Islands, Rooms, and Queues: Three Tropes in Arabic Science Fiction

Wessam Elmeligi, Ph.D., University of Michigan-Dearborn

Abstract: This study traces the development of three trajectories in Arabic science fiction illustrated by four narratives. Starting with Ibn Tufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the article analyzes the scientific focus of this 12th century philosophical narrative, written at the peak of Islamic Andalusian philosophy. The island motif exemplifies the unity of creation in a scientific pursuit of spirituality. Youssef Ezeddin Eassa, a pioneer of 20th century Arabic science fiction, wrote short stories, novels, and radio dramas expounding on the philosophical ideas of earlier Arabic literature. The article studies the Kafkaesque motif in his short story "The Waiting Room," and the grotesque alternative reality in his novel *The Facade*. The last trope is exemplified by Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, a dystopian narrative of endless queues, where life is stifled by surveillance and control. In all the narratives, there is an invisible force watching the characters. The motifs of island, room, and queue represent examples of the attempt in Arabic science fiction to grapple with the crisis of isolation and to understand and interact with higher powers, whether they are benevolent or evil. This article reads all four narratives from a narratological lens, examining how the writers construct their visions.

Keywords: science fiction, Arabic science fiction, narrative, Ibn Tufayl, *The Queue,* Ezzedin Eassa, place, power

This study examines the narrative intersections of power and place in Arabic science fiction literature in four narratives. Starting with Ibn Tufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the article analyzes the scientific focus of this 12th century philosophical narrative written at the peak of Islamic Andalusian philosophy. The island motif exemplifies the unity of creation and the almost pantheistic existence of humanity within nature, in an amalgam of scientific pursuits and spirituality. The article then moves to Youssef Ezeddin Eassa, one of the pioneers of 20th century Arabic science fiction and radio drama (*ʿAbd el-fatāḥ,* 1988). His Kafkaesque 1974 short story, *Ghurfat al- ʾintiẓār*, published in English as "The Waiting Room" in 2002, and 1981 dystopian novel, *Al-wājiha*, published in English as *The Façade* in 2014, expound on philosophical ideas of creation, life, and death through the space of closed appointment rooms and utopian cities that turn into grotesque nightmarish spaces. The last trope is exemplified by Basma Abdel Aziz's 2013 *Al-ṭābūr*, published in English as *The Queue* in 2016. An Egyptian psychiatrist, novelist, and artist, Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* is an apocalyptic narrative of one endless queue, based on the aftermath of the Arab Spring, where visions of life are stifled by surveillance and control. In all four narratives, there is an invisible force watching as the characters struggle to survive. The motifs of island, room, city, and queue represent attempts to grapple with the crisis of isolation. They also provide a way to describe an awareness of higher powers, and endeavors by the characters to fathom and even interact with them.

The authors foreground the functionality of place by linking the shape of the main place to the narrative progress, whether circular or linear, as well as by offering alternative dimensions that act as further extensions of the main place, whether as shadows of that place or as mysterious destinations. The significance of place in all the narratives is enhanced by narrative perspectives, which focus either on the individual protagonist, acting as the chosen one who might fail or succeed in his quest, or the community, which behaves collectively. The intersection of the individual and the community creates conflict that remains unresolved until the end of each narrative. The science fiction tropes of place, narrative quest, solitary protagonist, and hostile community are interconnected by their subjugation to some form of higher power, which is spiritual or political, or possibly both. Such power ranges from favorable to despotic but remain, for the most part, controversial. I will highlight the role of two narrative perspectives—that of the individual and the communal—in enhancing the intersection of the manifestations of power and place.

Manifestations of Power

The dominant powers within each of the stories have specific features that figure prominently in each narrative. All manifestations of such power appear to be omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. The dominant powers willingly distance themselves from other characters and then "inadvertently" interfere in ways that remain enigmatic to the characters, who never see or meet the force that rules over their lives. Details of how the nature of each power is perceived differ from one narrative to another. It is the sole creative force that distinguishes the Abrahamic, monotheistic deity in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the feared and revered City Owner in *The Facade*, the low-profile doctors and nurses in "The Waiting Room," and the sinister and bureaucratic government in *The Queue*. It ranges from a single invisible figure to a secret board or committee. It is a singular force reflecting the monotheistic doctrine in the spiritualized version of the search, stated as the Islamic creator in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and hinted at in the thinly disguised symbol of the City Owner in *The Façade*. It is a Kafkaesque group reflecting more material versions of power, as the medical team that calls upon the patients waiting in the appointment room in "The Waiting Room," and as Gate, which replaces political authority in *The Queue*.

The power is depicted in the light of the moral judgment of the protagonist and the rest of the characters that form the community in each narrative. It is a force of good in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the Creator worthy of worship by the intellectual savage Hayy. It is highly controversial in *The Facade*, in which the protagonist, M N, cannot decide whether the City Owner is a force of good or evil, as he hears contradictory views from three men. One of these men, who represents an archangel of sorts, calls the Owner benevolent. The second, who seems to symbolize a fallen Satanic figure, refers to the City Owner as evil. The third one, an intellectual vagabond ignored by everyone, claims that there is no owner.

In "The Waiting Room," this power is eerily neutral, rarely discussed at all by the patients. They take it for granted that they need to succumb to a medical team behind the closed door, although none of them has ever seen that team, but only surmise it must be a group of doctors since they are in a clinic. The power is increasingly and aggressively villainized in *The Queue*. It is presented as an Orwellian, organized, and dictatorial governing elite, which has an iron grip over everyday life and controls everything (including food, education, media, and even hospital reports). In all four narratives, it is possible to detect a trait of Arabic science fiction that depicts society as deteriorating, serving as a form of internal critique, as has been described by Ian Campbell (2018). This is evident in Ibn Tufayl's critique of the Muslim societies of his time, and similar critiques of modern urbanized communities in Eassa's narratives, and, most recently, Abdel Aziz's focus on the aftermath of Arab spring and the hegemony of political regimes in the region.

In a study of Islamic ideology as a dominating power, Sabry Hafez compares the long-lasting effect of the Caliphate to Jean Baudrillard's simulacra. The idea of the simulacra, argues Hafez, focuses on making "the real coincide with its simulation models" (Hafez 2015, p. 32). Similarly, the power of a lost empire still defines its followers and "informs their ideologies and nightmares" (32). The concept of the simulacrum is reflected in the looming presence of power in the four narratives in this article—powers that remain largely unfathomable and unseen, but are capable of manifesting themselves in the dreams of the believers (in the case of benevolent powers) or their nightmares (if they are the victims of maleficent powers).

Individual and Communal Perspectives

Two of the narratives, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The Façade*, focus on the protagonist, and provide narratorial insight into the consciousness of the lone character as he embarks on a journey of discovery that involves both self-knowledge and an attempt to understand the world around him. This search leads him to an ambitious endeavor to unravel the mystery of the powerful force dominating that world. The sole protagonist is openly on a quest for truth in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The*

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Façade. In Ibn Tufayl's novel, the protagonist's name is a straightforward reference to the author's intent to present the narrative as a philosophical treaty. *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*'s name means "Alive the Son of Awake," denoting a spiritual and intellectual awakening for which Ibn Tufayl is arguing. The narrative engages with the ideas of theological and natural philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Ghazaly, two of the pillars of Islamic philosophy of his age. Ḥayy is the epitome of the man-on-island motif. Ḥayy can be seen as the European concept of tabula rasa, referring to the infant washed ashore and raised on an island. (Campbell, 2018). His birth is an allegory for the scientific theories of existence as compared to Abrahamic creation narratives. Ibn Tufayl attempts to reconcile both by accepting either of them as his protagonist's origin story. He writes that Ḥayy could have been generated on the island when natural elements were in harmony:

> I bring it to your attention solely by way of corroborating the alleged possibility of a man's being engendered in this place without father or mother, since many insist with assurance and conviction that Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān was one such person who came into being on that island by spontaneous generation. (Ibn Tufayl, p. 105)

He also writes that Ḥayy could have been the secret child of the sister of an unfair king of a distant kingdom who opposed her marriage. When she delivered her baby, she put him in a box and set him to sail to his destiny in the sea, a clear reference to the Quranic version of the story of Moses. The box lands on an island, opens up, and Ḥayy is raised by a deer He grows up, and as the result of his mother-deer's death, begins to question the relationship of the soul and the physical body, a thought process that prompts him to explore the island and study the intriguing secrets of life. His scientific observations of plants and animals lead him to the realization that a supreme being must have created all of the world.

The protagonist of Eassa's *The Façade,* Meem Noon, is only given initials of the Arabic alphabet, like all the characters in the novel. Together, the two letters can make the word "man" (which means the interrogative "who") or "min" (which means "from") depending on the diacritics used that can change the pronunciation and the meaning of the word. In the published translation of the novel, the name is translated as M N. As this article refers to the translated edition, for purposes of clarity, Meem Noon will be referred to as M N. Indeed, M N arrives at the City as an adult with no memories, background, family, or even his name, for "he does not recall where he came from nor why he came […] He does not recall what method of transportation has brought him to this city" (Eassa 2014, 1). He finds out thathe is a guest at the city for one year. No one is allowed to answer his questions except the Information Office. There, he writes his questions on a piece of paper and submits it to a hole in the wall and waits for a paper slip with answers. He wants to know where he is, who he is, and where he comes from. The answer is that he comes from the unknown and that his name is the initials M N. His quest is stated bluntly on the answer paper slip: to seek truth,

> -One: The name of the City means nothing. Call it whatever you like.
>
> -Two: The mission you have come for in this City is: To search for the truth.
>
> -Three: Where have you come from: You have come from an unknown place.
>
> -Four: The grave secret, which everybody is keeping from you, is: All people of this city, with no exceptions at all, are sentenced to execution.
>
> -Five: The time you shall be staying in this city: All your life, until it is time for your execution sentence to be carried out. (Eassa 2014, p. 58)

The first fact that he learns of is the Execution, a terrifying verdict randomly and instantly hurled at anyone in the City with no trial and no crime. Everyone at some point gets a sign that they will be executed and they suddenly die. Men in dark suits show up in dark cars, and carry the body to a pit called the Sewer. The Execution is the City's equivalent to death, a fate that is so unavoidable that people try to adapt to it. The decision to execute anyone is at the discretion of the City

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Owner only. As much as the supreme power in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* is introduced through the death of his mother-deer, so the City Owner in *The Façade* is introduced to M N through the Execution. However, Ḥayy gradually sees the Necessarily Existent Being as a creator, a giver of life, not a being. M N learns that the citizens of the City are all toys made by the City Owner, and sees him more as a puppeteer. The narrative presents M N in a nightmarish setting, invoking the dream-like mood that can be reminiscent of what Sabry Hafez refers to as al-ru'ya or "visionary dream" (Hafez 2012, p. 274).

The two other narratives are community-centered in perspective. In Eassa's short story, "The Waiting Room," a number of patients are waiting in a clinic. When they start talking to each other, they discover that some of them have no idea they are in a clinic. They walked in randomly when they saw people inside the waiting room. Every now and then, someone opens the only door in the room, which they assume leads to the examination room or the doctor's office, and calls on one of the patients. Once the patient goes in, they never show up again. No one knows where they go. The patients play cards as they are called in, one after another. They refer to the doctors in plural, thus the novel is populated by groups—the patients and the medical team—without there being a single protagonist. Like *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The Façade*, their fate is completely in the hands of the medical team. Truth, as is the case in the two novels, is hidden. Yet, the characters in this short story do not try to discover the truth. They are aware of their ignorance of what is happening. But they do not seek to unravel the secret. Instead, they are occupied by their card game, which they play with money until they start quarreling. The communal reaction is distinctly opposite to that of the single protagonists. The community is sheep-like, displaying mob mentality, with vague awareness that they are being led to an unknown, and potentially deadly fate. The individual protagonists are restless, persistently seeking knowledge.

In Abdel Aziz's novel *The Queue*, a formidable structure referred to as the Gate seems to manifest itself to separate the governing elite from the rest of an un-

identified country teeming with everyday struggles). The government is a bureaucratic, authoritarian regime. Its strong hold on people's lives is guaranteed by monopolizing all vital activities. No citizen can be hired or receive medical employment or even food without the Certificate of True Citizenship, a document that declares those who earn it are free of any political activism. The need to possess this document ensures total obedience by the people. The Gate stipulates the following,

> [Services] shall not be granted, except to those who prove beyond doubt, and with irrefutable evidence, their full commitment to sound morals and comportment, and to those who are issued an official certificate confirming that they are a righteous citizen, or, at least, a true citizen. Certificates of True Citizenship that do not bear a signature from the Booth and the seal of the Gate shall not be recognized under any circumstances. (Abdel Aziz, p. 1308)

As one would expect, the media is state-run, and we gradually discover that the Gate bolstered its control in the aftermath of a failed uprising by some activists who were crushed by the security apparatus. Due to the impossible red tape and bureaucratic centrality of the Gate, an endless queue has formed in front of the foreboding construct, a line of people that stretches across the borders of the city. Shops, religious sermons, reporters, new relationships, and other facets of life (and even death) take place in the queue. While there is no single protagonist for this novel, several characters are highlighted. They stand close to each other in the same section of the queue, and whenever one of them leaves for a necessary errand, she or he makes sure the person before and after them keep their place in line. As we follow their intertwining stories, we unravel the Gate's invasive surveillance, which is capable of knowing even the color of one citizen's underwear. Like the patients in "The Waiting Room," the citizens in the queue are aware of the stifling power of the Gate, and are aware of their ignorance, but they are too distracted by their mundane bureaucratic needs for certificates, reports, financial aid, and other documents to care. Consequently, facing no resistance, the Gate

strengthens its control over the endless queue and the lives of the people standing in it. People spend significant amounts of time in the queue, waiting for their turn to get some paperwork done that makes their most basic needs possible. Those who need to leave the queue briefly make agreements with the ones before and after them to preserve their position. Shops and other businesses started opening on both sides of the queue. The queue has become so long it stretches outside the city where the Gate is situated. It has become the central figure in many people's daily activities.

Individual Perspective or The Individual as Protagonist

The individual protagonists, Ḥayy and M N, are carefully portrayed with psychological depth that is evident in the changes their personalities undergo because of their interactions with their respective worlds. Neither of them knows their true origins and both learn to grapple with their realities. Ḥayy is a well-developed personality. His growth against the natural backdrop of the island contextualizes his characterization on multiple levels, mainly intellectually and spiritually. He grows into a scientist and believer, and, judging by his initial physical confrontation with Absāl (who is regarded as an intruder by Ḥayy), his physical growth is also impressive. Ḥayy becomes an archetypal model citizen, another trope in science fiction—specifically cyberpunk, where the character is usually introduced as the object of scientific experiments that lead to super soldiers or some superior human or android form. Indeed, while it is possible to compare Ḥayy to the heroes in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (as discussed by Campbell, 2018), and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, it is possible to see early examples of the experiment on the island-lab motifs in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*. Ḥayy is not a super soldier nor an android, but he is close to a fully developed human being, fulfilling the full physical, intellectual, and spiritual potential of humanity. He develops to full potential because he grew up free of human influence, not only physically, but, perhaps even more significantly, intellectually and spiritually as well.

M N, on the other hand, sinks as far as possible. The ultimate peace, faith, strength, and sublimation that Ḥayy exemplifies are reversed in M N, who deteriorates into death after losing his two children, his sanity, and his health out of sheer exhaustion. Where Ḥayy achieves peace, faith, and strength, M N's destiny is torment, skepticism, and weakness. Sublimation is ironically represented in the useless tower where M N works. He dies in his office at the top of the tower, where he physically rises to the top but fails to reach the sublime due to his lack of knowledge. Ḥayy is physically much lower, on the ground in the island, but reaches the sublime through his knowledge.

While the development of the protagonist is central to *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The Façade*, the connection between the protagonist and the community still has a significant function. In both novels, the community is antagonistic. When Ḥayy meets Absāl on the island, he teaches his new friend all he knows about nature and his approach to a life, leading to the supreme being, who Ḥayy refers to as the Necessity Existent Creator (Ibn Tufayl 141). In return, Absāl takes Ḥayy to his country. There, Ḥayy attempts to guide Absāl's people to the path he and Absāl have adhered to during their stay on the island. Nevertheless, Ḥayy is ignored by the community and returns with Absāl to the island. Ḥayy remains unfazed by the community. In a sense, the loss is theirs, not his. His isolation this time, however, becomes more of a willing self-exile. He retreats to the center of his existence.

Similarly, in *The Façade*, M N's search is consistently impeded by the community. Throughout the narrative, he raises serious questions, a practice discouraged by the terrified residents of the City. His questions were shunned angrily by D, a man who generously invited M N over for dinner at his house and introduced him to his sisters. The sisters try to tell M N the truth and urged their brother to reveal the nature of the Executions to M N, and D angrily tells them to keep quiet (Eassa 2014, 34). Soon after, one of the sisters dies suddenly, providing the first example of an execution that M N witnesses. When M N goes to the Information Office seeking answers to his existential questions

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and receives unsatisfactory information, he voices his exasperation to the clerk. Immediately, people started dying in the street and a natural disaster shakes the City briefly, "at that moment bells echoed everywhere in the city sounding like thunder roars" (Eassa 2014, p. 62). The clerk yells at M N, blaming him for angering the City Owner with his forbidden opinions,

"Look what you've done!" she said to M, shaking.

"I've done nothing!" cried out M.

"You have made the owner of the city angry." (Eassa, 2014, p.62)

This incident begins the downward spiral for M N. There is no turning back from that realization.

The community in *The Façade* offers layers of consciousness through its interaction with M N. In the beginning, members of the community are welcoming towards M N as the new guest, offering to give him lifts or invite over for a dinner. Once he falls from grace, people in the streets immediately treat him with hostility, frowning when they see him, avoiding him or even running away. Forced to work at the grindstone to earn a living, M N notices a laughing audience forming outside the window watching his hard labor and the whippings he received (Eassa 2014, p. 97). The cruelty of the public when he becomes a laborer stands in sharp contrast to their generosity when he was a briefly a guest. Later, it changes yet again to something unexpected as it is revealed that the City Owner wants him to search for the truth. When M N reaches the stage where he is recognized by all residents as a truth seeker, he suddenly achieves a messianic status. People revere him and build a tower for him, with dozens of people working for him in the tower, facilitating his message as a truth seeker. Ironically, however, since he is not an employee in the tower dedicated to him, he is not allowed to use the elevator (Eassa 2014, p. 361), he has the smallest office (Eassa 2014, p. 371), and a small bookcase (Eassa 2014, p. 376). His employees burn the books of dead authors and reduce the number of books in his office (Eassa 2014, p. 409). The community's shifting attitude towards M N mirrors social hypocrisies, especially antagonism towards the

working class, represented by M N's labor. It can also be seen in their shallow support for intellect and religion, as evidenced by the unnecessarily gigantic tower they build for M N, which in fact makes his job more difficult, for he wastes his entire working hours climbing forty flights until he is exhausted.

The resistance that Ḥayy and M N face from their communities is a mythological and religious trope that found its way to some apocalyptic science fiction narratives. Ranging from Superman's father, Jor El, to Paul Atreides in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the protagonist gives prophecies to his people. In some cases, such as Jor-El's planet, the people respond cynically at their own peril, mirroring an Abrahamic tradition of ignored prophets followed by destructive cosmic punishment that falls upon the cursed cities. In others, the messenger protagonist takes matters into his own hands, acting as the chosen one, such as Paul Atreides. There are also other morbid scenarios in which the communal mob mentality prevails, crushing the prophetic anti-hero's voice, as seen with John the Savage in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Another type of protagonist faces off with the community mainly to survive rather than for the good of the people, a plot line more inclined to invasion science fiction novels, such as H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. An interesting take on the lone protagonist character and the island motif is expounded in Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In *The Façade*, M N is partly reminiscent of Edward Pendrick, the shipwrecked protagonist who finds himself on an island that gradually turns into hell as he discovers Dr. Moreau's experiments on the inhabitants of the islands. This is quite analogous to M N finding himself in the city at the mercy of its owner and misunderstood by its people, who fail to understand him. Ḥayy demonstrates elements of the noble savage we see in *Brave New World*'s John the Savage, also ridiculed by the community. However, Ḥayy is distinguished by a more solid personality built out of years of solitude and self-learning, leading to the gratification of knowledge as opposed to M N's tortured soul, lost in the frustrating journey of unreachable truth.

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In that sense, The City Owner, who makes dolls for his own reasons, only to execute them at will is a Moreau-figure and the Necessarily Existent Creator he seeks through both science and spirituality is indeed a creator, but a good one, worthy of Ḥayy and Absāl's faith. It is worth noting that in both novels, communal rejection impacts the final fate of the individual protagonist unexpectedly. Ḥayy achieves his personal goals after he is shunned by the community. Their rejection seems to lead to his personal accomplishment. M N, who suffers rejection throughout the novel, is destroyed only when he is finally accepted and revered by his community. Their approval brings about his downfall.

Communal Perspective or the Community as Protagonist

The two narratives that focus on the communal perspective underline the impact of total lack of freedom on the collective mind of the group. In both narratives, the community is immersed in the rules of the game, as with the patients in "The Waiting Room," literally playing a card game that echoes the random turns of those called by the nurse. Alternatively, the community is coerced into obedience to such an extent that some are eventually brainwashed into acquiescence and even appreciation for the authoritarian rule of the Gate in *The Queue*.

In "The Waiting Room," five patients are described physically, focusing on their age, facial features, and skin color; for instance, we have a man with a long nose, a dark-skinned man, and a stout man. Later, only one young woman joins the patients. When they express their joy that she is keeping them company, she cries and says she is the one who is lonely (Eaasa 2002, 133). She then does something that startles everyone:

> She started fiddling with her fingers then suddenly burst out into tears, weeping bitterly. She then stood up and started banging at the other room door. The door opened and the face of a smiling man looked out. He motioned to her to enter, so she went in and then the door was shut. (Eassa 2002, p. 134)

Her actions indicate that the examination room can be a metaphor for death, and her going in before her turn is, therefore, a metaphor for an untimely death, possibly suicide. Moreover, her presence accentuates the gender bias in the group as she is outnumbered by the men in the room. What starts as an idle conversation becomes rather aggressive as tensions rise. It is revealed that at least two of the characters have no idea that they are in a clinic (135). One of them states he entered the room when he found people there. They start playing cards, quarrel over bets, and stop playing with money. Then a child enters, claiming he is the grandchild of one of the men who went in the examination room, and the group of patients allows him to join them at the table, occupying his grandfather's seat, thus symbolizing that the clinic has been there for a long time. This is also suggested by the clock on the wall, which does not move.

The nurse, representing the medical team, completely controls communication between the examination room and the waiting room, which is one-sided in the first place since no one reaches anyone in the examination room. The patients wait passively for each patient's turn, and only complain that their turn is not respected, and patients are called in randomly. They seem to take their frustrations out on each other. It is possible to see a political and existential undertone in the structure of the short story. The passivity of the group, the silence of the doctors, the terse instructions delivered through the nurse—are all indicative not only of the total hegemony of the doctors, but also of the community's inability to grasp any purpose of existence. The *Waiting for Godot* type of futile waiting and lack of knowledge portrays an absurdist void, with the medical touch adding a foreboding notion of a sinister finality behind the closed doors of the waiting rooms. The child entering might reflect the mercilessness of the selection to enter the examination room, which can signify anything from death to any other form of loss into an unknown realm. The story ends with one man left, who decides to play by himself, remarking that he has no one to defeat now, while waiting for his turn to enter the examination room:

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The thick moustached man sat by himself, lonely. He started arranging the cards to while the time away. He kept fiddling with the cards. He then re-arranged them again so as to foretell his future. The smiling man looked out of the other room and pointed at him, so he hurried towards the room. (Eassa 2002, p. 140)

It is possible to see a political undertone here as well—specifically post-colonial, with the patients representing colonized, maybe specifically Arab, countries that are selected for occupation one by one, while they waste their time competing with one another.

The second of the two narratives that focus on the communal perspective, *The Queue*, shares elements of the endless wait and the medical horror that encompass "The Waiting Room" as well as what one critic referred to as "totalitarian absurdity" (Machado, 2016). The people in the long queue in front of the Gate managed to form a community, complete with diversity of socio-economic classes as well as religious and political ideologies. In addition, the queue stretches for so long and is considerably slow to the extent that shops and cafes open on both sides of the queue. An event that happened before the story begins still impacts the community at the present time of the novel. A failed uprising, led mainly by young activists, shook the state and apparently led to the erection of the Gate and the stifling bureaucracy that ensued. In the narrative present, most people have been successfully brainwashed enough to turn against the activists, branding them as traitors. Indeed, the protests are referred to in the media as The Disgraceful Events (Abdel Aziz 2016). What is more, it seems the campaign villainizing the rebels is only one stage of a larger scheme. Towards the middle of the narrative, a new media campaign gradually denies the events altogether. This is self-contradictory, as the same Gate-run media used to blame fictitious foreign agents for killing protesters, which in essence admits that there were protests.

The communal rejection of protest is in line with the Gate guidelines, and individual attempts to question loyalty to the Gate are quelled by the community as much as by the Gate. The few who dare object to the Gate are systematically hunted down. One stark example is Yehya, whose name means "he lives." A depoliticized figure, Yehya accidentally walked into a protest and was shot by riot police, called the Quell Force, during the earlier short-lived uprising. The Gate denies he was shot, and bureaucracy is used against him to delay his surgery, clearly in the hope that he will die while waiting for permission to have surgery. Other characters include Amal, who tries to help Yehya obtain the necessary paperwork from the Gate to authorize his surgery. When she pushes too close to the forbidden mechanisms of the Gate and their brainwashing tactics, she disappears for a few days. We do not know the details of what happens to her, but it is hinted that she is tortured, possibly psychologically. She emerges disoriented and hallucinating, and eventually dies, if not physically, then mentally. Tarek, the doctor who handles Yehya's case, suffers from guilt when he has to choose between his conscience (operating on Yehya who is deteriorating and needs the surgery), and his self-interest (by ignoring Yehya, who is designated an enemy of the state). The queue and its citizens constitute an ensemble of societal elements united by hypocrisy. There are those who know what they need to do, but do not act, such as Tarek, the physician who stalled Yehya's surgery until it was too late. There are those who unscrupulously capitalize on the situation. For example, the High Sheikh, the highest religious authority, in a bitterly satirical incident, preaches to the people and links his sermons to the state-run Violet Telecom company, by decreeing that the religious principle of loving one's neighbor can only be fulfilled by making seven consecutive phone calls, thus garnering profit for the phone company. The High Sheikh preaches,

A believer who is weak of faith, and does not join his brothers, is guilty of a sin, which shall be weighed on Judgment Day. This sin can be absolved by fasting, or by making seven consecutive phone calls, each one not separated by more than a month. (Abdel Aziz, p. 1600)

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The one-month period is a satirical reference to Egyptian telephone companies that require users to make at least one phone call every month to maintain services. The relationship between the High Sheikh, the Telecom business, and the government reflects how the governmental, religious, and economic institutions in much of the Middle East work hand in hand to control the people.

Manifestations of Place

The spaces for the narratives discussed in this article are designed to enhance isolation for the individual protagonists and conformity for community characterization. In *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the island provides an incubation period that nurtures Hayy's growth. While the island is ultimately a positive place for Hayy, it is not utopian. Ḥayy experiences a life-defining tragedy when his mother-deer dies. As he grows up, the island plays the role of a scientific laboratory where Ḥayy experiments with his theories about nature. When Absāl arrives at the island, he is attacked by Hayy, making the island a space of contention and conflict. This does not last long, as Absāl and Ḥayy soon become allies and friends. They teach each other the knowledge they have acquired over the years—mainly Absāl's language skills, which Ḥayy never had, and Hayy's experimental scientific findings and natural philosophical wisdom. During this stage of the narrative, the island becomes a school, a learning space. When Ḥayy leaves the island to visit Absāl's country and is shunned by Absāl's people, they both return to the island and resolve to devote themselves to sublime knowledge of the Necessarily Existent Creator. The island's role changes to a spiritual haven for meditation. The island, therefore, is a multifaceted symbol that acquires its significance based on its intersection with the changes in the protagonist's development.

The City in *The Façade* is also a fluid symbol. It mainly oscillates between a utopian and dystopian existence, based on the protagonist's experiences. Initially, M N thinks the City is utopian, with free meals and free residence offered for a year to guests, and with a priest of an unknown religion who announces that he is no longer required to preach since there is no wrongdoing in the City anymore. Yet, the utopia rapidly turns into a dystopia. M N offends a restaurant server unintentionally when he asks her to talk to him after her working hours. As a result, he suddenly loses his guest privileges and his life rapidly deteriorates into endless suffering. He is required to work for a living. The only job available for him is to turn a wheel that grinds nothing. He is whipped by a wheel keeper, who is a stereotypically grotesque, demonic figure, thus reinforcing the hellish transformation of the City. The money M N earns is hardly ever enough for meals and basic needs as prices always go up, sometimes almost instantly. M N gets married without being given much of a choice and his responsibilities rise considerably. The single mistake he makes when he talks to the restaurant server, followed by the brutal punishment of toil and pain, can be a reference to humanity's Abrahamic fall from grace when Adam eats the forbidden fruit and the entire human race has to work for the duration of its existence. This makes the City more of an allegory for life on earth than a futuristic fantasy or an afterlife representation, thus portraying everyday life as dystopian.

A twist in the presentation of the island and the City is the existence of another place in each story that acts as a foil, a distorted copy, or a reverse reflection. In *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, this alternate place is Absāl's country. It is the antithesis of Hayy's island. The island is devoid of humans and rich in natural and wildlife. Absāl's country is a regular human society, and there is no mention of wildlife there, only human gatherings. The island is a place of solitude. The other country is a place of communion. The island is a space for experimentation and discovery. The other place is one of certainties and old institutions. The island is a place of growth. The other place is a place of stagnation.

In *The Façade*, an entire city lurks behind the main city. It is a darker space that M N notices by accident. He hears about its existence but does not know what it is until one night he watches his wife, whom he suspects is having an affair, and sees a door suddenly materialize in the back of his house. His wife silently walks

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through it and he follows her to find the reverse of everything he had observed in the superficial utopia of the City. The clean streets and beautiful well-kept landscapes and houses are replaced by old, neglected streets and houses. The conservative people are brazen hedonists. Even the restaurant server who had filed a complaint against him for asking to meet her after work is the exact opposite in this other city: sexually uninhibited, behaving lewdly, and seducing men openly. At some point, M N is even put on trial for refusing to have sex with a woman other than his wife, which stands in sharp contrast to the conservative façade of the main city, where he was punished for nothing more than asking a woman to talk to him. Unleashed sexual desires are not the only vice in this other city. While M N's wife has her sexual escapades with other men, their children accompany her and turn into shoplifters. The distorted city represents a stereotypical notion of the Freudian unconscious mind, harboring all the desires and fantasies negated by the orderly conscious mind, and, thus, functioning as a dungeon for all of the baser human instincts. It also enhances the theme of social hypocrisy that underlies the depiction of the community in *The Façade*.

In "The Waiting Room," the place has few details. Like all waiting rooms, it is well organized and open. The minimalism of setting, events, and characters, as well as the reliance on dialogue are as appropriate to a short, one-act play as they are to a short story. The objects that stand out in the room are like stage props: a round table where the patients sit, a few chairs for late comers, a skeleton, and a calendar marking December 31st with the year crossed out:

> It is a spacious room with walls, which need painting. On one of its walls is a picture of a human skeleton of actual size. On another wall hangs a calendar, dated the thirty-first of December. It seems that nobody had bothered to change that calendar a few days earlier, perhaps a few months or maybe years ago, for the part stating the year, had been totally scratched. On the same wall is a clock, its hands have stopped at nine minutes past three.

(Eassa 2002, p. 131)

The round table is surrounded by men, each distinctly different in appearance, who are equally subjected to the same dubious fate in the examination room. The woman and then the young child who arrive later sit on separate chairs. By not joining the men at the round table, the male-centeredness of the community is asserted, with the female and the young child physically and symbolically on the margin of the central sphere of action. The waiting room is accessible from the street. This is evident as three of the characters enter the room after the narrative starts (one man, the woman, and the child) while everyone else was already there when the story begins. This connectivity between the waiting room and the larger community solidifies the function of the waiting room as a microcosm of society, with members trickling in gradually.

In *The Queue*, the main space is the endless line of people waiting in futility in front of the impenetrable Gate for bureaucratic paperwork that controls the most basic actions of their daily lives. A huge screen is at the far end of the queue, by the Gate, where the government broadcasts instructions and fabricated media items that habitually reshape truth to serve the Gate (p. 1301). This space, like the waiting room in the clinic, is a microcosm of society, a blend of all classes and lineages. People in the queue leave their spots when they need to go to work or run important errands, but only to come back as soon as they are done. When they have to leave temporarily, they confirm their positions in the queue with those in front and behind them to reserve their spot until they come back (Abdel Aziz, p. 358). Marking one's spot in the queue is an ultimate sign of communal interconnectivity and the link to the outside world—the source of more people who join the queue—just as the clinic's outside door brings in more patients.

The waiting room and the queue have other places linked to them as well. However, unlike Absāl's island or the back City in *The Façade,* the waiting room and queue are more like extensions of the original places and have the same foreboding natures. They are

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more like new dimensions—new mysterious abodes where "the power" resides. Their interiors remain unknown to the readers and characters during the time frame of the narratives, yet everyone ultimately has to deal with them. In "The Waiting Room," this space is the examination room, where a medical team presumably sits, decides turns, and receives patients. No one ever comes out of that room. The patients in the waiting room notice that and rationalize this by reassuring themselves that there must be a backdoor in the examination room that leads straight to the outside. This acts as a metaphor for the afterlife as a fatalist justification of death. This sinister space in *The Queue* is the Gate itself. Like the examination room, the Gate is the ultimate destination of the queue. Everyone has to interact with a representative from the Gate, even if they never enter. A clerk needs to receive their petitions and sign their paperwork. This becomes compulsory when the Gate issues a new, mandatory Certificate of True Citizenship that every citizen must obtain before they proceed with paperwork for any other facet of their lives. The Gate and the examination room, therefore, are the destinations that end the period of waiting in the waiting room and the queue. It is not necessarily the place where the power that nobody understands resides, but it is certainly the place where the decisions made by the power take place.

A study about the relationship between urban and rural settings in Arabic novels showed that Egyptian novels are positioned as forerunners in formulating the pattern of a vicious circle (Ostle, 1986). Rural values and urban promise were described as remaining in futile tension as early as Heikal's *Zaynab.* Even in Mahfouz's *Cairene* novels, the individual "man of destiny" character ends up forcing Mahfouz to adapt his narrative form to present a "world of helpless individuals in the grip of malevolent social and political forces" (Ostle, 2016, p.200). These forms are mainly allegorical, such as in Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley* and *The Thief and the Dogs*, and have affinities with the dystopian forms of narratives in this article, mainly *The Façade* and "The Waiting Room." Philosophi-

cally and socially, place represents the struggles of destiny reflected by the urban landscape. Politically, Ostle described the tension of place as exacerbated by the looming and stifling powers of the palace and the British. Place, therefore, and its association with power, seems ingrained in the Arabic novel.

A more elaborate use of spatial patterns than vicious circles directly connects metaphorical geometric structures to narrative forms. In Egyptian author Gamal Al-Ghitani's novel, *Pyramid Texts*, for instance, the pyramid shape reflects ontological factors "pertaining to an artist's outlook on time, individuality, the nature of the universe and the human condition" (Azouqa, 2011, p. 7). The pervasive use of patterns asserts that the "The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exist" (Waugh 47, as qtd. in Azouqa, 2011, p. 8). The four narratives I have focused on here use geometric patterns to reflect the interactions between the individuals and their communities in response to higher, unseen powers that at once monopolize, demand, and obscure truth. Those patterns correspond to the narratorial trajectory that each narrative adopts. The island is circular, as it is surrounded by water from all directions. This echoes the cyclical nature of the narrative. Hayy's consciousness and growth are initiated on the island, and after his friction with the outside world represented by Absāl's country, he returns to the island. "The Waiting Room" also has a circular center presented by the round table, but the room itself is not circular. Assuming it is an ordinary room, it will have some kind of angular structure like most rooms, and would therefore reflect the narrative depiction of the patients as captives in a cage, where entrance is willful but leaving is controlled and guided. The city in *The Façade*, has the most interesting structure. It is designed entirely around one long street, more like an avenue, that runs through the city and leads to the City Owner's mansion. When M N unknowingly enters this mansion, he learns from a butler that no one can see the City Owner. Anyone can come to the mansion, but only if they want to submit a written complaint (Eassa 2014, p. 83). The mansion can be

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a metaphor for houses of worship, where worshipers spill their innermost fears and anguish, but never see the power they are hoping will answer their prayers. Alternatively, in a political sense, it can be the authoritarian power that receives people's grievances, but never meets them. Behind the houses on both sides lies the other version of the city. The main place, therefore, runs along one single line with potential brief digressions left and right into houses, restaurants, and shops, brilliantly reflecting the linearity of the narrative, and the short-lived intervals when M N attempts to rebel or question the course of his life. Retreat is possible, just like going back and forth on a street is possible. M N does remember earlier events and characters he has met previously in the narrative, thus moving briefly sideways, with questioning and musings, as well as forward and backward, but always within the general linearity of the narrative avenue. Linearity is also crucial to *The Queue*. However, in *The Queue*, the possibility of leaving to a wider space is possible, but the return is also inevitable. The queue itself is even more stifling, reflecting the narrow confinement of the narrative structure, as the novel is divided according to documents from Yehya's hospital files and the narration progresses mercilessly until Amal's and Yehya's monumental demise and Tarek's dehumanization, just like the queue progresses towards its destination at the gigantic Gate.

Manifestations of place can be viewed through the concept of homeland. In a study of watan, or homeland, Samar Attar (2016) refers to the homeland's duality, as a nurturing mother or an oppressive tyrant. This is evident in the nurturing mother motif of Hayy's adoptive mother deer and the tyrannical Gate, for instance. Leslie Tramontini (2016) discusses the interconnection of memory and space, with place as a site for memory, constructing an ideal lost paradise or a personal refuge. In *The Façade*, M N's absence of memory dissociates him from any connectivity to a personal place or a homeland. The patients in the "Waiting Room" willingly leave their place to move into the unknown, mimicking the migration from the homeland to the diaspora.

Conclusion

Whether spiritual, philosophical, metaphysical, or political, the four narratives discussed in this article all share interesting tropes and narrative strategies that I have argued can be employed in readings of Arabic science fiction narratives. The role of place, specifically as it manifests itself in spaces that navigate trajectories of individual and communal intersectionality with power, is an underlying motif in Arabic science fiction. What is more, the geometric shape of space as a reflection of the narrative process—whether circular or linear, for instance—is another feature of the use of space in Arabic science fiction that is worth analyzing. Writers' ability to use the allegorical and the symbolic while implying references to local issues is an underlying feature of modern Arabic novels, seen most evidently in the works of Naguib Mahfouz who "combined universal relevance with local appeal" (Starkey, 2006, p. 124). In Arabic science fiction, the connection between the universal and the local seems to have been achieved by narrative use of place.

For further research, this article suggests that readings of Arabic science fiction can benefit from considerations of the interconnectivity of spatial motifs and what might be termed shape or geometric narratives, where the shape of place reflects the development of the narrative. A significant underlying element of Arabic science fiction is the interplay between the individual and the communal, with individual protagonists or the community itself presented collectively as a protagonist. Whether as an individual or a community, Arabic science fiction protagonists are often pitted against a higher power. Characterized by its omnipresence and omniscience, regardless of its benevolent or evil nature, this superior force is crucial in unpacking the complexities of Arabic science fiction. Within these complexities are individuals and communities sharing spaces that lead them to that formidable and unfathomable power, be it spiritual or political. Arabic science fiction had its roots in spiritual philosophical narratives. The increasing role of religious and political discourse in Arabic intellectual life now impacts science fiction as

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a literary genre of alternate realities. The narrative intersectionality of place and power can offer a deeper understanding of Arabic science fiction.

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