

Prison nostalgia and the collapse of emancipatory futures

Women's writings from the Egyptian prison of al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya

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During the 1960s and 1970s, many intellectuals and ordinary citizens in Egypt were imprisoned and detained for political reasons. Many of them wrote about their experiences, creating a corpus of prison memoirs known by the Arabic name of *adab al-suḡūn* (prison literature). These texts reflect the ambivalent position of intellectuals during the Nasser and post-Nasser periods, oscillating between their faith in the state, even when it revealed its repressive nature, and their progressive loss of trust in it. This article focuses on memoirs written by women who were imprisoned in the al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya prison in 1981. I will first highlight some common themes in women's prison writing, particularly within Egyptian literature. Then, I will closely examine two memoirs: Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's *Muḍakkirātī fī siḡn al-nisā'* ('My Memories from Women Prison,' 1983) and Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's *Ḥamlat taftīḥ: awrāq šaḡsiyya* ('The Search: Personal Papers,' 1992), pointing at the way these authors use the resources and conventions of the genre of prison literature to deconstruct the rhetorical image of the imprisoned intellectual. Building on Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope and on recent scholarship regarding the interplay between temporality, post-colonial memory, and trauma, I will demonstrate how the mass arrests of 1981, the emergence of a neo-liberal order in Egypt, and the failure of revolutionary and emancipatory ideals disrupt a linear perception of time. This creates a rupture, leading to what can be described as a 'post-colonial melancholia' that leads the women authors toward an idealization of the prison experience.

Keywords: Prison literature in Egypt: women's prison writing; nostalgia.

1. Introduction

"The days and demands of life have separated us, but whenever I encounter one of them, we embrace, reminiscing about our time in prison. It's as if we feel a fierce nostalgia for that place, as if the bond of sisterhood formed during our incarceration cannot be forgotten or diminished. Who knows, perhaps one day it will return" (al-Sa'dāwī 2000: 302). With these words, the famous writer, political activist, and physician Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī describes the moment in which she reenounters her fellow inmates

from the prison of al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya, after being released from prison in 1981. Along with her, several famous and less famous women writers decided to recall and write about their prison experiences to describe the repressive condition of the society in the Arab world, emphasizing the dimension of their struggle as common citizens and political activists (Booth 1987; Harlow 1992; Benigni 2009: 135-160; Elsis 2020: 366, 390).

Memoirs from prison produced by women had to be inscribed into the larger field of prison literature (*adab al-suḡūn*), a “literary phenomenon” (*wāqi‘ adabī*; al-Fayṣal 1983, 92) which has taken on particular prominence from the era of decolonization onward (Abū Niḍāl 1981; Camera d’Afflitto 1998, 148-156; Cooke 2001, 237-245; Benigni 2009, 7-15 and 247-49; Elimelekh 2014). During the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, scholarship on contemporary Arabic literature increasingly focused on the theme of prison literature (Sibilio 2020, 366-390; Taleghani 2021; Collective Antigone 2025). These works analyzed several Arab authors who reported their prison experience and used their direct or indirect autobiographical experience to enter the discursive tradition of *adab al-suḡūn*.

Memory is the dominant dimension of prison literature. Bearing witness to (and being the victim of) an abuse of power by the state implies the responsibility of recounting the feeling of injustice and the absurdity of political confinement. This act of memory occurs through autobiographical memoir or fiction that draws from personal experience. Autobiographies and novels depict the violence of the state through recurring themes, including governmental and bureaucratic corruption, intelligence services pervasively infiltrating daily life, violent police raids and abrupt arrests, as well as the intellectual’s resilience and integrity within the prison walls. The prison space appears in novels or autobiographies as a separate society with its own laws and rules, although confined to the obscurity of a parallel dimension closely resembling a limbo or a hell. The infernal aspect of prison life is redeemed by the close and trusting camaraderie that develops within it—a recurring theme, celebrated in many texts as a form of salvation. The prison community, while distanced from everyday life, reflects the broader society directly. One aspect that becomes evident by reading prison literature in Arabic is the central role of the prison as a reflection of the nation-state. From this perspective, Arab prison literature shares a common trait with all twentieth-century prison writing, that is, the centrality of prison writing in the historiography of a nation-state. Bruce Franklin has observed regarding his work on American prison literature that “in the seven-year period during which I worked on this book, I gradually realized that I was not looking at some peripheral cultural phenomenon but something close to the center of our historical experience as a nation-state” (Franklin 1989: 31).

The Egyptian writer and literary critic Radwa Ashour, among others, has highlighted the diverse voices emerging from the prison in contemporary Arab literature, describing prison literature as: “A

rich subgenre of modern Arabic literature (that) has been produced by both men and women; by liberals, communists, and Islamists; by professional writers, by one-book authors and by ex-detainees who have recorded their prison experience in interviews, oral testimonies, and fragments” (Ashour 2015). Even though this definition represents, to varying degrees, many Arabic-speaking countries, the specific political conjuncture of Egypt from 1960 onward led to the coexistence within Egyptian prisons of journalists, writers, intellectuals, and activists belonging to different, sometimes opposing, ideologies. Egyptian intellectuals themselves first noted the importance of delving into the circumstances of these mass arrests, which aimed at controlling and monopolizing the free flow of opinion (Abdel-Malek 1968; Stagh 1993; Di-Capua 2009; Litvin 2011; Abu-Rabij 2004; Gorman 2003). The Egyptian journalist and political activist Farīda al-Naqqāsh defined the detention camps as “miniature representations of society” (Harlow 1992: 135) and pointed out the importance of studying these testimonies because they reflect a space containing the wide variety of political opinions repressed by the Egyptian state. The ongoing cycles of repression and control within the publishing sector, along with intermittent periods of relative freedom of expression, are hallmarks of the cultural policies implemented by the two Egyptian presidents, Nasser (1965-1970) and Sadat (1970-1981). All these dynamics render the Egyptian *adab al-suḡūn* particularly significant, as it illuminates the intricate relationship between writers, censorship, and the publishing industry and provides a valuable pathway for exploring the complex “literary field” of modern and contemporary Egypt (Jacquemond 2003; Benigni 2009: 78-97).

The waves of the arrests of intellectuals (and common citizens) in Egypt were numerous, and the relationship with the military state changed over time. The prototype of the writer who was arrested during the late 1950s and early 1960s coincides with the figure of the intellectual-militant who supported the Republican Revolution and believed in his role as a *multazim* (engagé) intellectual (Kelmm 2000). For this reason, at least until the end of the 1960s, the writers showed a substantial confidence in Nasser’s government, even if they were imprisoned and referred to their imprisonment in their works. While noting its repressive attitude, they do not feel they can condemn the government in its totality, and they do not establish the emblematic prison-country parallelism that will be dominant in the literature produced from the 1970s onward. The experiences of writers who faced arrest and repression mirror those of intellectuals imprisoned under socialist regimes. Miklós Haraszti described these intellectuals’ attitude toward prison as “a joyous service: to serve a society that serves the valuable” (Haraszti 1987: 25).

The substantial trust in the Egyptian state slowly changed in the memoirs from prison published during the 1970s, which refer to the arrests perpetrated from 1964 onward. After 1964, when the parties

had been dissolved and the main political movements declared illegal, the secret police directed their attention toward organized groups, student movements, the circles of intellectuals, and the literary avant-garde such as the members of the ‘Generation of the Sixties,’ as well as lashing out with particular vehemence at the Muslim Brothers and Sisters (Cooke 1995, 147; Zollner 2007). In summary, while the most notable leftist figures imprisoned in previous years regained their positions of prestige, a new generation of intellectuals deemed politically subversive became victims of new raids. When released, these imprisoned intellectuals had fewer chances of being immediately reabsorbed into the social structure, partly because some were expelled from the Arab Socialist Union immediately after release. Some writers chose exile, while those who stayed in Egypt faced ongoing control and censorship even after they were released. Despite this, they persisted in seeking engagement amid the dramatic economic and social changes brought about by Sadat’s *infitāḥ* policies. In the words of Stephan Guth, “The writers did not give up the idea of literature as a useful tool and continued to see themselves as critical servants of society and nation” (Guth 2015: 138).

In this article, I will turn to the writings of a group of women detained in the al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya women’s prison at the end of these two decades of continuous waves of arrests, specifically in 1981. They were all detained after the massive campaign that Sadat put in place to persecute his opponents. The arrests followed the protests organized by all political sides against the signing of the Camp David Accords and the separate peace with Israel. More than 1,000 people were imprisoned, among them a large number of intellectuals, including many women. Some of these names, such as Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī (1931-2021), Farīda al-Naqqāš (b. 1940), Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt (1923-1996), Šāfināz Kāẓim (b. 1937), Zaynab al-Ghazālī (1917-2005), were prominent in the Egyptian literary, cultural, and political scene.¹ The writings they devoted to narrating their prison experience, both in their stylistic choices and in their contents, are inextricably connected to the works of the previous generations of intellectuals who wrote *adab al-suḡūn* and have to be read in conversation with this genre of writing. However, the specific way these women experienced their detention, influenced by their gender and the expectation implied in their position as daughters, mothers, or spouses in Egyptian society, leads to specific characteristics in their writings that will be analyzed in the first part of this article. First and foremost, the crisis that the women depict during their imprisonment breaks with the image of the imprisoned male intellectual, resistant and militant, which is one of the predominant characteristics of *adab al-suḡūn* of the 1960s and 1970s (Benigni 2009: 213-216).

¹ Their works were all published a few years after their release, except for Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt whose work was published in the early nineties: al-Naqqāš (1980, 1985), al-Sa‘dāwī (1984), Kāẓim (1986), al-Zayyāt (1992).

In the second part of the article, I will focus on two memoirs: Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī’s *Mudakkirātī fī siġn al-nisā’* (‘My Memories from Women Prison,’ 1983) and Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt’s *Ḥamlat taftīš: awrāq šaḥṣiyya* (‘The Search: Personal Papers,’ 1992). I will elaborate on two aspects of these memoirs: the idealization of the imprisonment and a sense of nostalgia for prison life, which is, I argue, related to a fragmented, reversed, and discontinuous perception of time. Prison in these memoirs assumes the characteristics of a chronotope in the sense that Mikhail Bakhtin gave to the term, namely “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (Bakhtin 1981: 84). Prison as a chronotope means that it is time, that is, its very perception and literary description, that creates the space and vice versa. In this close conjunction resides the meaning of the text. The time in which the memoirs are written, after the liberation from prison, is perceived as a continuous and progressive decadence of political ideals and a sort of second imprisonment in the new neoliberal order of the 1980s and 1990s. This situation creates an effect of “historical inversion” of the prison experience (Bakhtin 1981: 147). More recently, the literary critic David Scott in his work *Omen of Adversity* had analyzed “the temporality of the aftermaths of political catastrophe, the temporal disjunctures involved in living on in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past” (Scott 2014: 2). Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope and David Scott’s insightful analysis of the relationship between temporality and post-colonial memory and trauma, I aim to discuss the function and representation of prison in the memoirs of Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī and Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt and their idealization and nostalgia for the prison experience.

2. Women’s voice in prison

In her article about imprisoned women in Egypt and, more generally, in the Middle East, Marilyn Booth has pointed to a specific crisis that women endure while in prison: “The female political prisoner finds herself fighting not only the isolation and self-doubt which any political prisoner potentially faces, but also fighting the identity, the duties, and the sphere which society has shaped for her, and of which—in prison—she is constantly reminded” (Booth 1987: 35). In their literary reformulation of the coercive space, women authors emphasize a crisis of identity. However, in many of these memoirs, the authors insist on strongly emphasizing the solidarity among women prisoners and the old and new friendships created inside the prison walls.

Marleen Barr has suggested that the act of storytelling by women involves reshaping their internal space and challenging the spatial boundaries imposed by society (Barr 1992). In the writings of imprisoned women, this redefinition of the self and the breach of spatial and social boundaries primarily manifest through the interactions between female political prisoners and common criminals.

The interaction is, on some occasions, characterized by tensions with other women inmates coming from different social backgrounds and the replication of the social boundaries and dynamics of the external society (Elsisi 2025). Nevertheless, the literary critic and *Tagammu* party² member Farīda al-Naqqāš, the writer and activist Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, and even the literary critic and intellectual Ṣāfināz Kāẓim—despite the latter being the most focused on the description of prison as a space of isolation and self-reflection—recognize themselves, along with the non-political women prisoners, as a single group of women oppressed by institutions. The prison cell is idealized as a space of solidarity among women, despite differences in class, cultural backgrounds, or political views (Harlow 1992: 118-120).

This idea of solidarity, of an imagined society that transcends cultural and ideological divisions, permeates the texts in a way that also affects the relationship between the prisoners and the guards. The female staff of the prison are connected to the female prisoners by sharing a life of suffering and deprivation and by their forced submission to dominant power (Booth 1987: 39). Farīda al-Naqqāš recalls how one of the female guards had asked her to write an article about their condition so that it would be known by the public (Booth 1987: 40). The writers also note the substantial difference between female and male prison staff: the position of women working within the prison is one of subordination to a system run by men, to the extent that both Farīda al-Naqqāš and Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī note that the guards’ situation does not differ much from that of the female prisoners (Booth 1987: 39). In this sense, the prison is a microcosm reflecting the outside society in all its dynamics of the suppression of citizens’ rights, as Marilyn Booth observes: “Acquiring and maintaining one’s freedom is at once an internal and an external process; both levels are confronted sharply in the confined space of prison. In these memoirs, conditions of prison come to represent the political and economic structures of society” (Booth 1987: 38).

Farīda al-Naqqāš expressed this state-prison identity in the title she chose for one of her works, *al-Siġn...al-waṭan* (‘The Prison...the Country’), which could easily be read as one of those ‘national allegories’ that Fredric Jameson talks about in regard to third-world fiction, what we today would call postcolonial fiction. By the term ‘national allegories,’ Fredric Jameson identifies the phenomenon of the convergence in post-colonial narratives of the fate of the individual with that of the nation. According to Fredric Jameson, “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (Jameson 1986: 69). Similarly, the prison also corresponds to the country in the opening lines of Ṣāfināz Kāẓim’s book ‘*An al-siġn wa al-*

² The *Ḥizb al-Taġammu‘ al-Waṭanī al-Taqaḍḍomi al-Waḥdawī* members were left-leaning intellectuals, Nasserists, Marxists, and progressive Muslims. The party, commonly referred to as *Tagammu*, was established in 1977.

hurriyya ('On prison and freedom'): "For me, prison is no longer the beggars' cell full of scabies and lice [...] it is not the punishment cell [...] nor is it the solitary confinement cell...rather it corresponds to every kind of tyrannical oppression and violation of citizens' rights guaranteed by the Constitution" (Kāzīm 1986: 5).

This blurring of the inside/outside dimensions and the private and political in women's prison writings is probably one of the more powerful aspects of these writings. The correspondence with the outside is exemplified primarily in the authors' willingness to explore the overlap between the prison and the masculinist and patriarchal structures that women experience outside. Farīda al-Naqqāš, for example, observes the cultural difference between men and women through the graffiti on the walls left by prisoners. She notes that the content of the graffiti engraved by women is often related to the expression of feelings rather than a bare political statement, and how women, unlike men, do not affix their signatures (Booth 1987: 37-38).

A characteristic feature of the women's autobiographical texts from prison is the anguish for not fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers and the guilt for stepping out of the family sphere. The prison authorities, on the other hand, seem to be aware of this, as they use such frustrations and emotional frailties to exert psychological pressure on the female prisoners, burdening women with the crime of double deviance, political but also social. Marilyn Booth states in this regard: "The anguish of imposed guilt for working outside women's traditionally defined sphere, and the struggle against this punishing emotion, are among the sharpest manifestations of women's 'special treatment' as political prisoners" (Booth 1987: 35).

The emphasis on personal feelings in these narratives illustrates that imprisonment is portrayed not only as a time of suffering but also as a period of catharsis, for re-evaluating one's past life, and fostering opportunities for individual and collective liberation. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, there is significant emphasis on the prison sisterhood, depicting the cell as a space of female solidarity where traditional social roles are reversed. The prison of al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya, therefore, is reconstructed in the narratives as a uniquely feminine world, which the authors themselves are not afraid to describe as a sacred place, at some points, by virtue of the exquisitely feminine camaraderie created there. Latifa al-Zayyāt beautifully expresses this feeling with the following words: "Can I write about my prison experiences without remembering you, my friends? You, who have transformed this experience into a jewel, who have touched up the deepest blackness with white depths and turned it into a tolerable gray? How can I forget even you, my guard, who transformed solitude into a family, my exile into a home?" (al-Zayyāt 2016: 71-72).

3. Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī and the prison: coercive space and space of escape

Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī is an emblematic author in the creation of a ‘canon’ of Egyptian feminist literature in the 1970s and 1980s. She was detained between September 6 and November 25, 1981, during the campaign of arrests that President Sadat implemented against the political opposition and, in particular, against intellectuals suspected of dissidence after the heated protests that followed his signing of the Camp David Accords and the separate peace treaty with Israel in 1978. Like many well-known Egyptian writers of her generation, following her imprisonment, she placed this experience at the center of her literary works. In her renowned works *Muḍakkirātī fī siġn al-nisā’* (‘Memoirs of Women’s Prison’), published in 1984, and *Ithnā ‘ashar imra’a fī zinzāna wāḥida* (‘Twelve women in a cell’), published in 1982, she offered an example of a feminist reading of her imprisonment. Even before the experience touched her personally, she had already set one of her works, *Imra’a ‘inda al-nuqṭat al-ṣifr* (‘Woman at point zero’), published in 1972, inside a women’s prison where she worked as a doctor. In both works, prison is a real but also a symbolic space for portraying a condition of female marginalization and to witness the subordination to a repressive and patriarchal order (Malti-Douglas 1995; Saiti 1994).

Muḍakkirātī fī siġn al-nisā’ is set entirely in the prison of al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya. The book consists of a foreword, four chapters (The Arrest; The Prison; Breaking the Siege; The Exit for Interrogation; Sadat’s death) and a conclusion, in which the author, after her release, is seized with “a sudden feeling of nostalgia” (*ḥanīn mufāġġī’ ġarīb*; al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 300) and returns to the prison to visit her fellow prisoners. This conclusion highlights a significant shift in how prison is represented in her work, setting it apart from the dominant portrayals in the Egyptian literary field. Rather than adhering to the traditional contrast seen in the political memoirs of the 1970s, which depicted the outside world as a space of freedom and political activism and prisons as a realm of negativity, the author instead redefines the meaning of prison. The work embraces the idea of prison as a space for liberation and emancipation, subverting the conventional narrative.

According to Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, her memoirs are a protest against the oppressive nature of political power over civil society, with prison being just one symbol of this oppression. In the foreword to the third reprint, published in 1990, Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī insistently emphasizes the theme of Egypt as a ‘prison state,’ a country where there is no public opinion, ‘conscience is sin,’ and ‘knowledge an error’ (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 8). Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī does not experience her liberation as a moment to reestablish her own personal rights, of palingenesis, and the alleviation of oppression compared to the dark years of imprisonment, all of which are features that characterize the prison memoirs published until the end of the 1970s (Benigni 2009: 145). Imprisonment, in her view, is a continuum that has affected Egypt from the eras of Nasser and Sadat to that of Mubarak. It reflects a society where all ideals have been

thwarted, leading to a point where the very concept of revolution has lost its meaning: “One revolution after another, one revolution supporting another. Because there are too many revolutions, we have begun to dream of a life without revolutions... Is it possible that revolution is putting singing birds inside cages and prisons [...]?” (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 8). This continuity between the experience of imprisonment and what happens after the release is one of the key features of Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī’s work. In light of this, prison is the very essence of oppression, especially that enacted against women, that the writer wishes to bear witness to, choosing to adopt her own case of repression and that which comes from the voices of her companions, similarly to what she had done a few years earlier in the work *Imra’ ‘inda nuqtat al-ṣifr*. Her choice to dedicate her work to the collectivity of the oppressed and militants for the cause of freedom has to be read in this light: “To all those who have despised injustice to the point of death...have loved freedom to the point of being imprisoned...in Egypt and outside Egypt...I dedicate this book” (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 5).

As soon as she enters the prison, Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī is flooded with memories from her childhood, youth, and adulthood. For each of these moments, the writer reflects on the limitations imposed by her female condition. At least initially, the author’s choices mirror those made by other authors who wrote *adab al-suḡūn*: the entry into the prison, for example, is described as a traumatic and disastrous event, a radical transition to a death-like condition (*ka-l-mawt*). The author notes, then, the difficulty she encounters in adapting to the new prison environment: “The most difficult time of disasters is their onset, and what is most serious in prisoners’ lives is the sudden transition from one life to another, from lifelong acquired habits to new ones” (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 75). In other words, the first motif that emerges is the dichotomy between the outside world and the prison interior, which is emphasized through the recurring themes of death and the grave (Benigni 2009: 193). The officer who comes to arrest her during the night, for example, has the voice “of angels and devils questioning the dead in the graves” (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 43). Her first memory inside the prison is a sudden *déjà vu* about burying her mother’s body, which hits her precisely as she is pushed through the cell door (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 57). Once inside, her first reaction is one of annihilation and despair. The details she notices are those common to any prison space: the darkness, the cracks on the walls, the bars, the small window, and the bodies lying on the ground (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 57).

After a few pages, however, the protagonist begins to accept the hardships of this condition through a process of voluntary ‘normalization’ of the reality of prison. This transformation of her own imprisonment from an exceptional condition to an everyday one occurs through a mental process she defines as “madness” (*ḡunūn*; al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 68). In this sense, Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī clearly expresses her choice to read the prison experience through the lenses of ‘madness’ and, thus, she declares her

premeditated deviation from reality. Throughout the work, the author emphasizes the idea of detachment from reality and the positive reinterpretation of her imprisonment through the deliberate strength of her mind.³ This adaptation of daily life in prison highlights the important role that the body plays. Unlike other prison memorials that prominently feature themes of violence, torture, and physical degradation, Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī's work stands out for its unique perspective. The body is neither glorified for its capacity to withstand pain nor dehumanized by humiliation; instead, it becomes a stronger vessel for resisting confinement. One of the practices she adopts is a morning exercise session in the prison yard (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 136).

The memoir by Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī is an autobiographical journey that focuses entirely on individual interpretations of the prison experience. As the narrative progresses, the somber tones of the testimony are gradually replaced by descriptions of the lives of the women prisoners inside the cell. The salvific ‘madness’ that drives Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī to amplify the small moments of serenity in everyday prison life is closely related to the motif of sisterhood that emerges during detention, which she defines as *ḥayā al-ḡamā‘iyya wasaṭ al-nisā’*—the collective life among women (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 74). This sisterhood is formed through two shared experiences of marginalization: the oppression of life in prison and the subordination of women. In prison, the traditional social roles imposed on women are stripped away, leading to the development of new identities that emerge within the shared experience of living on the margins of society while incarcerated. In other words, the prison, in the sublimated view of the author, is configured as a free place, since it is freed from a patriarchal system. In this context, it becomes evident that in the prison described by Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, differences in social class, political beliefs, and religious views are either minimized or diminished. This sets the stage for a portrayal of coexistence and a collective struggle for a common purpose.

Prison life in the women's cell is characterized by episodes of strong community character: assemblies (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 78), heated political discussions (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 198-199), and intense mutual support (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 78). As is typical of the polyphony of prison testimonies, through the use of dialogues, ample space is left in the text for the stories of the various inmates: Nūr, the Christian woman accused of fomenting confessional conflict (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 74), I’tidāl, the teenage girl accused of being a spy (al-Sa‘dāwī 2000: 193), Faṭḥiyya, the peasant woman with a vigorous body and direct manners who killed her husband after she caught him attempting to rape her daughter (al-

³ See the description of the tea: “The tea in the prison was like a mixture of black earth and straw, and the sugar was made up of chunks dark and full of ants [...] But I sipped it slowly and it tasted sweeter in my mouth than any tea I had ever had” (al-Sa‘dāwī 2005: 68).

Saʿdāwī 2000: 181). In Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī's women's prison, each woman arrives carrying the weight of her guilt, whether due to her own actions or as a result of accusations made against her. However, within the confines of the cell, the details of each crime become less distinct and are often seen as acts of self-defense against the backward practices of society. Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī highlights the pasts of her inmates to show specifically the hand of the man who forced them to commit the crime: "Each of us when we enter prison has behind us a man, a father, a husband, a brother, a cousin, an ordinary man" (al-Saʿdāwī 2000: 78-79).

Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī presents a depiction of prison repression that is collective and focuses on narrating the liberation of a group of women from imposed societal norms. This theme is also evident on both formal and stylistic levels. In her portrayal of prison, the author employs various techniques characteristic of autobiography, specifically narrated through the prism of memory. These techniques include the dissolution of narrative time and frequent recollections, utilizing both flashbacks and flash-forwards. The dialogues play a crucial role in the text, typical of narratives from prison. Time moves continuously, transitioning from the present life outside prison to various pasts the author recalls. These pasts include thoughts and memories of life before imprisonment, experiences within the cell, and the lives of other women.

The primary purpose of the narrative is to portray prison as both a reflection and a critique of the political system. However, this critique takes a backseat to the author's desire to recreate the prison experience through a sense of nostalgia, envisioning a feminist ideal for society. This nostalgia motivates the author to tell a story about resisting the overwhelming nature of oppression within the prison setting, achieved through female solidarity and mutual support. The *locus horridus* is thus transformed, through a symbolization of the space, into a *locus amoenus*, of sweetness and sharing. This symbolic representation of the women's prison is what Mikhail Bakhtin defined as a 'historical inversion' of her own experience. She portrays the realization, in a hypothetical historical past, of what she hopes to see achieved in the future. This vision aligns more closely with an idealized outcome—a desired scenario—than with the actual realities of the past (Bakhtin 1981: 147).

4. *Ḥamlat taftīṣ: awrāq šaḥṣiyya* by Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt: recomposing fragments of life through the prison experiences

In Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's work, *Ḥamlat Taftīṣ: Awrāq Šaḥṣiyya* ('The Search: Personal Papers'), the description of her prison experience appears only at the end of a lengthy autobiographical journey. In this narrative, the author reflects on her entire life, beginning with her childhood and continuing through to her adulthood. My decision to focus on this book stems from the importance of the prison experience

in Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's autobiographical journey. This experience allows her to reflect on her past in a complex way, imbuing it with new significance. The theme of imprisonment is central to her work, as it occupies a third of the book and the entire final chapter, highlighting its significance in the author's life. Prison serves as both a tangible and symbolic space, more so than in the works of Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī. It possesses a profound ability to impact and transform an individual's personality, creating trauma that nonetheless holds formative and constructive significance. The arrests experienced by Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt during her political and intellectual activism are crucial events that mark significant conceptual and chronological turning points in her life.

The author, born in Damietta in 1923, was first arrested in 1948 alongside her first husband and detained for several months in al-Ḥaḍra prison for their membership in Marxist groups. In the 1950s, she left her political career to focus on academia as a scholar of English literature. She married her second husband, the academic Rašād Rušdī, and dedicated herself to writing. In the early 1970s, after her divorce, she re-entered politics and became an influential figure in militant literary criticism, taking on a prominent role within the Egyptian cultural scene as a literary engagée. Her political engagement culminated in the late 1970s with her assuming the role of chairperson of the Committee for National Defense (*Lağna al-difā' al-qadāyā al-qawmiyya*), a group of Egyptian intellectuals who, starting in 1978, protested the separate peace and normalization of relations with Israel carried out by President Sadat (Jacquemond 2003: 220, 340). Her second arrest, in al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya prison, occurred in 1981, as part of the already mentioned repressive campaign led by Sadat.⁴

The work *Ḥamlat Taftīš: Awrāq Ṣaḥsiyya* is divided into two parts. In the first part, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt recounts her childhood and youth. She structures her autobiographical narrative by alternating between descriptive and introspective moments, focusing mainly on her family memories, as well as her political and cultural background, and her two marriages. From the very beginning of the book, it is evident that the narrative lacks a continuous temporal flow. Instead, it is characterized by a kaleidoscopic arrangement of dates, places, times, spaces, and narrating identities (Bennet 1998: 286). The reader feels involved in a game of mirrors and endless reflections of the same figure, constantly oscillating between the writer's intimate perspective and the political activist's public persona.

Within that winding path of memory, the author makes some significant references to her first imprisonment in al-Ḥaḍra Prison in 1949 and how it shaped the course of her life. In the first of these references, like Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī, she compares the prison to the many houses she inhabited, in each of which she grew up and where she developed her personality: "In the course of my life I have changed

⁴ On her biography and writing see also al-Zayyāt (1990).

several houses, living there for a single day or long years, and, for a time, the prison was my home [...] From each dwelling in which I lived, even from the prison or the houses in which I took refuge and which I was forced to change every night, I came out enriched and, at the same time, in each place I left parts of that creature that I was and I am in perpetual transformation” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 48). Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt mentions a draft of a piece entitled ‘In the Women’s Prison,’ an account she claims to have written in 1950, just after her release from prison. However, she specifies that she never found the strength to edit the work (al-Zayyāt 2016: 71). In a short chapter of few pages entitled ‘My Companions,’ the author addresses in the first person, with words of intense transport and gratitude, the women with whom she shared the prison experience, stressing the importance of camaraderie and referring, in particular, to some of them who turned prison into a “sanctuary” and “an exile into a homeland” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 73, 72).

Before exploring the second part of the work set in al-Qanāṭir al-Ḥayriyya prison, it is evident that this prison significantly impacted her life and has driven her to share her testimony. Prison is a space that transformed her body and shaped her character, which was ultimately transformed and enriched by the love and support of other women. These are characteristic themes of women’s *adab al-suḡūn* to which the author gives more space in the second part of the autobiography, which focuses on the 1981 prison episode. The earlier prison experience of 1949, therefore, continues to resurface through memories and free associations of ideas.

This second section of the work, like the previous one, features a discontinuous and fragmentary narrative. The opening scene is, ex abrupto, that of her arrest by the Egyptian army officers and her transfer to the prison. In describing this procedure, the author focuses on the two feelings that dominate her state of mind: that of absurdity and bewilderment. As in other texts of *adab al-suḡūn*, the motif of the transition from freedom to captivity is dramatically connotated with a parallelism between a condition of ‘life’ and one of ‘death.’ Officers and soldiers are demonic creatures who “come from an intermediate world between the living and the dead” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 97). However, what characterizes them most in the eyes of the author is a kind of apathy and detachment, which is manifested, above all, in their lack of anger and reaction in the face of the author’s provocative jokes and in their passive execution of seemingly irrational orders, the reason for which they manifest ignorance. These traits make the act of arrest alienating; the whole event takes place in an atmosphere of real and metaphorical darkness and in a complete absence of logic. Immediately after the trauma of capture, the author moves on to describe the transfer to al-Qanāṭir prison, a journey that leads her back to an initial lengthy recollection of memories. The landscape of al-Qanāṭir’s gardens reminds her of a

‘familiar’ place where her childhood, youth, “dreams of revolution, the beginnings of love stories that never matured, the songs of revolt are engraved” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 98).

Like other prison autobiographies, the narrative alternates between nostalgic and painful memories and reflections on the present. Unlike in Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī’s text, however, the entry into prison does not materialize with the discovery of a new world: Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt was already arrested in her youth and is aware, from the very beginning, of the fundamentally ‘formative’ value of the prison experience that awaits her. From the moment she walks through the prison gate she knows that the period of imprisonment will have the power to rearrange the fragments of her own life, the very ones that until then had been thrown seemingly haphazardly to the reader: “I entered al-Qanāṭir prison at the age of fifty-eight, certain that the fragments of my life would finally fall into place, like pearls strung on the same thread” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 113). The description of detention aims to parallel the two situations through alternating memorial streams. These streams connect the moment of the first arrest, which featured the ‘girl from al-Ḥaḍra,’ with the current detention in al-Qanāṭir. The thread that unites the two imprisoned women is that of political activism, although the author notes how in the long time between the two arrests the political illusions of her youth collapsed: “How near the spring of love seemed, in 1949, to the young woman who entered the al-Ḥaḍra prison in Alexandria [...] Now I feel lost. The East was turned into the Middle East to make way for Israel, the Arab people stopped fighting back, and all of a sudden, with the surfacing of the 1967 defeat, salvation stopped coming from the Arab revolution and started coming from its money” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 108).

The theme of transformation is central to this work. In this context, prison takes on a significant role: the experience of imprisonment is seen as something that altered the innocence and vulnerability of youth, shaping the writer’s character. Imprisonment is described in her words as a radical passage that “reduces the human being to his brutality” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 163), but the despair experienced during the detention restores the human being to her primordial power. Within the confines of prison, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt continues, “one becomes fierce and beautiful” (al-Zayyāt 2016: 137). Only by experiencing it a second time can the now mature woman, existing in a new historical phase, comprehend such transformations and reconstruct her self-image through all her metamorphoses. As in a Bildungsroman, al-Qanāṭir’s imprisonment is the experience that completes a political and existential journey that the first imprisonment had left undone.⁵ In *Ḥamlat Taftīš: Awrāq Šaḥṣiyya*, the description of the author’s imprisonment is not confined to a single space or time. Instead, the prison of al-Qanāṭir parallels the prison of al-Ḥaḍra, and the woman from al-Qanāṭir connects to the girl from

⁵ On the work of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt and the dimension of the Bildungsroman, see Paniconi (2023: 87-113).

al-Ḥaḍra. This allows for a precise tracing of the development of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's personality through the comparison of these two distinct prison contexts.

The description of the second detention culminates in the final scene of the search or inspection, the *taftīš*, which the author recalls in the title of her work and which also represents the metaphorical focus of an entire existential experience. Of the many search scenes encountered in the *adab al-suḡūn*, the depiction contained in *Ḥamlat taftīš: awrāq šaḥṣiyya* is perhaps the one that best renders the atmosphere of violence, disorder, and loss of dignity that characterizes the brutality of the prison authorities. Through fragmented phrasing, the author highlights the chaotic search for incriminating writings in the cell, revealing the degradation experienced by female prisoners: the women's bodies are denuded, violently inspected, tortured (al-Zayyāt 2016: 139ff). In the *taftīš* scene, there is an amplification of all the traits that characterize the author's autobiographical writing: frantic shifts between first and third person, alternating times and places, and narrative discontinuity. In this intense culmination of conflicting emotions and thoughts, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt suddenly recognizes her growth and the complete recovery of all past aspects of herself. The trauma from her previous political experience, which had previously surfaced only in a fragmented and disjointed manner, now integrates into the drama of her present life: "I now know that I am the girl who, in the mid-1930s, climbed down from the balcony on 'Abbās Street in Mansura and laboriously broke through the black uniforms and guns. I know that I am the young woman who, in the mid-1940s, sat on the edge of the bridge in 'Abbās, holding back her salty tears, looking at her companions drowning one by one, their corpses covered by a green flag, companion after companion, the victims of the massacre of the 'Abbās Bridge" (al-Zayyāt 2016: 145).

By contrasting two experiences of imprisonment and providing only fragments of each, the author conveys a sense of immediacy through scattered details and explores a new dimension of prison realism. The autobiography highlights two detentions as narrative poles representing the woman's human and political growth, marking the beginning and the end (Hallaq 2008: 78-90).

5. Conclusion

In his insightful analysis of the aftermath of the Grenada revolution, David Scott points out how trauma distorts time and narrative. Reading the prison memoirs written by women detained in 1981 against the background of the vast majority of prison literature written by men, one can detect a very acute use of the prison's chronotope. The aftermath of the mass arrests in 1981, the onset of the neoliberal order in the 1980s, and the failure of revolutionary and emancipatory ideals created a rupture in the perception of time. The imprisonment is a door to enter a time "out of joint," betrayed by history and

their search for an alternative space of political solidarity. Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, Farīda al-Naqqāš, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt, and Šāfīnāz Kāzīm are all women of a generation that arose in revolutionary enthusiasm and ambition but ended up living in the world of disenchantment, defined by the unfulfilled promises of the revolutions (Scott 2014: 36).

Both Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī and Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt play with and carve the dimension of time of their prison experience to amplify and give it a profound and resonant meaning. While they employ all the conventions of *adab al-suḡūn* literature, their aim differs from that of their predecessors, as they are not focused on providing a realistic account of their prison experiences. Despite the fact that they point to President Sadat as their primary enemy, there is still no space for salvation and redemption even after his assassination and even after their release from prison. The new economic and political order that emerged during the 1970s and became even stronger during the era of Mubarak left no space to elaborate on the post-prison experience in the light of political hope for the future.

In Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī’s work, the representation of the prison space appears completely and deliberately distorted by memory and nostalgia. The division between realism and memory serves as the central theme of the entire text. When the writer introduces the motif of madness, she implicitly acknowledges that she has reassembled the fragments through nostalgia—an emotion that implies the passage of time, a sense of loss, and a transformation (Starobinski 1966: 81-103; Phillips 1985: 65). It should be noted in this regard that the work *Muḍakkirātī fī siḡn al-nisā’* is one of the few works of *adab al-suḡūn* that, although it is proposed within the typology of *muḍakkirāt*, contains no reference to a diary kept by the author during her detention.

In Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt’s *Ḥamlat taftīš*, the image of imprisonment, with all its pains, degradations, and afflictions of daily life, emerges through narrative fragments embedded in a discontinuous plurality of spaces between the two prisons. *Ḥamlat taftīš: awrāq šaḡsiyya* thus succeeds perfectly in the intent of a seemingly spontaneous biographical reconstruction, in which Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt skillfully employs the fragmentary evocation of her own prison experiences, with their traumas and discontinuities, to trace the transformations of her own life, aware, as Virginia Woolf would say, that the image of the person takes shape precisely in what is most difficult to represent, in the interstices, in the silences and in fragments floating in immense empty spaces (Woolf 1976).

Living in the aftermath of the collapse of Nasserism and experiencing the repression of Sadat, these women witnessed the gradual decline of their revolutionary dreams as Egypt moved further into the neoliberal world order. They sought refuge in the idealization of their prison experience, reconstructing their lives through the lens of this experience. Rather than conforming to strict realism, they openly address the distortion of memory and nostalgia in their autobiographical narratives. The

description of their life in prison becomes an alternative space for political agency and courage, a unique environment where women can form genuine coalitions and gain a political voice, enabling them to aspire for a better future by recalling their past.

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