



Full metadata for this item is available in Research@StAndrews:FullText at:  
<http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

**Bread and Cinema : Baghdad in *al-Nakhla wa-'l-jiran* by Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman**  
Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham

Date of deposit	[29 05 2013]
Version	This is an author version of this work.
Access rights	© This item is protected by original copyright. This work is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. This is an author version of this work which may vary slightly from the published version. To see the final definitive version of this paper please visit the publisher's website.
Citation for published version	Caiani, F., Cobham, C. (2010). Bread and Cinema : Baghdad in <i>al-Nakhla wa-'l-jiran</i> by Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman  <i>Middle Eastern Literatures</i> 13 (3): pp 231-259.
Link to published version	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2010.523203">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2010.523203</a>

Bread and Cinema.

Baghdad in *al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran* by Ghā'ib Tu<sup>c</sup>ma Farmān.

## 1. Introduction.

This article focuses on the depiction of Baghdad in Ghā'ib Tu<sup>c</sup>ma Farmān's first novel, but we will begin by giving a brief outline of the author's life and work.<sup>1</sup>

Farmān was born in Baghdad in the old, poor quarter of al-Murabba<sup>c</sup>a in 1927 and grew up during WWII, a period of great political instability which nevertheless played a positive role in his literary formation, as it further opened up Baghdad to outside influences. Farmān was exposed to Marxist ideas and European literary realism, in particular to the work of Russian writers such as Gorky, and it was during this period that he started writing fiction. In 1947, he moved to Cairo where he studied literature at Cairo University and published short stories and articles in the Egyptian press (partly in order to sustain himself). While in Cairo, he was exposed to a thriving cultural scene dominated by the modern critical approach of intellectuals such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī, Tawfīq al-Hakīm and Salāma Mūsā (he lamented the absence of role models like these in contemporary Iraqi culture; Shlayba 1996: 59-60). He became friendly with

Naguib Mahfouz, who had a great influence on him, as his first novels challenged the romantic and sensationalist literature of the period, offering instead alienated middle class characters with whom Farmān identified. In an article Farmān wrote in Egypt for the periodical *al-Thaqāfa* he refers to his links with other Iraqi writers and confirms that he was part of the Baghdadi group *Jamā'at al-waqt al-dā'i* ('The Association of Wasted/Lost Time')<sup>2</sup> along with 'Abd al-Malik Nūrī, Fu'ād al-Takarlī, Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb and others (Shlayba 1996: 61).

In 1951 Farmān returned to Baghdad but was forced to leave again in 1954 when the newspaper *Ṣawt al-ahālī*, for which he worked, was closed down by Nūrī al-Sa'īd's government. In the same year his first collection of short stories, *Haṣīd al-rahā* ('Harvest of the Mill'), was published.<sup>3</sup> His second 'exile' took him first to Beirut, where he briefly worked as a teacher, then to Damascus, where he participated in the 1954 conference of the Arab Writers' Union and was elected to the Committee for New Literature (*Lajnat al-adab al-jadīd*) which encouraged the use of the colloquial in fiction.<sup>4</sup>

On a second visit to Cairo, Farmān co-edited with the well-known Egyptian critic Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim the anthology *Qiṣaṣ wāqi'iya min al-'ālam al-'Arabī* ('Realist Stories from the Arab World'), published in Cairo in 1956 by Dār al-Nadīm. In the foreword the two critics defined their concept of 'new realism'.<sup>5</sup>

While at a conference in Romania Farmān was stripped of his Iraqi nationality on the publication of his non-fictional work, *al-Hukm al-aswad fi-l-ʿIrāq* ('The Dark Regime in Iraq'; published in Cairo in 1957). After that, he travelled to China, where he worked for a while in the New China News Agency, then returned to Iraq where he continued to work for the agency after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958. The following year, his second collection of short stories, *Mawlūd ākhar* ('Another Birth'), was published. Farmān describes the difficulties of this early period of exile in the introduction to this collection: 'I wrote these stories when I was away from Iraq in 1955, 1956 and 1957 [...] some of them I wrote in a freezing cold January when I was semi-homeless and [one of them] I wrote on my way back to Romania after Khalīl Kunah [one of Nūrī al-Saʿīd's ministers] had intervened to prevent me from re-entering Syria.' (al-Nuʿmān 1996: 296). This short story collection has been identified as part of the brief flowering of Iraqi fiction immediately after the establishment of the Republic.<sup>6</sup> However, any euphoria amongst writers and intellectuals caused by the political turning point of 1958 rapidly evaporated as many ended up in prison or went into voluntary or enforced exile.<sup>7</sup> Sometime shortly after the publication of his second collection (it is not clear whether in 1959 or in 1960), Farmān himself left for Moscow where he lived until his death in 1990. In his Russian exile, he suffered from ill health, depression and frustration, but he also got married and had a son. He worked for Moscow

publishing houses, translating into Arabic works by writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Pushkin. Furthermore, it is in this period that he matured as a writer and had all his novels published (in the Arab world), starting with *al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran* ('The Palm Tree and the Neighbours', 1966) and finishing with *al-Markab* ('The Ship', 1989).<sup>8</sup>

As we will see below, Farmān's first novel is not only the culmination of his own initial development as a writer, but can also be considered as the remarkable birth of the Iraqi artistic novel. It is not incidental that °Abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad, writer of one of the most comprehensive commentaries on Iraqi fiction, hails *al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran* as 'the true beginning' of the Iraqi novel (Aḥmad 1977, Vol. 1: 115).

## **2. *Al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran*: Realism.**

*Al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran* was published in 1966 in Beirut while the author was already living in exile in Moscow. As Fayṣal Darrāj writes in the introduction to the novel's 1988 Dār al-Fārābī/Dār Bābil edition, the novel has not had the critical fortune it deserves (Darrāj 1988: 7).<sup>9</sup> Even if some discussions and analyses of the novel have appeared in the Arab world, especially since the death of the author in 1990,<sup>10</sup> *al-Nakhla* remains virtually untouched by scholars of Arabic literature who write in English.<sup>11</sup>

Most Arab commentators on the novel agree that *al-Nakhla* is the first example of a sophisticated Iraqi novel with artistic ambition and value (*riwāya fanniyya*), as opposed to previous experiments which were marred by an overtly journalistic style, by sentimentality and melodrama, or by general technical ineptitude (as Farmān and the other notable writers of his generation, Fu<sup>c</sup>ād al-Takarlī and <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Malik Nūrī, were already well aware when they tried their hands at fiction).<sup>12</sup> The second observation unanimously expressed by all critics of the novel is that *al-Nakhla* represents a successful realist novel (*riwāya wāqi<sup>c</sup>iyya*).<sup>13</sup> This reference to literary realism is undoubtedly correct, but in general these critics justify their claim by writing about the novel's plot (a realistic, plausible story), characters (who represent the real people of Baghdad's poor quarters during WWII), and setting (which is the place where the writer grew up, with clear references to actual streets, quarters, squares, etc.). Less room is given to a thorough analysis of the forms and techniques that contribute to this realism, which is not only informed by conventional literary influences but also by folk literature and the world of popular cinema and crime fiction. This study aims at such a close textual analysis, which will be expanded through references to Erich Auerbach's work on literary realism and Gaston Bachelard's on the poetics of space.

Before analysing the text in detail we will offer a brief synopsis that will function as a general introduction to its themes and structure. The book

is divided into 32 chapters in which the third person narrator switches focus freely from character to character, often within the same chapter. Even though, by the end of the novel, four characters have emerged as the main protagonists, the narrative perspective is a choral one, sometimes focusing on many other secondary characters. This changing narrative focus is instrumental in conveying a comprehensive idea of the nature of the place (Baghdad, especially the old quarter in which most characters live) and the time (during WWII) in which the action takes place.

The four main characters are Salīma the baker, her late husband's friend and her future husband, Muṣṭafā, her stepson, Ḥusayn, and his girlfriend Tamādir. Salīma dominates the first part of the novel. She is a middle aged woman who has been widowed for six years at the time the narration starts and has been forced to work hard, baking bread overnight, in order to raise Ḥusayn. The latter, a young man in his twenties, lives in the same house as Salīma in one of the old quarters of Baghdad. Ḥusayn lives off the money that his father has deposited for him with Ṣāhib, owner of the bicycle hire shop, who lives in the same street. Ṣāhib is a father figure for the young man, who is supposed to be looking for a job. Although he does this from time to time, unsuccessfully, he actually spends most of his time arguing about money with Salīma and having a secret relationship with Tamādir. She is a young woman Ḥusayn picked up in front of a downtown cinema on the day she left home to escape from an arranged marriage.

Ḥusayn is seen at the beginning of the novel paying her one of his daily visits to her room in the Camp al-Arman quarter, but soon she moves to live with her old aunt, Nashmiyya, in the Karrada quarter, closer to where Ḥusayn lives.

The plot of the novel follows two main threads: on one hand we have Salīma's attempt to overcome the hardship of her life as a widow: she has to fight with Ḥusayn over the money she earns with her baking, and over what she feels is due to her of the house her late husband has left, but more importantly she feels lonely as she is growing older and wearier and wishes she could stop working and enjoy the company of a man. Here Muṣṭafā enters the scene: an old friend of Salīma's late husband, he exploits his acquaintance with her to persuade her to give him some money (thirty dinars) which is supposed to buy her a share in a modern oven (in the well-off Dhāk al-Şawb, 'the other side of the river' area)<sup>14</sup> and relieve her from her baking. Actually, Muṣṭafā intends to use her money to buy goods stolen from the occupying British army. Despite cheating her, Muṣṭafā ends up marrying her out of a mixture of self interest and a genuine liking for her.

The second main thread of the plot concerns Ḥusayn, who strives to find a way in his troubled life. He is jobless and fatherless, hence lacks guidance, and for him *al-Nakhla* is a dark coming of age novel. There are two key characters who will shape his life: Tamāḍir, with whom his relationship becomes increasingly difficult, and the 'thug' (*shaqī*) of the quarter, Maḥmūd



Ibn al-Ḥawla, who first publicly humiliates him and then kills Ṣāḥib, his friend and father figure.

Whereas the initial and middle parts of the novel are made up of chapters in which the perspective shifts from character to character,<sup>15</sup> the final part (the last 6 chapters) focuses solely on Ḥusayn, who emerges as the controversial hero of the novel. It is especially in this final part where the novel comes to resemble *film noir* or crime fiction.

We will start our analysis of *al-Nakhla* first by comparing and contrasting it with other fictional texts in order to demonstrate the quality of its realism. Then we will focus on the detail of the text in order to analyse the particular depiction of space and show how this contributes to its realism.

The two texts we have chosen to compare to *al-Nakhla* are the one whose alleged influence or inspiration the author was anxious to dismiss - Naguib Mahfouz's *Zuqāq al-midaqq* (1947; *Midaq Alley*, 1975) - and the one whose influence he was ready to acknowledge - Italian writer Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* (1933; *Fontamara*, 1985). The association between *al-Nakhla* and Mahfouz's novel is discussed by Iraqi critic Fāḍil Thāmir, who writes about Farmān's novel as follows:

It is obvious that the author was much influenced by the Egyptian atmosphere [in *Zuqāq*] and the attitude of the masses there to the

[1939-45] war, as the attitude of people in *Nakhla wa-'l-jīran* does not appear very different from people's attitude in *Zuqāq*, whereas events testify that the popular masses in Iraq were well aware of the war from day to day [...] and in fact specific armed movements emerged as a result of this awareness. Therefore, the Iraqi writer should have conveyed to us this distinguishing feature of the Iraqi people's consciousness during the war (Thāmir 1975: 154)

Farmān always denied such an influence and defended his novel as purely and genuinely Iraqi,<sup>16</sup> while appearing quite happy to acknowledge an influence on his work from Silone's novels and especially his first, *Fontamara*. All three novels can be defined as realist novels in as much as they depict as faithfully as possible plausible events set in a certain time and place (in all three novels the focus is mainly on marginalised, poor characters). At the same time, if we move away from general definitions to the texts themselves, we realise that these are three completely different novels. The conclusions we reach regarding the differences separating Farmān's novel from the other two are easily explained on one level if we consider the publication dates: Mahfouz's novel was published in 1947 and Silone's in 1933, whereas *al-Nakhla* appeared much later, in 1966, when Farmān would clearly have been exposed to other, more modern, texts.<sup>17</sup>

However, we consider these comparative exercises to be useful as we attempt to define in more detail what literary realism can be and what it is in *al-Nakhla*.

Let us start with the features which *al-Nakhla* has in common with *Zuqāq*: both novels deal with an urban microcosm, a street or an alley in an old, poor quarter of an Arab capital city under British occupation during WWII. Some characters might be said to have common features (for instance, despite the clear differences in character and behaviour, each of the two young female characters, *al-Nakhla*'s Tamādir and *Zuqāq*'s Ḥamīda, finds herself caught between two similar male characters,<sup>18</sup> while trying to live without relying on her family). Thāmir's comments on Farmān's failure to depict the political awareness of the lower strata of Baghdad's society seem unjustified as some characters (both central and peripheral) show on more than one occasion their awareness of the wider political situation and their willingness to argue and take sides.<sup>19</sup> If it is true that some of the characters (mostly, realistically, women) appear ignorant of the reality of the city outside the narrow confines of their quarter (Salīma is the best example as she is awestruck on a rare trip to the better off areas of Baghdad), it is also true that some other characters (mostly, realistically, men) debate politics in a way which profoundly distinguishes them from their Egyptian counterparts in the Mahfouzian alley: an excellent example is the lively and entertaining discussion (which, despite its humour, might well resonate with

today's situation in Iraq) between the nationalistic Ṣāhib and the secretly, perforce pro-British Muṣṭafā (127-9).<sup>20</sup>

Even more important than refuting Thāmir's harsh criticism of *al-Nakhla*'s politics is to go beyond the mere content of the two novels and see how they work, what their tone is, what their formal features are; in short how they represent two different ways of being realistic. Let us compare how *Zuqāq* and *al-Nakhla* begin. Here is the beginning of Mahfouz's *Zuqāq*:

Many things combine to show that Midaq Alley is one of the gems of times gone by and that it once shone forth like a flashing star in the history of Cairo. Which Cairo do I mean? That of the Fatimids, the Mamlukes or the Sultans? Only God and the archaeologists know the answer to that, but in any case, the alley is certainly an ancient relic and a precious one. How could it be otherwise with its stone-paved surface leading directly to the historic Sanadiqiya Street. And then there is its coffeeshop known as "Kirsha's". Its walls decorated with multicolored arabesques, now crumbling, give off strong odors from the medicines of olden times, smells which have now become the spices and folk-cures of today and tomorrow... (Mahfouz 1947: 5; 1)<sup>21</sup>

The following is the beginning of *al-Nakhla*:

Before sunset the neighbours heard her voice.

‘The place is run by gipsies,’ said Asūma, the lame woman.

‘What do you expect? This isn’t ‘Abkhāna,’ said Ḥamādī, the cab driver from the stables next door to her house.

‘You make my life a misery. I swear by ‘Abbās,’ said Ḥusayn, who was right beside her.

‘So where’s the money gone, dear?’ she said, taking off her black baker’s overalls.

‘How would I know? Have a look through my trouser pockets.’

‘Do you think I’m stupid? As if you’d leave it in your pocket.’

‘Look wherever you want.’

‘So I go to all that trouble to get hold of the flour ration, then have nothing to show for it? I work like a machine day in, day out, with people pestering me, black bread, black bread, as if I grind the flour myself, and every day half the money’s disappeared. Aren’t you ashamed, Ḥusayn?’

‘Shut up.’

‘Isn’t your daily allowance enough for you? Doesn’t the stew and rice you have for lunch and supper every day fill you up?’

‘Bloody stew. It’s only fit for beggars.’

‘So what are you hanging around for, my dear? When your father died, did he make you my guardian?’

‘This house belongs to me.’

‘Rubbish! I’ve got a share in it. It’s my right and I’ve earned it.’

(17-8)

First of all, it is easy to see how the depiction of place, the drawing of a setting, changes dramatically from one example to the other, and this does not pertain exclusively to the opening paragraphs but also to the remainder of the two novels. It is as if Mahfouz takes his reader by the hand with his accurate, precise beginning, written in an elaborate and elegant style. The first paragraph of the novel quoted above is an authoritative introduction to its setting (note the first person narrative, present only in this short introduction, ‘Which Cairo do I mean?’): we can sit back and see what happens. On the contrary, *Farmān* throws us into a deliberately obscure, confused setting, a dialogue between overheard voices uttered by unknown characters in mysterious surroundings and, if we are not Iraqis, we also have to struggle with the language, which is direct free discourse in the Baghdadi vernacular, used frequently throughout the novel. As the narrating voice zooms in on the novel’s protagonists,<sup>22</sup> Salīma and Ḥusayn, who are having an argument, we are there with them and their neighbours, and have to make an effort to understand who they are and what is going on (notice that

although Salīma is mentioned in the first line - 'her voice' - and the passage is focused on her, we do not learn her name until later). This is not to say that the beginning of *al-Nakhla* is revolutionary, much fiction begins thus, but it clearly differs greatly from the opening of *Zuqāq*, and even Silone's *Fontamara* is provided with an authorial introduction which clarifies the circumstances in which the narrating act is supposed to have taken place.

Whereas in *Zuqāq* everything is laid down on the page for us, including the characters' thoughts (which are convincingly portrayed by the third person omniscient narrator, who from time to time comments on them<sup>23</sup>), in *al-Nakhla*, we mainly have what the characters do and say, with the third person narrator's role more in the background. The narrator is certainly omniscient, but does not want to tell us everything, leaves much unsaid or, crucially, sometimes makes the characters speak for themselves and to themselves. In such cases, their thoughts are presented in the first person and in Baghdadi Arabic. This has the effect of reducing the intermediary role of the conventional narrator, and in *al-Nakhla* he is only very occasionally judgemental and didactic.<sup>24</sup>

A key role in this seemingly unmediated depiction of characters and their lives is played by the direct free discourse and by the colloquial language in which it is conveyed. It is noteworthy that here the author is uncompromisingly realistic (in a way that neither Silone nor Mahfouz, nor

many other writers are)<sup>25</sup> as he makes the characters speak (and at times think) in the actual language of the real people who inhabited that particular part of Baghdad during WWII. More than that, this uncompromising approach leads him to express all the differences and nuances in the way the characters speak, according to their ethnicity (the Armenian Khājīk is made to ignore the conjugation of verbs), regional origins (the Southern peasant speaks his own Iraqi vernacular which is different from that of the main characters who are from the capital) and the condition in which they are depicted as they speak (what the drunk says is occasionally misspelled). This is part of the linguistic richness of the novel, even if it does sometimes make the life of the non-Iraqi reader quite miserable.<sup>26</sup> As Shlayba, otherwise a great admirer of the novel, writes: ‘The numerous words taken from the Iraqi colloquial of the common people make the text burdensome in places as these are not understood by Arab readers and might be obscure even to some Iraqi readers’ (Shlayba 1996: 166). Presumably for this reason, in his subsequent fiction, Farmān tends to rely almost exclusively on *fuṣḥā*, abandoning the expressiveness and liveliness of a register which was perhaps so consistently represented in his first novel as an exile’s loving tribute to his childhood neighbourhood.

Apart from his enthusiastic use of the colloquial, another feature of Farmān’s style is its economy and simplicity (this distances him not only from Mahfouz, but also from his own later fiction, for instance the more



complex narratives of *Zilāl*). A good example of this lean and agile style occurs when a desperate Muṣṭafā is going from bar to café, chasing after his middlemen who have his money but can neither give him the goods they promised to steal from the British, who are now pulling out of Iraq, nor intend to return his money. ‘Fate! He drank his second glass. Bitter. Disgusting. Made him purse his lips. He stared at the empty chair in front of him. “Khājīk!” (140). These short sentences, at times even reduced to a one word exclamation (‘Fate!’, ‘Bitter’, ‘Khājīk!’), are used effectively to portray the inner state of an increasingly hopeless Muṣṭafā, whom we can almost hear sighing between sentences. Shortly afterwards, he is pondering on the fact that Salīma has a job and a big house and may therefore be the solution to his problems.

Something rejoiced inside him. He picked up the bottle. It was empty. He turned, looking for the waiter to ask for another half. The waiter was at the door, struggling with a stubborn beggar woman who was trying to enter the bar to ask for alms. Poverty. He looked away in annoyance and tried to see out through the window. Close to the window was a table where two men sat. He stared. He seemed to recognise one of them. He could see half of his face and the back of his neck. (141)

Again, Mahfouz's more elaborate style is substituted by one made up of concise passages which hint at the atmosphere of a situation rather than offering a detailed examination of it.<sup>27</sup>

Another example of such stylistic difference is in the characterisation of Ḥamīda and Tamādir. In *Zuqāq* Ḥamīda's desire to escape from the *ḥāra* is clearly articulated and planned by her and dissected by the author, and her three-dimensional psychological portrayal is thoroughly executed by the third person omniscient narrator (chapter 20). In *al-Nakhla* Tamādir's similar feelings are depicted through highly evocative imagery, in a few words. The difference in style is maybe even more evident if we compare the somewhat similar feelings (a mixture of attraction and fear in Tamādir's case, and one of attraction and repulsion in Ḥamīda's case) that the two young women have for their confident, strong pursuers, °Imrān and Faraj Ibrahim, respectively. Mahfouz's more expansive style contrasts with Farmān's economical sentences. After Tamādir is told one evening by Aunt Nashmiyya to guess who is coming for dinner, we read: 'She stared at [Nashmiyya], bewildered. Him? Yes. I don't want him to. Dark eyes. Fear. Feverish joy. For a moment the world appeared fair [*shaqrā*<sup>c</sup>], then turned overcast in her thudding heart.' (160).

While dismissive of any influence on him from Mahfouz's *Zuqāq*, Farmān admits he found Italian anti-Fascist writer Ignazio Silone and his political writing inspirational. We should say that *al-Nakhla* is generally

accepted to be not only a realist, but also a political novel, and Farmān himself states in one of his interviews that his novel's main subject is poverty, and that when he wrote he was thinking about the division of people between rich and poor (Shlayba 1996: 331). After all one of its themes, or at least one of the motifs running through the text, is daily bread. There are long descriptions of Salīma making bread, or not making it, after she has been convinced by Muṣṭafā that her share in the modern oven will earn her enough money to enable her to stop baking. Here bread has a symbolic value as a staple commodity, sometimes synonymous with life. Ḥamādī, the cab driver and one of Salīma's neighbours, sees life as a long journey in search of bread and water (178). The fact that Salīma is the provider of bread contrasts with and balances the depiction of her as a barren, exhausted woman.

The political element in both Silone's *Fontamara* and his *Vino e pane* (*Bread and Wine*, 1955) is very much in the foreground and Farmān mentions both novels in his interviews as sources of inspiration (Shlayba 1996: 321-2). Lengthy passages of both of Silone's texts are entirely dedicated to the delineation of straightforward political stances and precise ideological attitudes, whereas the expression of the political element is more subtle and indirect in *al-Nakhla*, so as to make Darrāj's Marxian reading of the novel appear out of focus (here we refer to the article Darrāj wrote as an introduction to the 1988 edition of the novel; Darrāj 1988). First of all,

Muṣṭafā's rebuking Salīma, 'Oh, Salīma, don't be harder than the English' (174),<sup>28</sup> is made to mean too much by Darrāj, who sees it as the expression of Muṣṭafā's 'impoverished consciousness and weak perception' (Darrāj 1988: 10). The critic stigmatises Muṣṭafā because, according to him, he is guilty of complaining about Salīma for no good reason, and even more guilty of complaining about the British decision to leave the country, when he should be happy about it (*Ibid.*). In fact, we know that for Muṣṭafā the British occupation of the country and their presence in Baghdad mean the bags of coffee, tea, canned food, whisky and other goods he can buy and sell on the black market. Muṣṭafā's exclamation is certainly ironic: he is annoyed as he has just discovered that Salīma does not intend to fight to prevent Ḥusayn from selling the house they live in (this is a blow to Muṣṭafā who wants to marry Salīma partly if not mainly, to have a roof over his head and stop paying rent). Secondly, while Thāmir wants Farmān to make the poor of his novel more revolutionary, so Darrāj praises the novel for being realistic in showing how the poor depicted in it correspond to a proletariat whose consciousness is outside of history and who are therefore in no position to change their pitiful situation. Here, Darrāj seems too eager to apply his own reading to a text which is more subtle and has different artistic intentions. In line with this reading, Darrāj regrets that Maḥmūd the bully ends up killing Ṣāhib, one of the more politically aware characters, and not the British soldiers who piss in the streets of Baghdad (Darrāj 1988: 11). This

alternative would have been unrealistic as there is nothing in the text to suggest that Maḥmūd might have issues with the British, which could motivate such a course of action. Maḥmūd is a thug, not a revolutionary!

Whereas in *Zuqāq* and *Fontamara* we are never in doubt as to what to think of the characters, as their authors clarify who are the good and who the bad, the strength of *al-Nakhla* as a realistic novel is that there is much ambiguity in the portrayal of the characters. With the exception of the entirely good Ṣāhib and the entirely bad Maḥmūd, the rest of the characters, including the protagonists, appear to swing between positive and negative attitudes, behaviour, ideas and actions. Muṣṭafā is a case in point: while some critics see him as a negative character, we maintain that he is presented to us with the same authorial impartiality as are Salīma and Ḥusayn. Muṣṭafā's behaviour is morally objectionable when, using all his skills of persuasion, he convinces Salīma that abandoning her traditional oven (*tannūr*) in favour of a share in Khājīk's modern oven (*furn*) will buy her a more comfortable life. In fact, what he is really after are her thirty dinars, which he intends to invest in the black market to buy goods stolen from the British army. At the same time, the author also presents us with Muṣṭafā's own gloomy situation. His life has been a series of misfortunes and he is now trying hard to improve it. Another example of this complex depiction of Muṣṭafā is his motivation for marrying Salīma: if it is the case that he mainly sees marrying her as a convenient solution to his problems, it

is also true that through the depiction of his drunken reminiscences we learn that he was always fascinated by Salīma, when long ago he would occasionally spend nights drinking with Salīma's late husband.

To summarise, Farmān's very first novel is already a sophisticated piece of realist fiction. In other words, he strives to keep as close as possible to real life people and events, but does so with hardly a trace of a didactic or judgemental tone. His style stands out as vivid and concise (even if his use of colloquial Arabic may be problematic for the non-Iraqi reader), simple and economically effective in alluding, evoking and implying rather than explaining, describing and commenting. If we add to this the fact that the novel is ironic, relies heavily on a low linguistic register, presents some experimental narrative,<sup>29</sup> is open-ended and is informed by the memories of an exiled writer, we might even claim that *al-Nakhla* belongs to a certain kind of modernist fiction, despite retaining some conventional traits. We can also see in the text one of the foundations of modern realism as defined by Auerbach: '[t]he serious treatment of everyday reality [and] the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation' (Auerbach 2003: 491).<sup>30</sup> As for the novel's political implications, the author was probably motivated by his own ideological convictions in writing about poor people striving for daily bread, but his text avoids any explicit polemic and leaves the readers relatively free to draw their own conclusions. In short, even if Farmān was working on the

novel for several years before he had it published, it is remarkable how he managed to solve the problems which up to that time had been preventing the Iraqi novel from reaching artistic maturity.

In the next section we will explore the text further as we focus on what is undoubtedly one of the overriding elements of its artistic realism: the poetic treatment of space.

---

### **3. *Al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran*: Space.**

#### **The Poetical Evocation of Space.**

بغداد نيزار قبابي

بغداد نيزار قبابي

*Baghdad Nizār Qabbānī*

Besides its subtle characterisation, it is the remarkable depiction of Baghdad which makes *al-Nakhla* most effective as a certain kind of realistic fiction. If we can say that the characterisation of all the main protagonists is ambivalent, we can also see the portrayal of the Baghdad evoked and described in the novel as working on different levels. In fact, as Darrāj points out, Baghdad emerges as a sort of character in the text (Darrāj 1988: 8). The people and the old quarter are closely connected: the palm tree of the title

(which stands in the courtyard - *hawsh* - of the house where Salīma and Ḥusayn live) is often associated with Salīma, but it gradually emerges as a symbol for the whole quarter, which will eventually be lost as far as the protagonists are concerned.<sup>31</sup> The quarter is not idealised, as the text makes clear that this is a poor place on the verge of collapse. This absence of idealisation is evident in the unflattering description of the landmarks of the street in which most characters live. Salīma's house stands between the neighbours' *khān* and the stables of Hājī Aḥmad Āghā, where Ḥamādī the cab driver and Marhūn the groom work.<sup>32</sup> The stables are worn-out buildings, which are to be demolished to make way for a cigarette factory, and the palm tree itself is said to be barren and appears almost always as *al-nakhla al-qamī'a* 'the lowly/ugly palm tree':

[Salīma] saw, in front of her, her stunted palm tree crouching close to the wall in the middle of a dark circle of soil, lonely and barren like her, living with her in this big house, deaf and dumb, putting up with all the dirty water thrown at it, as summer and winter passed with never a sign on it of a bud or a new green leaf. (18)

To Salīma here, the miserable appearance of the tree mirrors her own painful condition as a lonely, childless widow at the mercy of overflowing



gutters, although normally she appears tougher and more resilient. The writer turns the same unflattering gaze on places which are not in the street of the old quarter but are nonetheless depicted in their stark poverty. As the critic Khayrī al-Dhahabī admits, this modern day, grim portrayal of Baghdad can surprise the reader who, like him, has in mind ‘the Baghdad of legend and history [...] of the Abbasids and al-Iṣfahānī, slave girls and singing, palaces and literary contests [...] al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Tawḥīdī [...] Ibn Ḥanbal [...] Abū Nuwās [...] Ibn Ḥajjāj’, and is confronted by another Baghdad ‘deserted at night, dirty, its streets running with filthy water and full of piles of rubbish, each one attended by a stray dog and cat’ (Farmān 1988: 134; al-Dhahabī in al-Nuḥmān 1996: 261).

This objective, non-romanticised depiction of urban space is often taken to another level by the author’s use of perspective. In places the distinctive language and imagery he uses, to give a sense of *how* his characters inhabit this space, succeed in dignifying the characters and the space too. For example, as Ḥamādī the cab driver recovers from his illness, the sun comes out after the rain and he sees the world in a different light (literally) and daydreams about a horse:

The morning sun shone brightly, without warmth. The sky was clear, but it looked hard. Everything looked hard and cold and clean and turned in on itself. Ḥamādī screwed up his eyes and

looked up, his mouth open in surprise, as if he was seeing the world for the first time. In his pink old mouth three abnormally yellow teeth were visible, like the ruins of a destroyed city in the middle of a barren desert, and on that morning where imperfections were laid bare his lined and pockmarked nose looked too big for his small face with its sunken cheeks and eyes. It was a tiny face like a bird's, framed by the scarf which was wound around his head and fell on to his narrow shoulders and down his back, over the faded jacket, long as an overcoat. As he looked into the sky, his eyes dazzled by its pure blueness, it seemed to him like a shiny burnished dome made up of myriad fragments washed by angels' hands, and the sun to his right dyed the dingy wall a golden red, a deep yellow rug thrown down from the neighbours' roof. He felt its colour more than its warmth, and in his confused, racing thoughts pictured golden minarets and doves, then imagined himself sitting up behind a horse as it trotted down a broad straight road, the sun warming his back and on either side of him dusty orchards full of fruit [...] He smiled joyfully, overcome by a swift yearning for life. (174-5)

This passage is made up of short, simple clauses giving a realist portrayal of both space and character (of whom we have a typically brief physical

description; long, detailed descriptions of people are so rare in *al-Nakhla* that this is one of the longest). From this simple and solid starting point the author moves to expand his portrayal in two directions. On one hand, we have the narrator's commentary, often enriched by unusual similes that can be comical ('yellow teeth [...] like the ruins of a destroyed city in the middle of a barren desert'), or lyrical ('the sun [...] dyed the dingy wall a golden red, a deep yellow rug thrown down from the neighbours' roof'). On the other hand, the narrator's authoritative voice is made to lend its poetic skills to express the *character's* reaction to space too ('the sky [...] seemed to him like a shiny burnished dome made up of myriad fragments washed by angels' hands'). Not only is this a portrayal of both space and character, as the realist description of space interweaves with the character's fantasy, but it also implies a depiction of the simplest and humblest of people as capable of remarkable flights of fancy and worthy of lyrical portrayal.

The author conveys in his concise, intense narration the fact that he, along with his characters, is emotionally attached to such a space without sentimentality. The loneliness and depression that we know from secondary sources Farmān suffered in his Russian exile is here wiped away by a joyous recollection of the places of his childhood.

Besides Farmān's use of perspective, his use of imagery is one of the most important features in his evocation of space. We read that in the yard of the run-down stable stands 'a dusty carriage like a beetle emerging from

the soil' (37). It is this kind of poetic language which conveys the soul of a place, no matter how decaying, deserted and miserable it is. There is a similar quality to the depiction of space in certain films by the Russian director Andrey Tarkovsky. For example in *Mirror*, and even more so in *Stalker*, the places depicted are often destroyed, abandoned, sinister or threatening, but there is a poetic quality in the way they are cinematically *described* which, even if it does not make them conventionally beautiful, is powerful enough to stimulate the imagination in a positive way. Tarkovsky writes in his diaries: 'Whatever it expresses - even destruction and ruin - the artistic image is by definition an embodiment of hope, it is inspired by faith' (Tarkovsky 1994: 91).

If a parallel can be drawn between the ways *al-Nakhla* and Tarkovsky's films depict bare and poor space poetically, it is thanks to Gaston Bachelard's work on the way space is evoked by poets in his *La Poétique de l'espace* (*The Poetics of Space*, 1958) that we can articulate further our analysis of Farmān's treatment of space. Elsewhere we have noticed that Bachelard's concepts can be useful tools for analysing literary space in a way which can stimulate the critic to go beyond superficial descriptions and critical clichés (Cobham 2002: 142). Farmān's recollection of the Baghdad of his childhood is carried out with vividness, affection and much gusto and even if this space often serves as the background for drama and hardship, many are the images of 'felicitous space', to use Bachelard's expression.

Space in *al-Nakhla* 'has been seized upon by the imagination' and therefore it 'cannot remain indifferent space' (Bachelard 1994: xxxvi). In *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard focuses on poetic images which refer exclusively to 'felicitous space', mainly ignoring images of hostile spaces of hatred and combat, but he also stresses that feelings of intimacy and domestic familiarity are produced particularly by poor or simple houses, like those in *al-Nakhla*: 'If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty. Authors of books on "the humble home" often [evoke] this feature of the poetics of space' (Bachelard 1994: 4).

This is in keeping with what Farmān writes about the feelings his characters have vis-à-vis the space they inhabit. The stable, for instance, is miserable and run-down but it is also, crucially, seen through the eyes of Marhūn the groom, for whom it has been 'a piece of his life [...] his home, his refuge, his kingdom' (38). Marhūn feels a genuine nostalgia for the past, as he blames the present woes on the war, but the description of the place is realistic and sympathetic because of the language and characterisation: 'This rectangular piece of ground, enclosed with rotting corrugated iron, open to heat and cold, was his refuge [...] He'd arrived there in the spring of his life, when the stable was in its heyday. It had been his kingdom' (75).

According to Bachelard, our relationship with space can give a familiar and intimate quality even to those places which at first glance appear as far as possible from feelings of intimacy and homeliness. So, as the character of

Stalker in the eponymous film lies down to rest on the ground of an overgrown industrial wasteland, Marhūn the groom in *al-Nakhla* is happy to seek refuge in his bare room in the run-down stable ‘where the ceiling [greet]s him by depositing a handful of powdery dust on his bent back’ (76).<sup>33</sup>

Farmān succeeds in conjuring up a visual effect similar to the one produced in Tarkovsky’s films. The street in *al-Nakhla* is described in the following way when Ḥusayn leaves his house one evening to go to meet Tamādir:

The evening was the colour of ashes. In the wide street the buffaloes were going back from the Tigris to the Ma’dan quarter to be herded into their enclosures. Black smudges on the canvas of a smoky evening that exhaled the smell of burned cooking fat, and stagnant water that made the muddy ground gasp for breath, and food aromas mixed with the smell of hot ashes and unignited petrol. (44)

These are unsentimental words which evoke a precise sense of place, and avoid detailed descriptions. One of the most striking differences separating Mahfouz’s early style from Farmān’s as far as the depiction of space is concerned is that in the latter’s poetic evocation often replaces the former’s detailed physical descriptions. These are two ways in which to approach the

depiction of space. Bachelard writes:

[The] virtues of shelter are so simple, so deeply rooted in our unconscious that they may be recaptured through mere [evocation], rather than through minute description. Here the nuance bespeaks the color. A poet's word, because it strikes true, moves the very depths of our being. (Bachelard 1994: 12)

The short passage quoted above from *al-Nakhla* encapsulates some of the features found throughout the novel that make Farmān's style poetic: the brief references to colours and smells, the unusual or imaginative similes or metaphors. Inanimate things are familiarised when they are referred to in terms more normally reserved for human beings or animals (the earth gasps, the old carriage is like a beetle and the stable yard 'slumps in the August sun', 37). This is not of course unusual in fiction, but Farmān's originality derives from the nature of his imagery, whose content can be surprising and even daring but is always expressed in simple, linear language.<sup>34</sup> Many examples could be given to show the author's skilful use of these references to smells and colours and his daring images. Here is how Salīma's space is evoked and how a smell allows her to escape in her mind to another space:

She sat breaking up the wood near the oven. Wood from the open

countryside. A smell of pure earth. Samarra, Karbala and Najaf. She smelt dry dust and it reminded her of the dust from a car speeding away along a dirt road, while she was here, a prisoner in her house, spending her days at the oven and her nights making dough, never going any further than the Sadriyya market and never smelling anything but the stable [...] She closed her eyes again, relaxing, giving in to the gentle waves of drowsiness washing around in her head and remembered the boat that had once taken her to Samarra, rocking her gently in the shining water. (19)

If references to smells are discreetly functional to the depiction of space and the way it is inhabited, then references to colours are as important in shaping Farmān's oddly lyrical language. Salīma is on her bed on the roof of her house, at night: 'The stars shone above her like little balls of quicksilver on a dark blue cloth' (28); Muṣṭafā and his friend Khājīk are in a bar where 'the tables were red like bloodshot eyes, damp and dirty, littered with nutshells and cigarette stubs' (67); more unsettling is the poetry of the introduction to Aunt Nashmiyya's house where Tamādir stays: 'In the late afternoon the breeze was blowing from the river through a laden mulberry tree, whose strange fronds undulated with gold. From out of its dark heart burst a flock of sparrows and landed in the yard with a harsh sighing sound.'



(86-7). Tamādir remembers this unsettling vision later and it triggers a stream of disturbing childhood memories. Finally, when the torrential rains which hit the city are described (especially at the beginning of chapter 23), Farmān writes his own 'rain song'.<sup>35</sup>

Apart from Farmān's clear artistry and bravura in evoking the different Baghdads in which the action takes place, space plays an important role in characterisation: we have seen above how Salīma's more lonely and desperate traits are mirrored by the lowly palm tree. Almost every other character in the text is also seen through the space in which they move, as this emerges as an integral part of their being or as a symbol of who they are, or the particular situation in which they find themselves.<sup>36</sup> For instance, in the last part of the novel Ḥusayn is increasingly aware of being lost and hopeless only after his house has been sold. The text expresses some uneasiness about change, as what is going to replace the old is obscure and ill-defined and the characters do not know if the new will be any better.<sup>37</sup> The lost house comes to acquire a symbolic value, standing for Ḥusayn's dramatically uprooted status, and probably echoing the author's nostalgic view of Baghdad and his childhood and his own status as an exile.<sup>38</sup> Although Ḥusayn regrets having persuaded Salīma to sell the house, perhaps the author suggests that this is a necessary, albeit painful step towards his becoming an adult.

In this section we have shown how space in the novel is at the same time realistically and poetically depicted. Space emerges unequivocally as an overriding feature of the novel, or perspective from which to view it. We will now move further into our analysis of space by making a distinction between:

i) real/realist space;

ii) imagined space.

### **Real / Realist Space.**

بَغْدَادُ كَالْمِثْقَالِ .. كَالْمِثْقَالِ كَالْمِثْقَالِ

‘Baghdad is a toilet for the English... don’t you agree, man?’ (130).

If in *al-Nakhla* space and its inhabitants are impossible to separate, much of the characterisation of space depends on the time in which the events of the novel take place.

As we have seen, all the main characters belong to the lower strata of society and are depicted as they try to cope not only with poverty but also with war (rationing and inflation are among some of the most pressing practical problems facing them) and lawlessness (they confirm this by repeating expressions such as *mākū hukūma* ‘there’s no government’ - 48 - and *wilāyat farhūd* ‘chaos/anarchy rules’ - 195). The text clearly implies that the poor are the most vulnerable in such volatile, unstable times. In fact,

people like Şāhib and Ḥusayn are left to their own devices as they face arrogant bullies and violent thugs (*al-ashqiyā<sup>c</sup>*, represented by the character of Maḥmūd Ibn al-Ḥawla),<sup>39</sup> who can do as they please in the absence of any rule of law. This situation is exacerbated by the military conflict, and references to the war and to a western army occupying Iraq are reminiscent of current events.<sup>40</sup>

The effect of the presence of the British army on the Baghdad of the novel is evident in the way space is depicted. Space is controlled by the British (at least in the important areas of the city) in the scenes depicting crowds of people gathering in the square where the British legation is, waiting for hours, desperate for work (83). Space is abused by the occupiers in the scene that depicts two British soldiers urinating on the King Fayṣal bridge, watched by a group of Iraqis: Ḥusayn, another anonymous unemployed man, a policeman and a drunk, who are all eating at a sandwich-vendor's nearby. One of them, the drunk, reacts to this by addressing the policeman with the provocative statement quoted at the beginning of this section, describing Baghdad as a lavatory for the occupying army (130).

We have seen above how *al-Nakhla* can be considered as an example of modern realism as defined by Auerbach. Thus, according to him, one of the foundations of modern realism is '[t]he serious treatment of everyday reality [and] the rise of [...] socially inferior human groups to the position of subject

matter for problematic-existential representation [...] The other is ‘the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background’ (Auerbach 2003: 491). This latter element too is unmistakably present in Farmān’s text. The author exploits the changing period of WWII to deal with issues such as social change and the conflict between tradition and modernity and, once again, the characters’ perception of place is paramount, as it is connected with their perception of what and who is ‘civilised’ (the respectable, decent people called in the novel *muḥtashimīn*), and what and who is not (*mū muḥtashimīn*). Therefore, in the view of the poor inhabitants of the old quarter, Baghdad is divided into two: on this side of the river (*hā-l-ṣawb*) people like them live in a traditional way, which some characters see as antiquated and ‘uncivilised’. The other side of the river (*dhāk al-ṣawb*) is where the British and people like them are, people who are powerful and rich and live in a modern way which is perceived to be ‘civilised’. In other words, ‘the *muḥtashimīn* are the rich’ (Farmān quoted in Shlayba 1996: 331).

The gulf separating the two cities is illustrated when, one morning, Muṣṭafā takes Salīma to meet Khājīk on the other side of river. This is one of the rare occasions on which she leaves her own quarter and she is obviously impressed by the experience. That afternoon she is chatting with Khayriyya ‘The-Government-God-Bless-Them’<sup>41</sup> about what she has seen:

She had seen them [the English] with her own eyes as soon as she left her old quarter. They were racing madly down Rashid Street in their cars, their faces red, their hair blonde, all of them her customers! She saw some of them crowding in front of the Watani Cinema. They were talking gibberish: stuff like ‘cub, tub, bub’. On the empty ground opposite the new bridge she saw the Gurkhas and the Indians sitting on the bumpers of their military vehicles or standing *gurkhing*, with their black faces, round shaven heads, and some of them with beards big enough to weave an abaya with [...] She thought every impressive house was a mosque, every gathering of people the Haraj market and every plume of smoke a *tannur* oven. Muṣṭafā, at her side, was telling her about Baghdad, pointing places out to her until she felt dizzy and was about to empty the contents of her stomach on to the man opposite her. Everything became confused and the inside of her head was like a magic lantern. The sun hurt her eyes and made them water, and her tears obscured everything. (60)

The impact of the British occupation of the city is not only felt through the way space is dealt with or even changed by them, but also has implications for the way people live and perceive their way of living. Bread, which, as we have noted above, is an important motif in the novel, is the subject of heated

discussions amongst Salīma and her female neighbours: while everyone in the quarter is used to eating Arab bread (tellingly, this is just called 'bread', *khubz*), now some of them want to show they are more 'civilised' by claiming that the British/western rolls are much better than traditional bread. Badriyya, a young neighbour of Salīma's who is against the new rolls, concludes her argument with Salīma by saying: 'That [modern] oven's like the Zawra cinema. You sit there for three hours waiting for three bread rolls to bake' (64). The whole debate is obviously an ironic take on how and why people embrace or reject change. It is clear, for instance, that characters like Salīma are naturally inclined to reject Muṣṭafā's theories about how much better off they really are under the British. At the same time they partly want to believe Muṣṭafā, mainly in order to convince themselves that an improvement in their way of living is at hand: the illusory modern oven represents the promise of a better life to Salīma, in which she would not have to stay up all night to bake.

Even Muṣṭafā is trying to convince himself of the benefits of the British occupation because he really has no other options.<sup>42</sup> He can be seen either as a crafty opportunist or, more sympathetically, as an unlucky man forced by circumstances to rely on lies and dishonesty. However, it is clear that his character is not driven by firm ideological convictions. For instance, when he needs to convince Salīma to invest money in the Armenian's oven, he dismisses her doubts about an Armenian helping a Muslim (27). However,

when she starts complaining about receiving too little money too rarely from her share in the oven, he readily blames his Armenian friend, now labelled ‘an unbeliever, son of an unbeliever’ (117).

Khayriyya’s attitude is similarly self-serving. She is biased towards the British rolls for the same reasons she is in favour of ‘the English sherbet’: she wants to show that, unlike her neighbours, she is up to date with the new products imported by the British, her main concern being to score points off her rival Radīfa. When Salīma is celebrating her imminent marriage to Muṣṭafā with her women friends, she decides to offer them what she thinks is British sherbet from a bottle she has found in Muṣṭafā’s room, which is actually whisky. Khayriyya, not wanting to show her ignorance, confirms it is a drink for ‘civilised’ people. They all partake and clearly find it disgusting, but Radīfa, determined not to let Khayriyya appear superior, carries on drinking until she is sick. Once they realise that this is actually ‘English arak’, they still agree that it is better than Iraqi arak, partly because Ḥamādī goes yellow when he drinks Iraqi arak, and at least Radīfa goes a nice healthy red (150). It is perhaps worth reiterating that not all the characters of the novel are as unaware of the political situation as Salīma, or as deluded about their own status as Khayriyya. For example, Şāhib and Ḥamādī are well aware of Khayriyya’s true status and scornful of her pretentious behaviour (179).

In *al-Nakhla* the depiction of real space is not only made through an

authoritative third person omniscient narrator, and presented as objective and true to life. Such depictions are enhanced, expanded and rendered subjective by the characters' perspectives, how they are said to live and read space, whether it is their own space or somebody else's. We have discussed a very simple example of this, in the way the stable is depicted. It is objectively described as run-down and decrepit but from the perspective of a character like Marhūn, who does not necessarily disagree with the external objective perspective, the stable comes to signify much more than a decaying, obsolete space. Here and elsewhere throughout the novel we have depictions of situations (and spaces) similar to those observed by Auerbach in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Generally, the pictures the novel contains are not presented in and for themselves, but are subordinated to the dominant subject of the paragraph or paragraphs, whatever it may be; they are not put before the reader directly but are seen through the characters, in the light of their perceptions, but not as a simple stream of consciousness. To paraphrase Auerbach further: though the light which illuminates the picture proceeds from the characters, they are themselves part of the picture, they are situated within it (Auerbach 2003: 483-4).<sup>43</sup>

As for the wider implications of how the British occupation of the city is depicted, even though *al-Nakhla* is implicitly critical of the occupation, Farmān's writing is neither journalistic nor polemical, both faults of style that he criticised in pioneering Iraqi fiction of previous generations. Space is



presented in an understated manner as being occupied and controlled, but at the same time this fact is internalised and discussed by characters who have contrasting points of view and different interests. This phenomenon of the internalisation or rereading of external space by the characters occurs even if its implications are not immediately political, as we will see in the following section.

### **Imagined Space. Storytelling.**

‘The courtyard appeared to her as spacious and wide as imagination’  
(155)

According to Farmān, the characters of *al-Nakhla* are poor people who have no time to spend reflecting over what happens in their life, busy as they are in a continuous struggle to earn their daily bread (Shlayba 1996: 331). This comment clearly separates Farmān’s first novel from an identifiable strand in Iraqi fiction, which focuses on the inner life of educated middle-class characters.<sup>44</sup> However, the protagonists of *al-Nakhla* use their imaginations to escape from the harshness of their lives and the hostility of their space and time, by creating alternative places in their heads, or rereading their own actual situations.

For example, the torrential rains and subsequent flooding lead Radīfa,

Ḥamādī's wife, to imagine an alternative, better space. The *khān* in which she lives with her many neighbours has turned into a muddy pool, the old houses are so badly hit by the weather that they seem to be about to collapse and the people of the quarter are cut off from the outside world, 'flapping around like stranded fish' (152). Radīfa's own situation is made worse by the illness of her husband, who has just been made jobless by the closure of the stable. In this chapter, where place is anthropomorphised through a negative simile ('The earth exhaled a hideous, sick smell like a despairing sigh from an invalid's chest', 152), we read the following striking sentence which compares space to imagination: 'The [muddy] courtyard appeared to [Radīfa] as spacious and wide as imagination [*khayāl*]' (155). This is where Radīfa switches from the desperation of her real situation to a kind of hope, which takes the form of a folktale she narrates to her daughter: a knight, with a beautiful face encircled by a halo of light, comes knocking on their door and saves them all by transporting them on his horse to a new, clean and dry *khān*. The daughter becomes so involved in the story that she even manages to persuade her reluctant mother to include the woman's arch-rival Khayriyya in the group of people saved by the knight (155).

If Radīfa is led by the harshness of her circumstances to imagine a way out, the fact that she relies on a folktale, which she narrates to her daughter, has significant implications. First, folktales with their imagined or idealised space are exclusively used in *al-Nakhla* as an element of the

characterisation of some of the female protagonists. Ḥusayn, as we will see below in more detail, does not rely on folktales, and his imagination acts less as a means of coming to terms with life, and more as a spur to action. The text clearly hints at the traditional role of women's storytelling as a means of reassurance. Having told her daughter 'Everything's going to be fine [...] Things won't always be like this' (155), Radīfa tries to justify what she knows to be empty platitudes by telling her tale.

The purpose of the folklore element in the novel is not principally to allude to old ways of storytelling, but is another way of writing about social and personal problems, showing how individuals and societies romanticise or dramatise difficult issues in their lives in order to accept or deal with them.<sup>45</sup> For example, Nashmiyya tells Tamāḍir stories about Radīf, a handsome bird breeder, and her youthful romance with him, doomed because her family opposed it and forced her to marry a man she deeply disliked. Her tale, with Radīf as a typical storybook knight, reminds Tamāḍir of the stories her grandmother used to tell her. Nashmiyya describes how the girls of the neighbourhood complained about Radīf, and draws a parallel between her story and a popular tale of a muezzin with a beautiful voice who was ordered down from the minaret by the Sultan and made to perform the call to prayer in the mosque courtyard, because the neighbourhood girls claimed falsely that he was spying on them (122).

Nashmiyya's tale of doomed love and injustice suffered at the hands of

tyrannical parents cannot but resonate with Tamādir's own situation. Tamādir's isolation is perhaps best expressed in the way she senses her lack of freedom in contrast to Ḥusayn's freedom of movement. As we have noted already, smells are important in the narrative and here the contrast between the two characters' positions is powerfully evoked when Tamādir smells the river on Ḥusayn, who has bathed there before coming to see her (89). Forced to spend most of her time indoors, hiding away from her relatives, she is left to think about her future and starts having doubts about her relationship with Ḥusayn, the immature lover whom she doubts she can really trust ('How could she tell whether Ḥusayn would stay with her for ever, that kid who only wanted to sleep with her.' 103). The mythical Radīf comes to represent for Tamādir a masculine ideal, 'the knight of her dreams,' 'a fairy tale hero' (121), to Ḥusayn's annoyance. She also identifies with him as he falls on hard times in Nashmiyya's account of him. Characteristically, the atmospheric setting of these tales is evoked by Farmān with simple, straightforward sentences and understated lyricism:

The two women used to spend a long time sitting around the brazier, where the burning embers were like rubies, reminding Tamādir of the Sultan who kept warm by burning rubies. A tale she had heard from her grandmother when she was a child, coming back to her now, along with her dreams. Aunt Nashmiyya

made her dream. She was like a magic lantern to her. She gave things colour and sent her somewhere unfamiliar and sad. (121)

If Tamādir finds in Nashmiyya's tales a source of entertainment and dreams and can relate to them as they reflect a situation similar to her own, it is her meeting with a middle-aged man, the orchard owner °Imrān, which triggers her imagination further and substitutes her innocent fondness of the insubstantial charm of Radīf-the-myth with much more troubling thoughts about the tangible virility of a mature man of flesh and blood.

Once again, space plays an important role in how Tamādir relates to the men in her life: while the unattainable Radīf inhabits a dream-like, storybook setting, and Ḥusayn, the 'kid who only wanted to sleep with her', is associated with barely furnished bedrooms, °Imrān is inseparable in her mind from his orchard, which she invests with a sensuous, sometimes erotic, quality. While her reason may tell her that she should prefer Ḥusayn, her memories of the orchard, combined with her erotic and romantic fantasies, convey vividly to the reader that °Imrān will be the winner, despite his ambiguous, and sometimes even sinister, aura.

As she lies on her bed, confined even more than usual by the heavy rain, thinking fondly of Ḥusayn telling her about a Tarzan film, her mind is nevertheless drawn involuntarily to °Imrān: [...] Tarzan in the jungle. What's the jungle? A big orchard. The mound of oranges blazed in her mind,

and the ghost of a smile flashed beneath a fine, neatly clipped moustache' (159). She feels a disquieting tingle in her back 'like cool orange peel being passed over her naked body' (158).

Later in the day the rain stops and °Imrān comes to visit in person:

After a few minutes Aunt Nashmiyya called her. Tamādir came in, head held high, and greeted him languidly. She smelt, she saw in the gloom, oranges in a basket, and felt she was dreaming again. [...] °Imrān took a big moist orange from the basket and offered it to her. 'Taste it,' he said. 'I picked it this morning when it was still wet from the rain.' Was she dreaming? He leant towards her, holding the orange in his long brown fingers, and the tobacco on his breath anaesthetised her nerves a little. She took the orange, feeling its coolness, and said 'Many thanks!'

It was her father's expression. It flashed into her mind. He used to smoke too. [...] 'Taste it,' he said again. She felt a dryness in her mouth, but was afraid her fingers would betray her. He came to her aid, leaning towards her again and saying, 'If you like, I'll peel it for you.' (160, 161, 162)

Tamādir's story is narrated through a sequence of scenes characterised by settings from which powerful images stand out: from the places of her

childhood to the cinema where she is picked up by Ḥusayn (space remembered through flash-backs); from her gloomy room in the Camp al-Arman to the room in Aunt Nashmiyya's house (space depicted in the present of the narration), and finally from ʿImrān's orchard (space remembered and imagined) to ʿImrān in Nashmiyya's house.

As we have seen above, the imagination of some of the female characters operates within the traditional cultural framework of oral storytelling. The traditional, even outmoded, element in their outlook on the world is confirmed when we read that Nashmiyya is like 'a magic lantern' to Tamādir (121) and that the inside of Salīma's head is like a magic lantern when she visits the other shore of the city (60).<sup>46</sup> We will now see how Ḥusayn's imagination does not work within such a framework, but is inhabited by the more modern heroes of popular cinema: while the women think of sultans and knights, he thinks of Tarzan and gangsters. Not only does this characterise the difference in the way of living of men and women, but it is also another detail enriching the depiction of a city on the verge of modernity where, for the last time in its history, the magic lantern coexists with the cinema.

### **Imagined Space. *Film noir*.**

‘He tried to compare himself to a film hero and found many common features. That didn’t distress him, on the contrary he felt proud, like someone who suddenly discovers he’s of noble stock.’ (166)

The setting of *al-Nakhla* comes to resemble that of a *film noir* as Ḥusayn moves towards the novel’s violent ending in the Baghdad of dirty streets, small cafés and third-class hotels. This threatening and mysterious space is similar to the dark metropolitan space that serves as the background for the doomed protagonist of many French and American films from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, whose cinematic style is variously characterised as poetic realism and *film noir*.<sup>47</sup> Throughout the novel space is often depicted bleakly but, as far as Ḥusayn is concerned, it grows in darkness in the last section when he loses his homely space: Salīma sells their house and he is violently precluded from accessing Nashmiyya’s house. As in *film noir*, space in *al-Nakhla* is often nocturnal, rainy and shabby, but it does not necessarily have to be so, to be inhospitable and threatening.<sup>48</sup> Ḥusayn’s Baghdad is not always dark and dirty (like the cheap hotel where he spends his nights); it can also be a luxurious space (like the Orosdi-Beck department store or the Umara Hotel), where he is conscious of being an outsider and feels uneasy.

These films are relevant to the aesthetics of Farmān’s novel, specifically in the way the poetic images contribute to the reader/spectator’s attitude to the characters, which in both cases swings between empathy, revulsion,



disapprobation and astonishment, rapidly moving along the whole spectrum from the catharsis of classical drama to the alienation of Brechtian drama. Ḥusayn's shock at the news of Ṣāhib's death is distilled in the image of Ṣāhib's blood when Ḥusayn passes by the bicycle hire shop:

On the ground at his feet in the doorway was a dark stain. His blood. It hadn't been cleaned up yet. It looked like a piece of clothing left behind by someone in a hurry. He felt it was so solid he could have bent down and picked it up.' (196)

Not only is *film noir* relevant to the novel's aesthetics, but also to its content: both have working-class characters as their protagonists, who are trying to better themselves or extricate themselves from a risky situation, albeit through dishonest or exploitative means. More generally, the connection between these films and *al-Nakhla* is relevant to the way the latter fulfils its function as a realist work of fiction. After WWII the American public responded positively to a more realist, more honest and harsher view of their country, which they found in *film noir* (Schrader 1972; Hayward 2006: 335). Farmān's short story 'Ḥallāl al-<sup>c</sup>aqd' ('The Problem Solver', 1964) contains a character who mocks his friend's romantic taste in literature (specifically Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*) and prefers *Arsene Lupin* and other detective stories. The critic Hamid al-Khaqani takes this as a suggestion by

Farmān that such fiction could be useful as a counter to romanticism and was worthy of a wider interpretation than the customary surface reading (al-Khāqānī in al-Nu<sup>c</sup>mān 1996: 358).

There are numerous incidents in the narrative of *al-Nakhla* which hint at Ḥusayn's connection with the world of cinema: when he recalls meeting Tamāḍir for the first time in front of the Rafidayn cinema, he already sees himself as a romantic cinema hero (166) and later he dreams of making her into his female lead, if he ever manages to give her the presents he has bought her (188). Ḥusayn's childish admiration for cinema heroes is compounded by the fact that Maḥmūd, far from being a mere opponent, increasingly emerges as a role model for him.<sup>49</sup> On one hand, Maḥmūd is the bully who humiliates him and kills Ṣāhib; on the other hand, he is also the symbol of the world of the powerful *ashqiyā<sup>c</sup>*, the thugs, the gangsters who do as they please. The machismo 'gangster' culture that Maḥmūd represents seems glamorous and attractive to the lost young Ḥusayn.

After a pivotal scene where Maḥmūd taunts Ḥusayn about his mother and her new husband, Muṣṭafā, in front of a café full of customers, Ḥusayn's situation goes from bad to worse, his downfall appears inexorable and, like the hero of a *film noir*, he is caught in a web of deceit, partly constructed by dark forces he cannot identify.<sup>50</sup> After he buys a dress and jewellery for Tamāḍir he goes to Aunt Nashmiyya's to meet her, only to be welcomed by the old woman telling him that Tamāḍir has gone for good and he should

forget about her. He is then assaulted by Nashmiyya and a man he has never seen before (possibly ʿImrān, although the reader is left guessing).

As Ḥusayn roams the city on his own, he has the urge to break free from the closed circle of his past and decides to buy a knife and kill Maḥmūd. Although he appears to be facing reality at this point, he is still isolated, and escaping into a fantasy world. Immediately after he has bought the knife his gestures become theatrical and self-conscious:

He was invaded by the same feelings he had as a child when he wore something new, wanting to turn round and round, showing people his new clothes. He was even more intoxicated by this feeling now, like a child suddenly discovering he's become a man. Nothing stood in his way now, like any movie hero, like Flash Gordon [...] He wandered around the cinemas and pushed his way aggressively through a group of school students congregating in front of posters for a 'hellish' film in the Rashid cinema. (208)

He practises his 'gangster' (*shaqī*) walk as he goes towards his fateful encounter with Maḥmūd in the Umara Hotel:

He tried to keep up his new walk, one arm moving freely and the other down by his side. This is how gangsters walk. Before, he

used to think the arm was hanging down because its muscles were pumped and hard as iron. He felt the muscle in his own arm. It was still soft but would harden up for sure, and soon. He turned left directly opposite the Zawra cinema [...] (209)<sup>51</sup>

Space is partly used in a different way here, with references to cinema as a medium, but also to the actual cinema buildings. These references to the Rafidayn cinema (where Ḥusayn and Tamāḍir meet for the first time), the Rashid cinema (where he pushes his way through a crowd of students) and the Zawra cinema (near the hotel where he is going to confront Maḥmūd) can be seen as ironic nods from the author confirming the parallel between Ḥusayn's world and that of cinema.

As the novel changes from being the multivoiced fresco of the inhabitants of one quarter in old Baghdad to being exclusively focused on Ḥusayn,<sup>52</sup> its subject matter and style also change. As Ḥusayn the would-be gangster turns into a true killer, the novel becomes the 'hellish film' whose advertising poster he observes as he wanders aimlessly through the streets of the city. In the last scene of the novel, a drunk Maḥmūd is down on his knees vomiting in the toilets of the Umara Hotel, when Ḥusayn repeatedly stabs him in the neck and back, causing Maḥmūd's blood to spurt all over his face: 'he wiped the sticky blood off his eyelids, smearing it into his eyes so his vision was blurred' (215).

Those who value stylistic consistency and unity of form in fiction will perhaps see the change of tone that separates the final chapters from the preceding narrative as a technical flaw. It is true that the final, sometimes lurid scene, depicting in graphic detail Ḥusayn's killing of Maḥmūd, jars with the delicate and understated tone dominant in the rest of the novel, but it has a legitimate place in the pulp fiction the novel has become.<sup>53</sup> We maintain that the mixture of styles confirms the novel's status as a successfully heterogeneous text that is moving towards a modern(ist) form of realism,<sup>54</sup> and is also open-ended and ambiguous, making interpretations problematic. Here in particular the reader of *al-Nakhla*, like the viewer of *film noir*, empathises with a character whose actions are questionable, if not outright criminal, and then feels a shock of surprise or distaste.

However, the novel does not end with the violent death of the protagonist as always happens in the archetypal *film noir*, which can be characterised as fatalistic almost by definition, as it expresses a pessimistic and cynical view of the world. Fate is important even in *al-Nakhla* in as much as Ḥusayn's story seems to follow a certain, predictable path: he is orphaned early in his life, leaves school, does not find a job, spends the money his father has left him very quickly and has a relationship with a young woman that has no likely future. However, unlike the audience of *film noir*, the readers of *al-Nakhla* do not know what will happen to Ḥusayn after he has made the most momentous choice of his life: killing Maḥmūd. This is

how the novel ends:

Maḥmūd was snorting like a sheep being slaughtered. This terrified Ḥusayn and made him want to get out of the place. He put the knife in his pocket without closing it, keeping his hand clasped around it, then went to the door of the toilets. The yard was in silence, the way ahead clear. He crossed the yard rapidly and tripped at the door of the hotel. But he got to his feet and went through. (216)

From this open-ended finale, all developments are possible: Ḥusayn could emerge as a gangster/thug/*shāqī*, fulfilling his naïve dreams, he could begin a life of petty crime, end up in prison, or even be murdered himself. Or maybe the finale contains a hint of Ḥusayn's possible regeneration, as if he has gone through his cathartic moment and he is now ready to face life as a more mature man.<sup>55</sup>

If we are implicitly invited to use our own imagination to try to work out Ḥusayn's post-textual life, we are similarly left in doubt as to how to interpret his final action. The author himself suggests that Ḥusayn's killing of Maḥmūd is an act of revenge for those who have been wronged and humiliated by thugs who are free to operate in a state of lawlessness (Farmān quoted in Shlayba 1996: 147). However, the text makes clear that

Ḥusayn's motives are also questionable and naïve: when he first conceives the idea of the murder, we read that the element of adventure in killing Maḥmūd is more prominent in his mind than the revenge element (209). Then he dreams of improving his material status by becoming a gangster:

‘Wine and women - is there anything better! And maybe for free. A gangster's life!’ He felt the knife digging into his stomach and moved it up a little, towards his chest. The tingling numbness rose from his legs, accompanied by a delicious softness in his limbs and head, and he thought, ‘Maybe I'll be like that one day.’  
(211)

Ḥusayn is a childish young man, but at the same time a victim of circumstances, who is left to his own inadequate devices in his attempts to improve his life. This ambivalent characterisation tells us of a Ḥusayn who is more like the controversial protagonist of a *film noir* than the all-positive heroes of the films he admires (Flash Gordon and Tarzan).

## **Conclusions**

In *al-Nakhla*, as in the films of the French poetic realism of the 1930's

and in the American *film noir*, the contradiction between the realist and the lyrical approach is resolved by style. In both cases style is effectively simple and precise and at the same time highly evocative and atmospheric, lyrical and poetic without being sentimental. It is not incidental that we have drawn a parallel between Farmān's style and that of Flaubert as analysed by Auerbach, who in *Mimesis* quotes the following passage from the French writer's letters: 'Style itself and in its own right [is] an *absolute* manner of viewing things' (Flaubert in Auerbach 2003: 490; our italics). Darrāj makes a similar point with specific reference to *al-Nakhla* when he writes:

[the] novel creates language as it searches for [...] the essence [of the thing], digs deep for its movement and for what gives it significance; that is, [the novel] produces reality as language (*tuntij al-wāqī<sup>c</sup> lughatan*), so the form of the language is that of a search for a complex and many-layered reality [...] (Darrāj 1988: 15)

If space in *al-Nakhla* reminds us of the setting of a *film noir*, if the characterisation is at least as subtle and ambiguous as it is in these films, it is necessary to point to very significant differences separating the novel from such films. *Film noir* alludes to the failure of modern society successfully to replace the traditional world, and this is especially dramatised in the



depiction of space (often the metropolitan maze; see Reid and Walker 1993: 69). In the novel, we do not really have a modern space; the Baghdad of the novel is still a pre-modern city, if compared to the western capitals in the films. What we have in *al-Nakhla* is a traditional space depicted by the author in his characteristically ambiguous way: it is miserable and inadequate but also fulfils the protective function of the refuge for its inhabitants (Bachelard). More importantly, such space is being lost forever and we do not know whether what will replace it will be better or worse.

---

1 The sources for this biographical sketch are: Shulayba 1996; al-Miṣrī 1997; al-Nu<sup>c</sup>mān 1996 and Aḥmad 1977.

2 See Cobham 2004: footnote 1, p. 25.

3 Farmān benefited from a review of this first collection by <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Malik Nūrī, who compared his writing to Gorky's but also criticised him for being too descriptive and romantic (Aḥmad 1977, Vol. 1: 290; Shulayba 1996: 61).

4 'The style in which the new literature is written must be as close as possible to the reality we are living. We cannot abandon the literary language [*al-fuṣḥā*] as it represents a large part of our life but [we should keep] the best of it, [what is] comprehensible, simple. The colloquial language [*al-<sup>c</sup>amiyya*] is a fact we cannot ignore, it is the way people speak and in the production of a genuine literary work, especially in [...] the dialogue of a novel, we mustn't omit this aspect' (from the periodical *al-Thaqāfa al-waṭaniyya* in an item on the conference, quoted in Shulayba 1996: 65)

5 According to them, 'new realism' was a literary current connected with society, concerned with people's everyday problems, striving for change, sure about man's power to progress and, on a formal level, insisting that content and form should be inseparably connected. Their foreword also makes constructive references to Abbasid literature to expand the discussion of the relationship of literature to society, showing how formal renewal was a reaction to societal change in the work of poets like Abū Nuwās. For a detailed analysis of the foreword, see Shulayba 1996: 67-74. See also Aḥmad 1977, Vol. 2: 28.

6 This brief period of genuine development is confirmed by the publication of other collections of short stories such as al-Takarlī's *al-Wajh al-ākhar* ('The Other Face', 1960) and Mahdī <sup>c</sup>Isā al-Ṣaqr's *Ghadab al-madīna* ('The Anger of the City', 1960); Aḥmad 1977, Vol. 1: 44.

---

7 See Maḥdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr quoted in Aḥmad 1977, Vol. 1: 50.

8 His other works published while he was living in Moscow include the novels: *Khamsat aṣwāt* ('Five Voices', 1967), *al-Makhād* ('Labor Pains', 1974), *al-Qurbān* ('The Sacrifice', 1975), *Zilāl ʿalā al-nāfidha* ('Shadows on the Window', 1979) and *al-Murtajā wa-l-muʿajjal* ('The Desired and the Postponed', 1986). *Ālām al-Sayyid Maʿrūf* ('The Sorrows of Mr. Maʿrūf', 1982) is a collection which includes the novella with the eponymous title and four short stories.

9 Despite the fact that the novel was not more widely discussed by commentators outside Iraq, it was adapted for the Iraqi theatre at the end of the 1960s, with the title *Salīma al-khabbāza* ('Salīma the baker'. This is also the title of a short story written by Farmān in 1958 and published in 1959 in the Iraqi periodical *al-Muthaqqaf*; Farmān quoted in Shulayba 1996: 330 and in al-Nuʿmān 1996: 440). The fact that Iraqi television showed the play made the story and its characters popular in Iraq, and a journalist wrote in the Iraqi newspaper *al-Jumhūriyya* in 1971: 'We were visiting a writer friend in Basra with Ghāʿib Ṭuʿma Farmān [...] When this friend introduced Ghāʿib to his family, he said: "He is the author of the novel *al-Nakhla wa-l-jīran*." I looked at their faces. This piece of information did not arouse much interest, so I said: "The author of the play on television." Immediately their expressions changed and they started welcoming him warmly. I said to Ghāʿib: "People are only going to remember you for *al-Nakhla wa-l-jīran* the TV play.'" (Quoted in Shulayba 1996: 124).

10 See for example the monographs we mention in the introduction to this study, footnote n. 1, p. 1.

11 For instance, it is only mentioned in passing by Muhsin J. al-Musawi who, however, analyses another of Farmān's novels, *Zilāl ʿalā al-nāfidha* (1979) in his monograph on the postcolonial Arabic novel (Musawi 2003: 353-7). In his monograph on the Arabic novel, Roger

---

Allen focuses briefly and exclusively on Farmān's second novel, *Khamsat aṣwāt* (1967); Allen 1995: 82-3.

12 See, for example, Shulayba 1996: 56-8.

13 Darrāj 1988: 7; °Awn in al-Nu°mān 1996: 347; Aḥmad 1977, Vol. 1: 115.

14 Dhāk al-Ṣawb is both the name of an area of Baghdad and a term commonly used to designate 'the other side of the river', as opposed to *hā-'l-ṣawb*, 'this side of the river' (McCarthy and Raffouli 1964 Vol. 1: 460).

15 Most of the first chapters can be divided into two parts: the first focuses on a character, the second on another character, or on the same character but in another place or period of time.

16 Shulayba notes Farmān's manifest pain: 'A kind of explosion happened to him when he realised that I knew Thāmīr's opinion and he noticed the existence of his own novel and *Zuqāq* on my work table, indicating that I was re-reading them both' (Shulayba 1996: 350). Farmān assures Shulayba that, despite his great affection for Mahfouz, '*Zuqāq* wasn't in [his] mind when he was writing *al-Nakhla*, everything in it was Baghdadi and Iraqi and taken from [his] childhood and youth' (Shulayba 1996: 351).

17 The Italian novel was first published in German. Farmān read its English translation, which was available as early as 1934. He started working on *al-Nakhla* in 1956 (Shulayba 1996: 330) but he became involved in literature much earlier than that. He stated on numerous occasions that he had been greatly influenced by western literature and art (especially Russian authors such as Gorky) and read Arabic literature too (he admitted an early influence from Iraqi pioneer Dhū-'l-nūn Ayyūb and read classical literature), but his reading of writers like Mahfouz and friendly competition with Iraqi writers of his generation, al-Sayyāb, al-Takarlī and Nūrī, were much more instrumental in shaping his writing.

---

18 Ḥamīda between the good ʿAbbās al-Ḥulw and the sinister Farāj Ibrāhīm, Tamādir between the young Ḥusayn and the older ʿImrān.

19 Thāmīr might have been misled by passages like the following in which Muṣṭafā, who is himself well aware of the political situation of WWII - his occupation as a smuggler depending on the presence of the British in Baghdad - tries to convince Khājīk, his Armenian partner in crime, that the old quarter where most of the novel's characters live is the best place to hide their stolen goods because of its inhabitants' ignorance of what is going on in the world outside their street, and the fact that the British will never set foot in such a lowly place: 'Do you have a better place than this? A hidden quarter that nobody in the world knows about [...] All its people care about is having something to eat. They don't know what's going on in the world. They don't know your uncle Churchill or your cousin Hitler' (70). The marginality of the quarter and the lack of awareness of its inhabitants are here characterised by Muṣṭafā, not by the author or the narrator, and even if we dismiss the political awareness of people like him and Ṣāhib, this depiction is surely ironic, given that Muṣṭafā is an outsider from Kufa himself, who wishes he could belong somewhere, even in the poor old quarter he here characterises as a backwater. (Hereafter, each quotation from *al-Nakhla* will be followed by a plain number referring to the page numbers in Farmān 1988).

20 The novel offers other examples of political controversy and debate, rarely narrated without humour. See for instance chapter 7 where Muṣṭafā and Khājīk get caught up in an argument in a bar with supporters - some of them drunk - of Arab nationalism, of the Red Army and of the Axis powers.

21 The first number refers to the Arabic edition used: Beirut: Dār al-qalam, 1972. The number in italics refers to the published English translation by Trevor Le Gassick (see bibliography for further details).

---

22 As we will observe below this is not the only situation in which the novel uses cinematic techniques, and it also refers explicitly to the cinema.

23 For example, chapter 6 of *Zuqāq* is devoted to a portrayal of al-Mu<sup>c</sup>allim Kirsha, the owner of the alley's only café. Not only is Kirsha a dope user and seller but he also has a predilection for boys. The tone of the narrator is clearly judgemental and moralistic: 'he gave rein to his desires and passions and especially to that one unwholesome weakness of his [...] [he] had always lived a most irregular life, and he had rolled in its dirt for so long that it appeared to him a perfectly normal one' (Mahfouz 1972: 40, 38-9). Later in the same chapter, a didactic tone is unmistakably present when the narrator talks about al-Sayyid Raḍwān al-Ḥusaynī's harsh behaviour towards his wife: 'we must not underestimate the power of the traditions of the time and the place. We must not forget that among this class the prevailing opinion was that women were best treated as children' (Mahfouz 1972: 47, 45). Here we have the author's voice, which tries to guide his readers towards the right interpretation of what is narrated.

24 The most striking of such passages is the one in which the narrator describes how Salīma struggles with words, and finds it impossible to express her feelings of loneliness to Muṣṭafā. The usually concise sentences of the narrative and the character's utterances would have been enough for the reader to understand the situation and draw his/her conclusions, but the author cannot resist a rare example of clumsily explicit social commentary which jars with, as much as it is superfluous to, the surrounding narrative. It is clearly the authorial voice which explains why the man (Muṣṭafā) is chattering and the woman (Salīma) keeps quiet: 'Everything was homely - the oven, the tea keeping warm over the oil lamp, the cigarette, a man and a woman - a talkative man and a mute woman, unable to express herself. Thousands of years of slavery had robbed her of the gift of articulating the feelings raging within her, otherwise she would have said: I feel lonely too, Muṣṭafā. On

---

the feast day I cried because I was alone in this big house and winter was coming, and I knew I was going to hear the gutters overflowing and be scared' (115).

25 In the foreword to his novel, Silone explains how he opted to turn the dialect spoken by his characters (who are *cafoni*, peasants) into standard Italian in order to make the text understood (Silone 1986: 8-9).

26 As our experience as non-Arab, let alone non-Iraqi, readers of the novel has taught us, the novel should not scare away readers with a knowledge of literary Arabic only, as they can still enjoy it and understand the gist of even the most arduous passages, even if some nuances and some words remain obscure.

27 Even if we are stressing the striking difference in style and tone between the two writers' early novels, we want to clarify that it is not our intention to belittle the achievements of Mahfouz, who was undoubtedly the main writer responsible for simplifying the literary language and making it more flexible in radical ways, from which Farmān inevitably benefited.

28 Here and throughout this essay we have decided to translate the Arabic *al-Inklīz* literally as 'the English', even though the characters obviously use this word to mean the British.

29 The end of Chapter 18 is a piece of bravura in which the narration switches from one perspective to another with increasing pace, its focus shifting between the three main characters, and its rapid rhythm and high level of suspense eventually being resolved in a comic finale (132-6).

30 We will go back to the second part of Auerbach's definition of modern realism below when dealing with the historical background of the novel.

31 This unity of space and people can at times be positive, at times negative. The *khān* where most of Salīma's neighbours live typifies the close-knit community at its best and worst, and the torrential rains dramatise how easily its inhabitants can be cut off from the

---

rest of the city.

32 Even if Mahfouz confirms that the alley in *Zuqāq* is now poor and peripheral (as compared to Muski St. and the flat where Faraj Ibrāhīm lives), there is a noticeable difference between this alley and the street in *al-Nakhla*. Both have - in al-Sayyid Salīm ʿAlwān’s company office and the stables of Hājj Aḥmad Āghā respectively - hallmarks of an affluent life, which remains unattainable for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. However, the former is very much active and lucrative and the latter is a symbol of present decline, with vestiges of a past glory. The Hājj, who is probably still powerful and rich, does not live in the street, and unlike the Sayyid does not work in it, but crucially lives in the rich Dhāk al-Ṣawb, the other side of the river. Moreover, whereas the Sayyid, a rich and successful merchant, is a central character in Mahfouz’s novel, Farmān focuses on the poor: the Hājj ‘appears’ only in the often critical words of his employees and the inhabitants of the street.

33 Bachelard mentions how ‘imaginary primitive elements’ are connected to the childhood home. We can see how Farmān, living in his Moscow exile at the time of writing *al-Nakhla*, recalls his childhood home like Bachelard’s ‘dreamer of refuges’ who dreams of curling up ‘like an animal in its hole’ in the most primitive of places (Bachelard 1994: 30).

34 A style which is far removed from that of another Arab writer who is a master at evoking space, the Egyptian Idwār al-Kharrāṭ (b. 1926). Al-Kharrāṭ’s style, however, is lyrical but also unrestrained in its baroque sophistication and virtuoso verbosity.

35 Al-Sayyab’s *Unshūdat al-maṭar* (‘Rain Song’, 1960) is one of the best known and most influential Iraqi poems, as Farmān himself points out in one of his interviews (Shulayba 1996: 321). Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr’s novel *al-Shaṭīʿ al-thānī* (‘The Other Shore’, 1998) possibly contains allusions to it (al-Ṣaqr 1998: 120), and at the same time contains clear references to Farmān’s works; for example, the beginning of the novel, when the protagonist receives a



---

mysterious letter, echoes the beginning of Farmān's second novel *Khamsat aṣwāt*.

36 It is difficult to separate Salīma from her house (with its characteristic features: the palm tree, the *hawsh*, the roof); Marhūn is associated with the stable; Ḥamādī with the stable and the *khān*; Ṣāhib only appears inside or in front of his shop; in Tamādir's mind ʿImrān is inseparable, as we will see below, from his orchard, which she idealises. In general, women are associated with indoor space and men with outdoor space or, at least, men are seen as much more mobile. Tamādir and Nashmiyya are mainly seen in the latter's house, whereas we follow Ḥusayn from his house to Tamādir's, to Nashmiyya's, to the square in front of the British legation, to cafés, to a hotel, wandering in the streets until he reaches the Umara Hotel in the last scene. Similarly, Muṣṭafā is seen in streets, cafés, Salīma's house, etc.

37 'The novel depicts the clarity of the old and the ambiguity of what will take its place, so we see things falling apart, but not being born' (Darrāj 1988: 14).

38 'How forcefully [poets] prove to us that the houses that were lost forever continue to live with us.' (Bachelard : 56).

39 In the way Maḥmūd is represented it seems that the *ashqiyāʿ* are just thugs who, like the *ḥarāfīsh* in Mahfouz's novel *Malḥamat al-ḥarāfīsh* are powerful and operate as if they are above the law but, unlike the *ḥarāfīsh*, do not fulfil the function of protectors of the people of the quarter.

40 This is undoubtedly why in recent years articles have appeared on the internet drawing parallels between the novel and the current Iraqi situation (ʿAbd al-Ḥasan 2008, al-Yāsiri 2008), along with a website carrying the same title as the novel (alnakhlahwaaljeeran.com). This deals with art and culture and is inspired by the play adapted from the novel. Moreover, the novel has been prepared for serialization for Iraqi TV and, at the time of writing, is being filmed in Baghdad. Another important point to make regarding the

---

relevance of the novel vis-à-vis current events is that the Baghdad of the novel is not the segregated city of today: Kurdish and Armenian quarters are mentioned along with Jewish inhabitants: when the women of the traditional quarter ponder upon the real motives behind Salīma and Muṣṭafā's decision to marry, and someone implies that love must be the reason, the mock-horrified response is: 'What? Have we all become Jews?' (145). A church tower overlooks the courtyard of Salīma and Ḥusayn's house; Christian *shanāshīl* are mentioned (traditional enclosed *mashrabiyya*-like wooden balconies); and it is symptomatic that even if the characters are most probably Shi'a, not once in the whole novel do the adjectives Shi'i and Sunni appear.

41 Khayriyya's nickname is 'The-Government-God-Bless-Them' (*al-ḥukūma Allāh yusallim-hā*) because this is her favourite expression. Her husband works as an office boy in a government department, and she uses this connection with the government to imply that she belongs to the ranks of 'civilised' people, even though she lives on the 'wrong' side of the river. Ironically, throughout the novel her husband's position worsens, until one day she decides she has had enough: 'I won't say "the government, God bless them" ever again. I hope they can all hear me!' But, with the usual delicate irony, we are told that Khayriyya looks as if she has staged a failed anti-government demonstration as there is nobody in the empty street to hear her shouting her 'non-revolutionary slogan'; 180).

42 The following is a conversation between Muṣṭafā and Salīma:

- Umm Ḥusayn, if it wasn't for the English we'd die of hunger.
- True - she agreed rapidly - but how long are they going to stay?
- They're staying, Umm Ḥusayn, they're staying till kingdom come. The English don't enter a country and then leave. Can you imagine them doing that? [...] I can't imagine Baghdad without the English.
- No. Who can?

---

- So let them stay, then people can go on working. [...] When they left for a month, what happened to Baghdad? It was chaos.

- Executions and shooting - she backed him up - I couldn't sleep at all.

- You see? And there are people who say the English are no good.

- Who says that, dear? Only those with no sense.

- But there are people like that and now they've become Nazis and I don't know what!

She didn't understand who he was talking about, but said:

- The enemy you know is better than the friend you don't know.

He stared at her and she realised he was annoyed, so, trying to make up for her mistake, she said:

- I don't know how the proverb goes.

- No, Umm Ḥusayn, the English aren't enemies [...] (94-5).

43 Bakhtin draws a similar conclusion when he talks about 'the image of another's language and outlook on the world' in the novel as being 'simultaneously represented *and* representing' (Bakhtin 1981: 45; emphasis in original).

44 According to Farmān, the early fiction of al-Takarlī and others belongs to a certain existentialist current within pioneering Iraqi fiction (Shulayba 1996: 323). After *al-Nakhla*, in novels like *Khamsat aṣwāt* and *Zilāl*, Farmān increasingly focuses on more intellectual characters (educated professionals or students), describing in more detail the workings of their minds. His novels are clearly informed by his own experiences in different stages of his life: *al-Nakhla* by his childhood, *Khamsat* by his working experience as a young journalist, *Zilāl* by his returning to Iraq after a period of study abroad and his struggle to find a job.

45 In Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr's *Imrāʿat al-Ghāʾib* ('The Missing Person's Wife', 2004), the narration of a folktale by an elderly woman to her young grandchild takes up roughly half the novel. In the last three or four decades, a deliberate and overt use of the Arabic literary

---

heritage by novelists has emerged as one of the features of literary innovation. In al-Ṣaqr's novel, traditional storytelling helps a child come to terms with the absence of his father, who has gone missing during the Iran-Iraq war.

46 This difference in the characterisation of male and female protagonists is realistic and objective but we should not conclude that women are seen as mere victims. On the contrary, each of Salima, Radifa and Khayriyya is in many respects stronger and/or more responsible than her male partner, not to mention Nashmiyya who, for better or worse, makes things happen in Tamāḍir's life. Nashmiyya, referring in Iraqi Arabic to someone with guts and courage, only exists as a proper name in the feminine form.

47 In the following discussion, for the sake of simplification, we will arbitrarily collate in the term *film noir* both French films from the poetic realism of the 1930s and films from the classic period of American *film noir* from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. There are many connections between the two styles and French poetic realism can be seen as a prototype *film noir* (Shrader 1972).

48 E.g. Jules Duviver's film *Pépé le moko* (1937) is set in the city of Algiers, while the archetypal *film noir* setting is usually provided by colder and darker metropolises. However, the French film mainly takes place in the Casbah, which functions as both a maze protecting the fugitive gangster hero from the police and a prison from which he cannot escape without losing his freedom.

49 As the influence of cinema grows on the increasingly isolated Ḥusayn, we are reminded of James Baldwin's short story 'Sonny's Blues' (1948), in which he writes about the situation of black American youths after WWII as follows: 'These boys [...] were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives,

---

which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed [...]' (Baldwin 1995: 3).

50 As we have discussed elsewhere, it is possible to compare the narrative of another Iraqi novel, al-Şaqr's *al-Şaṭi' al-thānī* (1998), to that of a film (Caiani and Cobham 2008). The protagonist of this novel falls victim to a powerful and mysterious enemy who, by the end of the novel, completely defeats him in a way that makes him, even more markedly than Ḥusayn, a *film noir* type of hero.

51 It is possible to draw a parallel between the characterisation of Ḥusayn here and what Paul Schrader writes about *film noir*: '*film noir*'s techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style' (Schrader 1972).

52 Another difference between *al-Nakhla* and *Zuqāq* is that in the latter Mahfouz is consistent in his focusing on different characters in a regular, orderly and symmetric fashion, whereas in the former the author's focus is eventually completely hijacked by Ḥusayn. As a consequence of this shift, the reader is left wondering what has happened to the other main characters of the novel.

53 In this section, there are other less gruesome but equally stylised passages, which can be compared to cinematic sketches: when Ḥusayn is walking through the alley leading to the Umara Hotel, he comes across a wood carrier who raises dust that makes Ḥusayn close his eyes. When he opens his eyes again, the sign for the Umara Hotel appears in front of him (209). Another passage containing a similar visual effect, which suggests an increase in the dramatic content of the scene, occurs when Ḥusayn is sitting in the bar of the hotel, hoping to spot Maḥmūd, and suddenly sees him through the haze of his cigarette smoke (214).

---

54 Maybe even a post-modernist form of realism if we consider the references to the world of cinema and the actual cinema buildings as ironic, self-referential hints at what the novel and its main character are turning into.

55 The ambiguity of the final scene of the novel is not lost on the critic Shulayba who maintains that 'the reader / critic is perplexed vis-à-vis this positive / negative finale' (Shulayba 1996: 128).

---

## REFERENCES

*Dates between square brackets refer to the year of first publication.*

°Abd al-Ḥasan, F. (2008) ‘Riwāyat intihāziyyī al-°Irāq fī kull °ahd wa-zamān.

°Awda ilā *al-Nakhla wa-’l-jīran* li-Ghā°ib Tu°ma Farmān’, *al-Kalima*, 2  
(13).

<http://www.al-kalimah.com/data/2008/1/1/Faysal-on-Ghaib.xml>

Aḥmad, °A. (1977) *al-Adab al-qīṣaṣī fī-’l-°Irāq mundhu al-ḥarb al-°ālamīyya  
al-thāniya*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Baghdad: *Manshūrāt wizārat al-i°lām*).

Allen, R. (1995) *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*  
(2nd ed. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

Auerbach, E. (2003) [1946] *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western  
Literature* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press).

Bachelard, G. (1994) [1958] *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Jolas, M. (Boston:  
Beacon Press).

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) [1975] *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (Austin:  
University of Texas Press).

Baldwin, J. (1995) [1948] ‘Sonny’s Blues’ in: *Sonny’s Blues* (London: Penguin),  
pp. 1-52.

- 
- Caiani, F. and Cobham, C. (2008) 'The Other Shore: Dialogue and Difference in Mahdī 'Īsā al-Ṣaqr's *al-Shāṭi' al-thānī*', *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 11 (3), pp. 265-281.
- Cobham, C. (2002) 'The poetics of space in two stories by Ḥanān al-Shaykh' in: Hallaq, B., Ostle, R. and Wild, S. (eds.) *La poétique de l'espace dans la littérature arabe moderne* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle), pp. 181-94.
- (2004) 'Reading and Writing in *al-Masarrāt wa'l-awjā'* by Fu'ād al-Takarlī', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 35 (1), pp. 25-44.
- Darrāj, F. (1988) 'Riwāya 'an al-ams... Riwāya 'an al-yawm', in: Farmān 1988, pp. 7-16.
- Duvivier, J. (2004) [1936] *Pépé le Moko* (DVD, UK: Optimum Releasing).
- Farmān, Gh. Ṭ. (1988) [1966] *al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīran* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī / Dār Bābil).
- Hayword, S. (2006) *Cinema studies: the key concepts* (Electronic book, London: Taylor & Francis e-Library)
- Mahfouz, N. (1972) [1947] *Zuqāq al-midaqq* (Beirut: Dār al-qalam); trans. Le Gassik, T. (1975) [1966] *Midaq Alley* (London: Heinemann).
- McCarthy R. J. and Raffouli, F. (1964) *Spoken Arabic of Baghdad*, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Librairie Orientale).



- 
- al-Miṣrī, Kh. (1997) *Ghāʿib Tu<sup>c</sup>ma Farmān. Ḥarakat al-mujtama<sup>c</sup> wa-taḥawwulāt al-naṣṣ* (Damascus: Dār al-madā).
- Musawi, M. J. (2003) *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel. Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden and Boston: Brill).
- al-Nu<sup>c</sup>mān, A. (1996) *Ghāʿib Tu<sup>c</sup>ma Farmān. Adab al-manfā wa-ʿl-ḥanīn ilā-ʿl-waṭan* (Damascus: Dār al-madā).
- Reid, D. and Walker, J. L. (1993) ‘Strange Pursuit: Cornell Woolrich and the Abandoned City of the Forties’ in Copjec, J. (ed.) *Shades of Noir. A Reader* (London & New York: Verso), pp. 57-96.
- al-Ṣaqr, M. ʿĪ (1998) *al-Shāṭiʿ al-thānī* (Damascus: Dār al-madā).
- Shulayba, Z. (1996) *Ghāʿib Tu<sup>c</sup>ma Farmān. Dirāsa muqārīna fī-ʿl-riwāya al-ʿIrāqīyya* (Beirut: Dār al-kunūz al-adabiyya).
- Shrader, P. (2003) [1972] ‘Notes on *Film Noir*’ in Siodmak, R. *Ernest Hemingway’s The killers* (2003) [1946] (DVD, USA: Criterion).
- Silone, I. (1986) [1933] *Fontamara*, trans. Mosbacher, E. (London / Melbourne: J. M. Dent & Sons).
- Tarkovsky, A. A. (1994) [1989] *Time within time. The diaries 1970-1986*, trans. Hunter-Blair, K. (London: Faber).
- (2002) [1979] *Stalker* (DVD, UK: Artificial Eye).
- Thāmir, F. (1975) [1969] ‘Bayna “Zuqāq al-midaqq” wa-“al-Nakhla wa-ʿl-jīran”’ in: *Ma<sup>c</sup>ālim jadīda fī adabi-nā al-mu<sup>c</sup>āṣir* (Baghdad: Manshūrāt

---

wizārat al-Iʿlām), pp. 150-5.