically, the institutionalisation of feminism and gender equality embodied by organisations such as the al-Ḥaraka al-Niswiyya, (Women’s movement) reproduces the same hierarchies and power relations between genders, as it remained a state-controlled institution practicing state feminism. After all, this sort of trajectory is common to a variety of post-colonial contexts, and as Kumari Jayawardena has clarified in Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, post-colonial nationalist and anti-imperialist movements failed to answer the question of women and their emancipation, reproducing the patterns of a traditional patriarchal system.

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251 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, pp. 3-6.
After independence, Syria witnessed the modernising and usually authoritarian efforts of the Ba‘ath party, which aimed, amongst other things, at incentivising the participation of women in the public sphere, to operate a clear break with the traditional patriarchal society and were essential to the empowerment of women and to their access to education and public life. However, women’s emancipation was an organic, but vastly subordinate aspect to the country’s modernisation project. The Ba‘ath’s modernising and emancipatory nationalist project was not devoid of contradictions and shortcomings, and a largely neopatriarchal language that assigned to women the role of mothers and bearers of the nation – which in turn is represented as a woman – has typified the Syrian Arab nationalistic discourse since the early days of the Ba‘ath, for example in the writing of ideologues such as Zakī al-Arsuzī. Of particular relevance is the stress that Ba‘athist theorists have put on to the shared etymological root of the words *umm* (mother) and *umma* (nation), a mother to be loved and protected. In particular, the association between Palestine and the female body usually allegorised the former as the occupied Arab land through images of the latter as the victim of rape and violation. In the collective imagery of nationalist propaganda, men, and especially leaders, are fertile and powerful defenders of the nation’s honour against traitors and invaders. As Beth Baron shows in her *Egypt as a woman – nationalism, gender and politics*, in colonial and post-colonial Arab contexts, every time the nation is depicted visually, it is represented as a woman. Representations of the nation as a woman, common across a variety of cultures around the globe (from Marianne, the female embodiment of France’s *république*, to Armenia’s *Mayr Hayastan*), began to be employed in Syria, describing the Arab nation as a victimised woman to be protected. Assessing the degree of gender equality accomplished

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by Syrian and Arab nationalist regimes in their respective societies is not the focus of this research; however, emphasising the patriarchal nature of their discourse and the marginal role of the question of women needs to be taken into consideration when addressing the relationship between the nationalist, modernising enterprise and the representations of female protagonists in Tāmir’s stories.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, Tāmir’s works from the 1960s and 1970s reflect to a large extent the male-centred nature of the hadāthī project, as well as the marginal and instrumental role of women. Their role is usually secondary and accessory to that of men, whose tyranny and narrow-mindedness they are helplessly subjected to as a tool made to provide sexual enjoyment to the man and for procreation. The working-class background the female protagonists from these early stories come from restricts their range of action to familial and community relationships, and prevents them from any political or intellectual agency. In the recurrent description of alienated individuals who cannot attain their basic necessities that characterises this early period, women come across as passively subjected to the needs of men. Men dominate this landscape, with women usually relegated to play the role of accessories to the male protagonists’ aspirations of bread, love and freedom. Men who suffer from material and intellectual deprivation recur considerably more frequently as the central motif of Tāmir’s earliest collections, which appeared in the context of modernism and social realism and were strongly influenced by the emancipatory ideologies of nationalism and socialism. Hunger, unemployment, hostility, violence, backwardness and ignorance lay as plagues upon his main characters, a grim picture that leaves women aside, confining them to the part of the victims of the victims.
4.3 “Thalj ākhir al-layl”: The role of female characters in the struggle against the patriarchal family

This modernist, emancipatory tone of Tāmir’s early works manifests itself in the representations of the patriarchal family that characterise many episodes. The subtexts that had typified the Arabic modernist cultural production, considered by Abu Deeb as organic to the abovementioned emancipatory ideologies, include a decisive rupture with the past and with tradition, identified usually, but not exclusively, with patriarchy. Novels, short stories and poems characterized by love, violence, tenderness, death, purification and destruction as necessary to achieve the breakthrough to modernity and to reach a freer future, are the trademark of the literary movement that was organic to the ḥadāthī political project.257 As seen in Chapter Three, many of these characteristics are central to Tāmir’s early works, in particular in Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ and Rabī’ fī al-Ramād, whose stories express a more manifest political commitment to the struggles of the marginalised sectors of urban society. Here, patriarchy and the unyielding authority of familial institutions join the state and religion to form the triangle of oppression that prevents the individual from expressing himself freely. The general feeling of estrangement that Tāmir’s characters usually experience often comes as a consequence of the inflexibility of familial traditions, and of the conformity that is demanded by parents. A quasi-anarchist impulse seems to animate the ferocious attacks on fathers and on the family since the early stage of this writer’s career. From the numerous episodes set in a familial context, and from the recurrence of stories, which amounts almost to an obsession with the household and its dynamics and repercussions on the individual, we can detect the extremely negative connotations assigned to the family as the primary societal source of identification. Oppressive fathers as the embodiment of ancestral tradition emerge as the main target of a style in which the

257 Abu Deeb, “The collapse of the totalizing discourse”, pp. 344-345
family represents the first and most natural of the institutions that subjugate the individual in his quest for material and intellectual well-being. A deep sense of malaise surrounds the house, an asphyxiating feeling of being observed, watched, followed and patronised by an ever-present figure, which expects unwavering obedience.

“Thalj ākhir al-layl” (Snow late at night) describes the internal conflict of the male protagonist Yūsuf, a young boy whose father has ordered him to find his wandering sister and kill her (“like a dog!”). The disparity between the father’s obstinate conformation to unwritten rules and Yūsuf’s genuine love for his sister functions as the narrative tool to denounce the patriarchal family as the site of incomprehension and atomisation. In the realistic tone that characterises such early works, one detects an underlying denouncing of honour killings and the interplay between traditional justice and state law. In the early stage of Tāmir’s writing, love as the antidote for the unquestionable power of traditional institutions in this early stage represents a rudimentary weapon in the hands of the urban individual, torn between modernity and tradition. This story appeared in the early 1960; although devoid of any explicit sexual connotations, the episode is populated by symbols and allegories that emphasise the desire for liberation from the overwhelming institutions of patriarchy: the protagonist associates the catastrophe of his escaped sister with the presence of a snake living in the patio.

In the oppressive atmosphere created by the parents and the latent snake as embodiments of patriarchy, the protagonist Yūsuf finds refuge only in his imagination: He pictures the time when spring comes and he will finally find his sister, meeting her by coincidence in the city market. She will have moved on in her life and settled with the man she loves and Yūsuf will come home to “find the snake tossed in the patio, dead.

258 Tāmir, Rabī’ fi al-Ramād, p. 15.
and cold, and he will look at his gloomy father in triumph.”

His reconciliation with his beloved sister whom his father asked him to slaughter, signifies the definite annihilation of patriarchy symbolised by the snake that the father cherishes. Yet, it remains at the level of mere imagination, leaving the protagonist helpless in his quest for love and emancipation. The story contains no sexual dimension, and the frustration Yūsuf and his sister feel towards their father focuses on a vaguer atmosphere of oppression inside the family, embodied equally by the two parents and symbolised ideally by the poisonous snake. Although the narrator bestows some degree of agency on the runaway sister through her deliberate divorce from the patriarchal household, in most episodes from this period the female protagonists are left at the margins of the narration and never address the high-minded social and political subjects that represent the author’s main concern. After all, the sister remains in this story a nameless character, who does not enter the text except through the father’s mention of the shame she brings upon the family, or through Yūsuf’s imagination, leaving male protagonists at the centre of storytelling.

4.4. “al-Ughniya al-zargā’ al-khashina” and “Qaranfula lil-asfalt al-mut‘ab”: The objectification of the female as accessory to the male’s quest for emancipation and the emergence of female sexual desire

An overwhelming presence of male protagonists distinguishes Tāmir’s very first collection, Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ. The narrator tells most stories in the first person, usually putting great emphasis on the male protagonists’ suffering and discomfort at material and spiritual deprivation, at the lack of freedom in the patriarchal household, at their material poverty, and at their sexual frustration. The impetus to denounce a collective reality of social inequality as well as to express strictly individual concerns come together in numerous stories, set

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mostly in the Syrian capital Damascus, Tāmir’s native city (recognisable in “Rajul min Dimashq”, (A man from Damascus)\textsuperscript{260} as well as in places like Baghdad Street, or the al-Ḥijāz Station). The concern with social issues such as industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, unemployment and inequality figuring prominently in a story like “al-Ughtniya al-zarqā’ al-khashina” (The blue harsh song) in which female characters do appear and have a voice, reduces them to the accessory in a broader picture dominated by male protagonists. The only female character makes her appearance in the male protagonist’s fantasy, who dreams of the day when he will become a king. In the following conversation the nameless protagonist describes to Abū Aḥmad, the owner of the local coffee shop, the ideal of woman that he would like to marry.

I will marry a woman that I saw some time ago on the street. A true woman. Her face was like the moon, framed by her black hair hanging loosely. Green eyes. Firm breasts that shuddered at every slightest movement of her body. I walked behind her for a while, and I enjoyed observing her behind quaking. Oh, what a woman! She was a big happy world! I will give an order to search for her and I will marry her.

The evident objectification of the woman by the protagonist in this episode remains an exception in Tāmir’s oeuvre, which nonetheless especially in this first collection, contains several images of idealised women as the object of frustrated male desire. The focus on the individual’s contemplations, photographed sometimes through a stream of consciousness, repeatedly stresses the lack of love amongst the protagonist’s biggest concerns. Notably, most protagonists come from a working class, poorly educated background, struggling to make ends meet and unable to find a woman with whom they can settle down. They

\textsuperscript{260} Tāmir, Ṣahīl al- ḵawād al-abyad, p. 51.
usually idealise the woman they are looking for, a woman whose features match the popular (sha‘bī) standards of beauty: long black hair, green eyes, fair skin tone.

These stories explore the isolation and disenfranchisement of the protagonists giving prominence to men, bringing to the stage women with very little agency, merely as the object of male desire. Although Tamir’s hero’s highest aspiration is not the sexual act of love, but marriage and sentimental love with a soul mate he cannot find, for one reason or another, the narrator makes the first timid references to eroticism, hinting at sexual intercourse between the protagonist and the city prostitutes.

I want nothing from life more than a modest house to live with the woman I have not met yet. But I am confident that I will find her, and I will love her loyally. I don’t want to live a single day hungry, and if I fell sick I would like to have enough money to pay for the treatment and the medications. 261

The same protagonist, an unnamed man from Damascus, finds himself compelled to justify to his father the little money in his pockets, after giving half of his salary to a prostitute who had talked him into following her to her house the night before.

Oh, she’s such a kind woman. When I inhaled the smell of her hair, I was struck by a sudden emotion and almost forgot that I was with a promiscuous woman. I felt I was hugging an innocent young girl.

Oh, she’s such a kind woman. Suddenly I felt like leaving, but she stopped me and said: you’re not leaving before you’ve had coffee.

261 Ibid., p. 60.
She started talking to me about her troubles, whilst I sipped my coffee and observed her thinking to myself: this is a good woman, she deserves a home and a man worthy of her.\(^{262}\)

As seen in Chapter Three a rich and suggestive language characterises the stories of this period whose main themes remain inequality, poverty and deprivation, as experienced from the point of view of the male protagonists. The female body remains the object of the male protagonist’s lust, described through suggestive representations and analogies which have become Tāmir’s signature style. The narrative structure still relegates the woman to helplessness and relative marginality, allegories associating the female body or the sexual act of love with music or nature. The desire for the emancipation of women overlaps with, and is often overshadowed by a more unifying view and a broader realistic, progressive and totalising vein expressing a desire for emancipation of the individual from patriarchy and tradition, as well as from inequality and exploitation.

However, we observe how the gradual emergence of sexual appetite as an urgency affecting the female too emerged from a mass of stories whose protagonists seem bound to a vision of the woman as a marginal actor in the personal accomplishment of the male. At a significantly early stage in Tāmir’s very first collection, the first seeds of a preoccupation with female sexuality, a central theme in his latest works, show a boldness of language that explicitly condemns families and social mores imprisoning desire and lust. Crucial to this process of concealment and repression is again the patriarchal family, embodied equally by mothers and fathers, who strive to protect the honour and the reputation of the household.

\(^{262}\) Ibid., p. 64.
“Qaranfula lil-asfalt al-mut’ab” (Carnation for the tired tar)\textsuperscript{263} is a brief sketch with four episodes occurring apparently in the same city, like a series of random photographs shot with no apparent connection to each other. The first episode is particularly significant as it frames an adolescent girl lying on her bed, her eyes closed, listening to a music that “sent a dazzling and strange joy to her” […] “her body lying on the bed cover was as mature as aged wine” […] “without a man her body was like a sea, whose brown waves were sleeping”. The protagonist finds herself alone dreaming, but suddenly the ever-present mother appears, to remind her of the deceitful nature of men who “worship women as long as they smell their odour, but they desert them when their lust is quenched”. Suddenly she remembers the story their old neighbour told her once of a woman who was kidnapped by seven men, and only escaped their hold after several nights. In a poetic crescendo of the girl’s imaginary depiction of the men around her and of their comments, her own imagination arouses her, and she begins to tremble and moan with pleasure. Yet, at the climax of her self-elicited enjoyment, she hears her mother’s voice calling her insistently.

The seven men disappeared. She opened her eyes and said to herself:
- “I’ll be happy when my mother dies.”\textsuperscript{264}

This story appeared as early as 1960, articulating the conflict between the traditional authorities of family and patriarchy, and the natural sexual pulse pulsating inside men and women, embodied by the female protagonist who wishes her own mother would die in order to attain sexual fulfilment. Similar to the early episodes depicting patriarchal sternness, in these episodes too an intolerant environment corners and represses the young protagonist’s desires, but the latter’s response to

\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., p. 104.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., p. 105.
this asphyxiating situation remains at the level of words. Devoid of the tyranny usually embodied by fathers in most episodes but almost equally detrimental, the relationship between mothers and daughters/sons, another recurrent theme in his collections too, is cast in a bad light. Tāmir’s female characters also come under the attack of his irony as complicit in an environment typified by fear and terror that their misogyny and conformism contribute to perpetuate.

4.5 “Wajh al-qamar” and “Imra’a wahīda”: The emergence of the female point of view

However, at a closer look, already in the early 1960s, Tāmir’s stories exhibit a more nuanced style and a different narrative angle in their dealings with sex, and in the exploration of the female body. It is in this period that the first original, albeit rare representations of female eroticism appear, infrequent but nonetheless relevant because of the transgressive point of view on sexuality and desire that they propose. Two stories in particular encapsulate this style: “Wajh al-qamar” (The moon’s face) and “Imra’a wahīda” (A lonely woman) published in the early 1960s in local literary magazines al-Ādāb in 1962 and in Jarīdat al-Kifāḥ in 1961 respectively, and later included in Dimashq al-ḥarā’iq in 1973. These stories’ relevance resides in their capacity to bring together a variety of themes to offer a taboo-breaking outlook on female sexual desire. The repression of sexual desire in fact is represented as strictly linked to patriarchy, misogyny, poverty, social disenfranchisement, religious hypocrisy and violence, as part of the broader struggle for individual emancipation that typifies the stories of this period. It is also significant how the pleasure that the protagonists of these stories experience through the discovery of their sexuality is rendered through episodes denouncing the oppressive presence of men in women’s sexual life.
In particular, the way “Wajh al-Qamar” (The moon’s face)\textsuperscript{265} articulates the oppressive but not invincible nature of patriarchy as a major obstacle to the free expression of the female’s sexuality, breaks definitely with the man-centred trend of the first collections. This narrates the protagonist Samīḥa’s recollection of a series of sexist abuses, in parallel with her first moment of genuine awareness of the nature of her heterosexual desire, operating for the first time a subject/object reversal that, contrary to a trend typified by parricide in the stories of this period as seen in Chapter Three, is careful not to alienate the man/father as the oppressor. The narrator portrays sexuality and the protagonist’s awareness of her sexual drives as blurred and uncertain, inarticulate and vague, but at the same time as an unstoppable and inexorable process of inner discovery and emancipation, which culminates with the collapse of the symbols of her upbringing. The reasons why the author did not publish this story in his compilations before 1973 are not strictly relevant in this context, and there is nothing to substantiate the idea that the sexually charged language might have encountered some disapproval from the publishers earlier in the 1960s. The deep glance that the narrator offers into the protagonist’s inward-looking experience, articulated through the recall of her formative experiences, and paralleled by the distress the environment brings about, form a powerful and expressive assemblage that deserves to be quoted in its entirety.

\textit{The moon’s face}

The wood-cutter's axe fell with monotonous regularity on the trunk of the lemon-tree which stood in the courtyard of the house, as Samīḥa sat near the window overlooking the alley, from which every now and then the cries of a mad young man rose and mingled with the noise of the axe. The scent of the

lemon-tree wafted into the room and penetrated its atmosphere like a blind beggar-woman knocking on every door in humble supplication.

The madman's shouts came up from the alley and reached Samīḥa's ears, harsh and disjointed. An angry savage animal lurked in them calling out to a mysterious creature lying dormant in her veins.

She could see the madman leaping in the alley, while around him a group of boys shouted and threw orange peel at him. Samīḥa thought his eyes were like two sick tigers drowsing on the grass of some thick jungle.

Samīḥa's father was a very old man, tortured by illness. The scent of the lemon-tree distressed him, and he had decided to get rid of it. He had called in the wood-cutter regardless of Samīḥa's entreaties, for the lemon tree had been her friend since the days of her childhood. With the approach of winter its beauty always increased and rain drops glittered like pearls upon its leaves. Then its green coat seemed to shine and glow, as though it were about to burst into flame.

The sound of the madman's cries rose again as though it were the weeping of the lemon tree, which would so soon be destroyed. A vague fear grew in Samīḥa's flesh. It seemed to her that she possessed a sky full of pale-fired stars which were nothing but her dead dreams; for at that moment Samīḥa was just an ordinary woman in the prime of her life, whose husband had divorced her several months ago.

She might have been a good wife: cooking the food, washing the clothes, cleaning the rooms, surrendering herself to the man who was her husband, with simulated ecstasy and joy and warmth. When she was ten years old her father had slapped her cruelly because he had seen her dress uncovering her thighs. Then, on the eve of her marriage, those of her female relations
who were already married had taught her how she should move her body when it was joined with the man's and become an answering voice full of responsive harmonies, full of passionate yearning and desire for the man. And her husband had been angry with her, for, at night when she lay stretched out beside him, she would panic and flinch whenever his hands touched her. She would then become passive flesh, motionlessly submissive to the weight of a man. The husband had not been able to go on living with her; he wanted a woman who moaned in ecstasy, whose flesh would tremble when it sensed a man near.

So Samīḥa had gone back to her parent's home to live abandoned, helping her mother with the housework and idling away the rest of the day in sitting by the window watching the passers-by in the alley. And the madman was always there, screaming and leaping about trying to drive away the boys.

The axe was still wounding the trunk of the lemon-tree with its blade and penetrating its body further and further. The sound of the axe made Samīḥa feel that she was losing her childhood little by little. In the old days Samīḥa had been a child who laughed with no reason; she had been frightened of the moon and could never be reconciled to the fact that it was only a solid disc, which shone with white light.

Samīḥa heard a strange shrill scream. She realised immediately that it must have come from the madman. She looked out of the window: there was the madman, sitting on the ground, holding his head with his hands, while the blood gushed out between his fingers. The boys had fled for safety after one of them had thrown a stone at him.

Seized by a mysterious terror, Samīḥa turned away from the window and lay down on the couch. The scent of the lemon tree
and the noise of the axe mingled with the cries of the madman. Samīḥa shut her eyes and succumbed to a severe fit of trembling. She imagined that there were fingers pressing into her throat preventing her from breathing, and she wanted to cry out for help before she was strangled.

She felt a painful weight creeping over her whole body and then drawing away leaving her calm and able to breathe once more. She began to pant with happiness mixed with apprehension. And suddenly she saw the mysterious man who used to come bursting into her dreams at night. He was a tall man, completely naked, and his skin was covered with a thick layer of coarse black hair. She always longed to touch him but she was unable to move. The axe beat away maliciously at the trunk of the lemon-tree. The mysterious man smiled; he was standing near the door, his eyes gleaming.

Samīḥa said in a hoarse voice: "Go away."

His lips split open into a broad smile. His teeth were very white, and his lips were like frozen scarlet blood. If only he would say something! She wanted desperately to hear his voice-surely it would be like the roaring of the waves as they beat against the rocks of a far distant shore. As the man began to come nearer she tried to run away and said again: "Go away."

The man paid no attention and continued to approach her. He stretched out a hand, and the five fingers stroked her flowing hair. His lips moved and no sound came from them; but Samīḥa was certain that he was saying to her: "My darling."

The madman's screams grew louder, and the mysterious man took hold of Samīḥa's hand and began to pull her after him. Samīḥa followed him unresisting. A feeling of sweet reassurance calmed her; she knew his hand, knew it well. Where had she seen it before? She could not remember, however hard
she tried. The man led her onwards. Together they crossed the vast plain where the snows of winter, the summer sun, and the flowers of spring all meet together. They arrived at the front of a crumbling house. Samīḥa thought she had known this house. Where had she seen it before? Where? Where?

The darkness began to clear, and she had the sudden fleeting impression that it was the same old deserted house, which had squatted like a ghostly figure at the entrance to the alley in the days when she had been a little girl.

She looked at the man, and saw that he had changed. He was no longer young but had become middle-aged. She recognised him immediately. One day, when she was not yet twelve years old, she had been returning to her house. Dusk had fallen and she had begun to run along the streets. When she reached the old deserted house, a middle-aged man had blocked her way. He had grabbed her little hand in a cruel grip, and said roughly: "I will kill you if you scream."

Then he had dragged her quickly inside the house and stripped off her clothes. Her breasts were not fully developed in those days, but their flesh was smooth and firm. The body of the middle-aged man smelt like an extinguished fire. Samīḥa looked with anxious longing at the middle-aged man who was returning to her after she had waited long for him. She wanted to rush towards him and bury her head in his breast. But she had heard him say: "I will kill you if you scream." And she made no attempt to resist him. She was fascinated by the strange feeling of desire which surged deep inside her, and remained lying on her back waiting for the body of a middle-aged man who smelt of burnt-out fire. The madman's cries rose again. Samīḥa tried to lie on the couch and ignore them; but the screams continued to grow louder and more savage, until she could not bear it any longer. She jumped to her feet, ran over to the window, and
looked down into the alley. She saw that the madman was still sitting on the ground and was fighting off the barber and the greengrocer, who were trying to bandage his head with a piece of white cloth, while his screams changed to the savage howls of a wild animal.

Samīḥa did not try to go back and lie down on the couch, though at this moment she could have gone back and hidden in the old deserted house with the evening darkness and the middle-aged man. Instead she looked at the madman who was rolling on the ground agitating his arms and legs. She felt that the middle-aged man had departed and was breathing his last in a distant place. She longed for the madman to turn into a vast flood of knives, which would sweep through her body slowly tearing her flesh apart, and then leave her face to face with her old terror. Samīḥa went back to the couch, lay down, and shut her eyes. One day she would be alone in the house, she would lure the madman inside, strip off her clothes without any shyness and give her breast to the madman's mouth. She would laugh as he tried to nibble the teat, she would beg him in a voice heavy with panting to bite her flesh, to sink his teeth into it until the blood spurted out and stained his lips. Then she would lick his lips with her tongue so greedily and so compassionately.

The beating of the axe stopped for a moment; and there came the sound of the lemon tree falling, crashing to the ground in the courtyard with a sound, which soon faded away. Samīḥa smiled when she thought of the moon. It would never frighten her again—now that she had seen its face unveiled.266

As Husam al-Khateeb recounts in what remains the only deep analysis of this story in English, the individual experience of the protagonist Samīḥa draws the reader into the exploration of the broader subject of sexuality in society.\(^{267}\) Samīḥa’s persona and her record of encounters with men from inside and outside her family, although apparently an inexorable series of inevitable abuses, bestows centrality to the sexual experiences of the female character to exemplify the asphyxiating nature of the patriarchal family. The glance into Samīḥa’s confused and inarticulate desire, includes the middle-aged rapist into a sequence of men that Samīḥa, in a way, has *loved* and that have shaped her experience until this moment. The protagonist’s longing for a renewed encounter with the same man that raped her as a little girl (but still the only one able to satisfy her desire) provides an unidealistic view on female sexuality that steers away from the patronising and objectifying tone of the very early episodes.

For the first time, this story passionately proposes a narration structured around sexuality as a fundamental need for women against the hindrances put forward by men and misogynist patriarchy. Through Samīḥa’s own imagination, illusions and fantasies, the episode suggests the inevitability of defeat for patriarchy and sexism, represented by Samīḥa’s father, and by the middle-aged man. And although somehow gruesome and disturbing, the protagonist’s attraction to the same men who abused her as a twelve-year-old reinforces an element of autonomy in her sexual desire. Similarly, her desire to attract the madman inside her room and engage in sexual intercourse with him signals the protagonist’s unmanipulated quest for sexual fulfilment. The process through which Samīḥa comes to realise, accept and assert her sexual desire is beset by men and women equally as she receives a premarital and misogynist briefing from experienced women in her family.

\(^{267}\) Ibid., p. 101.
The subject/object reversal addressed in the previous chapter returns here from the point of view of women. The exploration of Samîḥa’s inner distress takes the reader to a journey into the psychological consequences of this worldview and of patriarchal impositions and prejudice. What is apparently only a close-up on the protagonist in fact possesses great social implications, manifest in the characters’ structure of the story, particularly the parallel relationship between the father’s monotonous hits on the lemon tree as the embodiment of the patriarchal family and the madman’s intermittent shouts as he is rebelling against this act of violence. Another parallel relationship is represented between on the one hand the madman’s and Samîḥa’s own libido, on the other hand, society represented by the children, the grocer, the barber and the father, who all violently condemn Samîḥa’s and her objective correlative, namely the madman. The female protagonist becomes aware of her sexual drives, of her desire to have sexual intercourse thereby deconstructing the male’s presence as besetting, finding comfort in her own sexuality through a journey of self-discovery that remains largely autonomous although confined to the limited space of her room. The disparity between the closure, with Samîḥa ultimately finding gratification, and her previous, unsuccessful sexual encounter with the divorced husband highlights again the defectiveness of a misogynist idea of sexual intercourse as a necessity of the male exclusively. This value system implicitly views the physical act of love as an obligation the female must perform to fulfil the male’s bodily urgency, but it is perpetuated in this episode by misogynist women, and not exclusively by men.

This contradicts many of the conclusions al-Khateeb comes to in his analysis of the social and political implications of this story. In fact, the structure of the story contains the first signs of a postmodern style268, particularly in the way it deconstructs a binary male patriarchy vs.

female sexuality logic, which al-Khateeb’s analysis is nevertheless based on. The process of deconstruction is evident not only in Samīha’s journey of self-discovery, but also in a number of contradicting elements showing the multiple configurations of patriarchy and the possibility of emancipation: the definitive cut with the lemon tree as the symbol of the protagonist’s childhood happens at the hands of the father, not necessarily “a typical oriental despotic father”\textsuperscript{269}, the fundamental role women play in the protagonist’s family in trying to shape a self-erasing view of female sexuality and the considerable degree of attraction that Samīha feels for the middle-aged man to whom she “looked with anxious longing (…) after she had waited long for him”. The middle-aged smelly man remains the object of her distorted desire until the definitive break with the past (the collapse of the lemon-tree), and she can finally articulate her desire for the crying madman, the other outsider figure in the story who is simultaneously the object of the protagonist’s desire and the embodiment of her unconventional personality.

The overbearing role patriarchy plays in women’s sexual lives appears mixed with religion in “Imra’a wahīda” (A lonely woman). The protagonist of the story Aziza (‘Azīza), described as “a beautiful young woman who was frightened of black cats”, has turned to Sheikh Sa’id (Shaykh Sa’īd) to help her find her runaway husband, whose family intends to marry him off to another woman. The word sheikh, an Arabic term, used also in the Syrian vernacular to define someone with a high level of formal religious education, often extends to those who do not have such expertise but enjoy the respect and the reverence of the community for their age and experience. As Aziza explains her situation to the sheikh, his intimidating figure and the smoky atmosphere he creates with incense contribute to increase her helplessness.

\textsuperscript{269} al-Khateeb, “A Modern Syrian Short Story”, p.102.
His eyes were two pieces of savage blackness, that encompassed Aziza, who was trying to escape from a terror that was very gradually increasing, while the smell of the incense that rose from a brass container filled her nostrils and slowly numbed her flesh.270

The first passages serve to characterise Aziza as poor and ignorant, a vulnerable personality that the sheikh understands as easy to manipulate for his own benefit. Sheikh Sa’id offers his services to help Aziza, who is alone and poor, to be reunited with her husband. But after conducting a brief interrogation with her he concludes that her husband’s family have put a spell on her and he offers to break it with a piece of incense of the cost of ten liras. Once he has extorted the money from her the sheikh proceeds to break Aziza’s spell, for which he needs to resort to the jinn, supernatural beings of Arab folklore as well as Islamic mythology.

Sheikh Sa’id got up and let down the black curtains over the two windows that overlooked the small winding lane, then reseated himself in front of the brass container in which embers glowed above fine white ashes, and began throwing in incense and saying: ‘My brethren the djinn hate the light and like darkness, for their homes are under the ground’.

Daytime outside the room was a woman with white flesh, and the sun’s yellow light burned hotly in the alleys, mingling with the clamour of people, while Sheikh Sa’id’s room was dark and silent.

‘My brethren the djinn are kind. You will be lucky if you gain their love. They love beautiful women. Take off your wrap.’

The story’s language and style serve to construct an atmosphere that attaches extremely negative connotations to the sheikh. It uses smoke and darkness to symbolise obscurantism and superstition, exposing his greediness and lust which contradict the authority that the sheikh enjoys and the confidence he inspires, and his cunning exploitation of the protagonist’s faith and naïveté for his own pleasure and enjoyment. He starts by rubbing Aziza’s forehead and face with his rough and large hands, which remind her of her father; then he grabs her neck, reminding her of her husband’s soft and flabby hands. He strokes her breasts and “the rest of her body” and then the sheikh asks Aziza to undress completely.

‘My brethren the djinn love beautiful women. You are beautiful and they will love you. I want them to see you naked when they come, and they will take away from you every spell’

‘No, no’ Aziza whispered in panic.

Immediately there came to her the sheikh’s voice, like a stern echo: ‘They will harm you if they do not love you.’

Her refusal to undress, and her recollection of past negative experiences project the reader into Aziza’s inner universe, and her aversion to pleasure which, similarly to Samīha’s in “Wajh al-qamar”, finds in the image of a screaming madman its objective correlative. She suddenly remembers a man screaming “like a wounded animal on the ground, white foam on his mouth, moving his arms and legs like someone drowning.” Aziza struggles and attempts to curb her sexual drive,

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271 Tamer, Tigers on the Tenth Day and other stories, p. 48.
272 Ibid., p. 49.
273 Ibid., p. 50.
which reminds her of the madman, evoking negative connotations attached to female sexual desire as a form of insanity. At this point the story, which so far associated ignorance, poverty, gullibility and religion to outline the profile of the female protagonist as a victim of patriarchy and religious hypocrisy, takes a decisive turn to depict the sexual act. As Aziza abandons herself to the Sheikh’s embrace and gets naked, the language transforms and takes a turn towards the poetic and the evocative, reflecting the protagonist’s feelings that the encounter with sexual enjoyment elicits.

Breathing heavily, motionless, Aziza felt her fear dwindle. Leisurely, she experienced a delirium with a new flavour. Smiling, laughing she beheld white stars and a dark blue sky, yellow plains and a sun of red fire. Aziza heard the purling of a distant river. The river. Far away it was. It would not remain far away. She laughed joyfully. Sadness was a child who ran away from her.274

In the middle of the casual sexual encounter with the sheikh, Aziza remembers her previous sexual experiences. The recollection of the loss of her virginity in particular serves to highlight the paradox of marital sex as a painful and socially-driven activity, as opposed to the casual but enjoyable moment of intimacy with the sheikh. The contrast is exemplified through the reference to a traditional patriarchal convention: the exposure of a blood-wet tissue to the public following the wedding night as the sign of the bride’s bleeding upon sexual penetration proving her hymen’s material and her family’s moral integrity.

On her wedding night she had let out a scream, and now she did not scream. She beheld her mother holding a handkerchief wet

274 Ibid., p. 50.
with blood, which the neighbours viewed with curiosity, and her mother called out, her face showing rapturous joy: “My daughter’s amongst the most honourable of girls… may all enemies die of frustrated rage.”

Aziza returned to the yellow fields, fields without water. Clouds on high, the sun was a fire that drew near to Aziza. Aziza languidly writhed, elated, burnt by a cruel heat. The sun was a fire that approached and crept into the blood, and Aziza did not attempt to flee, though her feeling of elation continued to increase until she attained the culmination; then the rains pelted down and her whole body trembled.275

Together with “Wajh al-qamar” the story’s relevance comes from the female point of view on sexuality that it provides, transforming Aziza’s unfortunate occurrence into an enjoyable experience, thereby proposing a conceptualisation of sex as a delightful activity for the female. The story presents a similar approach to female sexuality that describes the protagonist’s arousal through metaphors from nature that contrast the harshness she has been subjected to in her previous sexual experiences. However, similarly to Samīḥa, the protagonist does not possess a self-aware subjectivity and is depicted as seemingly devoid of any form of resolution outside religiosity and it is only through her husband’s disappearance that she comes to discover sex. In the closure it becomes clear how the episode with the sheikh has served as a moment of realisation for Aziza who would otherwise have remained unaware of her sexuality.

In the context of the grand narratives of modernisation to which social realism was organic, this story challenges the overpowering character of patriarchy through exposing religious hypocrisy manifestly embodied by the manipulative sheikh, but also condemning popular

275 Ibid., p. 51.
beliefs and superstition. The episode projects a manifestly anti-religious view, with Islam as superstition and the low-minded protagonist as its helpless victim contributing the denouncing of past traditions and a popular (sha‘bī) brand of Islam. The sheikh’s unscrupulous actions leave the female protagonist helpless only from his point of view as, in his patriarchal and backward universe, he does not contemplate the idea that Aziza might have in actual fact taken pleasure in his superstitious scam. However, while the variety of strategies that the sheikh employs to take advantage of her body, his religious and patriarchal authority, the incense and the smoke, the violence and the superstitious beliefs do contribute to cast a negative light on him, ultimately the physical act in itself is presented from Aziza’s point of view as devoid of any harmful connotations.

4.6 “al-‘Urs al-sharqi”: Female sexuality as critique of the patriarchal family

The similar fashion in which the two tropes of patriarchal oppression and female sexuality have developed in Tāmir’s stories mirrors concurrent transformations in Arabic creative activity since the 1960s, in particular with regard to ideology. Whilst the early episodes expressed a more manifest rejection of past traditions as well as a strongly individualist stance, in the early 1970s a polyphonic and more fragmented vision, for example on patriarchal authority in the family, began to emerge. At this stage Tāmir’s stories remained under the influence of the predominant realist trend, even though already in decline, while also showing a tendency towards the surreal, the suggestive and the imaginary that would later become his trademark. The role women play in his early story evolved relatively slowly, and still in the 1970’s the preoccupation with women’s sexuality emerges clearly, but usually articulated in response to the man’s demands, or in reaction to his incentive.
Al-Ra’d, published in 1970, contains episodes that bring this preoccupation forward, towards a more female-centred narration but still exposing the severity of patriarchy and its male-supremacist and belittling attitude towards women. The story quoted below brings forward the concern with female sexual identity through a style that depicts traditional institutions such as arranged marriages coldly, but also uses elements of surprise and a gradually stronger female presence in the text. This constitutes a break with earlier representations of women as the accessory of the man’s necessities. Ṣalāḥ and Hayfā’, the protagonists of “al-‘Urs al-sharqi” (the Oriental wedding), embody the two extremes the narrator uses to poke fun at the institution of arranged marriage: the former a young school boy who wants to get married, willing to accept whatever his parents decide for him just in order to find a woman who can help him solve a mathematical problem and leave school; the latter the proverbial bint al-jīrān (the neighbours’ daughter, the girl next door) an expression used in the Syrian vernacular to indicate an ordinary well-mannered girl perceived as familiar and dependant, whom Ṣalāḥ’s parents choose for him as his future wife. The boy soon comes across as naïve and sexually inexperienced, but the prospect of marrying him to the neighbours’ daughter leaves the father heedless to this fact.

- “And so you’ve decided to get married. You chose the right time of the year, because the winter is approaching,” said the father. He coughed and rubbed his hands enthusiastically and added, “How beautiful it is to fall asleep cuddling to warm flesh!” - “I don’t like to sleep with women” said Ṣalāḥ calmly - “Why do you want to get married then?” said his father in perplexity.

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276 Tāmir, al-Ra’d, p. 71.
Ṣalāḥ smiled enigmatically without saying anything, and silence reigned in the room until his mother came back accompanied by Hayfā’. 277

Ṣalāḥ’s and Hayfā’’s parents eventually meet, to discuss the details of the engagement, and agree on the price the former’s father must pay to obtain the latter’s hand in marriage to his son. A great deal of irony and cold realism characterises the episode of the two parents debating Hayfā’’s price per kilo, exposing a tradition that excludes the girl from the decision-making process. In addition, the conversation between Ṣalāḥ and Hayfā’ when left alone together in the living room, would seem to suggest an accusatory tone, depicting the girl as helpless and accommodating, but is later revealed as an element in the build-up that takes the reader into the unexpected closure:

- “I want to marry you. Do you have any objection?”

Hayfā’ feigned shyness and said in a soft and shivering voice:
- “I don’t have an opinion. It’s up to my family.”278

At a first glance, this dialogue mimics a realistic depiction of a stereotypically submissive young girl, which in Syrian popular slang would be described usually as one “whose lips no one but her mother has kissed”279, and who holds no agency with regards to her sexuality and her future life. The fact that she is feigning her insecurity, though, suggests that she is more aware than what she might appear, and it is only in the closure that she shows all her maturity and sexual awareness in comparison with the boy’s childish and insecure nature.

277 Ibid., p. 74.
278 Ibid., p. 75.
279 “واحده ما باس تنها غير أمها” - wāḥida mā bās timm-ha ġayr umm-ha.
Hayfā’ was then taken to Ṣalāḥ’s room, and the door locked firmly behind her. The women crowded together outside the room hoping to peek through the keyhole.

- “Will you still help me to solve my math problems?” said Ṣalāḥ to Hayfā’.
- “I will help you”.
- “You won’t tell my parents”.
- “I won’t tell them”.

Ṣalāḥ laughed gaily, whilst Hayfā’ headed over to the door and stuck a cotton ball in the lock. She then started taking off her clothes like a mature, self-confident woman and laid on the bed saying to Ṣalāḥ in a strange, commanding tone:

- “Come, come closer. I want to tell you a secret”.
- “What is it? Tell me…”.
- “Come closer, don’t be afraid, I don’t want to raise my voice too much so that no one can hear us”.

Ṣalāḥ found himself compelled to approach her, and stick his face to her naked breast. Then his mouth seized her nipple and a savage desire to swallow it hit him. He did not eat Hayfā’’s breast, instead he broke into tears after a little bit, when her bosom would not grant him warm milk.280

The whole story is structured in such a manner as to build up the narrative tension, by employing characters from a traditional setting that readers are familiar with (like the well-mannered girl), using the element of surprise and Hayfā’’s astute nature to undermine the patriarchal-perpetuator-vs.-young-victim pattern. What seems to his parents an aware and mature man, who kisses his father’s hand in reverence, ready to officially enter manhood through marriage, is in

280 Ibid., p. 79.
reality a little boy whose infantilism is unmasked by Hayfā’, presumably a naïve and essentially simpleminded character. Although the story is constructed around Şalâḥ and his ineptitude in order to ridicule the institution of arranged marriage, it gives prominence to women and their awareness of their sexual drives. The prominence the female gains comes at the detriment and ridicule of patriarchy and its customs, which the more assertive and self-confident attitude of characters like Hayfā’ contribute to voice. At the level of language, the disregard for patriarchal institutions comes about through their ridicule in a build-up that expresses no judgments, but leaves it to the female protagonist to unmask the conventions through the assertion of her mature sexual desire.

4.7 “al-Ightiyāl”: The rise of the authoritarian state and the objectification of the female body

As outlined in the previous chapters the mid-1970s and 1980s inaugurated a new phase in Syria’s political life. An ideology that had presented itself with a progressive and emancipatory language, witnessed a regression paralleled by the gradual retreat of the nationalist and socialist ideologies. A series of traumatic events that left indelible scars in the Syrian collective memory made European-style modernisation and secularisation lose appeal. Simultaneously, the consolidation of an authoritarian military regime entailed the spread of extensive surveillance and coercion that amounted to oppression. In addition to the institutions of punishment common to the modern state, the intimidation and suppression of all forms of political dissent became widespread in this period, affecting intellectuals as well as ordinary citizens. The intrusive and cancerous presence of the state in the life of citizens turned into a defining trait of society in Syria and the wider Arab World, a monolithic institution characterised by arbitrariness and
blind violence. As Sharabi points out, the efficiency of its security apparatus and of its intelligence agencies (*mukhābarāt* in Arabic) are the most advanced and functional aspects of the neopatriarchal state, depriving citizens of their private existence and making them prey to its capriciousness. In Syria, since 1963 the Emergency Law exempted the intelligence agencies from judicial checks, encouraging widespread practices of torture. In the aftermath of the ascension to power of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad in 1970 the traditional *mukhābarāt* expanded their branches, building a reputation for brutality, violence and corruption amongst ordinary Syrians. The themes of arbitrary arrest and the grotesque logic of the modern state’s representatives appear in Tāmir’s stories as early as 1960, however the presence of episodes denouncing authoritarian violence on ordinary citizens becomes extensive in the mid-1970s, exemplified by the story “*Fī layla min al-layālī*” (One night) analysed in Chapter Three, as well as by numerous other stories tackling authoritarian practices of domination published in the mid and late 1970s and later included in *al-Numūr fī al- yawm al-‘āshir* in 1978. While most stories portray this confrontation between the state and citizens leaving women outside of the picture, the following episode is significant for the connotations attached to the female body as a token of the male’s helplessness vis-à-vis the overwhelming force of nameless men. In “*al-Ightiyāl*” (the assassination), although the narrator makes no mention of the *mukhābarāt* or any other security branch, the rapists described by the narrator protagonist as “men that I don’t know” can be easily associated with the arbitrary forces of state intelligence agencies.

Men I don’t know chase me. I hide inside my beloved’s body, but the men come nonetheless fast, angry and harsh. They descend upon my beloved’s room, they’re looking for me, but

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282 Sharabi, Neopatriarchy, p. 7.
they cannot find me. Their expressions frown and they’re about to leave when one of them suddenly says to my beloved:
- “Take off your clothes”.
- “You should be ashamed,” said my beloved in shock and contempt.
- “We want to conduct a thorough search,” said the man to her calmly and inflexibly.
Thus my beloved hastily takes off her clothes. There she stands, naked in defiance. The man feels her flesh, then he flings her to the ground with a fierce and sudden strike. I can hear her gasping, trembling. “You’re hurting me” she whispers.
The man continues penetrating her body, until he bumps into me. He’s not surprised, and in a harsh and shaking voice says to me: “Get out, if you don’t want us to shoot you”.
I do as he says, yet he keeps looking for me followed by the other men. I yell in disapproval, and they ask me to be silent. I obey, and stand by watching with dead eyes.284

Comparing this episode to the originally female point of view of “Wajh al-Qamar” and “Imra’a wahīda” which appeared as early as 1962, makes it obvious that the development of this theme in Tāmir’s writing does not follow a coherent line of elaboration. In this story, published as late as 1978, the female body remains entangled in representations that assign a secondary role to it, usually for the purpose of symbolising the male’s success or demise, or to denounce social injustice upon the male protagonist. By deconstructing its more manifest political significance, the narrative device employed to voice the angst at authoritarian arbitrary violence reveals an objectification of the woman, and her accessory nature in a male-dominated environment. The story has been praised as a courageous interpretation of the current state of

284 Tāmir, al-Numūr fī al-yawm al-‘āshir, p. 159.
“domesticated societies” and it certainly exposes the overwhelming and unchallenged forces of authoritarianism and their practices of humiliation of the individual’s dignity. However, the text employs images that ideally take us back to the early days of the realist representations of male protagonists, with their frustration and deprivation voiced through the marginalisation of the female. Here, female body is reduced to the role of the carrier, the accessory through which the authoritarian state performs its humiliating practices.

More generally, modern Arabic literature has addressed the issues of authoritarianism, occupation and disenfranchisement through the extensive use of bodily metaphor. While the country is conceptualised as female, this is in stark contrast with descriptions of the male’s feminisation and sexual incapacity as symbols of defeat on one hand, but also of sexual prowess as embodied revenge on the Western coloniser. The political significance of sexuality and gender roles in Arabic literature and cinema characterises the works of authors such as Najīb Maḥfūz, Ghassān Kanafānī and al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, who made extensive use of sexual metaphors and similarly objectified the female body as the repository of the male’s and the nation’s honour. In Maḥfūz’s Zuqāq al-midaq (Midaq alley), indications of male homosexuality made their first appearance in Modern Arabic literature but the novel is notable for the allegorical embodiment of the Egyptian nation in the character of Ḥamīda, and her role as a prostitute who sells her body to a local pimp delivering local women to British soldiers in Cairo during World War Two. In Kanafānī’s Rijāl fī al-shams (Men in the sun), a group of Palestinians stranded in Iraq are smuggled illegally into Kuwait by a treacherous fellow Palestinian.

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287 Lagrange, “Homosexuality in Modern Arabic literature”, p. 177.
truck driver who lost his genitals fighting in the 1948 war. A lack of manliness and low moral standards typify this character’s personality, rendering a sense of betrayal and failure through his emasculation. Muṣṭafā Saʿīd, the protagonist of Şāliḥ’s Mawsim al-hijra ila al-shamāl (Season of migration to the north), personifies both Sudan’s experience of colonisation, acculturation and migration at the hands of the “North” (i.e. the imperialist Western coloniser), as well as the colony’s “revenge” on the “North”. Muṣṭafā Saʿīd carries out his revenge in London, inverting the traditional masculine role assigned to the coloniser and the feminine nature of the colonised, engaging almost obsessively in sexual intercourse with English women and leading them to commit suicide.

Deconstructing “al-īghtiyāl” as an attempt to denounce and undermine patriarchal authoritarianism eventually reveals that the language of this attack remains entangled in the same male-dominated worldview that it seeks to undo. Here, the female body encapsulates the degradation of the man, becoming once again an accessory of his existence rather than enjoying its own autonomous experience. Although other stories of the same period suggest an acute awareness of female subjectivity and sexual desire, the penetration the nameless woman is subjected to at the hands of the thugs, and the man’s consequent humiliation reveal a tendency to objectify the female body in the attempt at tackling the grotesque practices of the authoritarian state. The ‘beloved’ sacrifices her body to protect the male protagonist from the beating and the arrest, which in turn become a pretext for the thugs to abuse her. This objectification of the female body as the site of the male’s honour and humiliation is mitigated by her greater endurance in the face of the antagonists. The male’s emasculation materialises not only in the brutality visited upon his partner, but more specifically in his inertia.

289 Meyer, The experimental Arabic novel, p. 27.
291 Ţarābīshī, Sharq wa gharb, p. 151.
and his passive following of the events as they unfold before him, as well as in the cowardice displayed by hiding inside his partner’s body. The story captures the contradictions of the ideological period, and of the literary social realism that was organic to the nationalistic and modernising project, through expressing the desire for individual liberation whilst at the same time perpetuating a patriarchal worldview in which the female body is represented as accessory.

4.8 Conclusions

A chronological examination of female characters in Tāmir’s writing reveals the emergence of a more female-centred style, including explicit representations of female sexual desire from the perspective of women. Although the condemnation of sexism and patriarchy and their detriment to women are evident in the ideological character of most stories, the female protagonists remain secondary if not accessory to the male. Although significant in the prominence they bestow on the protagonists’ inner needs and longing for sexual intercourse most stories do not articulate the woman’s experience as the norm but seem to merely strive for the destruction of the traditional patriarchal order. Female protagonists and their sexual desire appear considerably less frequently in these early episodes, which nonetheless possess great suggestiveness and a poetical tone that make them stand out in the analysis of this trope as addressed throughout Tāmir’s career. The noteworthy presence of suggestive sexual images however, portrayed through metaphors of nature and the world of animals, indicates the author’s preoccupation with the subject since his first appearance on the literary stage, and an openness to address sexuality and libido as a fundamental need for the individual in his or her quest for freedom and emancipation.
The evolution in the style of Tāmir’s representations of female sexuality in particular in “Wajh al-Qamar” and “Imra’a wahīda”, show the female protagonists taking to the stage decisively, exploring their own sexuality. In their representations of the female inner libido, and the relationship between her eroticism and the environment around her, these stories possess the verbal dynamism of an original and explosive mix between prose and poetry. The presence of a sexually aware and active female character emerges also in opposition to patriarchal tradition in “al-‘Urs al-sharqi”, sarcastically attacking the institution of arranged marriages, while also putting forward the notion of female sexuality as enjoyable. Whilst patriarchy, regardless of the geographical context is obsessed with the destructive potential of female sexuality, in Tāmir’s stories it becomes a recurrent trope that amounts to a tool for liberation and emancipation of the female.

Analysing the confrontation between citizens and the authoritarian state from the point of view of women has confirmed the predominantly male-centred character of the early stories. In the 1970s an increased presence of widespread violent practices in most stories reflects the rise and consolidation in Syria of an authoritarian regime with a pervasive role in the lives of citizens. The urgency to address this issue in the episode analysed results in a form of objectification of the female that leaves intact the essentially male-centred nature of the works of this period.
Chapter Five: The divorce from ideology as multiplicity and transgression in the latest collections: The women’s revolution from object to subject.

5.1 Introduction

As retraced in Chapters Three and Four, the relationship between Tāmir’s writing and the modernist/modernising ḥadāthī worldview manifests itself in the representations of patriarchal tradition. In the same vein, representations of female characters in the stories of the 1960s and 1970s are also testimony to a style that was organic to the ḥadāthī project, which denounces the marginalisation and inferior status of women in patriarchal society, albeit giving voice and agency almost exclusively to male characters. Yet, the collapse of the totalising discourse of modernisation and nationalism, and its ramifications in cultural production, are already evident in Tāmir’s early works. In particular, in transgressing the dichotomy between oppressor and subject in representing the conflict between children and patriarchal figures in the household, and in the gradual, albeit timid emergence of a female subjectivity, the first signs of a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints emerge, reminiscent of the ideological breakup analysed by Abu Deeb. All in all, however, the presence of female protagonists in Tāmir’s early short stories of the 1960s and 1970s fails to articulate a mature model of femininity able to challenge patriarchy and its implications on female sexuality consistently.

The analysis in this chapter makes reference to the process of fragmentation analysed by Abu Deeb to situate gender against the backdrop of a distancing from nationalist ideology, and of the persistence of nationalist authoritarian rule in Syria. As Abu Deeb explains, since the 1970s “the remarkable spread of interest in feminist writing, especially in the Arab world, occurs in the context of a total
loss of faith in unifying, comprehensive, totalizing projects of modernization, modernity and emancipation on the higher level of society as a whole.”292. This process of gradual disintegration of “the totalising discourse” has affected creative activity in the Arab world dramatically, leading to the emergence of individualistic and non-ideological forms of writing. In turn, these new forms have exposed the contradictions that were inherent to the modernising enterprise, and have contributed to the erosion of monolithic understandings of national identities and gender roles. Both male and female writers, have produced works that reject the notions of “unifying, comprehensive, totalizing projects of modernization, modernity and emancipation on the higher level of society as a whole”293 questioning the oneness and singularity of neopatriarchal authoritarianism, dismantling the roles assigned to masculinity and femininity by the nationalist and progressive ideologies of the 20th century. They contribute, for example, to the deconstruction of the official discourse on the emancipation of women, which nonetheless failed even at the level of language, to raise women from a subordinate position.294 Amongst the most relevant literary phenomena that have germinated in this context of ideological fragmentation, the rise of gender-motivated fiction has been interwoven with the collapse of the totalising ideologies.295

Motivating this chapter is the desire to situate the analysis of female sexuality in Tāmir’s latest stories in the context of the collapse of the “grand narratives”, of the totalising and unifying ideologies, which began in the 1970s and coincided with the germination of marginal narratives. Rooting the analysis of Tāmir’s latest stories in this context of ideological fragmentation, I propose an interpretation of this process of disintegration as constitutive for the germination of an original style

293 Ibid., pp. 340-341.
294 See Kayawardena, Feminism and nationalism in the third world, pp. 2-10.
that engenders multiplicity and allows for the emergence and flourishing of a new feminine subjectivity, a new female dimension of the text which stands in stark contrast with the predominantly male-centred structure of the early ḥadāthī style. In Tāmir’s stories this multiplication of voices and viewpoints is exemplified by dynamic conceptualisations of masculinity and patriarchy, as well as by transgressive representations of female libido that expose a widespread taboo, and challenge a conceptualisation of female sexuality as reprehensible. This evolution is punctuated in the latest period of Tāmir’s career by the emergence of the female’s perspective in Nidā’ Nūḥ, Sa-nadḥak and al-Ḥiṣrim and more prominently in the definitive break represented by Taksīr Rukab, in which female characters gain a greater degree of subjectivity, conquering the scene once and for all through sex, often to the detriment of their male counterparts.

The chronological aspect that typifies this transformation, and the disparity between the early and latest representations gains in importance in the context of contemporary Syrian literature, confirming the emergence of new trends, and the separation of literary creativity from the overarching discourse of ḥadātha. For this purpose, this chapter draws on Stephan Guth’s analysis of a new literary sensibility towards female sexuality that the decline of an ideologically oriented approach has engendered in Arabic literature.  

Although reference to useful examples from the early stories of the 1960s and 1970s will be necessary to substantiate the main argument and to interrogate the development in parallel with the collapse of the totalising discourse, most of the stories analysed in this chapter were published in a period of time spanning approximately a decade between

1994 and 2002. In Tāmir’s trajectory these works represent his first literary output after sixteen years of literary “silence” following his self-imposed exile from Syria to England. The decision to focus on this specific period of Tāmir’s career in this chapter, as separate from the previous one, which addresses the same subject of female sexuality in the stories of Tāmir’s early period, is also motivated by the desire to challenge the assumption that disregards the works by exiled and expatriate writers as devoid of the moral authority to address politically charged subjects.297 The scrutiny of the theme of female sexuality will serve to elucidate the limitations of exclusive categorisations that disregard the works by Syrian writers living outside the country as less worthy of consideration, surpassing also the notion that geographical estrangement and exile possess the capacity to engender progressive transformations in content and style, as suggested by Mahmoud Kayyal.298

To address the political significance of the more markedly female tone of many of the latest stories, this chapter also draws on Sabry Hafez’s analysis of the different types of feminine subjectivity in the works of contemporary female Arab writers.299 Although Hafez’s framework seeks to explain the emergence of different stages of female characters exclusively in novels authored by female writers, the categories of his analysis can also be put to use in the study of a male writer like Tāmir as well. In the case of Syrian and Arabic literature, Rita Stephan too has shown how female writers have written on sexuality and desire and how they have shaped alternative models of masculinity300, overlooking the

contribution of male writers like Tāmir to the emergence of a new femininity. Instead, this chapter analyses this writer’s stories without regard to the author’s gender, focusing exclusively on the text to explore the ways in which female and male characters in the stories shape each other’s identity and roles.

The interpretations proposed by Hafez and Stephan help to clarify the extent to which the ever-present assertive and dominant female protagonist in Tāmir’s latest works is illustrative of a new prototypical female, operating a break with a traditional form of representing women, transgressing the standard social codes of honour, shame, tradition and patriarchy. The relevance of the taboo-breaking representations of sexuality resides in the subversive potential that sexual images possess in a patriarchal context where female sexuality and subjectivity contain considerable political implications. As Rita Stephan argues in her analysis of el-Saadawi and al-Sammān, these two author’s representations of female sexuality challenge a normative and hegemonic discourse on sexuality, put forward by nationalist, religious and traditionalist actors in the Middle East since the postcolonial period. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s *The history of sexuality*301 and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad’s reflections on the changing discourse of hegemonic sexuality in the Arab world, especially as a consequence of the rise of political Islam,302 Stephen’s analysis highlights the political potential of addressing female sexual desire in the modern Middle East to defy a hegemonic discourse on sexuality that is tightly intertwined with a patriarchal worldview.303

Ultimately, drawing on Tierney-Tello’s *Allegories of transgression and transformation*, this chapter interrogates the relevance of the

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302 Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Islam and Gender: dilemmas in the changing Arab world” in *Islam Gender and Social Change*, p. 3.
303 Stephan, “Arab women writing their sexuality”, pp. 159-161.
transgressive nature of a transformation that has brought the female characters to the fore to express their sexual desire openly. This chapter looks at the contradictions of a style that, whilst managing to bring to the front the taboo subject of female sexual desire with irony and levity, also articulates the social and political dimension of the female almost exclusively through her sexuality. On the one hand, addressing female sexual desire openly in a patriarchal and authoritarian context like Syria entails the transgression of fundamental taboos and the disarticulation of a patriarchal sexual economy, an element that Tierney-Tello has situated in the context of patriarchal authoritarianism. However, on the other hand this thesis interrogates the limitations and the contradictions of a transgressive style that concentrates its empowering dimension exclusively on the body and more specifically on the female as a sexual actor. While the representation of female protagonists asserting their sexuality represents a powerful strategy to subvert the patriarchal logic of the female body as the repository of the male’s honour, the range of settings in which women in these stories express an assertive subjectivity is confined to the sexual, the bodily and the libidinous. The examination of a number of stories revolving around female sexuality aims at challenging the models of femininity and masculinity that have germinated in the context of the aesthetic transformations of Tāmir’s latest collections.

5.2 “al-Bustān” and “Sa-nadhak” as different approaches to oppression and gender roles

An endless number of episodes deals with sexuality in Tāmir’s works, projecting sex as an enjoyable experience, but considerably more vehement in the latest period for the uncompromising rejection of patriarchal structures and the emphasis stories put on female sexual desire. Whereas in the early stories a markedly male-centred trope

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304 Tierney-Tello, Allegories of transgression and transformation, pp. 6-8.
assigned a secondary role to the female, the latest stories exhibit the first signs of a more feminist and female-centred narrative. The denial of female sexual desire and the reprehensive attitudes towards their daughters’ expression of their sexual identity, of fathers and mothers equally, are met with little resistance in the very early period. In contrast to a predominantly marginal role female characters played in the stories of the early period, in Tāmir’s latest works the female protagonist upgrades from playing the role of the object of male desire, to a subject that gains centrality and agency, and even supremacy in her relationship with the male. A comparison between the different roles women play in his early and latest stories cannot fail to notice the disparity: While in most episodes from the early collections women are marginal or accessory objects in male-centred society, or objectified by the narrator to emphasise the humiliating practices of the authoritarian state, in the latest period a more equal fashion of representing male and female protagonists characterises numerous stories. This development is manifest at the level of structure in the roles performed, as well as in the more uniform linguistic registers employed to describe male and female characters.

Two stories in particular illustrate the considerable transformations in the representations of the female body that typify the latest period of Tāmir’s career. The two episodes quoted below, taken from collections that appeared in very different historical contexts, can be seen as a parallel between two versions of one single episode as seen from two different angles, retold only with a different approach to the sexes. In “al-Bustân” (The orchard) the narrator begins by employing elements of magical realism to introduce the two protagonists, Samīḥa and Sulaymān, and their love relationship.

In the old days Samīḥa was a fish that lived in the sea, then she turned into a drop of water in a cloud, and one day Sulaymān
met her, and she became a beautiful woman. He loved her mouth and her two fine lips, which gave out fire, music, wind, light and fire.

Standing in front of the mirror in his room Sulaymān used a serious tone as if addressing a crowd: “gentlemen…her mouth is my homeland”.

Every day he strolled around with Samīḥa, down the street between the buildings and the trees, she would look to him like the eyes of a child and a hungry voice.305

The accurate and poetic description of the female protagonist’s beauty, as well as the rain as a metaphor for sexual enjoyment, display the features typical of Tāmir’s early period and the tendency to associate elements of nature with the female body, emphasising the disparity in the roles performed by men and women. While walking through the city, the two protagonists find themselves entering an orchard, surrounded by trees and dreaming of living the rest of their lives there. Samīḥa kneels down to put her ear to the ground and listens to the earth laughing. Suddenly, a group of four men interrupts their peaceful and idyllic conversation, moving fast towards them, carrying a stick in their hands. In a confrontational and provocative tone, the thugs arouse Sulaymān’s anger by asking him to share Samīḥa’s body with them.

Sulaymān was seized by anger, he pushed away the boy holding the stick, and he walked towards the gate grabbing Samīḥa by her hand, but the stick hit him hard making him stagger and tumble. Samīḥa shouted, and the trees shouted, and the green grass shouted, and Samīḥa shouted unable to turn into a drop of water carried by a cloud.

305 Tāmir, Dimashq al-harā’iq, p. 11.
When he recovered Sulaymān was hardly able to open his eyes to see Samīḥa with her clothes ripped, under the body of a wheezing man. Sulaymān closed his eyes and surrendered to a cold terror. He stuck to the grass, and listened to a weeping coming from under the ground, mixed with the wheezing of animals in search of water.

The red sun set over the horizon, and the black night was coming...  

Published originally in 1971 this story can be understood in the context of a sense of disquiet because of the lack of individual freedoms that typified Tāmir’s very early works, but also as the expression of an urgency to denounce widespread violence and abuses that emerged prominently in the 1970s. As observed in Chapters Three and Four, the combination of this necessity to address the increasingly pervasive presence of the state, together with a linguistic style emphasising the disparity in the roles assigned to men and women, resulted in the objectification of the latter. This episode too presents similar connotations attached to the female protagonist Samīḥa: she magically turns from a fish into a drop of rainwater (a frequent metaphor for sexual intercourse) and her violation at the hands of the bullies functions as the literary device to emphasise the male individual’s helplessness.

Twenty-seven years later a similar episode, this time in the title story of Sa-nadhak, published in 1998, presents a similar set of characters but with significant transformations in the roles assigned to male and female protagonists. The narrator and his beloved remain nameless, but enjoy each other freely and blend in with the surrounding nature, or live through ordinary everyday moments, only to be disrupted this time not

306 Ibid., p. 17.
by unspecified “men carrying sticks” but by the police (*rijāl al-shurṭa*), which however are unable to unsettle the harmony of their love relationship. This time, the story is narrated in the first-person-plural voice, eliminating the boundaries between the two elements of the couple, constituting yet another episode of invasion of the private sphere with a four-eyed look. The attack happens not on the man, on his masculinity and his honour, but on the couple as a dyad, establishing equality between the two sexes and no longer objectifying the female body as the repository of honour. In addition, however grim the feelings that the ubiquitous police might initially elicit as they descend on their house, wit, magic and imagination come to the couple’s rescue. The title of the story itself (We shall laugh… we shall laugh a lot) expresses greater optimism and a defiant demeanour in the face of the asphyxiating presence of authoritarianism embodied by the police.

(1) One day the police descended upon our house, looking for me and my wife but they did not manage to find us because I converted into a coat rack and my wife converted into a sofa, and we laughed when they left the house in disappointment.

(2) Another day the sky was clear blue, so we went to one of the gardens, but suddenly the police raided the garden looking to catch us. They didn’t succeed, though, because I transformed into a black crow whereas my wife converted into a green tree of many branches, and we laughed at their failure.

(3) One day my wife was tired of working in the kitchen, so we went to a restaurant, but as soon as we started eating the police surrounded the restaurant and stormed it with frowns on their faces, to conduct a thorough search, looking for us. They didn’t find us because I turned into a knife, and my
wife transmuted into a glass of water, and we laughed a lot when they left the restaurant in despair. 307

Magical realism in this instance serves not as a tool to romanticise the female as a delicate object, but has transformed into a strategy to poke fun at the grotesqueness of the capricious authoritarian state and its blind victimisation of both male and female characters equally. The political significance of a style that restages reality employing elements of the fantastic corresponds to the urgency to present the point of view of women and the disempowered vis-à-vis tyrannical powers. 308 Tāmir has made use of this device since his beginnings as a writer; however, its significance in the context of this analysis lies in the different approach to the sexes that the text puts forward, going beyond the previous separation between man and woman that bestowed prominence and centrality on the former through the penetration of the latter’s body. This story also significantly expands the width of space allocated to the protagonists, emerging from the claustrophobic orchard where the thugs humiliated the male in the first story from which the protagonists were unable to escape, to a variety of spaces and situations all meant to deride the harasser. This expansion of settings becomes regular in Tāmir’s latest period, with female characters playing a new assertive role in diverse places and situations, seldom relegated inside the house or to their role as inactive housewives.

5.3 The postmodern short story and the emergence of the female point of view

The magical realist element of this story, and its more equal approach to gender roles already figured prominently in Tāmir’s first “exile” collection ْنَدَّاءُ نُّهَ, characterised by a greater thematic homogeneity

307 Tāmir, Sa-nadhāk, p. 120.
in contrast with the fragmented structure of the stories. Most stories in this collection contain different sub-episodes, with further sub-plots written in different styles and addressing disparate topics carrying different titles, a feature that Tāmir began experimenting with in the late 1960s but which becomes systematic in *Nidā’ Nūḥ* and *Sa-naḍḥak*. While the episodes revolving around female protagonists were the exception in the early stories from the 1960s and 1970s, *Nidā’ Nūḥ* and *Sa-naḍḥak* present multiple signs of the fragmentation of the text as well as a much greater presence of female protagonists with an increased awareness of their sexuality. In *Nidā’ Nūḥ* the thematic homogeneity is rendered through the recurrence of episodes featuring the intertextual restaging of elements of Arab heritage, and the reinvention of tradition functions as the device to put forward a multifarious perspective on present concerns to which gender roles are central. By way of illustration, “*Shahriyār wa Shahrazād*” (Shahriyar and Shahrazad), restages *One Thousand and One Night*’s frame-story, although reversing the roles of the story-teller, assigned to the husband Shahriyār, and that of the king/queen to Shahrazād. While in the original collection of folktales Shahrazād told a different story every night to save herself from Shahriyār’s misogynist wrath, in Tāmir’s the latter is the helpless victim of the queen’s desire to be told stories “that make me forget the concerns of my government, and the bitter and ugly truth according to which men are not loyal to their wives”.

Although these episodes do not necessarily possess a sexual dimension, their significance comes from highlighting the role female protagonists specifically play in the broader stylistic transformations that the stories present. The latter are a reaction to the breakdown of an old order, that entailed the exploration of tradition in search of what Stephen Guth calls “undamaged treasures”, i.e. stylistic and thematic elements that

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could function as meaningful tools to address a changing reality.\textsuperscript{310} Along the same lines drawn by Abu Deeb, Guth explains the new aesthetics of pleasure in Arabic literature of the 1990s and early 2000s as a process of “digging in the ruins” of the “collapsed house” that is modernity, a process of experimentation that allows for the emergence of a new conceptualisation of desire detectable in the breaking of taboos and the increasingly transgressive representations of pleasure and the body.\textsuperscript{311} Similarly, drawing on the relationship between cultural production and ideological fragmentation, many have interrogated the emergence of a new approach to the female, as well as to sex, pleasure and gender-motivated fiction in the landscape of Syrian and Arabic contemporary literature that has emerged in Arabic literature in the late 1990s; a phenomenon which is part of a broader new fashion of personal and non-ideological cultural production that germinated not only in Syria but in the broader field of cultural production in Arabic in the 1980s. For example, in her analysis of the works of the Syrian novelist Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan, Martina Censi interprets the strongly erotic connotations of her novels and the representations of the body as a means for criticism of patriarchal authoritarianism. In fact, Yāsīn Ḥasan forms part of a broader nouvelle vague of writers that have made a name for themselves by rejecting traditional literary culture, surpassing the idea of commitment and striving towards individualism, focusing on the individual and his/her struggle for freedom.\textsuperscript{312}

5.4 “\textit{al-Mahsūda}”: The development of the sexual trope and the process of self-realisation of the female

As we have seen in \textit{Sa-naḍḥak} we notice the first signs of this development, exemplified in the greater degree of agency the female protagonist enjoys, in contrast with the marginality of the early period,

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\textsuperscript{310} Guth, “The Changing Role of Pleasure”, pp. 121-123.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid., p. 124.
\textsuperscript{312} Censi, “Tra critica sociale ed erotismo,”, pp. 21-22.
but also in the space allocated to her and in her range of action that is expanded to embrace a variety of contexts outside the household. Sex does not recur in Sa-nadḥak as frequently as in other collections, but the roles the female protagonists play in this collection signals the gradual emergence of their new subjectivity to the detriment of male protagonists and their masculinity. The advent of the female protagonist’s perspective in Tāmir’s latest collections, marks the transition towards female-centred writing, witnessed on a larger scale in the 1990s and described in detail by Sabry Hafez. Hafez’s analysis of the maturation of female protagonists, and their emancipation from the feminist, progressive struggle coincides with Abu Deeb’s historical approach, but brings the discussion forward by zooming in to interrogate the nature of the female point of view. In particular, Hafez situates the emergence of what he calls “the sophisticated discourse of self-realisation” in the context of changing national realities, the disintegration of the old nationalist project and the appearance of new forms of traditionalism. Hafez’s analysis gives prominence to the position of the female protagonist in the text, deconstructing the political impact of feminist writing as essentially anti-hegemonic. Instead, he proposes a theory of self-realisation of the female writer, which is mirrored in the characters’ personality and more significantly in the language, analysing chronologically the historical dynamics that have brought about a new style of feminist writing by female writers. This development further contributes to the deconstruction of the binary logic of patriarchy, which opposes men to women hierarchically, and provides the female character with an authentic voice without idealising her or proposing didactic views on women’s emancipation.

This research seeks to add a further element to Hafez’s categorisation of feminist writing, bestowing centrality to the role of female sexual desire and libido specifically, and to the taboo-breaking nature of

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313 Hafez, “Women’s Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature”, p. 171.
episodes that discuss eroticism openly from the point of view of women. As Abu Deeb shows, the introduction of female sexuality into the narrative has affected male Arab writers as well, such as the Syrian playwright Sa‘dAllāh Wannūs, whose early plays usually voiced a strong commitment to the Arab nationalist cause. With the gradual retreat of Arab nationalism and of the modernising project, Wannūs’s 1990s plays, in particular Ṭuqūs al-ishārāt wa al-tahawwulāt, (Rituals of signs and transformations), exemplify the degree of fragmentation Arabic fiction and theatre reached in the last decade of the past century. This transformation has heavily affected Tāmir’s oeuvre as well, although in a considerably different fashion. While Wannūs’s female hero asserts her autonomous identity and existence through violence, penetrating decisively into the narration and depriving the male of his centrality, in Tāmir’s stories the female protagonist’s sexual drives turns into a “weapon” that allows her to symbolically defeat patriarchy and express her agency.

In “al-Maḥṣūda” (The envied woman), the environment in which women operate is limited to the household, but the story introduces a new model of femininity and of active female sexuality, which in turn informs and shapes the masculinity of the male protagonists. At the breakfast table Izdihār, one of the two female protagonists, the second one being Khadija (the envied woman of the title), informs her nameless husband that their neighbour Khadija is pregnant in her fifth month, although her husband, also nameless, has been away for seven months. And although Izdihār’s husband advises her not to interfere in their neighbours’ affairs, Izdihār goes to see Khadija to ask her for an explanation, justifying her intrusion with a popular saying attributed to the prophet of Islam by which Muslims are expected to take care of

314 Sa’dAllāh Wannūs, Ṭuqūs al-ishārāt wa al-tahawwulāt, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1994).
their neighbours living up to seven doors away.\textsuperscript{316} The saying evidently has very little to do with the protagonist’s thirst for gossip, but serves to clarify the nature of the milieu in which the episode takes place, satirising Izdihār’s resorting to religious beliefs for trivial purposes. In an unexpected turn for Izdihār all she finds out is that Khadija’s husband visited her one night and passionately made love to her after missing her for a long time. Khadija’s description of the episode elicits a feeling of envy in Izdihār who later confronts her husband in their house and relates to him the reality of their neighbour’s pregnancy.

- “God the Almighty will judge us because we doubted our poor neighbour” - said her husband.
- “Envy is wrong” said Izdihār, “but I must say I envy our neighbour Khadija for her husband, who does not neglect his duties as a husband regardless whether he is at home or away”.

Her husband lowered his head and did not try to look at his wife.\textsuperscript{317}

This story introduces themes and roles that become central and considerably more frequent in the two following collections, \textit{al-Ḥişrim} and \textit{Taksîr Rukab}. As Eric Gautier notes, the centrality of the two female protagonists stands in contrast with the evident insignificance and lack of agency of the two male protagonists whose names the narrator does not mention, but refers to them through a periphrasis (Izdihār’s or Khadija’s husband).\textsuperscript{318} This fashion of representing marital relations and their nomenclature contradicts the most widespread examples in Syrian society, in which a woman can

\textsuperscript{316} “أوصانا الرسول بسابع جار” – the Prophet instructed us to take care of our neighbours up to seven doors away.
\textsuperscript{317} Tāmir, \textit{Sa-nadhak}, p. 151.
sometimes be referred to as Mr. So-and-so’s wife, but rarely the opposite. Moreover, the female’s capacity to intimidate and subjugate her husband derives from her judgement of his sexual performance, from the individual and marital assessment of the male’s sexual prowess, which in the closure emerges in all its relevance inside the household. As the story unfolds and Khadija’s personality comes to the front, we witness the gradual deterioration of male privileges, reversing the society’s judgmental attitude towards Khadija’s immoral sexual relations into a condemnation of the male’s incapacity to live up to masculinity and its expectations. Highlighting the disparity between the different standards of masculinity and femininity as understood and performed inside the household or in public, the story exposes sex as the one empowering tool women possess to counterbalance the predominance of men in a patriarchal milieu. The other protagonist, Izdihar, goes through a journey of discovery and self-empowerment the moment Khadija crushes her standards of female respectability with her assertive account of her impregnation. Izdihar approaches her neighbour with a baggage of assumptions, with an almost schadenfreude attitude only to discover what Khadija did, regardless of whether it was really her husband the one who impregnated her. Ultimately Izdihar exposes her unhappy marital situation because of her husband’s evident sexual incapacity.

5.5 The emergence of transgressive female sexuality in *al-Ḥisrim* and *Taksir Rukab*

The pivotal transformation of the female’s role in the realm of sexual desire happens more frequently and more openly in *Taksir Rukab*, from which the following episodes are excerpted. According to the author, in the parlance of the Damascene middle class “breaking someone’s knees” – or *Taksir Rukab* in Arabic – is a metaphor for long exhausting
sexual activity that literally “breaks a man’s knees”. The following story – quoted in its entirety – epitomises in a few lines the minimalist representations of female libido that traverse this collection. Together with numerous other examples from the same collection, it represents the culmination of a theme, that of female sexuality and eroticism, that has typified Tāmir’s oeuvre from the outset, but that in this compilation finds its most eccentric representations.

Lama was accustomed to dozing off and putting in her mouth whatever happened to be in her hand. Her mother advised her in an angry and reproachful voice to get rid of her nasty habit, especially now that she was engaged and about to get married. But after marriage Lama discovered that her mother was naïve and that her advice was wrong, for what she had grown used to doing while dozing was widespread, prized, and desirable.

What can come across as a rather explicit episode about oral sex and its urgency, forms a crucial part in the development of the representations of female sexuality that amounts almost to an obsession in this particular collection. Characterised by a cold, condensed language that conveys transgressive elements as the norm, this collection achieves a crystallisation of female sexual desire through its dynamic role as the catalyser of the events. In what remains one of the very few attempts at analysing this aspect of Tāmir’s stories, albeit brief and devoid of any other socio-historical context other than the author’s personal circumstances, Mahmoud Kayyal concludes that women’s object-to-subject path of emancipation should be interpreted as a consequence of his geographical estrangement from his home country, but also as a result of the rise of postmodernist writing. The greater prominence

320 Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 8.
that women gain in his latest works however, can also be ascribed to
the rise of Islamism and more conservative views on the role of women,
paralleled by the regression of progressive ideologies.322

Be that as it may, this collection is marked by the crystallisation of a
notion of female pleasure and of a new female subject that already
began to emerge in Nidā’ Nūh and Sa-nadḥak. While the stories of those
two collections exhibited a fragmented style of writing, with most
episodes divided into numerous, sometimes very brief sub-stories with
no apparent connection, the sixty-three stories of Taksīr Rukab display
a formal unity of theme and language in which sex becomes the
leitmotif. Sex, in other words, is the “undamaged treasure dug out of
the ruins” that Guth refers to in his analysis of postmodern Arabic
literature; its enjoyable and politically transgressive nature makes it a
lasting theme that retains the quality of a reliable certainty in light of
ideological breakdown and pessimism.323

Besides, female sexuality in this collection becomes a tool for exposing
religious hypocrisy. In one of the interviews I have conducted with the
author, he expressed his belief in the physical act of love as a means to
explore the complexity of human nature, and explained the focus on
sexuality in this particular collection with his desire to unmask
widespread hypocrisy amongst Syrian religious figures.324 The
unfavourable opinion this writer maintains of the religious
establishment emerges in this collection with an ironic stance that
ridicules their connivance with power. Eros, marriage, affairs, sexual
frustration and religious hypocrisy play a predominant role in nearly all
stories of this collection. However, different interpretations of the title
of the book itself can also be given, since like other titles of Tāmir’s

322 John L. Esposito, “Women in Islam and Muslim Societies” in Islam, Gender and
social change, ix-xi.
324 “My interview with Zakariyya Tāmir”, p. 105.
books this too seems to carry a double meaning. By reading the stories we realise that the metaphor this title provides is considerably subtler than it could appear, and as the author himself confirmed in the same interview in addition to the sexual dimension the title also employs this painful image to refer to the destructive effects of authoritarianism on ordinary individuals. From the very first page, rather than just picturing conventional erotic scenes, sexuality serves to upturn the traditional hierarchies and conventions of gender relations and bring together human, social, political and religious issues.

The self-confident nature of the female emerges through her fearless assertion of her sexuality which strips men of their phallic authority and disregards all hierarchies to the detriment of the male’s assumptions of physical supremacy. The stories are usually built around two characters, a man and a woman, the former imprisoned in male-supremacist expectations and contradictions that demand he perform his natural role, while the latter unmask the insecurities behind the male’s “manly” behaviour. In the following story, a fashion of allegorising the phallus with a knife, common in the stories of the latest period, serves to build up the narrative tension to expose the apparently self-assured male through the female protagonist’s unexpected degree of self-confidence and eagerness to engage in casual sex.

The woman was strolling in an orchard thick with trees when suddenly, out of she knew not where, a tall man appeared in front of her. He brandished a long knife and said in a coarse, threatening voice: “Careful! If you scream, I’ll kill you.”

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325 Dimashq al-harāʾiq (Damascus of fires) for example, could be interpreted as a metaphor of the lust of his Damascene characters as well as an image for their ardent but constantly frustrated desire for liberation.
326 “My interview with Zakariyya Tāmir”, p. 105.
The woman was filled with terror, and her face turned pale. The man was pleased to see her fear, and wanted to enjoy more of it. “Do you know what I’m going to do to you now?” he asked. She assured him she didn’t know, and had no way of knowing. He told her he was going to rape her in a way she wouldn’t forget for the rest of her life. The woman sighed with relief, ignoring the knife close to her. “Are you going to rape me here, in this orchard?” she asked without fear. “Or will you take me to your house with a bed? Are you going to rape me standing up, leaning against a tree, or lying on the grass? Do you want me to take off all my clothes, or some of them, or are you going to rip them with your hands and teeth? And when you rape me, do you want me to keep quiet or moan with pain? Do you want me to cry and beg, or laugh and get excited? Are you going to rape me once, or a number of times? Will you alone rape me, or are you going to share me with your friends?”

The man found his hand stashing the knife back in his pocket, and his feet carrying him away.

Reminiscent of Hayfā’, the apparently naïve teenager entering into an arranged marriage, the story unmasks the supposed sexual prowess of the male and his assumption of the female’s submissiveness and physical inferiority, as well as her lack of sexual desire. It emphasises the female protagonist’s confidence with her sexuality subverting rape and forced sexual intercourse by men on women, representing casual sex as desirable, and as an activity in which the female protagonist appears more versed than the rapist.

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327 Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 13.
328 “al-‘Urs al-sharqi”, Tāmir, al-Ra’d, pp. 71-79.
5.6 Sex and marriage in *al-Ḥiṣrim* and *Taksīr Rukab*: As women rise, men fall

The victim of the female’s confident attitude however is not always represented by villainous figures like the rapists and thugs as seen in the previous episodes, but also through the deconstruction of the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter, brothers and sisters, that stresses the female’s need to satisfy her sexual appetite. Already in *al-Ḥiṣrim* the emergence in more prominent terms of this new female is evident as the family becomes once again the object of a fierce satirical critique. Marital relations are exposed as the battleground for the conflict between the sexes. For example in “*al-Ṭāliq*” (The divorced) the female’s assertion of an irresistible urgency comes to the detriment of unexpected male victims. A widow visiting her husband’s grave wilfully engages in a spontaneous sexual encounter with an unspecified man in the cemetery, leaving her deceased partner devoid of any agency and unable to pose a threat to her sexual drive.

Her husband was furious, and urged her to resist until her last breath. He reminded her that respectable women would rather prefer to be slaughtered like ewes than surrender. Her answer came in the form of those familiar pants he had heard frequently in his bedroom. She couldn’t hear him, as he announced to her in a contemptuous voice that he divorced her.329

This cynical attitude the widowed wife puts forward, disregarding her deceased husband’s cries characterises a series of stories from *al-Ḥiṣrim* and *Taksīr Rukab* that, through sexuality, deconstructs taboos like incest and revered figures such as dead husbands and religious authorities. Notably, deconstruction always happens at the hands of women, who manipulate the male characters and strip them of their

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centrality, although apparently leaving them the decision-making authority. Men, however, appear helpless and incapable of performing decision, control and intercourse, overwhelmed by the confident and canny defiance women display.

Highly original representations of female sexuality and the greater presence women enjoy in the stories of this period fundamentally reshape male protagonists’ masculinity. Women usually deprive men of their authority as fathers and husbands. In return, male characters are mocked, cheated and scared by women, and they are sometimes kicked out of their houses for falling short in their sexual performances. Story 36 from *Taksīr Rukab* offers an example of how sexuality serves to expose the ineptness of male authority inside the household. The sixty-year-old protagonist Mukhtār is a bachelor with several unsuccessful and childless marriages behind him due to his sexual idleness, which the narrator describes as “an extreme weakness that made him very forgetful and unable to save himself from embarrassing situations, unsuitable to his position in society”. Yet, he falls in love with young Rashā and obtains her family’s approval to marry her “for his wealth was beyond measure”. Again, the story represents yet another attempt to expose the hypocrisy of the patriarchal family, whose approval of the marriage is guided more by greed for wealth and prestige than by a desire to protect the female members of the family. The impotence of the protagonist suddenly seems to disappear when Rashā gets pregnant, but every time Rashā gives birth the children display a striking resemblance to one of the male neighbours, which insinuates that it was not Mukhtār who impregnated her. The juxtaposition between the two levels, the internal level of the story in its apparent absurdity and the external one, related to the language of power and the cornerstones of patriarchal society, can be inferred in the

331 Ibid., p. 77.
choice of words. The word *mukhtar*, apart from being a common (though old-fashioned) given name, is a term employed in the Arab East to refer to village chiefs and mayors, male figures of responsibility who enjoy the respect of their peers. Whilst the confident assertion of their sexuality is the means through which female protagonists embody an anti-patriarchal stance, male impotence and incapacity becomes a means to expose the hypocrisy behind concepts such as virility, honour, mutual respect and family that nationalist authoritarian discourse in Syria has employed extensively. This story appeared in 2002, when the young and inexperienced Bashār al-Asad had already inherited the presidential throne. This, it can be interpreted as a satirical allegory of Asad’s political inadequateness. Yet, drawing on Max Weiss’s analysis of the effects of gradual liberalisation of Syrian society in the early 2000s, it is difficult in this case to say who in this story has “the last laugh”. It is almost as if society as represented in the story works in circles, while leaving untouched the privileges of the *Mukhtar*’s family. For the purpose of this analysis it will suffice to point out the accessory and bodily dimension attached to the female protagonist, represented as the object through which ordinary male characters take their “revenge” on the wealthy *Mukhtar*.

More than a simple satire of authoritarianism and patriarchy these stories reveal the persistency of a tendency to instrumentalise female sexuality to express the degradation of the male character at the hands of the authoritarian state. A similar narrative can be found in Story 22, from *Taksīr Rukab*. In this story, the wife’s overwhelming verbal agency and active resourcefulness and initiative gradually overshadows the male protagonist’s naivety and inaction: The protagonists Abdel Sattar (‘Abd al-Sattār) and Layla have just got married when the former is put under temporary arrest for no apparent reason and ends up

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spending several years in jail. When Abdel Sattar comes out, the whole neighbourhood is awaiting him outside prison as well as his wife Layla, looking younger than her age, as if she had grown more beautiful during his imprisonment. More relevantly though, Layla is surrounded by a group of five children who vary distinctly in their appearance, producing great embarrassment in the male protagonist who nevertheless tries to maintain a veneer of respectability in front of the community by saying “Legally she’s my wife. Have you forgotten that I married her according to the laws of God and His Prophet?”334 Once the social embarrassment has been dealt with, Abdel Sattar confronts Layla inside the household, asking her to identify the unfamiliar children. Layla replies defiantly, not attempting to deny her marital misconduct, pointing to the kids’ resemblance to different male neighbours, a clear indication of her sustained sexual activity with members of the same community that cheerfully welcomed him back from jail.

Abdel Sattar’s fingers let go of the coffee cup, which fell to the ground and shattered, and he squatted against a wall made of rough black stone. He wanted to cry, as he had cried when beaten severely in prison, but his eyes remained dry.335

This story exemplifies the way in which this collection brings together the sexual and the political, the individual and the collective, confirming their inextricability as well as the undiminished political significance of Tāmir’s story in the post-ideological period. Linking sexual deprivation to arbitrary arrest, the episode exposes once more the authoritarian state as an emasculating force, as well as a destructive element that strips men of the role that has traditionally been assigned to them. The woman’s prominence and apparent superiority however,

335 Ibid., p. 47.
introduces a sexualisation of the female protagonist, and her exclusively bodily dimension, reflecting the fragmentation of the male-dominated society. The closure’s parallel between the humiliation experienced in prison by the protagonist and the embarrassment he feels to find out that his neighbours slept with his wife while he was in prison bring back an element of objectification of the female body as the repository of (male) honour and respectability. These stories expose the disparity between two different and interconnected aspects in the representations of male and female protagonists that the stories of this period put forward: On the one hand the greater degree of sexual agency that women have gained, acted out through the overt expression of their sexual desire and even licentiousness; on the other hand, the subsequent collapse of the male, overwhelmed and overshadowed by the lustful female, unable of impregnating his wife, seemingly unaware of being the object of ridicule. This aspect, strictly connected with the emergence of the female viewpoint, bestows a greater degree of agency on the female, highlighting the male’s incapacity and inability to make decisions. This confirms an idea of gender roles as mutually informed, but the active role women play is not necessarily charged with positive connotations, and a disappointed, scornful look is shed on the changing nature of men and women. The manipulative role women play results usually in the man renouncing his masculinity and surrendering to the demands of the female.

These stories are also notable for the evident stress on the correlation, almost a cause-effect one, between the social fragmentation and the diminished masculinity of male protagonists, ascribing the greater agency of the females to a crisis of values. In addition to her anti-patriarchal taboo-breaking potential, the assertive female protagonist also reflects a sense of helplessness in the male. In this vein, Darrāj understands Tāmir’s trajectory as an example reflecting the disenchantment of an entire generation of politically committed Syrian
authors, and interprets Tāmir’s latest stories as an indication of a pessimistic glance at a society that has lost its humanity and has given up on its ambitions of freedom and emancipation. In line with Abu-Deeb’s approach Darrāj emphasises the contrast between the optimism in “a future that makes virtue triumph” of Tāmir’s early works, and the latest period characterised by broad pessimism that “promises nothing but catastrophe”.336

Stylistically, the pessimism is expressed through a colder and seemingly indifferent language, devoid of the poetic connotations of the early ḥadāthī period. An equally matter-of-fact style characterises both men and women, replacing the strong contrast produced by the evocative representations of the female body. This new space and greater relevance that women take on is often symbolised by the use of sexuality as a “weapon” that they can hold against their men, threatening to destroy their honour and their reputation. While in the early stories women intervened occasionally as accessories of the male protagonist’s struggles against a hostile environment, and as symbols of the male’s quest for love, in these collections the presence of sassy female protagonists serves to reinforce the incapacity of the male to respond to the expectations of a traditional model of masculinity. The fact itself that the stories of Taksīr Rukab – unlike its predecessors – carry no titles has been interpreted by Fayṣal Darrāj as another indication of the pessimistic glance that the narrator seems to throw onto his protagonists.337 The undeniable taboo-breaking nature of these stories does not simply question a system of values, instead it also serves as an aesthetic device that outrages the reader lamenting the undermined role of men. The overtly provocative language does not entail the detailed portrayal of sexual intercourse, but rather frequently represents a weak and impotent type of masculinity that fails to meet

337 Ibid., p. 28.
sexual expectations embodying defeat and incapacity. If masculinity is traditionally defined by traits such as sexual prowess, courage, independence and assertiveness, the emergence of a new confident feminine voice has led to a collapse of the male, usually represented as helpless, impotent and incapable of performing the sexual act.

5.7 Sex and politics in *Taksīr Rukab*: The sexualisation of the female

The political implications of this new approach to female sexuality become clearer in story 49 from *Taksīr Rukab*, where women manipulate men, employing sexual privileges in their relationship with their husbands to impact an on-going conflict. The setting is that of two neighbouring quarters – the inner quarter and the outer quarter – historically at odds with each other, suddenly at war again following the spreading of rumours that undermine the men’s masculinity and honour. The content of the rumours involves the supposed incapacity of the men to oppose their women’s fierce beating and to prevent them from sleeping with other men. Conflict seems again imminent, until women from both quarters decide to meet secretly to find a solution and agree to put an end to the hostilities. Upon returning home to their husbands they convince them, by having sex with them, of the pettiness of their misunderstanding with the men of the other quarter. “They went back to their homes and tried to convince their men by night that the conflict between the two neighborhoods was nothing more than a simple misunderstanding which could happen even among brothers. Their success was dazzling, for in a few months some of their bellies started to grow.”  

New rumours then started spreading describing the women of both quarters as submissive and acquiescent, and peace returned to reign between the two quarters. At this point, the story suddenly assumes an international dimension when the Secretary General of the United Nations pays a visit to the two quarters extolling

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the virtue of their people, and their capacity to solve conflicts. The event brings great pride to the two quarters, and after signing a peace agreement under the aegis of the United Nations harmony grows “until they became almost one neighbor”\textsuperscript{339} In the end, however, what were merely rumours turn into reality and men with men beating their wives and cheating on them with women from other quarters.

This story makes overt references to the social fabric of Syria, satirising the widespread narrative of a country populated by a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities that have coexisted relatively peacefully, despite the differences and the disparities. In comparison with the social realism of the early episodes, the unedifying character of these stories comes across as postmodern, disengaged and politically irrelevant in the context of authoritarianism. Yet, new representations of female characters, and in particular of female sexuality shows the greater political potential of the challenge to patriarchy that the new female voice puts forward. It overturns sex as a form of fitna and ironically reinvents it instead as a potential solution for petty conflict and a source of peace. Paradoxically the unconcerned nature of these latest collections reveals the contradictions of the more explicit ideological tone of the early episodes, and the greater political potential of non-realistic and non-ideological aesthetics. This finds an interesting parallel in Nadine Labaki’s film \textit{Et Maintenant On Vas Ou? – Wa Halla’ La-wayn?} (Where do we go now?)\textsuperscript{340} in the way it satirises the narrative of peaceful coexistence between different communities in Lebanon. Labaki’s film is set during the Lebanese civil war in a nameless, isolated Lebanese mountain village that has witnessed inter-sectarian warfare and periods of harmony. In the unnamed village a mosque and a church and the Muslim and Christian cemeteries stand side by side, and the imam and the priest are friends. The film presents

\textsuperscript{339} Ibid., p. 120.

a national allegory, with the village as a microcosm of Lebanese society. The notable parallels with Tāmir’s story emerge when the women of the village manipulate the men to prevent the echoes of the ongoing war from reaching them. As sectarian strife gradually starts affecting the village and its surrounding area the women gather to conspire and concoct ways to keep their men away from killing each other: first they hire a group of Ukrainian strip dancers to entertain them, then when a local Muslim boy is killed in a nearby Christian village the women drug the men by adding narcotics to their pastries, and proceed to destroy their men’s weapons. The following day, as they recover from intoxication Muslim men wake up to find out that their wives have removed all signs of their affiliation to Islam, while Christian women have adopted the Muslim ḥijāb (headscarf). The entire village population participate in the young boy’s funeral and the final scene sees men from both communities turn to their women asking for direction, unsure as to where they should bury the boy.

Similar to Labaki’s film, Tāmir’s story pursues a vaguely idealising approach to women as the repository of common sense in a male-dominated environment inevitably poisoned by communal strife. The similarities and parallels with the 5th century BC comedy by Aristophanes’s Lysistrata, in which the female population of Athens plots to end the Peloponnesian war by denying sex to the men, are obvious. Female power in Lysistrata is temporarily achieved through sexual blackmail, which ultimately succeeds in forcing men to stop the hostility. However, this and a number of other stories in this collection, similar to Labaki’s film and Aristophanes’s comedy, project the image of female power as manipulative, and of the female’s bodily dimensions as the only mechanism through which women manage to disrupt an unchanging environment dominated by men. Whilst female characters have undoubtedly achieved a greater presence and express their libido more overtly, male characters retain the privilege of being represented
appearing and operating in multiple contexts and situations that transcend the merely physical dimension that women possess. Stories that address women’s issues beyond the body see female characters relegated to the margins of the narration, similarly to Tāmir’s early stories, the difference being a new narrative focus on sexual desire.

Challenging and satirising an idealised model of manliness, this style still offers a greater variety of roles to male characters, while limiting the female’s agency to the bodily dimension. With a few exceptions, the new female and the new sexual connotations attached to female protagonists not only are unable to cancel this disparity, but they eventually limit the female’s scope of action and her political agency to the sexual. This becomes clear in another story from al-Ḥiṣrim that can be interpreted as an allegory for the moral decay that the author claims to detect in the country, or perhaps just the city of Damascus. As Tāmir publicly acknowledged in a talk he delivered in Damascus in 2008 this story is based on many anecdotes he had heard about his native city in recent years before the collection was released.³⁴¹ The sexualisation of the female and the representation of the female body as an allegory for the nation, returns in “Imra’a jamīla” (A Beautiful Woman), a story from al-Ḥiṣrim exhibiting the same contradictions detected in the early representations of sexual abuse performed on the female as embodying decay.

Layla, whose surname was unknown, was a beautiful divorced woman. The director of the company she worked for raped her, and the taxi driver who took her to the police station raped her, the policeman who listened to her story raped her, and the doctor who examined her in order to make sure that the rape wasn’t just a false claim raped her, and the judge to whom she told in

details how she got raped three times raped her, but he didn’t rape her in the court; he raped her in his office after asking her a few questions that were not fit to be asked publicly. A journalist raped her, after he had noted all she told him. Layla felt like the humiliation she endured claimed revenge and told Death what happened to her. Death didn’t rape her, it only flooded her flesh with ice that froze the blood in her veins.\textsuperscript{342}

Again, the sexual dimension central to the allegory and the rape of “the beautiful woman” Layla, confirms the duality of a narration that, while denouncing and satirising sexism to bring female sexual desire to the fore, remains entangled in a fundamentally polarised view on gender roles. In fact, it continues to objectify women through lumping together the nation (or perhaps the city) and the female body, in order to expose corruption and fragmentation affecting a community.

The desire to articulate the tight relationship between the sexual and the political, as well as the contradictions of the exclusively sexual and bodily role assigned to female characters, becomes manifest in another story from \textit{Taksīr Rukab}, in which the female protagonist Iqbal al-Tabbakh (Iqābāl al-Ṭabbākh) engages overtly in political activism to become a member of parliament. Again, the protagonists’ political success comes again as a consequence of her manipulation of men through the alluring prospect of sexual intercourse, making the most of her body as the ultimate weapon to obtain political recognition. Initially, the narrator introduces Iqbal as outraged at her husband’s affair with their unattractive housemaid. Suddenly the story takes a turn to the political when Iqbal decides to run for parliament, immediately enjoying the enthusiastic support of women who see her as their representative against the oppression of men. Male support, on the other

\textsuperscript{342} Tāmir, \textit{al-Ḥişrim}, p. 37.
hand, is only won through her irresistible sexual skills which the narrator describes through allusions and metaphors.

Male support was lukewarm at first but quickly turned to boundless enthusiasm when Iqbal started to meet with the men separately, one after the other. She presented her arguments slowly but surely, convincing them of the validity of her thoughts and opinions with irrefutable evidence and a logic so clear that no one could resist it. Those on their way out of her house warned those coming in that awaiting them was a fire which burned but did not kill and which would drive them to ask to be burned again. When Iqbal al-Tabbakh’s electoral victory was announced, her supporters and helpers broke into trills of joy, but Iqbal complained because she was obliged to wear clothes. Yet her complaints dwindled when she remembered that in the parliament she would be facing fierce and powerful enemies whom she would not be able to overcome except by resorting to her irrefutable arguments and her easy but inimitable logic, which could not be resisted or defeated.\textsuperscript{343}

Together with the two neighbourhoods’ story quoted above this story also exemplifies a style that in this collection in particular addresses female sexuality openly and articulates a vision of equality between the sexes through the assertion of female sexual desire to the detriment of the male’s privileges. However, the ever-present sexual trope reinforces an objectification of the female body which is ultimately patriarchal rather than empowering. Female characters accomplish their social and political dimension inside and outside the household exclusively through their bodies, but remain intellectually passive and insignificant, failing to truly penetrate the spaces assigned to men. What is more, Tāmir’s conceptualisation of female power appears all the more

\textsuperscript{343} Tamer, Breaking Knees, pp. 75-76.
objectifying because of the constant reference to female sexuality which, from being taboo and a subject the writer timidly hinted at in his early works, has become the sole element through which female protagonists articulate their subjectivity.

5.8 Conclusions

In the chronological analysis of Tāmir’s œuvre, female sexual identity is amongst the tropes that have witnessed the most significant transformations in his latest collections. This chapter mainly draws on Guth’s, Abu Deeb’s and Sabry Hafez’s analyses on the relationship between ideological fragmentation and the emergence of a new female oriented writing in Arabic literature, to show how the representations of women and of female sexuality in Tāmir in the latest period of his career signify the maturation of the female characters through a daring assertion of their sexual desire as a stringent necessity. In the 1960s and the 1970s Tāmir’s protagonists encounters with sex were introspective and self-centred, expressing great frustration and frequently denouncing the lack of contact between young boys and girls, due most often to social norms. The realistic approach that characterises the early stories exposes a reality of oppression and sexism, backwardness and cruelty in the face of which women are helpless and are unable to counteract. In more recent stories the episodes concerning sex have taken a more relaxed, humorous and satirical approach that puts women at the centre of the stage, to ridicule men’s inadequateness and their claims of superiority and leadership. The role female characters play in the stories gradually upgrades from claims, complaints and demands of their recognition as possessor of sexual desires, to assertion, reaffirmation and crystallisation of transgressive female sexual identities that liberate their instincts, all of which represents a decisive object-subject reversal.
This style emerges in the context of fragmentation, the collapse of the totalising ideologies and the rise of Islamism, but it also represents the accomplishment of a process of self-realisation of the female protagonist that is commonly solely ascribed to female writers. However, the abandonment of ideology that this fragmentation brings about does not deprive the text of its political significance, and clarifies the potential of the aesthetic strategies through which representations of female sexuality have developed, evolved and matured significantly throughout this author’s career, as well as the ways in which it relates to the persistence of authoritarianism on one hand, and to the emergence of political Islam on the other.

Nonetheless, the aspiration to unsettle the reader with taboo-breaking representations of women asserting their sexual desire that the stories project nonetheless puts excessive emphasis on the female body, and its potentially empowering nature eventually confines the female character to the domain of the sexual, the bodily and the libidinous. Thus, the stories fail to grant female characters intellectual capacity, a precondition to truly subvert the centrality of the male in the patriarchal system. One might argue that the fragmentation and multiplication of voices, theorised by Abu Deeb and others, has entailed a new objectification of the female body. As Censi points out, this focus on the body and its objectification also appears in the writings of female authors, and cannot be ascribed exclusively to male writers such as Tāmir. The desire to give voice and centrality to the female point of view, perhaps in response to a renewed surge of more traditionally Islamic mores, seems to have to be inevitably charged with sexual connotations, partially depriving the text of its empowering potential in a patriarchal context. In other words, the process of self-realisation that invests the female with significance and ideally upgrades her status to

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that of subject is evidently undermined and crippled by the objectification that results from the recurrence of female protagonists exploiting their sexuality as a “weapon” to gain the upper hand in their relationships with men. The obsession with female sexuality has significant implications for shaping new models of masculinity. Moreover, the later stories also introduce a view on masculinities and femininities as mutually informed, i.e. the new femininity contributes to stripping men of their prerogatives, an aspect analysed in greater detail in the next chapter.
Chapter Six: Shaken masculine identity and the persistence of male-centred narrative in Tāmir’s latest works

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has shown how the latest period of Tāmir’s career is characterised by significant transformations in the realms of sexuality and the representations of female characters. Stories with a stronger female presence also hint frequently at the parallel overshadowing of the male characters. This chapter looks more closely at the new configurations of masculinity that the stories published during Tāmir’s self-imposed exile put forward. Motivating the analysis of this theme in Tāmir is the desire to scrutinise the ways in which the works of this period retain a significant political charge. Despite the supposedly diminished ideological charge that the collapse of consensus has brought about, the study of changed representations of male characters elucidates the political significance of Tāmir’s short stories vis-à-vis a persistent authoritarian regime.

As Aghacy argues in her introduction, the institutions of religious authority, family and the authoritarian state in particular, exerting an “exaggerated and amplified power”346, exercise their influence and power on the individual to such an extent that addressing individual matters reversely offers insights into the changing nature of the patriarchal institutions. This chapter explores the new configurations that male identity has acquired in the latest period of Tāmir’s career with regard to a variety of themes, including homosexuality, nationalism and patriarchy. Borrowing from Connell’s theoretical approach towards patriarchal masculinity as a social construct, as well as from Aghacy’s conceptualisation of male identity in post-1967

346 Aghacy, Masculine identity, p. 9.
Arabic literature, this chapter addresses the male individual as a victim of the emasculating forces of authoritarianism and patronage. Together with the decline of nationalist, socialist and emancipatory ideologies, the consolidation of authoritarian and patriarchal regimes across the Arab East during the 1980s/1990s normalised practices that put men in a feminine position in relation to the authoritarian state. In addition, Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity will serve to elucidate the ways in which the mutually informed representations of femininity and masculinity in the stories under scrutiny express compliance with and/or subversion of a patriarchal worldview.

The first part takes further insights of the previous chapter, exploring the effects of an increased presence of female characters on the masculinity of male protagonists, highlighting the emergence of a more nuanced approach to changing dynamics of gender. In the second part, the analysis turns to weakened traditional masculinities and the transformation of the male-centred narrative that typified Tāmir’s early period. In the later stories, we witness the decline of an old, strong and all-dominant type of masculinity. Finally, the third part addresses male sexuality through the study of significant albeit infrequent episodes of homosexual intercourse. This theme rarely features in Tāmir’s works and in modern Arabic literature more generally, but contributes to a wider deconstruction of the male that Tāmir’s entire oeuvre is concerned with. While there is hardly a detailed analysis of this theme in Syrian cultural production, Frédéric Lagrange’s analysis of homosexuality in modern Arabic literature347 as well as Rebecca Joubin’s research on drama series348 serve as useful frames of reference.

The second period of Tāmir’s career features a relevant transformation in the content and originality of the single compilations of short stories, as opposed to the stories of the 1960s and 1970s which appeared at different times in local magazines and were later collected into compilations. While the collections of the early period were compiled as anthologies of various stories previously published in magazines, in the latest period of his career each collection presents the characteristics of an organic artistic unit revolving around a main subject. As seen already in the previous chapter the themes of gender and sexuality are central to Taksīr Rukab, in which almost every single episode involves references to sex, and the mutually informing relationship between stronger female and weaker configurations of masculinity appears more manifest. However, although the largest number of examples will be drawn from this collection, the transformations and developments in the gender configurations will be traced by making reference to episodes from Sa-nadhāk and al-Ḥisrīm as well.

6.2 Fragmentation and the collapse of the male

While much has been written about the emergence of female Arab authors and their representations of female characters and their sexuality in Arabic literature, the exploration of masculinities with regard to concurrent historical circumstances has remained a relatively unexplored subject. In the specific case of Syria, a deep analysis is still required to construct the framework to address the political significance of changing masculinities in contemporary cultural production. The distancing of Arabic cultural production from a traditional form of commitment to the causes of modernisation and national liberation has not resulted in an unambiguous separation between fiction and politics.

In return, the persistence of authoritarianism has reshaped the political dimension of cultural production, particularly with regard to the relationship between politics, gender roles and sexuality. The greater presence of sexual images in Syrian and Arabic literature since the 1970s allows us to situate the transformation of Tāmir’s style within a trend that has affected cultural production from the Arab East extensively, but whose implications and significance remain relatively understudied. Whilst the relevance of the transgressive representations of female sexual desire that we have addressed elsewhere can be safely interpreted as an attack against a patriarchal worldview that disapproves of women expressing their sexual desire openly, gender roles seen from the point of view of men have further implications.

Looking at Lebanese fiction writing from the post-war period Aghacy argues for the increasingly significant transformations in the realm of gender roles. In particular, her study explores the new forms of male identities engendered by the trauma of war, exploring them as changing in accordance with the social, economic, and political events and changes in the region. With regards to Syrian literature and to Tāmir’s works specifically, a similar approach can be pursued to assess the new configurations of masculinity that his works project in the context of the broader albeit bloodless political trauma represented by the collapse of consensus and of all notions of ideological and political unity. The gendered dimension that this process of collapse and defeat possesses entails a diminished degree of agency for the male as the primary actor in the political arena. As shown in Chapter Three, the quest for emancipation and modernisation, exemplified by the optimism of stories like “Rabī’ fī al-ramāḍ” as well as episodes characterised by uncertainty addressing disenfranchisement and marginalisation, was typified by the central role of male characters and

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351 Ibid., p. 2.
by the accessory presence of women. The failure of the project from which those stories derived their vitality and inspiration, and the persistence of authoritarian and arbitrary rule, similarly to the shock of the Lebanese civil war, have produced new gender identities in an author like Tāmir, often associated with a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. Certainly, gender roles and the gendered nature of patriarchal authoritarianism have been a concern for this author since the early period. However, in the latest stories the sense of inadequacy that defeat and fragmentation have produced in the politicised male and the subaltern position to which authoritarianism relegates him, present us with the opportunity to discuss the aesthetic strategies through which Tāmir’s stories reinvent masculinities to address these transformations.

Through a variety of textual strategies and themes already present in Sa-nadḥak, a number of relevant stories project a model of weak, unreliable masculinity, introducing gender roles as a tool to exemplify decay. For example, Muṣṭafā al-Amīr, the protagonist of “al-Mutanakkir” (The Disguised) camouflages himself as an eight-year-old when his fiancée Kawthar visits him to announce her pregnancy to him. Belittling and infantilising himself in order to avoid his responsibilities Muṣṭafā al-Amīr appears to Kawthar as a child, signalling the emergence of a coward male who, faced with fatherhood, fails to meet the expectations of masculinity.352 Another relevant aspect of this collection is the gendered dimension that the restaging of historical events and personalities acquires. In “Ḥamlat Nabulyūn” (Napoleon’s Expedition), the French emperor’s famous expedition to Egypt is reinvented in contemporary terms, set in today’s Damascus, which Napoleon occupies enjoying the submissive reception of the city’s dignitaries and religious authorities. The story takes an unexpected turn to the sexual when inverting the male/female relationship between colonial powers and colonised victims: Napoleon’s wife Joséphine

352 Tāmir, Sa-nadḥak, p. 55.
taints the emperor’s reputation by engaging in repeated sexual intercourse and introducing “the young Damascenes to what they did not know”; the emperor’s colonising/phallic prowess on the other hand is reversed to represent him in homosexual terms. Sad and depressed about his wife’s scandals, Napoleon seeks the advice of a local sheikh, who advises him to attend the local hammams. There the emperor finally finds gratification, “for being under the masseurs’ bodies made him imagine his army conquering the entire world”.

Napoleon Bonaparte led a happy life in Damascus, but the French government sent someone to abduct him and bring him back to France where he spent the rest of his life sighing in sorrow and distress every time he recalled Damascus and its men.” This reversal and the “revenge” of the feminised East on the male coloniser confirms a conceptualisation of the relationship between East and West that remains necessarily a sexualised relationship, one of strength and challenge, shaped by dichotomies such as activity/passivity and positivity/negativity. As Ṭarābīshī explains, according to this view there can never possibly be room for two males. One of the two has to prove his manhood to provide evidence of the womanhood of the other.

6.3 Shaken masculinity: Male submissiveness to authoritarianism and women

In addition to the greater degree of subjectivity that female characters attain, the collapse of the male protagonist’s supremacy in this period comes frequently as the consequence of internalised submissiveness. While in the realm of women and female sexuality the subject/object reversal has engendered a process of empowerment through the assertion of the female sexual drive, in the case of male characters the

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353 Ibid., p. 78.
354 Ibid., p. 78.
355 Ṭarābīshī, Sharq wa gharb, p. 15.
stories of the latest period exhibit a different, contradictory development. In the confrontation between citizens and the authoritarian state, the early 1960s and 1970s stories successfully exposed the overpowering role of the representatives of the State in crushing the helpless male citizen. This male citizen – perfectly exemplified by Abū Ḥasan, the protagonist of “Fī layla min al-layālī” analysed in Chapter Three – is highly aware of his own integrity and manliness. This aspect contributed to heighten the significance of the State’s emasculating practices and their effects not only on the single individual but on an ideal of man.

Although the themes of arbitrary arrest and violence at the hands of the state’s representatives remain present in the latest period, the idealised manliness of characters like Abū Ḥasan as seen in Chapter Three serves as a useful term of comparison to trace the developments in the representations of male characters. In the former’s case the lengthy description of the protagonist’s manly self-image and confidence in his own integrity, accentuate the contrast between a positive model of traditional masculinity and the castrating force of the capricious authoritarian state. In turn, while the connection between the protagonists’ subjectivity and their sexuality remains a central aspect in the latest period, however, the oppressor/victim relationship is transformed as the male appears as a victim of both the emasculating state as well as a self-emasculating figure.

This process is accompanied by a rich array of symbols of an ideal masculinity which populate the stories of al-Ḥisrim and Taksīr Rukab. Alongside the active role female characters play in shaping the male’s identity and manipulating him for their own benefit, symbols charged with cultural and historical connotations intervene to reinforce the contrast between an ideal masculinity that male protagonists seldom match.
In fact, these men have internalised obedience to the extent that they become complicit in the brutal practices of the State. This aspect adds a further degree of complexity to evolving representations of male characters vis-à-vis the persistent authoritarian state, but also reveals the author’s acute awareness of the dynamics and strategies of domination of the Asad regime. Drawing on Vaclav Havel’s discussion of authoritarian Czechoslovakia, but analysing in turn the Asad regime’s strategies of domination, Wedeen has shown the role complicity and outward obedience plays in reinforcing the power of the authoritarian State. This view makes everyone complicit in self-enforcing strategies of domination, deconstructing a State-vs.-citizens binary opposition, but attributing an equal amount of responsibility to the state’s practices of coercion and the citizens’ continued, albeit hypocritical acceptance.356

Farid al-Murabba (Farīd al-Murabba’), the protagonist of story 58 from Taksīr Rukab, represents an example of this new obedient male: Arrested by a number of armed men in the early morning and taken to a makeshift prison, he is accused of refusing to take bribes by the interrogator. The protagonist goes on denying the accusation, proudly asserting his descent from a family in which no one would ever refuse “the blessing of a bribe”357 and extolling his easily bribable personality. After beating and torturing Farid for days for denying the accusation levelled against him, the interrogator agrees to release him, accepting Farid’s offer of a monthly bribe and the prospect of increasing its amount every month. Yet, in addition to the male protagonist’s own self-image and internalised submissiveness, the collapse of his supremacy in this period comes as the consequence of the greater degree of subjectivity that female characters attain, testimony to the

mutually informing relationship of stronger female and weaker masculinity. The degradation of masculinity in story 47 in *Taksīr Rukab*, is rendered through the gradual fragmentation of the male protagonist Said (Saʿīd) as a result of his urge to please a “beautiful and daring young woman”.

Said kissed the lips of a beautiful woman and daring young woman. She complemented him on his kiss, saying without embarrassment that she enjoyed it and would welcome more, but she found fault with his dense mustache, in which the stale odor of tobacco had taken root making it smell more like rotten fish. As soon as he reached home, Said rushed to the bathroom, paying no attention to his wife. He stood in front of the mirror and with a firm hand shaved his mustache.358

As the Lebanese novelist Hasan Daoud notes, in the Arab tradition (*turāth*), preserved in popular sayings and folk takes, the moustache stands for masculinity and respectability, as well as a form of symbolic currency employed in honour disputes.359 The thicker it is, the stronger the display of manhood it reinforces. Said however, the protagonist of the story, does not hesitate to shave it off to please his nameless beautiful and daring mistress. The consequences though are inevitable, and as Said looks at himself in the mirror he realises he does not recognise his own reflection. The removal of the moustache as the symbol of masculinity introduces a process of gradual emasculation of the protagonist that amounts to a humiliation.

He then looked into the mirror and saw there a man he did not recognize. “Who are you?” he asked.

- “My name is Raghid” said the man with the shaved mustache.

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Raghid then laughed a merry and mocking laughter and said to Said, “the moment you shaved your mustache you disappeared. You didn’t exist any more”.

- “Don’t gloat or feel glad,” said Said to Raghid. “In a few days my hair will grow back the way it was because it’s very thick and has always given barbers a hard time”.  

Men’s incapacity to stand up to women’s demands results in their ideal as well as physical fragmentation and loss of identity. The competition that the female attractive protagonist induces in the different male characters pushes them to symbolically castrate themselves, first by shaving off their moustaches, then their hair. Even Said’s reflection splits up and sees itself reflected in the mirror as a different man who introduces himself as Walīd. An argument explodes between the elements of the threefold contradicting personalities of the protagonist, exposing a process through which the male becomes incapable of pleasing the female. “I’m married to the beautiful and intelligent Amal who’s impossible to please” argues Walīd; “she only loves my moustache and considers it a sign of true manhood”;  

“She used to pass her hand through my hair and say it was the hair of a black stallion”. But upon finding out what Said has done, Amal asks him for an explanation, to which he replies first by making up that he has cancer. Contradicted by his two reflections in the mirror, he then claims to have been called up for the army. When Amal asks him to compensate her for the shock caused by his lie, the protagonist embraces her and engages in sexual intercourse, which the narrator describes as paying “whatever compensation he owed”. The woman’s apparent superiority again reinforces the sexualisation of the female protagonists, and their exclusively bodily dimension, as a means

360 Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 114.
361 Ibid., p. 113.
362 Ibid., p. 113.
363 Ibid., p. 113.
to visualise the fragmentation of the male-dominated society. In line with the trends examined by Aghacy in contemporary Arabic literature, transgressive imagery in Tāmir’s latest stories does not promote a liberation of sexual mores and free relations between men and women, but rather decries a diminished role for men in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{364}

6.4 Symbols of a long-lost manliness and instruments of satire in \textit{al-Ḥiṣrim}: The \textit{qabaday}

\textit{Al-Ḥiṣrim} is a collection characterised mostly by the recurrence of episodes depicting the incommunicability between generations and the widespread detriments brought about by patriarchy in its various embodiments, as well as by the original reinvention of historical figures and different religious traditions. This trait, widespread in contemporary Arabic literature and according to some a trait of Arabic literary postmodernism,\textsuperscript{365} typifies most of Tāmir’s latest collections and is particularly prominent in \textit{Nidā’ Nūḥ}. The title \textit{al-Ḥiṣrim} (Arabic for sour grapes), borrows from the biblical tradition, hinting at a well-known proverb that goes: “The fathers eat sour grapes and their children’s tongue gets bitter”\textsuperscript{366}. The proverb is usually interpreted as a metaphor for the negative effects that the mistakes that parents make have on their children, an allegory for the price younger generations have to pay for their predecessors’ bad choices.\textsuperscript{367} The title of this collection suggests the intergenerational motif that characterises the stories of this collection, with particular consideration to the consequences of past and current habits and practices on the future generations.

\textsuperscript{364} Aghacy, \textit{Masculine identity}, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{366} The \textit{Holy Bible}, Ezekiel, 18:2.
However, the biblical proverb and the relationship between fathers and sons, are far from being the only cultural reference. In fact, this collection opens with a quote from the Qur’an, surah Yūsuf, almost as to warn the imagined reader against family members as the primary actors of betrayal and distrust. In addition, as the Palestinian critics Aḥmad Daḥbūr and Ibrāhīm Muḥawwī note, the title also alludes to Aesop’s famous “the fox and the grapes” story, comparing the sourness of the grapes the fox leaves behind, to the bitterness of life in the al-Qawāq quarter, imagined perhaps as a microcosm for Syria. The word ḥiṣrim itself connotes sourness and crudeness, describing something that is half-grown and immature, a metaphor for a world that possesses the seed of change and emancipation but is still unprepared for the imaginary harvest. The metaphorical bitterness that children inherit from their fathers refers to a set of social habits and behaviours, a corrupt mentality passed on from one generation to the next, that usually originates in the home and from the mistrust between members of the same family.

Most of al-Ḥiṣrim’s stories are set in the microcosm of the popular al-Qawāq quarter, where the protagonists experience dependency and patronage, both characteristic incarnations of neopatriarchy, in circumstances that are depicted with a style charged with Arabic cultural connotations. Khaḍar ‘Allūn, the protagonist of “al-Muhārasha” (The quarrel) and “Maṣra‘ khanjar” (Death of a dagger) from al-Ḥiṣrim, is an example of the original variety of concepts and roles performed by male protagonists in this period, as well as of the historical and mythical symbols of masculinity that Tāmir

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368 “My son, tell your brothers nothing of this dream or they may plot to harm you”, al-Qur’an, Yūsuf, 12:5. All Quranic quotations from The Qur’an – a new translation, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
incorporates in the stories of this collection. The two episodes could be seen as two parts of the same story, revolving around a quarrel between Khaḍar and Umm ‘Alī,373 stirred by Najīb Bey al-Baqqār, the richest man in the quarter, who manipulates the opponents for his own benefit, exploiting the former’s sense of pride and the latter’s haughtiness and poverty. The narrator introduces al-Qawīq as “notorious for its wealthy, who would kill their mothers if that had granted them more money” as well as “for its rude men, who would never say no to a bloody wrangle and would happily go to prison. Men such as Khaḍar ‘Allūn, who cut his left ear in court in front of the judge and ate it with great pleasure”.374 Without mentioning it directly the narrator outlines the protagonist’s profile as a qabaḍay, a colloquial term used to this day in the Syrian vernacular to describe a generous and morally upright man, but which traditionally in Ottoman Syria was a real-life figure, a manly tough guy and an instrument of the local notables to ensure their control over areas of the city. As Philip Shoukri Khoury recounts, the qabaḍayāt (plural for qabaḍay) were symbols and almost authorities of the popular (sha’bī) quarters of Damascus, and an expression of the city’s multiple traditions and customs. They were a prominent feature of life in the city, renowned for their strength and moral righteousness, with an intimate and loyal connection to the popular quarters (al-ḥārāt al-sha’biyya in Arabic), to which the qabaḍayāt belonged and whose honour they defended.

Far from being role models, though, they also possessed a darker side, in that they were usually violent unsophisticated instruments of power who used their physical prowess to serve the authority of the local notables, known as beys (beyk in Arabic). Although widely respected and revered, the qabaḍayāt possessed no political or financial power

373 Literally ‘Ali’s mother, using the common Arab paedonymic of referring to a person by the name of their children, but also a popular nickname used in the Syrian vernacular to describe a haughty woman.
and were usually under the protection of beys who employed them to run their patronage networks.\textsuperscript{375}

It is important to note how the narrator sets the episodes of these two stories in contemporary times, an aspect the reader can infer from the occasional mention of cars, paved road and plastic surgery, which did not form part of the urban landscape in Ottoman Syria. Nowadays the delusional and romanticised \textit{qabaḍay} model of masculinity that Khaḍar represents—far from being ideal—becomes in this case the object of ridicule in the second story ("\textit{Masra‘ khanjar}"), eventually causing the male’s own disenfranchisement and demise. The story begins with the protagonist Khaḍar ‘Allūn discussing with his mother the prospect of getting married and settling down, as well as that of receiving plastic surgery to get his ear fixed. His refusal to accept his mother’s advice and the model of resilient virility he projects comes across as a delusional myth modelled on the 6\textsuperscript{th}-century Arab knightly poet and warrior ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād,\textsuperscript{376} as a symbol of a long-lost ideal of courage and integrity. The protagonist entertains imaginary conversations with ‘Antara, who functions almost as his consciousness, instructing him on everyday issues and on how to resist the feminisation of society.

‘Antara Ibn Shaddād secretly accompanied Khaḍar day and night.


\textsuperscript{376} ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād is considered one of the greatest poets of the pre-Islamic period and is the object of tales and legends. Born to a black slave mother he obtained his freedom and pursued the love of his cousin ‘Abla. For more information about this historical figure see Griffithes Wheeler Thatcher, "'Antara ibn Shaddād", in Hugh Chisholm, \textit{Encyclopaedia Britannica}, 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) pp. 88–89; Bernard Lewis, \textit{Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 24-25.
- “Don’t listen to your mother’s petty talk” – said ‘Antara to Khadr – “my enemies used to abuse me for my black complexion, but I remained the man that ‘Abla loved, and that all the men revered and sought to please”.

[...]
- “If you let your mother talk” – said ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād – “the next thing she will propose is that you get your hair cut in a women’s salon”.

[...]
- “It has become fashionable these days for men to emulate women” – ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād said to him– “and for women to emulate men. A few men are real men these days, and nobody understands them.” 377

His mother was shocked to see her son laughing. He’d been frowning and looking so angry as though he was about to explode. She said to him impatiently: “May God help you and your twisted mind.” After kissing his mother’s hand Khadr left her house, and headed over to the local café. He sat down alone, smoking his shisha. ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād said to him:
- “Don’t smile. When men smile too much they become like coquettish women.” 378

What makes a true qabaḍay these days in other words is not his strength or his courage, but rather his ability to distinguish himself from women. The role of ‘Antara’s myth becomes more relevant when the emasculating forces of the modern state intervene to deprive the male protagonist of his dagger, the token of his masculinity, which underpins his subjectivity and serves as a phallic metaphor. During an ordinary stop-and-search, two police constables confiscate Khadr’s dagger, the

377 Tāmir, al-Hiṣrim, p. 20.
378 Ibid., p. 21.
dearest object he owns, symbolically castrating him and leaving him dumbfounded.

Khaḍar sat down speechless, feeling ashamed as though he was naked.
- “A man who gives up on his knife isn’t a man and he only deserves to sit among women” said ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād to Khaḍar.
- “But it’s the police who took it” said Khaḍar.
- “As if you didn’t know that they’re men too” – replied ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād “people like you and me who will die one day, just like you and me.”
- “Without my dagger, I’m as fragile as an old paralysed woman” said Khaḍar.\textsuperscript{379}

Khaḍar tries to retrieve his dagger through Najīb al-Baqqār, himself the remake of an equally important traditional Damascene figure, the Bey to whom qabādayāt were loyal and dependent. But al-Baqqār’s intercession to the authorities remains unsuccessful, and to add insult to injury, Khaḍar discovers that the police sold his dagger to a foreign female tourist. Feeling weak and helpless in the story’s closure he is run over and killed by a car after wandering aimlessly in an affluent area away from his quarter.

As he was drawing his last breath ‘Antara Ibn Shaddād said to him: “You have no regrets, don’t be sorry. You can die peacefully.”

The men of the Qawīq quarter walked in Khaḍar’s funeral preceded by Antara Ibn Shaddad who led them with a bowed head. Khaḍar was proud to see ‘Antara take part in his burial ceremony. He was sorry though, to realise that his neighbours

\textsuperscript{379} Ibid., p. 22.
could not see Antara scattering earth onto his dead friend with his sword.\textsuperscript{380}

Comparing the story to Abū Ḥasan’s episode quoted in Chapter Three help clarify the transformations of gender roles. In this episode, the narrator idealises the protagonist and his working-class model of manliness for the purpose of highlighting the castrating power of the increasingly invasive authoritarian state in the 1970s. The denunciation of inequality and class segregation retains a significant presence in the latest stories set in \textit{al-Qawīq} quarter and the restaging of the old Damascus quarters serves as a microcosm characterised by patronage and dependency. However, Khaḍar’s estrangement is also a consequence of his own delusion, and his resilient and delusional commitment to his knife, which ultimately serves as an instrument not of his own, but of the Bey’s power. The historical figure of ‘Antara and the imaginary conversations the protagonist entertains with him reinforce the contradictory nature of the protagonist’s obstinacy and self-denial even after his death. The collective dimension of gender roles emerges particularly in the authority of the state, patronage and wealth that rise above masculinity, deconstructing the protagonist’s ideal of honour and respect embodied by his knife. The attempt made by Najīb al-Baqār to intercede for Khaḍar confirms masculinity and male solidarity as a façade behind which power relations and patronage hide, revealing them as the decisive factors which determine the man’s position in society. The different connotations that the context and class identity attribute to masculinity successfully expose the performative nature of gender roles, acted out in accordance with socially constructed norms and patterns that make them pertinent or not, a product of class-bound gender ideologies and overall repressive political atmosphere.\textsuperscript{381}

\textsuperscript{380} Ibid., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{381} Aghacy, \textit{Masculine Identity}, p. 4.
6.5 “al-Muṭarbash”: The restaging of historical events as a satire of delusional masculinity

Although the roles assigned to male and female protagonists might come across as extremely polarised, other examples show how, far from reinforcing patriarchy, the representations of male characters involve a satirical take on their virility that contributes to deconstruct men’s apparent integrity and superiority over women. Again drawing on al-Ḥiṣrim, “al-Muṭarbash” (from ṭarbūsh, Arabic for fez, muṭarbash someone who wears a fez), also revolves around a qabaḍay, Manṣūr al-Ḥāf, another character embodying a mythical model of masculinity. “Manṣūr al-Ḥāf was a man from Damascus, feared and revered by the fiercest men. A man with the composure of a calm sea who would gladly go to jail as though he was going to a summer resort, and when he was discharged he would say: ‘only a stupid man would be happy to move from a small jail to a big one’.

His loyalty to his wife Nazīha also highlights his qabaḍayesque gallantry, but comes to an end when she asks him to take off his fez, which in turn causes his divorce and subsequent expulsion of his wife from the house. The conflict between the protagonist and his wife takes an unexpected turn when the fez dispute acquires an international dimension, the moment the narrator reinvents an important moment in Syria’s history. As the story unfolds the fez’s symbolism is expanded to connote the protagonist’s masculinity, as well as nationalism and resilience, and resistance against foreign occupation.

One day his wife said to him impatiently in an angry voice: “Either you divorce your fez, or you divorce me!”. Manṣūr al-Ḥāf was furious, but he didn’t produce his dagger. He said to her: “Our house’s door is wide enough for a camel to walk

382 Ibid., p. 161.
through it. Go, run to your family. You’re divorced… You’re divorced… You’re divorced”

Nazīha left the house in shock, bareheaded, crying in a desperate voice: “Help!”

A nosy, curious wind carried her lamentation to the ears of the French general Henri Gouraud, who set off to save her, and led his troops victorious into Damascus, stained with the blood of the city’s sons killed in Maysalūn. Damascus received him with the desolation of a falcon trapped in a cage, deprived of its sky. However, a clique of dignitaries and their servants rushed to carry general Gouraud’s car on their backs to express their warm reception to him.

The episode is loosely based on true events. In 1920, following the San Remo Resolution with Britain and a League of Nation mandate, France claimed control of the territories of today’s Syria and Lebanon. General Henri Gouraud mentioned in the story was a real general who led the French troops against the Syrian nationalist resistance to occupation in the battle of Maysalūn in July 1920, and was subsequently appointed France’s high commissioner for Syria. The importance of these events and of the twenty-six-year long French mandate for Syria’s contemporary history cannot be overstated. Particularly in both Syrian and Pan-Arab nationalism, French rule entailed a process of carving up the countries of Greater Syria, known in Arabic as Bilād al-Shām, a vast territory including today’s Syria, Lebanon and parts of Turkey and Palestine. Although Bilād al-Shām had never been a unified state, it existed under Ottoman rule for five centuries, and in Syria’s collective memory it is considered a culturally

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384 Ibid., p. 67.
and linguistically homogenous entity. The French proceeded to divide this whole into small sectarian-based, semi-independent entities and by the time Syria gained its independence in 1946 the territories of Ottoman Bilād al-Shām had shrunk dramatically.\(^{386}\)

Thus, in this story the connection between the wife’s cry for help and the subsequent French expedition then reinvents the significance of the Syrian defeat in Maysalūn, using the male/female dynamics between Manṣūr and his wife to symbolise colonisation at the hands of the imperial Western powers. After taking power in Damascus, General Henri Gouraud proceeds to ban the fez in the entire country, but Manṣūr refuses to remove it and is arrested by the French authorities. Summoned by authorities as the only transgressor of the fez ban, the hero’s defiant resilience arouses the French general’s irritation, who sentences him to decapitation.

- “Do you know what you’re dying for?” asked him Gouraud.

Manṣūr al-Ḥāf’s face went pale, but his voice remained calm and confident and he said:
- “Everything will perish except His face…”\(^{387}\)
- “Whose face?” said Gouraud “Who are you referring to?”
- “Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of the people, the King of the people, the God of the people, against the harm of the slinking whisperer\(^{388}\), do not lose heart or despair, if you are true believers you have the upper hand,\(^{389}\) and we destroyed what Pharaoh and his were making and what they were building.”\(^{390}\)

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\(^{386}\) Seale, Asad of Syria, pp. 14-16.
\(^{387}\) The Qur’an, al-qaṣaṣ, 28:88.
\(^{388}\) Ibid., al-nās, 114:1-4.
\(^{389}\) Ibid., Āl ‘Imrān, 3:139.
\(^{390}\) Ibid., al-a’rāf, 7:137.
- “Are you blind?” Gouraud said to him “we have the upper hand, we have destroyed our enemies”
- “Our Lord, grant us your mercy and find us a way out of our ordeal… the imminent hour draws near and only God can disclose it”.

In that moment, bent down on his knees as he was, Manṣūr al-Ḥāf looked to Gouraud like a confused, obnoxious, presumptuous, repulsive, stupid being who doesn’t realise what is happening to him and engages in a duel happy to face a tragic ending, persuaded that it is not a defeat, reciting someone else’s words like a record. Gouraud tried to contain his fury shouting to his soldiers: “Execute him now!”

The sword fell on Manṣūr al-Ḥāf’s neck, chopping off his head which rolled over like a ball kicked about by a kid. The fez though remained stuck to the head and Gouraud instructed his men to pull it off, but no matter how hard they tried they wouldn’t succeed. That fez was like an immovable part of the head. Gouraud ordered to burn that head and its fez. The soldiers proceeded to prepare a fire so big it could burn an entire cow. When the fire went out, that head which had once been full of caprice, and stood high proudly between the shoulders, had turned into ashes. But the fez remained red and intact as though nothing had touched it.

Upon finding out what had happened Gouraud was baffled, irritated and disoriented. He ordered that the fez be sent to France’s scientific laboratories to be analysed and solve the conundrum of its occult strength. However, the fez disappeared

391 Ibid., al-kahef, 18:10.
in mysterious circumstances and didn’t get to visit France. It was seen one day on the head of a brown-coloured man firing shots from his revolver towards a warplane flying over Damascus, bombing one of its quarters. And it was seen again one day on the head of a man who made coffins and stashed them for a time when their price would double and they would be sold in the black market. And it was seen again a third time. It had become a happy red ball kicked about by children laughing.393

The ironic twist to the heroism and resilience of the protagonist is provided by the ambiguous symbolic value of the fez, a type of headgear originally from Morocco but popularised by Sultan Mahmud II in the Ottoman Empire.394 Simultaneously a symbol of past Ottoman imposition, a fetish that embodies the protagonist’s resistance to the new occupiers and a token of his masculinity, the fez’s ambiguity serves to bring together core elements of Syria’s collective memory. Syria had been part of the Ottoman empire for over four centuries between 1516 and 1919 when the Syrian Arab Kingdom was established, dissolved shortly afterwards following the battle of Maysalūn. Associating religious faith – through the quotation of Qur’anic verses - with this form of irrational defiance in the name of a tyrannical power like the Ottoman sultanate also stresses the delusional nature of the protagonist’s resilience.

Comparing this story to Abū Ḥasan, analysed in Chapter Three, the virility of the protagonist is again exemplified by his courage as well as by his capacity to love a woman, in contrast with the emasculating authority impersonated by the tyrannical foreign colonisers. Similar to

the figure of ‘Antara bin Shaddād this protagonist equally embodies a
traditional model of masculinity in decline, symbolised by society’s
lack of respect for the fez. At the same time, the contradictory nature of
the fez and its resonance in historical terms proves a powerful literary
device to satirise a model of delusional masculinity. This is not the first
time Tāmir satirises a peculiarly male stubborn and self-erasing
attitude, this story being reminiscent of “al-Lihā” (The beards),
published originally in April 1967. Here the male inhabitants of an
unspecified city, confronted by the prospect of annihilation at the hands
of the Mongol Taymūrlank, choose death before accepting to have their
beards shaven. A dark irony surrounds the narrator’s view of the
protagonist’s blind and illogical acceptance of sacrifice, excluding
simplistic and unequivocal interpretations. In addition, the multi-
layered and ambivalent style that pokes fun at elements of history and
tradition while encouraging multiple viewpoints on the same story
introduces elements of postmodern writing. As Ulrike Stehli-Werbeck
observes, the parodistic attitude towards elements of tradition reinvents
the Arab turāth in order to satirise a delusional worldview. As these
episodes show, satire also extends to gender roles and a rigid notion of
masculinity, successfully exposing their political significance.

Furthermore, it is important to point out the political significance of the
qabaḍay in contemporary Syrian culture. The changing connotations
the term possesses in Syrian drama series, an extremely popular and
prolific genre, with perhaps much greater influence and impact than
literature, testify to the relevance that these manly figures retain.

396 Hutcheon argues that irony is “an interpretative move”. The reader must return to
the passage multiple times to “infer meaning in addition to and different from what is
stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and unsaid.”. See Linda
Hutcheon, Irony’s edge: The theory and politics of irony (London: Routledge, 2005),
p. 11.
Analysing the transformations in the construction of the *qabaday* in drama series from the 1960 to the present day, Joubin highlights the connection between the downfall of the manly and protective figure and the emergence of more equal gender relations. More relevantly for the purpose of this analysis, such multi-layered, evocative episodes might come across at a first glance as sexist and patriarchal for the significantly more intense presence and agency male characters still enjoy in Tāmir’s latest stories. However, while intellectually sophisticated and politically charged subjectivities are interpreted exclusively by male protagonists, these are also most frequently the victims of the narrator’s sarcastic remarks. While it is still the case that men retain a criticality that women achieve only through their bodily dimension, this element becomes a tool to satirise the male’s supposed superiority, exposing the self-mutilating, delusional and deceptive nature of a dominant and generally accepted notion of what is male/female. Although male protagonists such as Manṣūr embody a political dimension that female protagonists do not attain, their soundness is hardly idealised and the interpretative effort that the style involves engages the reader to deconstruct the relationship between men and women.

6.6 Male homosexuality as decay and humiliation

An examination of masculinity cannot overlook the role homosexuality plays in producing it. Applying this approach to Arabic literature and society, Emma Sinclair-Webb suggests in the introduction to *Imagined Masculinities* that ideal models of masculinity are frequently constructed in opposition to deviant models and in relation to presumed characteristics of femininity. Drawing on Connell’s theory of subordination, the position homosexual men occupy in the gender

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399 Joubin, “The politics of the Qabaday (tough man)”, p. 65.
hierarchy of dominant and complicit masculinities remains right at the bottom. In patriarchal ideology normative homosexual traits, such as the pleasure derived from passive anal sex, join normative feminine traits to define everything that masculinity is not. To this day, homosexuality and homosexual practices remain technically illegal in the Syrian penal code, and addressing the subject openly remains as frowned upon as anywhere else, if not more.

Ṭarābīshī shows that the sexualised and erotic aspect of Arabic literary production before the 1980s pointed to the essentially male nature of war, the liberation movement, political activism, imprisonment, and confrontation with imperialism. In this vein, Arab nationalism and Arabic literature, deeply influenced by a patriarchal worldview, understood the concepts of manhood and womanhood not only as signifiers for the relationship between men and women, but expanded their significance to apply it to the relationship between human beings and the outside world. Hence, power relations could only be conceived in terms of strict dichotomies of domination/submission, strength/weakness and crucially male/female. As observed in Chapter Three, homosexual desire, love and intercourse are practically absent from Tāmir’s early stories, with the exception of timid allusion to homosexual practices as the direct consequence of (hetero)sexual deprivation and disenfranchisement. In Tāmir’s latest works the subject retains negative connotations that serve to reinforce the pattern of male helplessness.

*Taksīr Rukab* serves as a manifesto for the changing nature of gender roles, representing the most significant transformation in Tāmir’s career because of its transgressive taboo-breaking themes and imagery.

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402 Article 520 of Syria’s penal code states: “Any unnatural sexual intercourse shall be punished with a term of imprisonment of up to three years”.
403 Ṭarābīshī, *Sharq wa gharb*, pp. 5-17.
404 Ibid. p. 7.
Throughout this collection, Tāmir explores sexuality extensively, shaping an alternative view, transgressing sexual taboos and exposing the hypocrisy of male supremacy, and pushing the unmentionable to the limits of obscenity. The very first episode in the collection serves as an introduction to this central theme that presents elements of transgression of social norms as well as a style that reinforces gender hierarchies and a traditional view of sexuality and gender roles. The negative and destructive connotations that the narrator assigns to homosexual desire, remain a marginal theme even in this collection, but the few episodes that address it signal the narrator’s view on same-sex relationships as unmistakably reprehensible. While the episodes quoted above address the ways in which women shape a new form of weakened masculinity, homosexual intercourse also emerges in Tāmir’s works in this period as an element of decay, and in contrast with an idealised, long-lost heterosexual masculinity.

The rains were scant. People appealed for help to a saintly man whose prayers were often heard, and a strange, heavy rain fell such as had not been seen before. One drop falling on a man, made that which men have, but not women, grow bigger. And one drop falling on a woman made her breasts and buttocks swell. Women were happy, for the real thing was not like the artificial, and cosmetic surgery was very expensive. Men celebrated this correction, which made a trunk out of a branch, but some were not content with what they got for free. They asked for a rain that taught proper manners to any man stupid enough to think that size exempted him from having to rise for a woman. Women prayed for a sudden rain that would make them pregnant and able to give birth without men. Men became idle, and found only dismissal, contempt, and derision wherever
they went. Women then fell upon women, and men upon men.405

The ending’s allusion to male and female homosexual desire as the ultimate manifestation of decay confirms a widespread trend in modern Arabic literature, discussed by Frédéric Lagrange in his essay “Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature”. Lagrange shows how the few episodes featuring same-sex intercourse in Modern Arabic literature can be grouped into three main categories: homosexual desire as an element of a bygone past and an aspect of traditional society, frowned upon in modern times; in other examples homosexuality represents as a disease leading to death and suicide; finally, as Ṭarābīshī also suggests, same-sex relationships represent a trope articulating in sexual terms the humiliation at the hands of a foreign occupant with the coloniser performing the role of the active partner. There is no “happy” homosexuality and this variety of representations ultimately conceptualises homosexuality as a lack of masculinity and deviancy.406 The representations of male same-sex intercourse in Taksīr Rukab contribute to add a further category to this set of interpretations, i.e. homosexuality as an internalised form of submissiveness to both women and authoritarianism.

In Story 24 from Taksīr Rukab, set in the imaginary village of Dhaghbit (Ẓaghbīt), same-sex intercourse is introduced through a nameless male thief who rapes a series of men inside their houses. The narrator first sketches the village as dominated by men, as an environment where “a woman could not even mutter “good morning” to her husband unless he gave her permission”. When a mysterious figure referred to as “a strange man who wanted to rob and rape”407 appears, the village’s reaction is one of widespread silence and hypocrisy. Soon however, a

405 Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 1.
407 Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 51.
major development entails and “the women of Dhaghbit started to ignore their husband’s orders and did exactly as they pleased”.408 It is only when an old man and retired soldier catches the “strange man” entering his house that the truth is revealed by the thief/rapist: The men of Dhaghbit welcomed the rapist into their houses and asked him to rape them repeatedly in front of their wives. Attacking the contradictions underpinning sexist and patriarchal society, the narrator contrasts the male villagers’ desire to be raped with their performance in public and their despotic relationships with their wives. Confronted with the shameful prospect of exposing his fellow villagers’ honour, the old man decides to summon the men that the thief claims to have raped and seeks their advice, but is slaughtered by the same men together with their rapist. Order is restored and “the women of Dhaghbit went back to listening to their husbands’ orders with a shudder, rushed to obey them, and wished that Dhaghbit would vanish under the snows.”409

This story echoes the way Syrian and Arab cinema have addressed sexuality and masculinity using the protagonists’ incapacity to fulﬁl their role as men to represent the frustration of defeat and helplessness. In the climax scene of Michel Khleifi’s “Wedding in Galilee” (1987) the young groom is incapable of fulﬁlling his family’s expectations on his wedding night; the sheet upon which he sleeps with his newly married wife Sāmiya needs to be stained with her blood, in order to give evidence of his virility to the members of the community. However, he is incapable of consummating the marriage and Sāmiya has to penetrate herself in order to take her own virginity and spell the drops of blood required to protect the family’s honour.410 Relevant examples of this recurrent theme in contemporary Syrian cultural production include the

408 Ibid., p. 50.
409 Ibid., p. 51.
410 “If virginity is the proof of a women’s honesty, what is the proof of men’s?” - Wedding in Galilee.
movies written and directed by Nabīl al-Māliḥ and ‘Abd al-Laṭīf ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd. Al-Māliḥ’s films are considered a visual example of how art voices to the frustration of the young generations, even though directors, writers and artist in general operate in a context where an authoritarian regime has a monopoly over cultural production. In al-Māliḥ’s al-Kumbārs (The Extra, 1993), all scenes take place in a tiny oppressive space where the constant intimidation of social criticism and intrusive presence of the state’s representatives asphyxiates the love relationship between the protagonists. The characters imprison themselves in order not be seen by others who would condemn their “immoral” relationship, yet they are unable to touch each other and make love because of the oppressive atmosphere that reigns around them. Visions of family members spying on them, unexpected visits from suspicious-looking men, the sound of people coming and going outside the room all contribute to scare them to the extent that they are forced to leave and cannot enjoy the only moment of intimacy in months.

While al-Māliḥ’s “The Extras” represents the oppressive role of the state institutions in the life of citizens and their sexuality while depicting the male and female protagonist in a relationship of relative equality, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd’s Layālī Ibn Āwa (Nights of the Jackals) associates the man’s impotence with defeat and weakness. Here, the male protagonist’s failure is exacerbated by the empowerment of the female. Realised under the supervision of the state-controlled National Cinema Organisation of Syria in 1988, it presents clear parallels to Tāmir’s motifs and images. Set in rural Syria during the years of the United Arab Republic and later of the 1967 defeat to Israel, the protagonists are members of a working-class family of peasants who struggle to make ends meet, while facing the challenges of urbanisation

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412 Ibid., p. 62.
and modernisation. The paterfamilias Abū Kamāl, a seemingly self-assured and confident father, suffers from sleep deprivation, scared as he is by howling jackals that can only be chased away by his wife’s whistles - the same wife that he beats and humiliates in day-time yelling out his frustration at the emasculating forces of poverty and disenfranchisement. Just as the bossy father of ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd’s Layāli Ibn Āwa mistreats his wife, keeping up the appearances of a paterfamilias who commands respect and reverence from his family, although he is incapable of providing for them, the men of Dhaghbit reveal their weakness and hypocrisy when confronted with the prospect of being raped. In an environment where men belittle women, the submissiveness to authoritarianism that the former have internalised serves to overturn patriarchal logic. In Tāmir’s story the critique of the male-dominated society is taken to an extreme through the homosexual trope: not only are men incapable of protecting their households, but they desire to be humiliated and subjugated.

In Story 42 from Taksīr Rukab, the protagonist Taha (Ṭāhā) is a man who “enjoyed being submissive”.\textsuperscript{413} His wife Iffat (‘Iffat) easily manipulates him, and vents her frustration at his sexual incapacity by kicking him out of the house to look for some entertainment or play with the kids in the street. After wandering through the city, the protagonist stumbles upon a fight swiftly dissolved by the police, but is stopped by a stranger, whom the narrator describes as “a tall man with broad shoulders, protruding eyeballs, and a thick moustache”, an intimidating figure who forces Taha into the basement of an unfinished building and rapes him at gunpoint. Familiarity with Syrian regime thugs, commonly referred to in the Syrian vernacular as shabbīḥa, may induce to interpret this “tall man” as their embodiment, but the story

\textsuperscript{413} Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 91.
offers no further indication to substantiate this speculation. The humiliation Taha experiences inside the household at the hands of his unsatisfied wife is paralleled by the degradation that he experiences at the hands of a thug outside in the form of sexual abuse. The relevance of the story resides not only in the portrayal of same-sex intercourse as degradation and humiliation, but more relevantly in the victim’s ambiguous reaction to the abuse.

Taha felt hungry and thought it was strange. He took from his pocket a piece of chocolate which the stranger had given to him, and was about to toss it to the ground in disgust. But the hand that held the chocolate lifted it to his mouth and pushed it inside, and his teeth chewed it until it was mixed with saliva. [...] He was surprised by his feeling of pride when the stranger said that he was handsome and delectable. He wished his wife could hear that.

His diminished masculinity has transformed the protagonist to the extent that he has internalized obedience and submissiveness, symbolized by his inability to control his body movements, his hands and his arms. Even though he still grasps the humiliation of what his body has become used to do, the protagonist cannot help repeating the same humiliating gestures; the seemingly conflicting thoughts that the traumatic experience of rape elicits leave him trapped and helpless. Similarly to the narrative structure of “al-Numūrī fī al-yawm al-‘āshīr”, of the proud tiger gradually growing accustomed to the taste of grass provided by its trainer, little by little the individual becomes accustomed to swallowing the same chocolate that his rapist administers to him. The narrator overturns gender roles to highlight the

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415 Tamer, Breaking Knees, p. 94.
despicable decay of masculinity, with women representing not a “fair sex” but playing a dominant role since their men are incapable of living up their expectations. This reversal of gender roles turns men into objects unable to uphold their reputation and their honour, desiring to be raped, incapable of making decisions and of deciding of their own destiny they have become objects at the mercy of their women. Their incapacity to confront their women inside their home is reproduced outside by the inability to defend themselves and their dignity against the oppressing force of the emasculating state. Thus, the increasingly powerful and sexually confident role women play joins the capricious forces of the state in undermining the male.

This said, the scarce and desultory nature of stories about homosexual intercourse is representative of a reticence to address the topic in contemporary Arabic literature that Lagrange points out and defines as “the invisible desire”. Whilst censorship remains certainly a possible explanation, it is also safe to argue that the disparity in the ways and the frequency with which Tāmir brings to the stage heterosexual and homosexual desire is revealing of a moralism that advocates a form of normalised sexual equality between the two sexes. Same-sex intercourse, although it is mentioned only in Taksīr Rukab, a collection relevant for its unprecedented taboo-breaking episodes, appears exclusively as a means to express the decline of a strong masculinity, hence carrying negative connotations. This confirms the inclination to employ a shaken and weakened type of male protagonist to lament the decadence and helplessness of a traditional strong type of manhood, instead of exploring masculinity in its multiple shades. Hence, homosexual desire serves to portray a subdued and compliant male as the victim of his own lack of masculinity and self-respect, denouncing submissiveness to authoritarian practices rather than denouncing oppression and tyranny. The significant shift happens in the realm of

sexual practices changing the focus from the emasculating forces of the authoritarian state, to the self-emasculating nature of the subdued and delusional male.

6.7 Conclusions

This chapter has analysed the representations of male protagonists in Tāmir’s recent works in the context of a split between literature and nationalist ideology, and in relation to the persistence of neopatriarchal authoritarianism. Highlighting the pervasive role of female characters reveals a lasting tendency to instrumentalise the female body and her sexual agency to symbolise the demise of the male at the hands of the authoritarian state. Particularly in stories about arbitrary arrest and the volatile nature of power, politics are reconfirmed as essentially male. This inclination has been analysed extensively by Ṭarābīshī, who has significantly drawn attention to subtexts that emphasise the phallic nature of political activism in works authored by both male and female writers across the Arab world. However, whilst Ṭarābīshī explains this phenomenon in relation to the patriarchal ideology of a backwards society, the persistence of a male-centred view on society in Tāmir’s latest works reflects a sense of pessimism at the persistence of authoritarianism and its normalisation.

Gender roles retain a decisive function in the stories under study in this chapter, with most episodes putting forward a model of masculinity that is vulnerable, subordinate and weak. Looking at gender configurations as mutually informed, instead of separate universes with disparate political significance, the pages above have elucidated how the collapse of the male protagonist’s supremacy emerges as the consequence of the greater degree of female agency, as well as the man’s own self-image. However, whilst on one hand the social and political dimension of the

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417 Ṭarābīshī, *Sharq wa gharb*, p. 5.
female comes to the front only through her sexuality, the disintegration of the male contains a larger variety of articulations. The analysis of a variety of symbols employed to signify masculinity and the feminisation of the male characters, in contrast with the exclusively sexual dimension of the female protagonists, has also served to show the greater relevance that male characters still retain. However, this hardly amounts to male supremacism and the stylistic devices of irony and historical restaging serve to expose a dominant and virile type of masculinity as delusional. Tāmir transforms sex and gender relations into a suggestive means to denounce oppression, stagnation and political hypocrisy, depicting male protagonists characterised by sexual incapacity as well as by a form of homosexual desire that comes across as a form of perversion to expose the decay of the individual’s masculinity.

This analysis has also shown how, although a new female subjectivity has emerged in the works of this period, exemplified by the stories addressed in the previous chapter, the exclusively bodily and sexual role that these new female protagonists perform leaves male protagonists with the advantage of embodying multi-dimensional subjectivities, as opposed to the one-dimensional sexual female. Extracts from al-Ḥiṣrim and Taksīr Rukab have shown how, in addition to the bodily and the libidinous elements of the male’s personality, the male’s disintegration and loss of subjectivity is also articulated through the intellectual and the political, often through a direct confrontation with the authoritarian state and its oppressive practices. In other words, although the stories analysed elsewhere demonstrate a significant degree of maturation in the greater variety of roles assigned to women, this chapter has shown how the language inevitably reveals a conceptualisation of men and women in society performing two strict, separate and polarised subjectivities. The greater variety of roles that male protagonists perform, in Syrian and Arabic literature traditionally,
as well as in Tāmir’s works more specifically, suggests a broader range of interpretations and greater political significance. Similar to the explicit sexual passages constructed around female protagonists, the representations of male sexuality also witness a transformation towards the provocative and the transgressive. To clarify their relevance, it is necessary to situate these aesthetic developments in the context of nationalism and patriarchy, cornerstones of Syrian authoritarianism containing a normative gendered and sexual dimension. This allows us into an alley of interpretation that deciphers this new and somehow crippled male that has emerged in the context of fragmentation and defeat, as an attack against the symbology of power in Syria, as well as a disappointed look on the deterioration of the male.
Conclusions

This thesis has analysed the transformations in the representations of male and female characters in Zakariyyā Tāmir’s short stories. Analysing the works of this writer has also entailed translating numerous passages from his short stories from Arabic into English for the first time. Few of his short stories and none of his articles had been translated into English, and throughout this thesis a large number of passages from Tāmir’s articles, Facebook posts and short stories are quoted making them available to the English-speaking reader for the first time.

While this research is motivated by the desire to determine the political potential of Tāmir’s representations of male and female protagonist, and whether these channel subversion of or compliance to a patriarchal worldview, it rejects a clear-cut definition of Tāmir’s short-stories as unquestionably sexist, or feminist, or patriarchal. Such an approach would ultimately disregard the variety of transformations that his works have undergone in relation to the changes in the relationship between cultural production, ideology and authoritarianism. This thesis has instead clarified the inextricable and complicated relationship between the works of this writer and the historical conditions in which they appeared, as well as the centrality that familial relations, sexuality, marriage, and gender roles have retained in his short stories.

Looking at his very early stories in comparison with the literary trends popular in Syria and elsewhere, and examining the formal peculiarities of his works has reaffirmed the avant-garde aesthetics his stories contributed to introduce in the Arabic short story at the time of his beginnings as a writer. Situating Tāmir’s trajectory in the context of different conceptualisations of literary commitment popular in Syria and the Arab East in the decades between the 1950s and late 1970s, has
shown the peculiarly autonomous idea of commitment to which the author subscribed as being intimately linked with a complex engagement with aesthetics.

Having established the committed nature of his work, as well as the existentialist and progressive tone of his early stories, a close analysis of the language has also clarified the male-centred character of a style which, despite its detachment from the prevalent trend of socialist realism, represented the struggles for modernity, national emancipation and against class inequality and authoritarianism as performed almost exclusively by male protagonists. This is exemplified in his very early stories by the greater frequency of male protagonists, as well as by the objectification of female characters who usually remain marginal and serve as accessories of the male individual’s aspirations. The male’s quest for material stability, freedom and love underpins a vast number of stories in which female characters appear as the object of the protagonist’s lust and desires for love, sexual intercourse and stability. Aesthetically this is reflected by a disparity in the registers employed to represent male and female characters, and by the dissimilar metaphors the narrator resorts to in order to convey the descriptions of the protagonists according to their gender. While the internal dimension of the male protagonist is what concerns the narrator the most, not his physical appearance, the lengthy and evocative illustrations of the female body and beauty reinforce a polarisation of male and female subjectivity. The introduction by Tāmir of the stream of consciousness in his stories – a most significant innovation charged with great political implications at the time his early stories appeared – takes the reader into the male protagonists’ minds, voicing their inner feelings, travelling back and forth in time to explore past experiences and their affects on their present situation. The opposite, i.e. female character clearly articulating their desire for love and sex, emerges considerably less frequently only in a handful of examples, which nevertheless possess
great significance in the historical development of the themes of sexuality and gender roles. These relevant albeit infrequent examples of aesthetically evocative and highly poetic stories that Tāmir published in the early 1960s have shown an acute awareness of sexual drives in women as deeply embedded in the author’s existentialist and antipatriarchal stance. In addition, the capacity of this author to articulate representations of female desire contradicts the idea of this theme as a prerogative of female writers.

Yet, the existentialist exploration of the male individual’s inner universe and the evocative representations of female protagonists, putting forward a genuinely female point of view on female sexual desire in a patriarchal context, gave place to a greater focus on the increasingly pervasive presence of the authoritarian state in the life of citizens in the period 1970-1978. The analysis of this theme has revealed the stories’ capacity to capture the gendered dimension of authoritarian practices of arbitrary arrest and torture, as well as the contradictions in the disparity between the representations of male characters as emasculated victims of tyranny on one hand and of female characters as the accessory repository of the man’s humiliation. Particularly in episodes in which the practices of arbitrary arrest, torture and humiliation are addressed more explicitly, only the male protagonists appear charged with agency vis-à-vis power. In other words, while the significance of transgressive portrayals of female characters and the daring acknowledgement of sex as enjoyable is undeniable, stories that signal an increased concern with the detrimental impact of authoritarian practices leave female characters at the margins. The political arena and the confrontation between citizens and despotism remained a men’s issue.

Drawing on Connell’s conceptualisation of dominant and complicit masculinity has helped ascertain how, while overall Tāmir’s stories
never put forward an openly male-supremacist view, the greater degree of agency male characters enjoy and the fundamentally male conceptualisation of modernism and the quest for freedom that emerges from his stories contribute to reinforce a patriarchal system. This tendency allows an interpretation of gender roles in Tāmir’s early works that is fundamentally *complicit* to a patriarchal worldview, at the same time denouncing the belittling attitude of patriarchal tradition towards women in various stories, exposing the misogyny of both men and women in others, expressing occasionally – albeit relevantly, open acknowledgment of the female’s necessity for sexual intercourse, but essentially revealing all these aspects as secondary in the broader quest for emancipation. Ultimately the analysis of gender roles and patriarchy in Tāmir’s oeuvre has clarified the political significance of a style that was organic to the project of national liberation, state building and modernisation to which however the issue of gender equality had represented a subordinate aspect.

The intimate relationship that cultural production in the Arab world entertained with the grand narratives of national liberation and modernism until the 1970s, and that was subsequently put into question by the experience of war defeat and political fragmentation, has helped to situate the developments in Tāmir’s stories from the 1970s onwards. The signs of a distancing from the ḥadāthī worldview materialise in Tāmir’s early period, but come to the fore only in a group of four collections the author published between 1994 and 2002 from his self-imposed expatriation to London and Oxford. Aesthetically this latest period presents the crystallisation of compilations of short stories that revolve around a set of subjects, as opposed to the early collections which brought together stories published at different times in local magazines and were characterised by greater thematic variety. This increased thematic homogeneity stands in sharp contrast with the stylistic fragmentation of the text, especially in the first two collections
from this period, *Nidāʾ Nūḥ* and *Sa-nadḥak*, which feature the extensive presence of multiple-part, segmented short stories. Thematically this fragmentation is reflected first by a sense of pessimism permeating the language, signalling the decline of the modernist and nationalist causes of emancipation to which Tāmir’s early works – albeit in an original way – were organic. The narration exhibits a more nuanced and multifarious approach to the bodily and sexual dimension of the stories that can be labelled as postmodern, which nevertheless does not amount to indifference and a clear-cut separation from social and political developments in Syria and the Arab East. In this process of departure and distancing from énagé and ideological aspects, the stories have retained a significant political charge, particularly in the representations of sexuality and desire.

The analysis has highlighted the increased presence of assertive female characters confidently expressing their sexuality not in response to patriarchal tradition, but actively shaping the masculinity of male protagonists. A more equal approach to gender roles, especially in the confrontation between authoritarianism and ordinary citizens, a richer and more diverse approach to masculinity and the mutually informed understanding of gender roles has emerged, crystallised more manifestly in the stories of *al-Ḥiṣrim* and *Taksīr Rukab*. Both collections present formal characteristics that make them stand out amongst the works of the latest period for the greater degree of textual unity the stories display. In *al-Ḥiṣrim*, multiple points of view on masculinity and the social and political dimension of gender roles emerge, while in *Taksīr Rukab* a greater presence of transgressive sexual images typifies most stories. The analysis has also highlighted how the prominent presence of this trope, however, has also resulted in an exaggerated sexualisation of female characters, particularly in these two latest collections. The marginal and accessory role women played in the early stories has been elevated to portray female protagonists who
possess greater agency in their relationship with men, however the form of power they have attained resides mostly in their increased bodily dimension. The transformation of female characters from objects of male lust, or simply victims of a patriarchal order, into sassy lustful subjects often serves the purpose of highlighting the male’s incapacity. By contrast, females’ social and political dimension is confined more often than not to the sexual weapon they can wield against their male counterparts. In addition, amongst the significant taboo-breaking images *Taksīr Rukab* contains, a few significant stories feature instances of same-sex intercourse which, in line with a widespread trend in contemporary Arabic literature, is never represented as a genuine form of love and affection. Akin to the representations of female protagonists’ confidently performing their sexuality, homosexuality also functions as a device to expose the male’s diminished self-worth and to denounce authoritarian practices as the result of an internalised form of submission to abuse amongst men.

This research has shown the applicability of an approach to contemporary Arabic literature that brings together a variety of subjects to substantiate a main argument about changing representations of gender roles. Coming to these conclusions would have proven complicated without the assistance of studies devoted to the history of Syria and the broader Arab World, social studies on sexuality and authoritarianism, the capacity to access resources in a variety of languages. Making a virtue out of necessity, this approach was dictated primarily by the relative scarcity of resources focussing specifically on the same interstice between aesthetics, gender, ideology and authoritarianism. This methodology has also allowed me to discover the potential for future research that a widely unexplored field like Syrian contemporary literature presents. In particular, the variety of responses that the connivance between authoritarianism, sectarianism and political Islam has generated in novelists and short-story writers in
Syria since the early 2000s represents an intriguing alley of investigation which remains largely uncharted. This particular interstice figures rarely in Tāmir’s stories in which the sectarian affiliation of the protagonists, especially minorities, is hardly mentioned or even hinted at. In contrast, a new generation of novelists has successfully brought sectarian and Islamic revivalism into their narrative exposing its deadly effects in a context dominated by an authoritarian regime. The novels and short stories of Samar Yazbik, Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥassan, Khālid Khalīfā, Fawāz Ḥaddād and Nihād Sirrīs have brought to the stage new themes as well as an original, more openly subversive fashion of addressing authoritarianism and its effects on the individual, sexuality and the body. Motivating this long-term research project would be the desire to clarify the changing nature of cultural production in Syria and the new political connotations that Syrian literature has assumed in the post-ideological period, in parallel with the rise of political Islam.

Amongst the difficulties this approach has faced is the cultural gap that exists between my personal background and the working-class Syrian milieu in which Tāmir’s works have been imagined, negotiated and published. This has represented a major limitation. While over ten years of study of this language have allowed me to partially fill this gap, and the relatively brief but intense study experience in Damascus in 2010 has equipped me with an extensive list of contacts who have proven of invaluable assistance to my study, the appreciation of the linguistic and cultural nuances that abound in Tāmir’s stories can never equal that of a native speaker of Arabic. In addition to that, the country’s current situation and the impracticability of visiting Syria to get access to further resources and increase my understanding of its social and cultural environment have also represented a major obstacle for the accomplishment of the project’s initial ambitions.
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