



HAL
open science

DIGGING INTO THE SYRIAN UNCONSCIOUS: THE "PERTINACIOUS NATURE" OF FEAR IN DĪMAH WANNŪS'S NOVEL AL-ḤĀʿIFŪN

Annamaria Bianco

► **To cite this version:**

Annamaria Bianco. DIGGING INTO THE SYRIAN UNCONSCIOUS: THE "PERTINACIOUS NATURE" OF FEAR IN DĪMAH WANNŪS'S NOVEL AL-ḤĀʿIFŪN. *La rivista di Arablit*, 2023, XIII (26), pp.31-54. hal-04397932

HAL Id: hal-04397932

<https://hal.science/hal-04397932>

Submitted on 17 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Public Domain

DIGGING INTO THE SYRIAN UNCONSCIOUS: THE “PERTINACIOUS NATURE” OF FEAR IN DĪMAH WANNŪS’S NOVEL *AL-ḤĀ’IFŪN*

ANNAMARIA BIANCO*

As the Syrian uprising turned into civil war, the hope of the first months of 2011 gradually dissolved and paved the way for the resurgence of fear, a feeling that the Assads’ clan policy of terror had been instilling in most of Syrian society for fifty years. Fear and paranoia are also at the core of Dīmāh Wannūs’s novel, al-Ḥā’ifūn (The Frightened Ones, 2017). The book explores the psychological fallout of living under dictatorship in post-revolutionary Syria through the intimate romance between two patients of a Damascene therapist, a plot that intertwines with the stories of their family members, of other minor characters and some autobiographical memories of Wannūs herself. Grounding on in depth textual criticism and socio-historical analysis, this article makes an intervention both in the field of Syria’s political anthropology, by highlighting how the revolution’s crackdown has stirred suppressed traumatic memories among the population, generating new forms of anxiety and distress, and in the field of Trauma Studies, questioning their Eurocentric approach, and enriching them with some insights coming from a non-European experience. In so doing, contemporary Syria, as narrated in Wannūs’ novel, appears as a laboratory to understand the psychological mechanism that in authoritarian regimes allow distress to finally emerge as the ultimate national link between both victims and perpetrators.

«ماذا فعلت بالخوف طوال كل تلك السنوات؟»

(What have you done with your fear, after all these years?)¹

Introduction: Syrian Literature and the Dark Side of the Revolution

The peaceful uprising against Syrian President Baššār al-Asad in March 2011, inspired by the other Arab Spring movements, suffered an immediate crackdown, and soon turned into a civil war. This conflict involved both ethno-sectarian hostilities and international intervention, leaving hundreds of dead, internally displaced people, and scattering thousands of refugees

* University of Aix-Marseille (IREMAM).

¹ Dīmāh Wannūs, *al-Ḥā’ifūn*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2017, p. 2; Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, translated by E. Jaquette; A.A. Knopf, New York 2020, p. 16.

across the world². The violence of the repression enacted by the government forced the citizens to take up arms and organise a counter-society with embryonic institutions and improvised military units, including the Free Syrian Army, consisting of a group of defectors. Moreover, after 2013, the inclusive logic that had animated the beginning of the protests gradually faded, and the once united revolutionary front became increasingly fragmented among groups that advanced different claims, reflecting also socio-economic divides. The Syrian conflict progressively transcended the Syrian national borders, and transnational groups with ethno-nationalist demands, such as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), became central actors in it, together with the newly born Islamic State (2014), independent jihadists, and other radical groups. In the meantime, militias loyal to the regime, known under the name of *šabiḥah* (ghosts), have in turn started to put the country to the sword³.

Since 2011, more and more Syrian writers and filmmakers have been devoting their work to the description of this situation. Anne-Marie McManus analysed a corpus of these recent cultural productions, and she noted the emergence of a common aesthetic of «devastation», recognising in the recurring *topos* of “ruins” (*al-aṭlāl*) an iconography that links today's fiction both to the pre-Islamic legacy of elegiac poetry and to Walter Benjamin's reflections on the notions of history and modernity⁴. As pointed out by several other scholars such as Stephan Milich, Ryszard Bartnik, Greta Sala and Naglaa Waly⁵, and particularly acknowledged by Syrian writer Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan (1974, Damascus)⁶, the trauma of loss and experienced violence has thus become one of the central themes of post-2011 writing.

² See the UNHCR data on «Syrian Emergency», <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (last accessed 13 November 2022).

³ A. Baczeko; G. Dorronsoro; A. Quesnay, *Syrie, anatomie d'une guerre civile*, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2016.

⁴ A. McManus, *On the Ruins of What's to Come, I Stand: Time and Devastation in Syrian Cultural Production since 2011*, in “Critical Inquiry”, 48, 1 (2021), pp. 45-67.

⁵ S. Milich, *Narrating, Metaphorizing or Performing the Unforgettable? The Politics of Trauma in Contemporary Arabic Literature*, in F. Pannewick; G. Khalil (eds.), *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on / of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, Verlag Reichert, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 285-301; R. Bartnik, *From Vivid to Darker 'Shades of the War' – Sumis Sukkar's Fictionalization of Syrian Trauma*, in “Polish Journal of English Studies”, 3, 1 (2017), pp. 41-54; G. Sala, *Il trauma nella letteratura siriana contemporanea: il caso di Nuzūḥ Maryam di Maḥmūd Ḥasan al-Ġāsīm*, in “Maydan: rivista sui mondi arabi, semitici e islamici”, 1 (2021), pp. 121-142, available at: <https://rivistamaydan.com/home-2/maydan-vol-1/> (last accessed 24 October 2022); Naglaa Waly, *Memory, Trauma and Identity: A Reading of Sawṣan Ġamīl Ḥasan's Ismī Zayzafūn*, in L. Denoos; M.G. Sciortino (a cura di), *Percorsi della narrazione nel mondo arabo e islamico. Tra storia e racconto*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2023, pp. 67-90.

Syrian literature, in its attempt to say the unspeakable and describe the harsh reality of everyday life, increasingly addresses the psychological consequences of the war across the different population strata remaining within the country, as well as on its displaced citizens scattered around the world. Despite this, the fictionalisation of the “dark side” of the revolution has not always been straightforward. As Fatima Sai observed, several Syrian writers came up against what she called «the limits» of fictional representation⁷, putting aside complex narrative plots and producing mostly documentary works and newspaper articles. However, as later stated by Federica Pistono, this general tendency seems to start reversing in 2015, date from which the authors seem to be slowly emerging from their creative funk⁸.

Dīmah Wannūs (1982, Damascus), daughter of the well-known dissident playwright Sa‘d Allāh Wannūs (1941-1997), from whom she inherited not only her literary talent, but also her political commitment against the Syrian regime, is part of this very group of writers. Author of a collection of short stories (*Tafāṣīl*, Details, 2007) and a novel in the aughts that won her the Beirut 39 prize for young literary talents (*Kursī*, A Chair, 2009)⁹, she only started publishing fiction again in 2017 with *al-Ḥā’ifūn* (The Frightened Ones), which was shortlisted for the 2018 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and was followed in 2020 by *al-‘Ā’ilah allātī ibtala‘at riḡālahā* (The Family That Devoured its Men). While the last novel follows almost autobiographically the exodus of a young Syrian woman and her mother from Damascus to Beirut and from Beirut to London (where Wannūs has now resided since 2017), the events described in *al-Ḥā’ifūn* take place mainly in Syria. As suggested by the title of the book, its plot deals with the “system of fear” put in place by the Baathist regime since 1963, by emphasising how it affected the daily lives of its citizens, even in including their most intimate spheres, and even after the revolution. To illustrate the way in which this feeling is rooted in the collective unconscious of the Syrian people, the author chooses to present the reader with the story of Sulaymā, a woman in her thirties who has been under the care of a psychologist for about half her life, and whose psychic malaise has only intensified since 2011. Her storyline intertwines with that of the other characters revolving around Dr Kamīl’s practice, patients and employees alike, as well as with the vicissitudes of the

⁶ See, for instance, Rosa Yassin Hassan, *What did exile change in our narratives? Syrian narratives in the eyes of others*, in “Syria Untold”, 26/01/21, available at: <https://syriauntold.com/2021/01/26/what-did-exile-change-in-our-narratives/> (last accessed 17 October 2022).

⁷ F. Sai, *The Limits of Representation. The Transformation of Aesthetics in Syrian Artistic and Social Discourse*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, 5, 9-10 (2015), pp. 106-113.

⁸ F. Pistono, *Diritti umani e libertà civili nel romanzo siriano dell’epoca di Baššār al-Asad*, PhD thesis, Sapienza Università di Roma, 2019, p. 267.

⁹ M. Censi, *Le Corps dans le roman des écrivaines syriennes contemporaines*, Brill, Leiden 2016, p. 19, n. 2.

members of her own family. This technique allows us to traverse some crucial moments in the country's recent history, following both mandates of Ḥāfīz al-Asad (1971-2000) and his son, Baššār al-Asad (2000-).

The present article will analyse the original Arabic version of the novel in the light of recent theories developed in the field of Trauma Studies to highlight how the aftermath of the revolution and its crackdown has further contributed to the awakening of fear, anxiety, and distress in the daily lives of Syrians, stirring suppressed memories, opening new wounds, and fragmenting social bonds. Jaquette's English translation will be referred instead when longer text excerpts are used for illustrative purposes. This methodology, applied to a Middle Eastern context of authoritarianism and repression, will make use of a decolonial approach aimed at shedding light on how the Syrian regime's actions allow for distress to finally emerge as the ultimate national link between the different segments of its population.

At the core of Wannūs' novel is, indeed, the representation of a general state of fear in the country. Fear is a survival mechanism that triggers the body's fight-or-flight response to perceived threats, whether real or imagined. This primal emotion therefore plays a critical and essentially positive role in the lives of human beings, but it can also have negative effects when it becomes disproportionate to the situation at hand or chronic. Chronic fear can lead to a range of mental health issues whose most common pathological manifestation is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This definition applies to the cluster of symptoms that emerge after exposure to a traumatic event, such as actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence¹⁰. Following Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytical approach, trauma can be defined as a state of disruption caused by having suffered an «overwhelming experience»¹¹, in which one or more life-enhancing processes are irretrievably lost¹². However, this epistemological pattern has been considered too Eurocentric by several post-colonial scholars, including Steph Craps, who calls for a broader definition of this notion, arguing that it failed to achieve «cultural solidarity»¹³. In the field of Arab studies, Stephan Milich was the first

¹⁰ For a detailed study of the interdependence between trauma and fear, see P. Gonzalez; K.G. Martinez, *The role of stress and fear in the development of mental disorders*, in "Psychiatr Clin North Am", 37, 4 (2014), pp. 535-546.

¹¹ C. Caruth, *Trauma and Experience: Introduction*, in Ead. (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1995, p. 4.

¹² See the entry C.R. Figley, *Trauma, Definitions of*, in *Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide*, 2012.

¹³ «[The founding texts of trauma theory] marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favor or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and

to point out how the constitutive exceptionality of trauma theory is often missing in the Middle East context. He referred specifically to the Iraqi case, emphasising how the citizens of this country have been exposed to increasingly shocking events in the last thirty years, from the Gulf Wars to the rise of ISIS¹⁴. Together with Lamia Moghnieh, he also pointed out that, nevertheless, «claiming individual, collective, or national trauma as a political identity that demands justice, recognition of suffering, and rights of retribution has not yet acquired legal authority within the countries of the region»¹⁵. It is therefore local cultural production that strives to fulfil the complexity of this task, somewhere between testimony and catharsis. As we shall see in this article, this especially applies to the Syrian case, where the years of Baath repression have been compounded by the events of the civil war, provoking an unbroken chain of unprocessed traumas in most of the population's unconscious, regardless of their sectarian or political affiliation. These shocking experiences are at the origin of the same psychoses illustrated through the stories of *al-Hā'ifūn* – a novel where individual distress and a «collective mental state»¹⁶ of terror and paranoia mingle through a polyphonic narrative.

Although much has been written about the epistemological challenges of transferring individual aspects of trauma to the collective level, it is generally accepted that the interdependencies between social, cultural, and individual forms of distress still need a more thorough conceptualisation. The stylistic choices made by Wannūs allow her to often intersect these two layers in her writing, thus enabling literature to become a further tool for understanding the complexity of the Syrian civil war experience, while contributing to innovating the broader literary representation of global conflicts.

The present study will generally focus on the socio-historical framework reconstructed by Sulaymā's fragmented account, whose non-linearity alludes to one of the main constituent elements of trauma, i.e. the challenge of telling it¹⁷. The stories of her family members and lover allow to identify the policy of terror implemented by the Asad regime as the source of the «pertinacious»

non-Western or minority traumas». S. Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2013, p. 2.

¹⁴ S. Milich, *Narrating, Metaphorizing or Performing the Unforgettable? The Politics of Trauma in Contemporary Arabic Literature*, cit., p. 285.

¹⁵ S. Milich; L. Moghnieh, *Trauma: Social Realities and Cultural Texts*, in "Trauma: Social Realities and Cultural Texts, Middle East – Topics & Arguments", 11 (2018), p. 5.

¹⁶ If a mental state is shared by a large proportion of the members of a group or society, it can be called a «collective mental state». See: W. Bostock, *Collective Mental States and Individual Agency: Qualitative Factors in Social Science Explanation*, in "Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research", 3, 3 (2002), Art. 1, available at: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs020317> (last accessed 14 November 2022).

¹⁷ C.R. Figley, *Trauma, Definitions of*, cit.

nature of fear in Syria – as one might define it, by borrowing an expression used by Sigmund Freud¹⁸. He described as such the persistent attacks on the human mind carried out by the traumatised unconscious and its disguised emotions, thus introducing the notion of the “return of the repressed” into psychoanalysis¹⁹. This “return” embodies a process whereby repressed elements of memory tend to reappear in the shape of repeated and dissociative behaviours or thoughts, which constitute the raw material of this novel.

Within this framework, the first part of the article will clarify the narrative mechanisms implemented by Wannūs to signify the damage inflicted on Syria’s «cultural memory»²⁰ by the regime. The second part will further deal with the symptomatology of this persistent psychic phenomenon, through the illustration of the characters’ disorders, as well as the identification of their survival strategies in response to trauma. Finally, the third part will take us from the individual to the collective level. It will argue how the “divide and rule” strategy implemented by the dictatorship to justify its persecutory actions has contributed to fragmenting social and family ties in Syria, as well as establishing a climate of suspicion and paranoia among people belonging to different ethnic groups and confessional orders. This last point, in particular, will allow us to observe how fear not only transforms the unconscious of those who experience it, but also the lives of those who instil it, exerting nefarious effects on both “victims” and “perpetrators”. As we shall see from the novel, a point of no return has been reached in the Baath Party’s process of dehumanising Syrian citizens and, as a result, the revolution represents a factual divorce between society and politics. The idea of national reconciliation emerges in the end of this book as a mere mirage, suggesting that a re-writing of Syrian collective identity is still sorely needed.

Before and After the Uprising: Political Taboos and Cultural Wounds

al-Ḥā’ifūn opens in Dr Kamīl’s waiting room in Damascus where the intradiegetic narrative voice of Sulaymā recalls her first meeting with the man who then became her lover, Nasīm. He entered the protagonist’s life exactly fifteen years earlier than the main timeline of the novel, which is set around 2017, at the moment of the book’s publication. These dates, however, are never explicitly mentioned, but are slowly deduced as we progress through the reading of the novel, which features an unilinear storyline, shattered by

¹⁸ S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated and edited by J. Strachey, W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London 1961.

¹⁹ S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, London 1974.

²⁰ On this point, we will namely refer to Jeffrey C. Alexander’s social theory of trauma developed in J.C. Alexander (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004.

numerous time jumps within the fragmented memory of the protagonist. This narrative technique, built through free associations of thought, repetitions and omissions, is an element which, although not new in the history of modern and contemporary Arabic literature, recurs frequently in Syrian novels of the last decades. As a matter of fact, authors have often attempted to reproduce their characters' vulnerabilities through the fictionalisation of the dysfunctional mechanisms of traumatic memory²¹. In *al-Ḥā'ifūn*, Sulaymā's scattered recalling of specific historical events allows the reader to reconstruct the chronology of the text. The 1982 Hamah massacre and the outbreak of the 2011 revolution stand out as the most determining episodes of the novel's plot, as they influence not only Syria's history, but also Sulaymā's family and love life, overlaying present and past fears. These recollections also cut open new wounds in her fragile mind: Dr Kamīl has indeed always connected «her tendency towards self-flagellation» with the Hamah massacre and their move to Damascus²².

The “events” (*al-aḥdāṭ*) of Hamah – as the bloody repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, and of the Sunni opposition more generally, was called by the Syrians at the time²³ – dug a furrow between Sulaymā's parents when she was only five years old, tacitly defining their interfaith marriage as a mistake from then on. Afraid of being accused of disloyalty to Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's regime, with whom he shared the same sectarian affiliation, Sulaymā's Alawi father forced the family to flee to Damascus. Since then, he gradually became a slave to a form of «silencing fear»²⁴, as Cristina Dozio argues in her analysis of the novel, and stopped making any reference to Hamah massacre, and, more generally, to Syrian politics. Sulaymā's mother, for her part, never forgave her husband for what was in her eyes nothing less than an act of cowardice and connivance: as a doctor, he should have stayed in the city to

²¹ G. Sala, *Il trauma nella letteratura siriana contemporanea*, cit., pp. 133-134.

²² Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 36.

²³ Depending on the sources, the number of the victims of the air strike launched by the government against the city would be between 10,000 and 40,000 people, as reported in Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, Cambridge University Press, London-New York 2018, pp. 1-3.

²⁴ In her contribution, Dozio ascribes to the characters of the novel the different forms of fear found by Wendy Pearlman in her field study conducted with Syrian refugees. These are: “silencing fear” produced by intimidation, “surmounted fear” understood as a barrier to be overcome in order to participate in protests, “semi-normalised fear” in the war context, and “nebulous fear” concerning the uncertainty of the future. See W. Pearlman, *Narratives of Fear in Syria*, in “Perspectives on Politics”, 14, 1 (2016), pp. 21-37, quoted in C. Dozio, *Il dialetto come lingua degli affetti e della paura: variazione linguistica nel romanzo siriano al-Ḥā'ifūn*, in E. Alberani; A. Andreani; C. Dozio; L. Paracchini (a cura di), *Sui sentieri delle lingue: sistemi linguistici tra movimento e complessità*, Ledizioni, Milano 2021, pp. 57-71.

help the wounded, including her own brother, for whose death she will forever hold him responsible.

As suggested by the selective mutism maintained out of shock, political intimidation, and fear by Sulaymà's father, the massacre remained a taboo in Syrian society for more than two decades²⁵ before being explicitly addressed by Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, in *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah* (In Praise of Hatred, 2006)²⁶. Later on, the revolution lifted the veil of silence on many other crimes committed by the Baath, by unearthing what Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan defined as «the buried traumas of the Syrian people»²⁷, a series of “political taboos” which had been preventing from healing the “cultural wounds”²⁸ of the population as a whole.

However, while this “process of exhumation” had the merit of awakening the people from the state of torpor into which government repression had plunged them, it also led to more ominous consequences. This applies specifically to the character of Sulaymà, whose previous anxieties seem to intensify day after day in the face of the sudden change in her life: she was utterly terrified of the revolution. The uprising often becomes synonymous with chaos in the book, defined as an equally unifying and divisive event by Sulaymà's narrative voice. While the events of 2011 have rekindled old ethno-sectarian conflicts and personal hostilities²⁹, reducing the society into deep poverty³⁰, they have also become a source of collective psychological

²⁵ At that time, the cultural field was dominated by state censorship as well as by the preventive self-censorship of authors, as reported in Mohja Kahf, *The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature*, in “World Literature Today”, 75, 2 (2001), pp. 224-236.

²⁶ Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2006.

²⁷ A. Bianco, *Les gardiens de l'air : une généalogie romanesque de l'exil en Syrie*, in A. Dahdah; D. Lagarde; N. Neveu (eds.), *Réseaux, trajectoires et représentations des migrations*, Presses de l'IFPO-Open Edition Books, Beyrouth 2023 (forthcoming).

²⁸ Political taboos prevent any questioning of the official version of the past and when their logic is applied to cultural trauma (which, according to Jeffrey C. Alexander's social theory of trauma, takes place when people who belong to a social group have the feeling that they have suffered a shocking, unforgettable experience which changes their awareness of themselves as a collectivity), it can provoke the refusal of a collective to recognize the other's suffering. On this point, see: J.C. Alexander, *Chapter 1. Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, in Id., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, cit., pp. 1-30.

²⁹ «The revolution erupted in an instant. And in that instant, monsters appeared. They filled our city, our homes, our living rooms. They hit and slapped and insulted and killed and destroyed a whole history of human relationships». Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 41.

³⁰ «Revolution means begging my mother not to fall ill, every morning and night. My eyes silently plead for her to stay healthy, to not contract a virus or other disease». *Ibid.*, p. 70.

distress. This condition has metaphorically brought the people together under the sign of fear and anxiety in the waiting room of her therapist's office:

“Don't worry...you won't go mad until we all do.” His response confused me. Before the revolution, Kamil had never spoken about “us” as an entity. [...] The revolution had snapped that line. Irreparably. We weren't standing on opposite banks anymore, we stood on the same shore; even *shabiha* still coming to see him had joined our ranks³¹.

Moreover, after the 2011 uprising had begun and a bomb had killed his family in Homs, Nasīm left for Germany, confronting Sulaymā with a *fait accompli* and a deep sense of defeat³². The man did not ask her to follow him and left her alone, wallowing in her memories and dealing with a feeling of loss that compounds her grief over the constant disappearance of men in her life: her father, killed by his own fears according to her mother, and her brother Fu'ād, who went out to work and never came back.

Sometime after his departure, in the present of the story, Nasīm sends Sulaymā the proofs of a novel he wrote. The narrator's life and anxious character, whose name is Salmā, closely resemble Sulaymā's, to the extent that the latter feels robbed of her own history by her former lover and confidant³³. Interestingly, the protagonist's alter ego is also orphaned by her father, who died of cancer when she was fourteen years old, exactly as of Dīmah Wannūs. This event had a traumatising impact on the life and trajectory of the writer, who also recalls it in *al-Ā'ilah allātī ibtala 'at riġālahā*, in which all the male determinant figures of the protagonist's family disappear because of illness, war, and exile. Nevertheless, the Russian doll system created in *al-Hā'ifūn* appears even more complex than what it seems, revealing unexpected and intricate correspondences between the author's life and that of the characters she created, who, just like her, are also the fruits of two intermarriages between Alawites and Sunnis, and, in the case of Salmā, not only is she herself a writer in her thirties, and the daughter of an intellectual, but she is also fluent in French and lives and works in Beirut just as was the case for Dīmah Wannūs.

The embedded narrative device intervenes as well to complicate the plot, multiplying the narrating voices through alternating long chapters in bold type headed *Awraq Nasīm* (Nasīm's Manuscript), in which it seems increas-

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³² «The revolution ended the day you and everyone else left». *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³³ See the recurrence of the verb “to steal” (*saraqa*, in the original Arabic version) in the following sentences: «When I read a similar passage in Naseem's manuscript, I saw myself. Naseem stole me and wrote me into his novel». *Ibid.*, p. 36; «Naseem hasn't written my father's story. My mother isn't in the manuscript either. It's me he's stolen». *Ibid.*, p. 37; «Naseem has stolen stories of my father and my fear-flecked childhood, and animated them with his own character». *Ibid.*, p. 47.

ingly difficult to understand whether it is Salmà or Sulaymà speaking. The metafiction instils doubts in the reader about the truthfulness of the narrated facts³⁴, and makes Sulaymà fall into a crisis: as she progresses in the reading, she begins to doubt her own memories and develops a sort of dissociative identity disorder³⁵. Dissociative syndrome is a form of PTSD and its essential feature consists in the development of specific symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events, characterised by the presence of at least two distinct personality states³⁶. And, indeed, Sulaymà ends up being so absorbed in reading Nasīm's manuscript that she loses the perception of her own identity, emotions, and dreams³⁷. This condition is triggered not only by the uncanny similarities between her story and that of the character, but also by the fact that her name, Sulaymà, is a diminutive (*ism al-taṣḡīr*) for Salmà, built on the linguistic pattern of “*fu' aylà*”. Moreover, these might be speaking names since they both derive from the verb “*salima*”, meaning “to be healthy”, “safe”, or, even, “complete”. The choice may not be accidental and aimed at emphasising by contrast Sulaymà's psychological condition of «splitting of consciousness» – or *Spaltung*, as Freud called this personality dissociation³⁸.

Her distress is also accompanied by other symptoms, such as depersonalisation and derealisation:

I felt like I didn't exist, and it frightened me. I'd begun seeing everything through a lens of terror, and felt like nothing existed beyond my own body. I felt my mother wasn't there any more, like Fouad, who had disappeared, or my father, who had passed away, or Naseem. Or maybe they existed somewhere separate from me, and did not sense my existence³⁹.

³⁴ When a story is told within another instead of being told as part of the plot («nested story»), it enables the author to play on the reader's perceptions of the characters, bringing into question the motives and the reliability of the narrator, whose identity, in our case, is not clarified until at least the second half of the novel. For further details on this literary device, see the entry W. Nelles, *Embedding*, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 2005.

³⁵ For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between identity and fear such that symbolised by the interpenetration of the story of Sulaymà et Salmà, see G. Sala, *Al-Ḥā'ifūn de Dīma Wannūs: la peur au quotidien dans la Syrie contemporaine*, in J. Kroubo Dagnini; R. Enault (dir.), *La peur: crise du siècle ?*, Éditions Camion Noir, Rosières-en-Haye 2022, pp. 495-524, 501-503.

³⁶ F.J. Stoddard Jr et al., *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*, in Eid., *Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, pp. 19-35, pp. 20-22.

³⁷ «Was that my dream or Salma's? I couldn't remember any more». Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 106.

³⁸ C.R. Figley, *Trauma, Definitions of*, cit., p. 676.

³⁹ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 92.

Crushed by the weight of these doubts, Sulaymà travels from her shelter in Beirut, where she moved to keep her panic attacks at bay, to Nasīm's former flat. There, she makes some disturbing discoveries: her partner has written for her and his other loved ones a series of burning *ante-mortem* obituaries. He also stored photographs of other women. The results of this research allow Sulaymà to realise that Salmà is not her, but another woman in the flesh, who also used to be a patient of Dr Kamīl. After discovering that she is also a refugee in Beirut and reaching out with her, Sulaymà tries to meet her "alter ego", posing as a Syrian artist interested in printing a catalogue of her works with Salmà's publishing house. However, when the moment comes, the protagonist turns around: she decides to avoid confrontation with the woman, whose disorders appear to her as a sudden mirror of her anxieties, behind the coffee shop window where she is sitting and waiting for her arrival⁴⁰. For the first time in her life, Sulaymà is thus able to visualise and understand her fear and decides to return to Damascus to take care of her mother, rather than stay in Lebanon alone. Back there, she acknowledges the sheltering role that fear has always played in her life since her father's death, and she consciously surrounds to it, as her last remaining grip on life in the face of devastation: «[Fear] urged me to live [...]. If it wasn't for fear, I would have lost my impetus for life»⁴¹. The same seems to be true for the other Syrians who cross her path: since the revolution, they can finally recognise the sources of their sufferings and can cling to them as a defence and survival mechanism, without falling into any pathological drift. It is in fact the way in which the different characters cope with their traumas, trying to get rid of their «fear of fear» (*ḥawf min al-ḥawf*)⁴², which constitutes the subject matter of the novel, where the word *ḥawf* recurs about 150 times – an average of almost one occurrence per page. The obsessive repetition of this word thus becomes a crucial stylistic element, which acts as the driving force underlying the narrated events.

In al-Asad's Syria, fear has been accompanying citizens in their daily lives for nearly fifty years, as an induced and inherited feeling at the same time. Exemplary in this sense is one of the first dialogues between Sulaymà and her therapist, in which the woman states that «fear matures with [them]»⁴³ and Dr Kamīl replies that it even seems to «cling to [her] soul»⁴⁴,

⁴⁰ «It wasn't her anxiety that made me anxious, but the resemblance between our anxieties did make me stop. I stood in confusion at the edge of the pavement, catching my breath. Her anxiety was equal to mine, equivalent; it had the same look and smell. As if my own wasn't enough, I saw it before me and experienced it twice: once in my soul and once before my eyes». *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴² Dīmāh Wannūs, *al-Ḥā'ifūn*, cit., p. 16.

⁴³ Dīmāh Wannūs, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

emphasising the extent to which this feeling is rooted in her, and streams from her eyes. Sulaymā's memories, stimulated by reading Nasīm's manuscript, fuzzily guide the reader through her growth path within the repressive reality of Baathist Syria. They penetrate the intimacy of her mind, identifying the political roots of her post-revolutionary anxieties. Thus, Wannūs is provided with the perfect tool to bring to light the strategies of spreading terror on which the Syrian dictatorship managed to stand until 2011, at the expense of the mental health of most citizens. As Salwa Ismail points out in her study of the regime's policy of oppression, *The Rule of Violence* (2012), the people who were not part of those segments of society affiliated to al-Asad's clan because of their occupation, sectarian affiliation or political identity, lived for years in a true «state of exception»⁴⁵. In this permanent siege condition, they were relegated to playing the role of *homines sacri*, deprived of any form of active life and reduced to their biological existence⁴⁶. This result was achieved through the brutality and pervasive control exercised over many aspects of their daily life by the intelligence services (*al-muḥābarāt*)⁴⁷, responsible for holding firm the two pillars of the Baathist regime, totalitarianism and sectarian division, that have often ended up dividing families from within. Nevertheless, a few more sentences from the novel, entrusted to the stream of consciousness of Sulaymā, who indulges in an imaginary dialogue with Nasīm, seem to suggest that, in spite of the patronage system set up by the regime to ensure continuous loyalty from the hard core of its supporters, this segment of Syrian society also lived in constant fear of losing its privileges, because of the ease with which any citizen could become *persona non grata* in an authoritarian context where oppression and cronyism go hand in hand and no one really seems to be sheltered from a common history of collective violence:

If I tell him this, he will say that my family and I are just four people among twenty-three million frightened Syrians, [...] [t]hat we all have the same story. We may as well be copies of each other. Here we are, at school, at home, in the streets, in Damascus's few cinemas, at the theatre, in government offices...all of us living one story, one aching version of humankind⁴⁸.

The lasting of everyday physical and symbolic violence in the country for half a century gives the Syrian trauma a different understanding from the one ascribed to this type of event in the Western tradition, where it is normally

⁴⁵ G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002.

⁴⁶ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998.

⁴⁷ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, cit.

⁴⁸ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 47.

perceived as a single, exceptional episode. Rather, the picture provided in this novel suggests adherence to what Nora Parr has described as a daily process of traumatisation, common to many other realities in the Middle East, in contexts of prolonged occupation or dictatorship⁴⁹. Wannūs's decision to explore the psychological fallout of living under a longstanding authoritarian regime thus implies that the language of pathology often infiltrates the narration. Neuroses, paranoia, and other symptoms of relapsing mental illness are deployed by the writer to represent the specificity of the Syrian situation, following in the footsteps of a local literature that in recent years has devoted itself to describing in great detail the gears of the police state in force in the country⁵⁰, where, accordingly, torture has become a common government practice, and fear is still filling the very air that one breathes.

Writing Trauma and Its Neuroses, Between Individual and Collective Madness

As previously mentioned, the narration opens in Dr Kamīl's waiting room, immediately introducing us to the novel's protagonist as one of his patients. However, the first chronicle of mental illness that Dīmah Wannūs presents to the readers is not the story of Sulaymā, but that of the therapist's secretary, Laylā. The first piece of information we learn about this woman is that her brother «had lost his mind years earlier»⁵¹, when he had the misfortune to fall in love with the daughter of an intelligence officer. After their first date, he was kidnapped, disappeared for a whole week and returned an «empty shell» (*ḡasad^{an} fāḡir^{an}*)⁵²: Laylā told Sulaymā that the Intelligence had «hung him from his feet for days, left him upside down, until his mind poured out, to the last drop»⁵³. Her words thus introduce the reader to the world of arbitrary and brutal torture carried out by the *muḥābarāt* against their fellow Syrian citizens. The impunity these officers enjoy is immediately blamed on former president Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, against whom the young boy cries out during his psychotic episodes:

She said her brother came back without his mind. From then on, he shut himself in his room. He'd sit next to the open window, looking out onto the

⁴⁹ For further details, see: N. Parr, *No More "Eloquent Silence": Narratives of Occupation, Civil War, and Intifada Write Everyday Violence and Challenge Trauma Theory*, in "Trauma: Social Realities and Cultural Texts, Middle East – Topics & Arguments", 11 (2018), pp. 58-68.

⁵⁰ On this point, see W. Max, *Sight, Sound, and Surveillance in Ba'thist Syria: The Fiction of Politics in Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan's Rough Draft and Samar Yazbik's In Her Mirrors*, in "Journal of Arabic Literature", 48 (2017), pp. 211-244.

⁵¹ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 7.

⁵² Dīmah Wannūs, *al-Ḥā'ifūn*, cit., p. 8.

⁵³ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 7.

crowded street in Masaken Barzeh and yelling at people. “Have you seen Hafez al-Assad?” he’d ask them. “If you see him, tell him I won’t leave my room until he comes to visit in person.” No one paid any attention. Crazy. Lost his mind. He’d urinate out the window and point his penis directly at whoever was passing, oblivious to their insults or swearing⁵⁴.

The combination of obscenity and nudity that Wannūs condenses in this scene underlines at once the process of dehumanisation imposed by the regime on its people, inscribing the everyday life experienced by unfortunate citizens under the sign of the absurd. It is nothing less than surreal than a woman with an experience such as Laylā’s finds herself interfacing with all kinds of patients suffering from mental disorders; a range that, in post-revolutionary Syria, also includes many ex-torturers and pro-regime militia men, hit by the boomerang effect of fear. The bitter laughter aroused by the scene and the paradox of Laylā’s condition harks back to Bakhtin’s grotesque realism⁵⁵ and brings out with the force of its objectivity the absurdity of everyday Syrian life. This interpretation is further corroborated in Maya Jaggi’s review of the novel, where she suggests that the name of Laylā’s brother might have been left anonymous to highlight how these kinds of stories continually occurred in Baathist Syria, where many innocents went through similar situations⁵⁶. Besides, the novel continually oscillates between individual and collective dimensions, first interweaving Sulaymā’s illness with that of her companion Nasīm, and, later, the dysfunctionality of this couple with that of Sulaymā’s parents as well as Salmā’s.

Sulaymā is an artist who stopped painting in 2012, after her brother’s disappearance. She suffers from anorexia and panic attacks, while the sturdy Nasīm, a doctor who faints at the sight of blood and secretly works as a writer under a pen name, slaps his face compulsively. Their physiques, their personalities, and the way they try to cope with their persistent fears and new traumas are opposite, yet somehow complementary, to the point that they seem to borrow each other’s terror in a sort of *folie à deux*⁵⁷, in which Sulaymā states eloquently: «I swapped my fear of the sky for his fear of the earth»⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁵ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by H. Iswolkly, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984.

⁵⁶ M. Jaggi, *The Frightened Ones by Dima Wannous review – love and loneliness in Syria*, in “The Guardian”, 15/04/2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/15/the-frightened-ones-by-dima-wannous-review-love-and-loneliness-in-syria> (last accessed 24 October 2022).

⁵⁷ The *folie à deux*, which is a shared delusional disorder (SDD), is also known as «shared psychosis» and consists of a syndrome in which symptoms of a delusional belief, and sometimes hallucinations, are transmitted from one individual to another. See K. Dewhurst; J. Todd, *The psychosis of association: Folie à deux*, in “Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease”, 124, 5 (1956), pp. 451-459.

⁵⁸ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 16.

Their acts of masochism are described in detail by Wannūs, who also exposes the conscious and unconscious mechanisms lying behind their persistent, recurring disorders. According to Trauma Theories, these conditions stem from the persistent return of the shocking experience in the mind of the traumatised subject who recalls overwhelming events when they are still unprocessed, through hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, and disturbing behaviours⁵⁹. In Sulaymà's case, hunger makes her feel safe, since «an empty stomach signals an empty mind, memory and soul»⁶⁰ and she wants to rid herself of her painful past, as well as of her extreme sensitivity, which lies behind her addiction to Xanax, which is used to treat anxiety. Clinically speaking, she understands how her panic attacks happen (when «a weary soul burdens the body and its exhaustion is expressed in physical symptoms like shortness of breath and disorientation»)⁶¹, but she doesn't seem to be able to control them without resorting to her medication. Nasīm, on the other hand, hits himself «to feel content, to feel pain»⁶², since, on the contrary, he seems to have become completely indifferent to pain or, at least, is unable to verbalise it, therefore sinking into permanent apathy. Only writing about other people seemed to «sate him»⁶³, but the last time he saw Sulaymà, before leaving for Germany, he told her that he couldn't do it anymore, because «[e]very time he started a new novel, he'd flounder about in his own experiences and those of his family, and end up sinking deeper into himself. Then he'd toss aside what he'd written and start anew»⁶⁴.

Nasīm's «inability to write»⁶⁵ about the aftermath of the revolution mirrors Wannūs's experience between 2009 and 2017, contributing to deep reflections on the meaning of literature in time of war, as well on its functions. Wannūs alludes, on the one hand, to the cathartic potential of writing, but, at the same time, to the fact that the act of witnessing performed by the writer ends up reviving the trauma experienced, which proves to be a particularly difficult and painful practice⁶⁶. While Sulaymà associates Nasīm's lack of imagination with the side effects of the antidepressants he takes, he clearly states that he was not able to talk about what was happening in front of his eyes. Yet, imagining the deaths of his loved ones, through the obituaries that

⁵⁹ C. Caruth, *Trauma and experience: Introduction*, cit., p. 4.

⁶⁰ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 32.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁶⁶ One of the most useful therapeutic approaches to healing trauma consists of the victim telling their experience to the Other, whether (s)he is a professional figure or not: when somebody listens to the testimony of a victim, this person is following the victim's departure from the event, in order to break the isolation that the event imposes. See C. Caruth, *Trauma and Experience: Introduction*, cit., p. 11.

Sulaymà finds after his departure, seems to allow him to tame his fear of fear, giving him the illusion of being in control of outside events. Nasīm lives his last months in Syria in a state of perpetual paranoia, convinced that he is constantly being followed and observed by the regime's men because of his profession, and he often shows up at Sulaymà's house in a feverish delirium at all hours of the day and night. This instils in the mind of the protagonist's mother the conviction that Nasīm has definitively "lost his mind", just like her late husband. Years earlier, the man had in fact begun to suffer from the same persecution manias as his daughter's companion, struggling with panic attacks every time he reflected on the public conduct to be adopted in order not to antagonise the men of the Baath:

"So what if they don't believe me?" my father often said. What more could he do, beyond running away to Damascus and "treating the people who lived there instead of his own kin in Hama," as my mother said he had done? What more could he control, beyond hanging a portrait [of Ḥāfīz al-Asad] in his office, high on the wall above everything else⁶⁷?

Sulaymà, who constantly imagined her father and brother «being abused, beaten and tortured»⁶⁸, tried to allay her father's fears as best as she could, participating in Young Revolutionaries and Pioneers concerts at school. This kind of event was meant to brainwash young minds about the meanings of the words «dignity and freedom» (*al-karāmah wa 'l-ḥurriyyah*)⁶⁹ in Syria. Questioned by the military-education instructor about what her family told her regarding Hamah, little Sulaymà went so far as to justify the bloodshed ordered by Ḥāfīz in an attempt to protect her loved ones. From that moment on, the fear anchored in her father's unconscious never left her either, exploding at the moment of the old man's death. A few years after his disappearance, Sulaymà would indeed discover through an ID check at the border that his paranoia was not unjustified: while keeping a low profile all his life, his name had been nevertheless added to the government's wanted list and remained there even after his death⁷⁰.

The roots of Nasīm's insanity, however, go back to a more recent event: three months before Sulaymà's brother disappeared, the state police arrested him in the belief that he was supporting protests in the same way as Fu'ād. When they found out he was a doctor from Homs, which was a major rebel stronghold during the first years of the revolution and was under government

⁶⁷ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 80.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 34.

⁶⁹ Dīmāh Wannūs, *al-Ḥā'ifūn*, cit., p. 134.

⁷⁰ A similar and equally grotesque episode is recounted in Ḥālid Ḥalīfah's *al-Mawt 'amal šāqq* (Death is Hard Work, 2016), in which men from the regime's army try to arrest the corpse of a political opponent, transported across the country by his sons to bury him in his hometown.

siege between 2011 and 2014, their suspicions grew, and they dragged him to the “Department of Death and Madness” (*Far‘ al-mawt wa ‘l-ġunūn*)⁷¹. There, he spent thirty days in a four-by-five-metre cell with more than ninety other detainees. Afterwards, he was transferred to another Department, and stayed with “only” twenty detainees in a seven-by-twelve-metre room. They tortured him twice, beating him with a metal pipe known as “Abrahamic green” (*al-aḥḍar al-ibrāhīmī*)⁷², since it had turned green with corrosion. «Naseem tried to kill himself by scratching at his body and ripping his limbs apart. He tried to strip his skin from his soul. But his soul fought back... and madness was how it resisted»⁷³. Since that suicide attempt, and since his subsequent release, Nasīm became obsessed with death. While immersed in this catatonic state of thanatophobia, writing was the only act of courage he managed to perform, at least until he decided to defy his hydro-phobia to smuggle his paraplegic father to Europe across the sea.

The only character in Sulaymā’s inner circle who does not seem to be crushed by the weight of fear in her daily life is the protagonist’s mother, who is in favour of the revolution and proud of her missing son. Nevertheless, she started showing signs of premature ageing since his disappearance. She overcame this unsettling event by convincing herself of the death of her son, since «how could a mother’s heart rest if her son were alive, being tortured endlessly?»⁷⁴. If madness has not managed to creep into her mind at the hands of the regime and its abuse, it nevertheless manages to penetrate under the guise of mental illness, manifesting itself through the first signs of Alzheimer’s dementia. We quickly learn that the woman has been reading and rereading page 24 of the same book for weeks and, towards the end of the novel, Sulaymā even goes so far as to wonder whether death might not ease her pain. A nightmare in which a shower head turns into a bloody heap of human flesh in the hands of her terrified mother finally shakes Sulaymā from these thoughts, bringing her back to the stasis of her everyday life.

The characters thus seem, each in their own way, to be victims of a deep trauma, certainly caused by the peculiar events that have disrupted their existence, but also by the wider web of oppression woven by the Baath and its intelligence. Yet, the real point of no return for the «collective madness»⁷⁵

⁷¹ “Department of Death and Madness” was the name given by human rights activists to Department 215 of Damascus military prison. The documentation of violations that occurred within its walls is extremely abundant.

⁷² Dīmāh Wannūs, *al-Ḥā’ifūn*, cit., p. 132.

⁷³ Dīmā Wannūs, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 85.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ When a community enters a period of collective violence, many factors can be causal and lead to the onset of pathological distress, especially where political leaders constantly try to manipulate the minds of their citizens. The philosopher and historian Franz Borkenau, drawing on Le Bon, Jung and Freud’s theories on the collective unconscious, used the term «collective madness» to describe a very

enveloping the Syrian citizens is reached when even Dr Kamīl decides to run away, depriving his patients of all psychological support against the widespread ethno-sectarian violence and the escalation of post-revolutionary paranoia. The therapist gradually closes his practice, abandoning his patients to the inevitability of their fate of insanity, in a country where there seems to be no prospect of a future.

An Illusion of Unity? The Fragmentation of the Social Fabric and the Issue of Justice

As mentioned in the introduction, an important element of collateral damage from the Syrian revolution has been the deepening of the ethno-sectarian divisions that have always run through the country, and Wannūs, as an Alawite herself, experienced this at first hand⁷⁶. She decided to draw on her own biographical background to address this sub-theme of the novel. It has already been shown how the Hamah massacre and the reaction of Sulaymā's father ended up digging a furrow of unbridgeable misunderstanding between him and his wife, but the story of Salmā's mixed family is much more suitable for analysing the progressive souring of inter-confessional relations in Syria since March 2011.

Alongside its policy of terror, the Syrian regime has implemented a strategy of *divide et impera* since its rise to power, thus placing itself in continuity with the French, who had subjugated the country under their mandate, together with Lebanon (1923-1943). They kept the minorities in power and ostracised the Sunni majority from the political scene in Syria, weakening the bonding between the different religious sects. It was the precariousness of this balance that allowed the Alawite minority (an ethno-religious group which originated from Shia Islam and had been massively promoted by the French) to eventually seize power through the bloody *coup d'état* led by General Ḥāfīz al-Asad in 1970. His authoritarian regime always sought to create a separator paradigm, drawing a clear differentiation between them and the "others", who, according to the Baathist propaganda, were constantly trying to cause instability in the country and instil insecurity in the minds of citizens. This "looming threat" provided the ideal pretext for the establishment of the security and securitisation policy of the government, supported

specific context of collective mental state of generalised paranoia, as a situation where there is a «universal, self-destructive persecutory mania separating man from man». See F. Borkenau, *End and Beginning, On the Generations of Cultures and the Origins of the West*, edited and introduced by R. Lowenthal, Columbia University Press, New York 1981, p. 82.

⁷⁶ See her letter of complaint written to President Baššār on behalf of the Alawite community: Dima Wannous, *We Alawites... Why do we love you?!*, in "Souria Houria", 2/04/2014, available at: <https://souriahouria.com/we-alawites-why-do-we-love-you-by-dima-wannous-for-al-modon/> (last accessed 25 October 2022).

and even justified by a salvific narrative which presented al-Asads' regime as the protector of the fragile Syrian society, ready to use any means necessary to prevent the risk of sectarian divisions to which the country was exposed⁷⁷. Exemplary is the fact that Sulaymā's brother, Fu'ād, is implicitly accused of terrorism before his disappearance, as coming from Hamah.

The hostility between Sunnis and Alawites has also been nurtured by the party's loyalty campaign, which has reinforced the Alawites' sense of confessional belonging by reserving numerous privileges and positions of power for them – although the real leadership has always remained in the hands of al-Asad clan⁷⁸. The Alawites' sense of superiority, stemming from the apparent authority exercised by their sect, emerges clearly from Salmā's childhood memories. Nasīm's manuscript, which offers us several insights into her past, contains many episodes alluding to the contempt shown by her paternal grandparents towards her mother, constantly accused of snatching their son from the Alawite countryside in order to take him to the Sunni stronghold of Damascus with her⁷⁹. At each visit, the girl was punctually blamed for the «guilt» (*ḍanb*)⁸⁰ of giving up her origins. A “sin” which suggested, implicitly, that her blood was not considered pure enough by her Alawite relatives, as being corrupted by her Sunni mother. In addition, her aunt and daughters often teased her about her tanned skin, calling her «Darkie» (*Sawdā'*)⁸¹, since the Alawites had mostly retained their fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes due to their endogamy. Sectarianism lurks in family relationships, at the point that Salmā's paternal Alawi grandfather, notwithstanding the love he has for his grand-daughter, is so obsessed by ensuring a “pure” lineage to his son that he advises him to marry a second wife, when Salmā's mother has to undergo a hysterectomy. Yet, her parents' marriage was not the only mixed union in her family, since this practice was not that unusual: her cousin had also married a Sunni. However, this man had been much better received than his mother for two reasons: not only he was extremely wealthy, but he had even had his name changed at the registry office, from Dībū to 'Alī, assuming a true Alawite identity.

It is important to note that things were much better for Salmā on the Sunni side of the family. The woman recalls that, when she was six or seven, her mother took her to a friend's jewellery shop to buy a present for another friend

⁷⁷ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, cit., pp. 120-121.

⁷⁸ Salwa Ismail, *Changing Social Structure, Shifting Alliances and Authoritarianism in Syria*, in F.H. Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi Press, London 2010, p. 14.

⁷⁹ Alawites have traditionally lived in the Coastal Mountain Range, along the Mediterranean coast of Syria. There, their strongholds are the cities of Latakia and Tartus. Alawites are also concentrated in the countryside around Hamah and Homs, even if many of them moved to the capital to work in the Baathist administration.

⁸⁰ Dīmāh Wannūs, *al-Ḥā'ifūn*, cit., p. 35.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

who had just given birth to her first child. The jeweller had paid her many compliments on her princess-like appearance, but once the little girl had asked for water in a clear Alawite dialect, the man had immediately changed his attitude, pointing out to her that this countryside talk did not suit her. For Wannūs, this is the perfect example to talk about «the accent or its power» (*al-lahğah aw sulṭatuhā*)⁸² in Syria, emphasising how language has progressively transformed into a divisive element within the country, used by the police as a tool in the service of fear. Numerous words have thus been turned into “shibboleth”, signalling loyalty and affinity to identify opponents of the regime⁸³. A further element related to the linguistic aspect in the novel is the issue of the verbal violence Salmà and her mother are subjected to. The mocking phrases that the girl had been accustomed to hearing during her childhood have turned into words of hatred after the revolution. Once, her eldest girl cousin, whose family eventually joined the *šabīḥah*, wrote her an awful letter, in which she gave voice to all the anti-Sunnite hatred inculcated in her head: «I don't hope they kill your mother, oh no, I hope they rape you in front of her, and then slaughter you like an animal, so she spends the rest of her days in agony»⁸⁴. The brutality of her cousin's words causes real terror in Salmà's soul, underlining the weight that hate speech will have on her psyche from then on, causing her, just like Sulaymà, to have real panic attacks:

I looked in the mirror, swallowed a Xanax and let myself cry. How could anyone be so fragile? How could words alone bruise one's soul like a violent blow? How could they conjure a complete memory, instantly restore a whole history? A single word could take my body from where it was seated safely on the sofa and toss it down a well of memory⁸⁵.

The «whole history» to which the protagonist of Nasīm's manuscript refers is clearly Salmà's family history, made up of mockery and rejection, whose traumatic memory is reactivated by her cousin's words. The daily violence of the war turned his paternal relatives from men into beasts, through a veritable process of barbarianisation (*tawahḥuṣ*)⁸⁶ which made them lose their humanity because of what in Salmà's eyes appears to be a pathological fragility, and not the expression of a well-founded hatred:

These beasts who flung insults and joined the *shabiha* to fight on the side of a regime killing people in cold blood, one day they had woken up and dis-

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸³ For a detailed analysis of these linguistic examples, see: C. Dozio, *Il dialetto come lingua degli affetti e della paura: variazione linguistica nel romanzo siriano al-Ḥā'ifūn*, cit.

⁸⁴ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 40.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Tarek El-Ariss, *Return of the Beast: From Pre-Islamic Ode to Contemporary Novel*, in “Journal of Arabic Literature”, 47, 1/2 (2016), p. 79.

covered my mother was Sunni! All these years she had lived with my father and alongside them, in the village and in our home in Damascus, and in their homes in Damascus too, all these years and they had not realised. The revolution had opened their blue and green eyes, and they stared at her Sunniness⁸⁷.

Once again it is the revolution that is blamed in the novel, since Salmà later describes it as «a divorce and a separation» (*ṭalāq wa ḥālat infīṣāl*)⁸⁸ which destroyed families from within and broke any other bond of friendship and love, only worsening the divisions encouraged by Baath policy. Another extremely significant episode is the meeting between Salmà and her long-time friend Yasmīnah in a Beirut café. Their reunion is marred by the news that the young woman has ended up falling in love with a pro-regime militia soon to be sent to the Harasta battlefield, where her uncle lived before his house was destroyed. Mindful of the abuses carried out by the regime against her people and unable to bear Yasmīnah's grief, Salmà leaves, recognising the impossibility of living together again.

Sulaymà herself does not feel any pity for the regime's men and wonders how Dr Kamīl can deal with the very men who tortured, and likely murdered, her brother. Although the young woman recognises in their eyes a bewildering mixture of evil and terror (*al-širr muḥāḍiy^{an} li 'l-ḥawf*)⁸⁹, she seems to doubt the former torturers' desire for redemption and the idea that they may also have been damaged by the system, or by the more recent events of the civil war, does not even cross her mind: «Do they tell him that they've killed? Do they speak of their pleasure in torturing people? Does one of them have Fouad's scent on his hands? Why do they come to see Kamīl? Do they simply have an abundance of time and money? Or are they sent to confess how they abuse and torture others?»⁹⁰.

In Wannūs's novel, such questions remain unanswered, leaving room for numerous interpretations. In recent years, as more and more former officers are publicly confessing their crimes, or their connivance with the regime, and apply for asylum in Europe, the themes of justice, forgiveness, and punishment have started to make their way into Syrian cultural production. These elements generated reflections on the “banality of evil” enacted by the dictatorship among its trusted men, who, just like Nazi officers, might have been reduced to mere cogs in the Baathist machine of terror, unable to distinguish good from evil⁹¹. However, since the government of Baššār al-Asad is

⁸⁷ Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 41.

⁸⁸ Dīmāh Wannūs, *al-Ḥā'ifūn*, cit., p. 78.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁹⁰ D. Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*, cit., p. 71.

⁹¹ The expression was created by Jewish political scientist Hannah Arendt when she was invited to attend the trial of Nazi hierarch Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. She had seen no pure evil in him, but a cold mechanics. A few years later, Primo Levi warned against exporting the Nazi model, recalling how the Nazi «silent diaspora»

still standing and several international powers are returning to normalise their relations with the regime, a true process of national reconciliation and peacebuilding, based on the recognition of the crimes committed by former perpetrators against their victims, still seems far off on the horizon⁹². Producing “therapeutic history” after violence represents an essential means to rebuild a divided community⁹³ and *al-Ḥā’ifūn* is one of those few novels that go into the details of the Syrian collective trauma, addressing a particularly thorny issue such as that of the “Perpetrator’s Trauma”, evocation of which provides grey shades to Wannūs’s writing of the civil war. After all, the author’s own biographical experience places her in a situation of in-betweenness which may have encouraged her to look at different types and degrees of psychological damage suffered by the various segments of Syrian society in a context of daily violence and fright.

Saira Mohamed acknowledges that «a cultural evolution in the concept of trauma from a psychological category to a moral one has taken place» in the last decade, and that a counternarrative of trauma, «one that recognises trauma as a neutral, human trait», must be developed in order to restore its meanings⁹⁴. In this sense, only the mutual recognition of the stories of the victims and perpetrators might help to build new shared memories of collective trauma in Syria and pave the way to social unity.

Conclusions: Looking at Syrian Devastation from a Therapist’s Couch

On light of the analysis produced in this essay, it is clear that Wannūs succeeded in constructing an extremely intimate yet polyphonic novel that allows the reader to penetrate the depths of what I would name as the contemporary “Syrians’ unconscious”. By applying the concept of the collective unconscious coined by the analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung to the peculiar case of daily repression represented in *al-Ḥā’ifūn*, it is indeed possible to identify the common psychic substratum of an entire population which has been exposed to permanent trauma by the system put in place by the Baathist regime, as well as to understand the roots of Syrian fear and its persisting nature. This feeling still grips the daily lives of most of the main and secondary characters of the novel, even, and perhaps even more, after the revolution, whether they stayed in their own country or left to seek refuge abroad.

had taught the art of torture to the military of a dozen countries, mostly in the Middle East. See P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by R. Rosenthal, Simon & Schuster Paperback, New York 2017, p. 188.

⁹² R. Hinnebusch; O. Imady, *Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements*, in “Syria Studies”, 9, 2 (2017), pp. 1-14.

⁹³ Idriss Jebari, *Therapeutic History and the Enduring Memories of Violence in Algeria and Morocco*, in “Middle East – Topics & Arguments”, 11 (2018), pp. 108-119.

⁹⁴ Saira Mohamed, *Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity*, in “Columbia Law Review”, 115, 5 (2015), pp. 1157-1216.

To describe in detail the mechanisms of terror used by the Syrian regime against its actual or supposed opponents, Dīmah Wannūs has resorted to several literary devices, which she has carefully combined, resulting in a unique literary work that oscillates between documentary and fiction, as shown by the detailed references to the prison reality. This interpenetration (*tarākub*) of genres is a characteristic feature of post-revolutionary writing, according to the observations of Syrian intellectual Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Ṣālīh⁹⁵, but with Wannūs this technique results in a truly courageous book. *al-Ḥā`ifūn* is characterised by a raw yet poetic language, which transforms the psychosis of the fictional characters into a reflection on the Syrians' lack of freedom and state violence, swinging between the different dimensions of traumatic experience (cultural, social, individual), which often end up intersecting.

Describing the reality from her therapist's couch, Sulaymā's character entrusts the reader not only with her own story but also with that of her personal network, casting an appalled glance at the political repression that has surrounded her since she was a child. Sulaymā particularly shows us the loss of humanity caused by half a century of Baath policies, weakening any form of social bond that was not subservience to the party. However, if the revolution seems to have deepened the furrow of sectarianism, it has nonetheless brought to light the unspoken traumas of different social groups, forcing them to confront their ghosts and finally name their phobias and paranoid syndromes. Thus, the war has paradoxically ended up bringing the Syrian people together for the first time in decades in one large medical practice, whose crowded waiting room is but a mirror image of the country as it is today.

Wannūs often uses clinical language in her novel to portray the complex workings of the human mind, describing the symptoms and pathologies of her fictional characters with textbook accuracy. Nevertheless, the writer does not stop at this dimension, trying to explore the depths of their consciousness through metaphors, similes and other rhetorical devices that are both the result of the creativity of her pen and the harshness of her past. It is precisely in the cracks of the game of mirrors between Sulaymā and Salmā that one can see how Wannūs's own autobiographical experience of fear emerges and nourishes the plot, adding social complexity to the latter, by virtue of the writer's belonging to the Alawite community on her father's side and to the Sunni community on her mother's side. The act of telling is vital not only for the patients in Dr Kamīl's office, but for the author herself who, thanks to this novel, has managed to tame terror and regain possession of her voice after ten years of silence. Unlike Nasīm's unfinished manuscript, Wannūs'

⁹⁵ Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *L'écriture habitée: à propos de quelques caractéristiques de la nouvelle écriture syrienne*, in "Confluences Méditerranée", 99, 4 (2016), available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-confluences-mediterranee-2016-4-page-161.htm> (last accessed 25 October 2022).

mature novel appears as a space in which the author is able to «work through» her own painful memories, to quote Dominick LaCapra⁹⁶, using her first-hand experience to try to understand the complex history of political and social violence of her country. The desire to identify the causes of these traumatic events and to overcome all the different fears they aroused gives rise to hybrid writing, somewhere between fiction and historical testimony, through which the author, while not presuming to speak for her entire nation, offers to her readers a text that commemorates their wounds. In so doing, she overcomes the challenge of the aesthetic representation of trauma and its transmission, without falling into binary logics of identification and separation with specific social category. Testifying to the general state of devastation in which her country has fallen, through an emotion as multifaceted and transversal as that of fear, Wannūs denounces the suffering of her fellow Syrians and advocates for the restauration of justice in a society ruled by an inescapable violence.

⁹⁶ D. LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 2004.