

METAFICTION AND THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB NOVEL: YUSEF AL-MOHAIMEED'S *LAGHAT MAWTA*

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Yusef Al-Mohaimeed's first published novel *Laghat Mawta* (written in 1996 and published in Damascus by the Union of Arab Writers Press in 2000) is a striking example of an Arabic Saudi novel that seems to be catching up with modern narrative techniques, namely, the metafictional, self-conscious, or narcissistic style strongly adopted by many postmodernist novelists in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ The novel (I here translate its title as *The Clamour of the Dead*) is narratologically an excellent one written in the style of the metafictional novel, the self-conscious and narcissistic one, or even the *bildungsroman*, the genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist as a novelist/narrator/character and individual. Although it is not my focus in this article, I could briefly state that *The Clamour of the Dead* is written as if it has been influenced by novelists such as Italo Calvino, in his 1979 novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*—which is about a reader trying to read a book of the same title; or by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, in his best novels *V* and *The Crying of Lot 49*; or John Barth, in his novels *The Floating Opera* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* with its 800-page loosely-structured text, with its huge digressions, distractions, stories within stories, and lists that end up with a biting satire. Barth's short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* and the novella collection *Chimera* are also typical of what Al-Mohaimeed is doing in his novel. *The Clamour of the Dead* seems also to be influenced by Samuel Beckett, in his trilogy, *Malone Dies*, *Molloy*, and *The Unnamable*; by Christine Brooke-Rose, in her extreme

self-reflexive novels *Thru and Between*; by Jorge Luis Borges, in his *Labyrinths* with its infinite regress of events; by John Fowles, in his metafictional novels: *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Daniel Martin* and *Mantissa*, which all foretell exactly what *The Clamour of the Dead* is doing. Al-Mohaimeed seems also to be influenced by Doris Lessing, in her self-reflexive novel *The Golden Notebook*, and by Alain Robbe-Grillet in his influential detective and self-reflexive novels *The Erasers*, *The Voyager*, and *La Jalousie*, which typify such Chinese-box structure, self-reflexiveness, circularity, and infinite locating of texts within texts. Other influences seem to be Luigi Pirandello, in his great example play of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or even Al-Mohaimeed's own Arabic ancestry of *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan* by Ibn Tufail from the twelfth century. Indeed, my main contention in this study is to show how *The Clamour of the Dead* is a vivid embodiment of the mode of fictional writing which is described as "metafiction" and "narcissistic" narrative fiction.

As defined by a leading critic in this field, the term "metafiction" is the type of fiction that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). Indeed, metafictional novels are actually texts which contain within themselves a propensity which addresses the difficulty of constructing fictions. Such writings also examine the possibility of fictionalizing the world outside the text, as *The Clamour of the Dead* is exactly doing. And narcissistic fiction is also the technique that is dramatically "self-referring or autorepresentational: it provides, within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception" (Hutcheon xii).² Moreover, Christopher Norris emphasises this view of self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness about postmodernist fiction when he argues that postmodernist novels "had better draw attention to their own fictive devices, rather than trying to pass themselves off as chunks of real-life experience" (Norris 157). *The Clamour of the Dead* thus seems to be written under the direct inspiration of modern literary theory of narrative advocated by many French thinkers as Ronald Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida and their great impact on Western literature, with the spread of post-structuralism and deconstruction, with the demise of the author and the advent of the reader, and with the plurality of texts and the multiplicity of voices.³ Yousef Al-Mohaimeed seems to be exactly echoing the post-structuralist and deconstructionist poetics in their proclamations about the "death of the author", as he proclaims at end of his novel, and that he has no control at all over his characters, and that his characters are actually the ones leading the narrative and he is only following their dictates and wishes of having a free, independent, and equal life.

The Clamour of the Dead begins with the narrator asking, and many times himself being asked: why don't you write a novel? Or are you able to write a novel? This, of course, reflects the *bildungsroman* motif mentioned above, which tells about the growing up or coming of age of a sensitive person who is looking for answers and experience in life and on the page as writer. As an experimental novel, *The Clamour*

of the Dead thus begins with a sense of loss on the part of the narrator/writer who is going out in the world to seek his fortune as a man who wants to become a writer. Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, we feel that the narrator-writer is seeking maturity, which he achieves gradually but with difficulty. Here the novelist is trying all the time to write a novel but always failing to do so. He fails, not because he cannot write, but because of the influence of his characters' personalities and their attempts to destroy this writing project. Every time the author sits down to his writing desk and lights the candle beside him, he finds his characters sitting on the table with him, one trying to extinguish the candle, the other trying to drink his cup of tea, while some other is wearing his shoes next to the door, and ultimately interrupting his writing process. The characters then flock in front of him and he has only to draw them down on the page, as the novel begins: "With a black pen I draw over the heads of these characters their features, history, dreams, hopes and memories; I also draw defeats, secrets, and plots; then I build for them roads and streets, basements, offices, 398 prisons and palaces, halls and houses of tin, to make them walk on their own accord to what prompts them of facts and events" (Al-Mohaimeed 1).⁴

The novel is also about some dead people who always come alive when the writer writes. This is enhanced in the title of the novel, which emphasises the anonymity of those dead when the writer uses the indefinite article in Arabic. This indefiniteness of the dead leaves the matter open for interpretations and for wider speculations about those dead, their number, and their intentions of coming back alive in front of the author. Those anonymous dead figures figure out something important in the novel: writing fiction for or about dead characters makes them alive again and they appear in front of the author, stir up confusion and chaos in his mind and in his room; they argue with him, interrupt him, and even force him to write about them and demand equal space and freedom for them as well as for others. They constantly make the author change his mind and adjust his text or texts, make him go back and forth and ask himself: did not I mention this incident before, did not I refer to those, and so on to the end of the novel. The dead, then, are those figures whom the young protagonist/novelist really fears, that they would come in his way and stop him from writing his novel, as he often tells his friends in his letters which he constantly sends away but seem to get lost. The novel is an answer to one of his friends who has always asked him: why don't you write a novel? And he always tells his friends that he wants to write a novel but he fears the resurrection of the dead and the way they get at him.

Indeed, those dead belong not only to Al-Mohaimeed's Saudi and Arab readers but to all people. Al-Mohaimeed suggests that after they die, the dead move to a limitless unknowable world, and only us the living are able to bring them back to life through our memories and resurrections. These characters are actually guests from different worlds and times who are resurrected fictionally and given new life through this process of writing. Characterising these dead is done through a production process by the author as well as his readers alike when he left a lot of details to be filled in by us the way we find proper. The reader is given a great deal of power in participating

in this narrative, just like the power given to the friend and other characters to reject or accept the portions of narrative given to them.

The novel, then, has adopted an extremely metafictional narrative voice: a narrator/novelist who is unable to write a novel, or finding difficulty in writing it, and who uses the technique of letter-writing, which offers him the power to change these letters not only once but many times, through the characters themselves who spy over his shoulders about what he writes or sends through fax or mail, who change their own letters and others' letters and so on indefinitely. This gives the novel the quality of inserting texts within texts *ad infinitum*, which makes the novel so postmodernist in its narrative technique of intertextuality, and which at the end enables its author to write a successful novel about his own Saudi society. Indeed, the novel is set in contemporary Riyadh and is meant to carry a great deal of fictional and allegorical weight for the author himself as being his first fictional attempt as well as for his contemporary Saudi readers who may find in it some seeds of change; and maybe for Western readers (in addition to his later novels), it is seen as an opening door into the lives and minds of Arabs, particularly in the Gulf.⁵ Of course, I am not suggesting here in any way that literature can be seen as a means of changing societies in the Gulf, or indeed anywhere else, or as a source of information that can help the West to understand the Arab world.

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From the outset, this novel deals with the story of one family, Masoud's, and further with the various stories of its members along several generations: basically the three generations of children, their fathers, and their grandfathers. These personalities appear then in this narrative as all announcing their wishes to narrate and tell their own stories, and their demand and insistence that they be given a specific and ample narrative role to narrate for themselves. Indeed, they aspire to have active roles which suit their importance or aspiration as they see it for themselves, and thereby these personalities jostle to express themselves, as an allegory for the conflict between generations, which is a typical question in this novel, and in many other modern Arabic novels, such as those by the Palestinian novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in his *In Search of Walid Masoud* (1978), which is a typical Arab novel that explores the Arab intellectual's response to the turmoil in the Middle East in the postcolonial era. This novel is about the disappearance of a writer and activist, Walid Masoud, who has become a symbol of commitment for his Palestinian people in their resistance against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Also, in his *The Journals of Sarab Affan* (2007), he demonstrates his affirmative and yet unsettling theme of salvation in the face of inevitable loss, alienation, and exile. Here Jabra tells his love story through alternating journal entries and with a complex layering of voices, revealing how a love relationship is formulated through twin perspectives of a famed male novelist and the woman who loves him. First, he is seen through the narratives of her journals: from her fascination with his writings until the moment she arranges their first meeting. Then, Jabra presents the male novelist's point of view: that is, from the start of the relationship leading to physical separation and then to a momentary reunion

in Paris.⁶ Indeed, in *The Clamour of the Dead*, such a way of a character fighting its way, carving its own niche, and even besieging the narrator to give it a place in the narrative, is a typical narrative strategy adopted by Al-Mohaimeed. This is how, for instance, Moudi always chases the narrator and demands from him to write about her, her history and her great disappointments and defeats in life. Her sister Muzna, the little girl, also does the same and requests from the author not to lose sight of her heroic deeds, not to deal with her as only a minor or naïve child, especially now she is ten years old. Moudi's dead grandfather also complains to the narrator how he is neglected, and admits how he in the past maltreated Moudi and ordered that she be segregated:

They all lied to me, taking advantage of my death and inability to expose their lies, and forgetting that I am actually following them step by step. If you like, I can cocoon their steps and count their extra breaths. This fool Moudi, for example, who now lives happily with her cat-like children, did not know that I kidnapped her child two years ago.

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While I was sleeping, I was not in my grave but airing myself out. When I got tired, I went into a nearby mosque where I had a little sleep, I don't know how long.... (14-15)

Indeed, the novel is not only about these characters' stories but further about the narrator himself who seems to be writing his own biography where he reveals a lot of connections and similarities with the real author, Al-Mohaimeed himself.

This autobiographical connection between the author himself and his narrator takes place throughout the novel, particularly where the narrator is concerned with the question of writing itself and the influence of characters over their author as is evident in particular in the author's special tribute that he wrote as a subtitle to the novel: "In your Hands is the Concerns of the Writer and the Domination of his Characters." This subtitle really embodies the whole implications of the narrative memory from which the entire narrative structure has arisen and the narrative language which the novel has developed throughout. It also reveals the major concerns of the author as he writes fiction, especially the one dealing with the influence and domination of characters over his faculty of writing. Such a feeling of domination then terrorises the author and keeps him continuously surrendering to the tyranny of various authorities: social, religious, cultural, political and moral. The author feels inhibited and prevented from drawing and characterising his characters freely and smoothly on paper. In this connection, the Derridian concept of the *eraser* achieves a symbolically pivotal role in this narrative where many concepts or expressions are erased or censured to avoid problems emanating from censors. That is why the process of characterisation becomes limited within the narrow parameters of language itself, which consequently make the author resort to mythology. In giving characters such mythological symbols, Al-Mohaimeed tries to avoid and even please the censors, particularly social censorship in its family context, for novels are often seen as "biographical", and they would therefore reveal the secrets of the author and his intimacy with the people among whom he lives. For Al-Mohaimeed the novel does not only expose the secrets of his people but also tells how these people become part

of the dead history and dead figures.

The novel is replete with such images of the dead from its very beginning—its title—to its very last sentence. In this connection, we feel the authority and domination of the author, Yousef Al-Mohaimeed himself, over his text and his characters from the very beginning to the end, although he keeps telling us that he cannot control his characters: “Really, I make my characters, twist the necks of their events, then I herd them in front of me like stray sheep, and in the midst of dust I make them pour out their latent secrets” (3). Of course, this is part of the narrative game of keeping the illusion that he is telling us the truth about his fiction and that he cannot control his characters and that they control him. We must emphasise here that authority is not really a fault here for it reveals to us the reasons—theoretically at least—behind his inability to write a novel, or at least made him delay such a project. And as the title of the novel indicates, these reasons are to do with the dead, and that narratives normally resurrect the dead, or the dead are part and parcel of the author’s memory when he writes, and they influence what he writes and consequently aggravate his creativity and how he draws his characters. The narrator says in this regard:

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What do you think my friend? You have honoured me when you say that I have the language, tools, and the power to conjure up the desolation of childhood, and the murmurs of women. Have you seen how some characters of whom I have dreamt that they would become heroes of my novel have actually cursed me? Can you see how they accuse you of stupidity, and endow me with failure? (42)

This novel then seems like a dramatic work based upon dialogue between the author-narrator and his characters on one side and among the characters themselves on the other. The whole novel is a kind of dialogue between the narrator and his problematical friend, who is supposedly to be there receiving and sending letters and urging him to write a novel. And dialogue, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues in describing the nature of the polyphonic novel that the entire scope of human life is seen as a dialogic process, and how meanings can only be found through our interactions with others:

Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally. And this is so because dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance. (Bakhtin 1973: 40)

In this sense, *The Clamour of the Dead* is dialogic in the ways in which its narrator-author communicates with his characters, the characters from their side with the narrator, and characters with each other, and the desire from them all to expose secrets, and even to camouflage their ways of keeping or revealing secrets and hiding behind such mystic relationships. These dialogues represent in the novel what Bakhtin calls, in his classic book *The Dialogic Imagination*, “heteroglossia” or the deep awareness of how language operates over time, and how he defines it as the

inherent diversity of unofficial forms of a particular national language—similar in nature to dialect (Bakhtin 1981: 67). Al-Mohaimeed's novel thus seems dialogic in its mixture of dialectical diversity of various characters and their reactions to society as a whole. In this mixture, the novel is quite poetical in revealing not only these dialogues of characters with each other and with the narrator but also it reveals the various monological or inner representational elements of sarcasm or self-criticism and the ironic mood upon which the novel seems to rest in its entirety. Indeed, Al-Mohaimeed succeeds in operating the "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces, as Bakhtin calls them, to promote some kind of change in life and culture; he wants to infuse a diversity of speech acts of the poor classes as represented by Masoud's family. Indeed, the various obstacles faced by such figures in attempting to forge an authentic, authorial voice when confronted with the rigid nature of society are further examples of the nature of dialogic assimilation as he intends it in his novel.

402 The dialogic elements of the novel are enhanced quite strongly in the narrator's employment of dialogue or virtual dialogue with his friend, his easy and yet complicated narrative voice, indeed in his split self, and in his poeticism or symbolism or mysticism of such journalistic narrative. This split self of the narrator, as embodied in the dialogues between the narrator and his friend, really makes up the entire novel. The dialogism of the novel is also embodied in its shortness: Al-Mohaimeed's (as is his narrator's) original writing career is journalism, which may explain his use of so many questions in a journalistic style. Such questions really fill the novel: the first opening sentence of the novel is a kind of question: "Many of my friends think that I cannot write a long text, a novel" (1). Such dialogues go on throughout the novel: "Many of my friends, and you are one of them, present their questions to me before even I entangle my hands into it" (12); "Do you see my friend that the one who asks me on one night" (37); "Many people yawn about if I have tried to write a novel" (41); "how shall I narrate to you" (44); "Do you know that the horrible thing about writing a novel comes from the eagerness of characters to narrate?" (47); "Do you see my friend how difficult it is to be with two mad men, each one trying to pull you from your sleeve to his side, and both want to narrate their stories simultaneously to you?" (54); "Do you see my friend that what stops me from writing a novel is the way these characters dominate me and pull my clothes!" (55); "What frightens me to death is how I shall reveal to you how I failed in writing a novel!" (56); "Do you see my friend?" (57); "You know my friend that I always write with a pencil!" (58); "If you do not believe my friend that while the eraser erases and obliterates the existence of someone, it does confirm his presence somehow" (69); "Can you imagine my friend how painful it is if you don't have any eraser?" (78); and "I have kept thinking about you, how you received my letter and excuses for not writing a novel, and what you would comment on it" (84), and so on.

The dialogic forces in *The Clamour of the Dead*, which make up the entire narrative and the memory of its narrator-author-hero, operate on three levels as this writer writes his novel. First is the level of the narrator's friend, who always demands from

him to write a novel, and even reproaches him for not yet writing it. The narrator responds to such reproaching demands by giving excuses for his failure to write, and here the narrator-author concentrates only on one specific friend, and ultimately accusing them all of trying to get him involved in the tragedy of resurrecting the dead, who will always chase and follow him wherever he goes, to the extent that he would, as he says, breathe out their own breaths. This is so because his memory is full of such dead people who seem to be very angry with the living beings. Al-Mohameed describes such a dead-resurrection process and its relation with the living in the early part of the novel:

O, I wonder about those friends who incite resurrecting those of the dead, to shake their past lives off at me as a carpet whose colours are so dazzling that it blurs my vision. This is how some of my friends believe that invoking the lives of others on paper is an easy thing and it is done in order to get rid of their roaming souls, which haunt those who are doing the resurrection just like coloured butterflies. Then he will forget those souls completely as Kasandzaki did his first love when he wrote his novel *The Serpent and the Lily*; how he breathed deeply as he looked out of the window and feeling completely easy. If I now breathed those dead would also breathe with me, while at the same time would surround me with their lost stories, and their discontent with the living beings and with hypocrites. (29)

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Indeed, through the friend, the novel plays the trick or the self-reflexive game of a novel written by its own characters or by the participation and freedom of its own characters, dead or alive. What is looked at as the failure to write a novel really becomes the novel itself. At the end of the novel, and while waiting in the hotel lobby for his friend to come, the narrator listens to some other people discussing exactly what is in his mind. Interestingly, the one who is speaking surprisingly looks exactly like his friend and is speaking to his friends about the secrets of a novel he is writing:

Just imagine a failed novelist, who always tries to write a novel, but he always fails miserably! He tears out all his papers that he wrote, then he repeats his attempt again and again, and he fails. Imagine also that his close friend asked him on one sea-cool night: why don't you write a novel? He did not want to answer and said that he had always been trying and yet failing. He just wrote him a long letter in which he explained the reasons for his worries about writing a novel, and his fear of failure. But then by doing so he discovered that he, for the first time, had written a successful novel. (101-102)

Thus we discover that this man is the narrator himself writing this novel we read, while he still insists that he is listening to and watching these three friends in the hotel lobby.

The second level on which the narrative memory operates is how characters chase the narrator-author and try to overrun him. As we have seen before, this character-control of the narrative is done deliberately by the author to show that he has given his characters their complete freedom and decision to characterise themselves and that they can voice their own opinions freely. This is also shown by giving some of these characters the power to complain and refuse the author's wishes and even some try

to take revenge against the narrator who, they claim, has deformed their reputations, changed their histories, or given others more privilege over them, or allowed other characters the control of some others. This narrative level is so vital in emphasising that narration is yet again a kind of dialogue between the narrator and his characters. This technique is so attractive, amusing, comical and even original. It reminds us of the humorous narrative style adopted by Laurence Sterne in his novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Al-Mohaimeed's novel has many elements of that Shandyesque tint when both of these novels parody all the narratorial conventions, mainly by drawing attention to the narratorial role itself, and by drawing the reader into the narrative to participate in the action and to lessen the tyranny of the narrator over the reader. Of course, this style was previously adopted (although in a lighter way) by the modern Arabic novel at the hands of such Arab novelists as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and some others whom I have briefly mentioned earlier in this study. Indeed, in *The Clamour of the Dead* this question of narration becomes the whole heart of the novel, where its main subject becomes this chase between the narrator and his characters and the various types of dialogues among them. The narrator admits early in the novel:

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Do you see how I am always chased by people and other creatures that I do not know? Do you see how I am constantly followed by the grandfather, grandmother, Masoud, Moudi, the young girl, the neighbour girl with the butterfly, the big mosquito, the man escorted by pigeon, and by the mother with the diaphanous veil? How all of them chase me and each one threaten to do something to me if I forget or neglect their demands!... How I am bringing in this far-fetched summer-night story without searching for the absent ones, those who are stretched on wet-cotton beds on cement roofs! (37)

In this way, Al-Mohaimeed's narrator confirms that bringing to life these dead figures is a hindering process to novel-writing and fiction-making. Those dead are the direct reason for him (the author and narrator) for delaying writing his novel or even for being unable to write it in the first place.

The third level on which the narrative memory operates in this novel is finally how it foregrounds the psychological worry of writing, which is really the central point of this novel. The narrator is always worried about how to write his novel, how to draw his characters, how to avoid their control and domination, demands and afflictions, and how to overcome all these worries, especially when he knows that he can do due to his deep-rooted knowledge and experience in this field of fiction writing. He knows that he can write good narratives, but when the right moment arises different circumstances interrupt this flow of writing, hinder it, draw it back and even bring it to a standstill. Writing then, the narrator says, becomes like a heavy burden that he cannot carry or wants to get rid of:

Writing is an anxiety, a concern which I drag behind me like a sack. If I let it go then I would relieve myself in body and mind, and if I kept dragging it behind me then I would get tired. Then you would ask me: what is inside it? I remember that I have told you this before that this sack contains lists of words, and also I hesitated to tell you that it contains characters, bone lime and deep secrets.

Every time I remember one of these characters, I try him and let him walk into my world, and then I get caught by what he argues with me. He would say, why did you describe me by just being brown and tender or green-hearted? I attenuate the loneliness of an old and foolish man, of whom there is no difference between his farts and his perfume. Why don't you depict the misery and loss of my childhood? How many times I get passed by men of flabby and sagging skins, and by cold women who choose me from among all the kids of the house! What a bunch of stray children! We used to envy each other. They have always envied me for I have always walked among them as a man tinted with dark hues that cover my face and with coiled hair as question marks that run after each other over my head. (38)

This rather long but apt quotation embodies how novel-writing is indeed a problematical process that will never cease to notch the author to reveal the secrets of his characters and his past as embodied in the dead. These matters turn out to be central questions for Al-Mohaimeed's narrator and his novel. It is the burden of novel-writing which goes on with him from the very beginning to the very end.

Thus, while complaining to his friend that he cannot write his novel, he does write it through these complaints and the letters he sends to him, even those that never reach him or get lost: 405

My friend, I did not care much, for I discovered that my letter to you was discovered and its secrets became public. One of the people of whom I tried to keep this letter away and about whom I was worried to narrate has actually read the whole letter—and, as he said, he has memorized it word by word. We all know that the post is public and common thing for all, and letters always do not arrive. They lose their right destinations and miss the addresses written on envelop, and fall into lost places and mysterious mazes. (92)

The novel, then, is these letters, which are written by the narrator to his various friends and other readers (some known and many others unknown) in various places and times. And these letters do not arrive at their intended persons, but they travel fast with the wind and reverberate. When one of them does arrive to someone, like the narrator's to Masoud, it tells a different story which the narrator did not write in the first place. These letters are actually tricks which mislead the reader and they change and tell different stories by time and place and they expose the secrets of the narrator. These letters are the novel which he successfully writes as a result of his friends' incitement and provoking. It is interesting here to note that these letters are not exactly like the letters we usually find in the epistolary novel that make the narrative in a straightforward manner.⁷ The narrator faces then these friends' challenge and proves to them that he can overcome his anxiety and write a good novel. He openly tells his friends: "No one knows how difficult it is to expose the secrets and treasures of those who quickly go through my mind and memory, not because I am an idealist who hides what I know and not expose it to any one until my memory is crammed and flooded. Only then its gossip leaks out like a secret thread in my chest while I console my shroud in my final sleep" (2). He goes on to tell his friends that writing a novel is a serious business, not easy, and not free of charge as they think: "I

don't see things and characters as they are and convey their experiences and actions as I know them. Then I would be a naïve conveyer of events and reality" (2-3). For writing is really a hard job; "writing a novel needs two ferocious jaws that never stop raging" (19); it is a permanent anxiety.

406 *The Clamour of the Dead* is thus about this theatrical game of narration between the narrator and his characters and the tricking of the reader into this whole process. There is a multiplicity of voices among narrator, narrators, and characters who all tell their stories in different ways. Stories get mixed up in this digressive game of story telling. For example, the narrator begins his story about his inability to write his novel, then he writes and sends letters to his friends, and then his characters take over the narrative and give different versions of these stories in a manner which emphasises their own freedom. For example, Muzna tells the story of her sister Moudi, who in her turn tells her story in the graveyard. Then Masoud, their father, comes along and retells Moudi's failed marriage in a different way, and so on. This shows that the characters in this novel are as strong and efficient in narrating stories as their own narrator, who often listens to them and obeys their demands and dictates. They accuse him of not being able to tell their stories as they happened and therefore they charge him of falsifications and in this way they are better narrators than him. They always interrupt him to tell their own stories. Muzna, for example, imposes herself on him and begins telling her own story and even develops from the little girl into a fully-fledged character with an independent name which she gives to herself. This strange relationship between the narrator and his characters (narrators) becomes the subject of this novel. The narrator asks himself: "why don't you write a novel without anyone sharing with me the accountability of standing in front of problematic characters as Masoud, Moudi, the carefully-trimmed-bearded man, the man escorted with pigeon, and the grandfather? Even my fear of the living is nothing compared with my terror of the dead, as of the grandfather for instance" (12). Such a narrator seems hopeless and even submissive to the power of his characters, the power of the dead, and the power of the censor. Interestingly, these powers are embodied in the novel from the very beginning to the end by strange creatures, cats, spiders, cockroaches, spirits and ghosts which haunt his writing room. But despite all these tricks the narrator seems to be the most manipulator when he reveals to his readers how he can read the minds of his characters and can see the power of the eraser in creating his characters.

The eraser is another narrative ploy interestingly employed by Al-Mohaimeed, especially how he creates Muzna out of the effects of rubbing the paper with the eraser: "If you don't believe, my friend, that while the eraser erases and exterminates the existence of something or someone it also somehow confirms and testifies its/his presence. This was what I did the other day when I applied my eraser and then suddenly a woman appeared to me and began narrating to me strange and mythological stories" (69). The eraser is something really interesting and useful for Al-Mohaimeed when he believes that the act of "erasing and rubbing or friction is something primi-

tive and instinctual by which one can create something or someone else” (79). The eraser for him is creative and magical: “If you rub two things together some third thing may emerge as new. For example, if you quickly rub two stones together you will get a spark. Or if you rub some static or dynamic object with a soggy one, or a vicious man with a submissive, you will find that something else, which you have never thought of, will slowly emerge and formulate” (79). Thus, Muzna was created through the act of rubbing her name on the page as the “little girl” and then developed into the mature Muzna we know throughout the narrative. She herself tells us her mysterious story with the eraser. She confirms that through the eraser she was able to erase all the things that she never liked in her past:

In my childhood I dreamt to erase, with the eraser stuck at the head of my pencil, all things that I hated. Actually, I was thinking of erasing my fat teacher, who always mocks me; erase my brother, who looks like a mosquito, or at least his wings which sprang on him on that summer night. I was thinking of erasing my mean grandfather and my father. I was dreaming of erasing the school walls so our class-breaks would be so open to people and the streets. I was thinking, like amazed children, that if I erased the open sky, what would then appear beyond it? These continuous dreams made my eraser rub off so quickly, maybe from the first day of school and the pencil would still be in its beginnings. That is why I have come to an early invention: to take the particles of the wooden pencil, so bent with the act of sharpening, and I can grind them and mix them in a small bowl with some sugary element and let them dry and become an eraser.

I told this secret invention to my bench mate in class, but then I discovered that all the other classes have copied and used my invention. Then my fat teacher knew of it and she made me stand in the morning in front of all other pupils to be mocked and severely punished. Can you imagine this violence, although she can never know how I dream of a massive eraser just like her and be able to erase her altogether? What do you think she would do if she knew of this? (75-6)

Muzna then was not obliterated by the eraser, but actually created by it, come to existence and got an identity through it. Muzna has used the eraser to erase everything that she does not like and even to create things through it. Thus, despite that she is young, Muzna has a powerful imagination and is able to create and narrate better than the narrator himself. She indeed becomes the enlightening agent, even the creative muse, for the narrator-writer to write. This is enhanced by the manner in which she appears in the narrative from thin air when the narrator was writing on his desk, with the widow open to “air his room from the odour of the dead and their defecation”, and trying to gloss or erase the words “little girl” as Alla’udeen used to polish his lamp (59). She appears from the light of creation, from serenity, and from the white spot on the line after the act of rubbing:

I saw a very small creature formulating. At the beginning I thought it the dirty rubbing particles. Then I touched it with the tip of my thumb, as if it were moving, with the size of a small and lazy ant. I did not know how it quickly grew and stood in front of me as if standing behind a black transparent veil of a small woman. She was not brown but burnt as with the burning light of noon suns, with her eyes open, wide and shining, just like two shining windows in darkness. Her hair was long and thick and shining with the sun rays that highlight it through the window. She shook her hair up, and I felt that

there was some dark cloud over me when she walked slowly over my page, trying not to disturb the sleeping dead, went to the window and tried to shut it out. She went back to the table, pushed aside with her hands all my papers and stood on it with her dangling legs. She tried to fix her dress, which is spotted with green and red circles of different sizes, to cover her thin legs.

"I am Muzna."

Her smiles were all over my table. I was astonished, sitting there, and not able to brush her off. On the contrary, while I was in temporary absence of mind or sweet numbness, I could see everything, hear everything around me, and yet I was not there:

"I am Muzna; I was suffering on the paper when you were writing me as 'the little girl'.

You see me now; I am not a child; I am not a woman, and I am not a boy. I am nothing, absolutely nothing. I don't influence your writing, whether you add me or delete me.

And yet at the same time I am everything in the story." (60-61)

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This rather long passage is a strong evidence about this metafictional element of character creation and novel writing as a whole. It tells us of how creatures are born on paper and in real life from the friction or rubbing of things together: two stones, a static thing with the dynamic, the wind with tree buds and which erodes stones, the male birds with their females, and man with woman to multiply.

When Muzna disappears, however, she disappears in darkness as she rubs the lamp and the whole room falls into total darkness. But this act in itself supports also her control of her life as she wishes, when to appear and when to die out. She loves the eraser and she erases people and things as she wishes to foreground herself strongly, and yet she does not erase herself when she feels it is time to. She does not use the eraser to leave the narrative and does not tell the narrator to do it either. She embodies the Derridian element of "erasure" or the deconstructive palimpsest text when she disappears in darkness to emphasise and keep her presence alive and safe somewhere else. For her, darkness does not imply that she is not there, while the eraser will erase her if it is used. The eraser then is used in a very tricky way by the author-narrator not only to obliterate obnoxious things but to create more obnoxious characters or creatures. Erasure for Al-Mohaimeed is thus an act of creation, exploration, excitement, elaboration, and an explosion of things. The eraser explodes his imaginative creation of fiction-writing, which is the subject of his novel, the salient self-reflexive element of fiction about fiction. When, for example, the narrator was about to erase the epithet of "pigeon-follower" of his character Muhammad, his imagination was then influenced by the act of erasing. He began drawing the deeds of the "man of pigeon", but, as he argued, if he dared to erase him then he would be changed to a real person, as Muzna did, and then he would be responsible for such action. Erasing, then, is an act of revival, a mind-detonation to make the narrator-author write, and a personification of real people whom the author fears to awaken, as if from the dead. Because the author fears his characters he tries to erase them but they always lurk there somewhere around him and continually terrorise and haunt him, as he begins searching for Muzna in his garden when she disappears in darkness without being able to control and trace her.

Indeed, this poststructuralist notion of “erasure” or erasing is at the heart of the question of authority and the role of the author in fiction. This important question of authority has been fully explored mainly by the two French critics, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, in their respective essays, “The Death of the Author” and “What Is an Author?” In this connection Foucault argues that the author is neither a “person” nor an “originator,” but s/he is a description of a collection of discourses; s/he is “something like a subject” (Foucault 118). And that “subject” is a reflector who frees narrators and characters from the metaphysical expectations of selfhood; he is the problematic promoter of different and differing voices, as Al-Mohaimeed is exactly doing here in his novel. The author then, for Foucault, Barthes, and even for Al-Mohaimeed, embodies pluralism that undermines any authoritative single discourse and foregrounds instead the indeterminate, the polyphonic (interestingly in the Bakhtinian sense as I mentioned earlier), and the undecidable functions of the author. For Foucault, the author is not a genius who is in a “perpetual surging of invention”; he is instead “an ideological product” of history; he is “the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning,” because when one seeks the monolithic function of the author “one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (Foucault 119).

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Roland Barthes, on the other hand, emphasises that the author can only construct a text by assembling its textual fragments: “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (Barthes 146). Indeed as it is in Al-Mohaimeed’s novel, not only its author but also its characters, are essentially in such act of making, the act of being assembled, as beings and as characters with different discourses, and attempting to connect their various meanings. As an author, Al-Mohaimeed and his characters seem to be the products of such textual fragments or even of pencil and eraser particles. For Barthes, language plays an essential role in author and even character making. Barthes believes that language replaces, subsumes, or incorporates the author, and the text becomes the essential arena of debate, not only for the author but also for the characters as well as the narrator, as it has theatrically been enacted in Al-Mohaimeed’s novel. The author, for Barthes (as well as for Al-Mohaimeed), becomes a “scriptor,” who “is born simultaneously with the text”, as exactly what happens at the end of *The Clamour of the Dead*. Indeed the author “is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate” (Barthes 145). Thus, the author, for Barthes and Foucault, and even for Al-Mohaimeed, becomes a product of such theatrical interplay among various competing discourses and conventions.

Furthermore, the act of erasing, and authorial power, is vividly foregrounded in the novel when the narrator tries to narrate the story of Masoud. When the narrator tries to hide some elements of Masoud’s life, a letter appears through the fax and totally shatters his attempts to hide things about this character. By the time Muzna

concludes her story of her sister, Masoud's letter appears, to narrate what the narrator did not do about Muzna even to his own friend. The arrival of this letter actually stops the narrator's imagination and fascination with the story of Muzna. It sheds all the mystery and doubt about Muzna's story and it exposes its fantastic elements which may have become a fertile subject for the narrator and with which he may have been able to convince his friends that he is a competent novelist. But in this manner, Masoud has applied his eraser in a harsh way when he attempts to erase the narrator's imagination, by stopping him from evoking the stories of the dead who were being continually resurrected by the author and to whom they were causing havoc and making a lot of clamour. Erasing for Masoud, then, is no longer a creative ploy as much as it is a stripping off of things, of shedding the story of its mysteries and attractions about both the dead and the living. With Masoud and his interruptions and interventions, the eraser becomes a crushing tool. When, for example, the narrator looks out of his window he sees a man crouching under a tree near a house. But

410 this man is only a truck which has been changed by the narrator's mind into a man sitting in a crouch. Here Masoud creeps into the narrator's mind and makes him doubt what he sees. He jumps to his cabinet, takes out his binoculars and tries to see that man under the tree. He then discovers that it is only a red truck parking there. Masoud thus becomes, symbolically, just like these binoculars through which he can discern reality.

Reality is indeed a key subject in this novel which is about the fabrication of reality into fiction. It is about the making of fiction out of the mysteries of life and its circularity. This circularity, interestingly, reminds us of Alain Robbe-Grillet's detective novel, *The Erasers* (1953), at least in its suggestive title of what Al-Mohaimeed self-reflexively does with the eraser, as we have already seen. Fiction and reality are always mixed up here with Al-Mohaimeed. Even characters seem to be more realistic than their narrator-author who is always flying with his imagination and following these characters wherever they go. Masoud tells the narrator, for example, about Muzna: "Her known story throughout the neighbourhood may suit you and may suit your gentle readers. You even wish that you did not hear me telling you the truth" (90). This is enhanced in how he draws many of his characters out of his pure imagination: Masoud's dwarfish son and his metamorphosis into a big mosquito represent such fantasy of character-creation, or the dead into insects; the fall of Moudi's necklace into the hospital toilet and its association with the fall of the white flag (71); the grandmother's sewing of her coffin which she later divides into two feast dresses for her grandsons, and so on (48). Indeed these fictional characters are not so realistically innocent; they are problematic, illusive, explosive, deluding, audacious, parasitical, and scandalous. At the end of the novel, Masoud comes back from his long absence and begins reading the narrator's letters. He comes back to take revenge and take malicious pleasure in the mishaps of the narrator, to boast in his silver-framed certificate after he had only been a chauffeur to a rich man. Indeed, because of Masoud, the narrator begins to doubt that there is someone else beside his friend to whom he

writes his letters and whom we do not meet at all throughout the novel.

This friend is anonymous throughout the narrative and he remains a virtual man. He does not appear as a normal character even when he is imagined to have a direct dialogue with the narrator. When, at the end of the novel, the narrator strikes a rendezvous with him, to meet him at the hotel, he never shows up, although the narrator hints that there is a small golden Honda car parking nearby, which is like his friend's. This is again a central trick in this narrative to show how this friend, who seems anonymous and always absent, is always practising his authority in the narrative as a central character and a prime mover of things in the novel. Could this friend be Masoud himself? Or could he be that man sitting next to the narrator in the lobby and who looks familiar to him? The narrator does not doubt at all that this man sitting next to him and narrating a story about a failed narrator is definitely his friend himself who never appears in person in the narrative. The narrator, however, continues to tell us about his characters through his letters to his friend, but he never tells us why his friend is always absent. It seems that if this friend appears in the novel the whole narrative will be over and his character will stop chasing him. The mysticism of absence is the source of narration and the driving force of writing for the writer, to write about his characters and their problems. This friend then is the useful agent of creation and novel-writing even when the narrator mocks him and takes him lightly. He is only a narrative ploy through whose friendship the narrator continues to write, his characters to chase him, to follow his steps wherever he goes, and the pigeon continue to fly over him to make him write a successful novel which he has always wanted to do.

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This intelligent and dodging friend is finally our good narrator-writer. He makes our writer always think that he can write a novel or even he is writing a good novel. When the narrative gets tough for the author-narrator this friend always takes over the narrative and drives it forward and impersonates some of these characters. He creates events and fabricates stories to help the narrator write. But he always admits that his (and our) narrator is a bad one and he continues to do so till the end of the novel. Even towards the end when our narrator-author believes that he for the first time has actually written a novel through his letters, he reminds him that this is only illusion, as do his characters too. This friend goes on to mock the author and his ability to resurrect characters from the dead by meeting him by chance for example in the street or in a restaurant or in a hotel lobby or sitting next to him with the same features drawn to him by the author. This is definitely the great game of fiction-making which Al-Mohameed is smartly doing here in this novel. We have always doubted this friend as only a tool for the author to write his novel. He is only a part of Al-Mohameed's figment of mind when he says that he is a narrator with no memory and no imagination; he is only then a puppet through which the author has created his characters and narrative, and is able to write a great novel which we have been reading throughout with pleasure. The narrator-author thus succeeds in this novel and defends himself against all odds that he is not a bad narrator and he can write a

good novel. All that talk, gossip and clamour about the author's inability to write his novel is then just a clamour that must be rejected. And this rejection is symbolically embodied in the title's reductionism of it all as being only a clamour of the dead.

NOTES

1. *Laghat Mawta* (*The Clamour of the Dead*) has not yet been translated into English, although I find it more attractive as a novel than the other two already translated by the British translator Anthony Calderbank: *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* (Penguin, 2007, originally in Arabic, *Fikhakh Al Ra'ihah*); in another edition its title was changed into *The Lure of Scent* (American University in Cairo Press, 2007), and *Munira's Bottle* (American University in Cairo Press, 2010, originally just *The Bottle*, 2004). Of course, stories which appeared in English include "Riyadh", published in a collection of stories by a number of Middle-Eastern authors called *Madinah: City Stories from the Middle East* (Comma Press, 2008), and another story called "Soap and Ambergris" (2008). The other notable Arabic novels by Al-Mohaimeed which are still not translated are *The Dolphin's Excursion* (Nozhat Addolphin, Beirut, 2006), and *Doves Don't Fly in Braidah* (Beirut, 2009). Of course, in addition to that, Al-Mohaimeed has written some good short stories, and an important book that falls within the genre of travel literature: *Al Nakhil Wa Al Qirmid: Mushahadat Min Al Basra Ila Norwich* (*Palms and Brick: From Basra to Norwich*, Beirut, 2004).
2. See also Alter (x); see also my own reading of this term in my book, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism* (24, 78, 107-8, 111, 112, 161, 168, 183, 216, 256).
3. I should mention here that, as a contemporary twenty-first-century novelist, Yusef Al-Mohaimeed could have indirectly been influenced by such modern trends in fiction at least in translations, if not directly in originals. The issue here is not really whether he was being influenced or not, but it is about the fact that he has practiced such poetics in this novel, as this whole article tries to prove.
4. I should mention here that the quotes throughout this paper are my own translation and I opted for not giving the Arabic text since this paper is written for an English-language-speaking audience.
5. In his other novels, particularly *Munira's Bottle*, *The Dolphin's Excursion*, and *Doves Don't Fly in Braidah*, Al-Mohaimeed undertakes tricky questions (which explain why they were at first banned in his country) such as the second Gulf War and Saddam's impact over the whole area. *Munira's Bottle*, for instance, is the story of many women in Saudi Arabia who are bottled up and imprisoned, who become the victims of perpetrators of crimes, who are pained, tormented and trapped in cocoons of silence and fear. It also addresses issues that characterise the lives of women in modern Saudi Arabia such as magic, envy, honour, betrayal, revenge, and the strict moral code that dictates male-female interaction. *The Dolphin's Excursion* also deals with events that take place over six days at a cultural forum in Cairo, during which the three principal characters experience a struggle of ambiguous relationships which illustrates patterns and ways of love among the peoples of the Arabian Gulf. *Doves Don't Fly in Braidah* is also a typical attack on Saudi society which is governed by the "men of virtue" as he calls them: meaning the Organization for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which actually stands against such novels. *Braidah* is the birth place of the writer himself and the whole concept of Islamic fanaticism. The novel also addresses the question of terrorism and Al-Qaeda influence in the country as a whole.
6. Similar novels of this kind that have an allegorical overtones for the conflict between generations are: Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, Second Edition, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick (Washington, DC: Three Continents P, 1998); Ghada Samman, *Beirut Nightmares* (London: Quartet Books, 2010); Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessimist*, trans. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (New York: Interlink Books, 2001); Hanan Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra: A Novel* (New York: Anchor, 1996); also her *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, trans. Catherine Cobham (New York: Anchor, 1992); Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street*,

trans. William Maynard Hutchins, Olive Kenny, Lorne Kenny and Angele Botros Samaan (London and New York: Everyman's Library, 2001); Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, trans. Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea (New York: Interlink Books, 2000); and Tayed Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (1967 Arabic Edition, English trans., London: Heinemann, 1969).

7. We know that the epistolary novel, by definition, uses letters, diary entries, newspaper clippings and other documents as a form of narration and as a reliable source to convince the reader of the narrative itself. It thus enables the writer to write and demonstrate differing points of view without recourse to the omniscient form, as it has fully been employed by its great masters in English, such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Aphra Behn, Mary Shelley, Anne Brontë, Wilkie Collins, Stephen King, John Barth, and Alice Walker; and even more theatrically by many more recent writers, as Meg Cabot and Gene Wolfe. In this way, *The Clamour of the Dead* has somehow benefited from such a theatrical form without fully employing it, through its monologic as well as dialogic forms of letter writing which creates the theatrically dramatic tension in the novel as well as the dramatic device of discrepant awarenesses among characters.

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