Allegory, trauma and an unfinished revolution in *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* by Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Laṭīf

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After the Arab Uprisings and the dramatic consequences of the protests in Egypt, Egyptian novelists produced an abundant number of literary works that deal with the dynamic and complex reality after 2011. Most of these works chronicle complex back stories which reflect national and individuals' crises in the society of the last few decades. This article focuses on Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt (2013); "The Sculptor's Book") by Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Laṭīf and argues that, though it reads and feels like a surreal or fantastic narrative, its events point allegorically at the political and social reality of Egypt in a circuitous and urgent manner. Thus, this article looks at how allegory (Benjamin 1928, Jameson 1986) can help to shed light on the literary treatment of political violence, historical collective trauma and argues that reading ʿAbd al-Laṭīf ʿs novel through a lens of trauma theory enables us to perceive the profound critique of the political Egyptian arena post 2011 as proposed by the writer. The article points out three traumatic tropes: absence, indirection, and repetition. The analysis of literary devices such as fragmentations, alienations, and nightmares will highlight the persistent aching pain and the insidious trauma of the protagonists. Moreover, addressing the main formal and stylistic features of the novel offers a chance to study the changes that may reverberate in narrative forms and symbolic meanings in Egyptian literature post-2011.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt , trauma theory, allegory.

1. Introduction

The revolutions known as the "Arab Spring" had an indelible impact on the collective consciousness in the Arab Region. Millions of people took to the streets and squares in many Arab countries for a liberal and civilised cause. They believed that these revolutions would put an end to social inequalities and authoritarianism and re-establish their leadership on a democratic model. Unfortunately, these protests had a dramatic consequence and turned into great dissipation of hopes. In Egypt, after the initial success of protests in toppling the Egyptian President on 11 February, 2011, the demonstrators

discovered that the dictator had gone but his regime continued to fight for survival[1] and the Muslim Brotherhood movement, that initially refused to support them, turned out, immediately after 2011, to be the party that had benefited the most from the revolution.[2]

In fact, later on, the leader of this movement's political party (the Freedom and Justice Party), Muḥammad Mursī, won the presidential elections and became the first elected president of Egypt.

Thus, the hopes for democracy and the promising political initiatives of the transition period vanished as the newly elected president's government, dominated by Muslim Brothers and Islamist politicians, had in mind a law which gave all powers to the president[3].

One year after his election as President, the anti-Mursī movement *Tamarrud* ("Rebellion") gained momentum and millions of Egyptians called for his removal and for new elections.

The situation worsened after Mursī was overthrown. The reinstatement of the military government of Egypt led to the suppression of political activism and the return of the perpetual state of emergency. Moreover, political activists continued to be persecuted by law enforcement.

Subsequently, the cultural field witnessed a continuous attempt to erase the revolution from national memory[4] and the government used some media to call it an external conspiracy. Such a distressful political environment, encouraged scholars to carry out research on the impact of those traumatic experiences on Egyptian activists (Matthies-Boon 2017; Matthies-Boon 2022; Miller-Graff *et al.* 2022).

On the literary front, the days of Tahrir Square and the rapid succession of political events in the months following January 2011, spurred on writers to tell their truths and give their accounts of what

[1] When it announced that Mubarak had stepped down and suspended the Constitution on 11 February 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed the position of interim president and also the authority to issue interim constitutions, promulgate laws, and appoint and dismiss ministers. From both a practical and a legal standpoint, the SCAF was the regime until a new president was elected and a new constitutional order was put in place. During that period, the SCAF had delegated the day- to- day business of government to Mubarak- era officials even after Mubarak had been deposed. This seemed to continue even after parliamentary elections in late 2011 and early 2012. Later on, the parliament that was seated in early 2012 discovered that the interim constitution issued by the military did not allow it to legislate without the military's approval or to oversee the cabinet in any substantial way (Brown, Shimaa and Adly 2021).

[2] The optimism of the early moments "turns to criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood as they began to play a larger role because of the transition's elections. In addition to arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood co-opted the revolution, some scholars expressed an affinity for simpler pre-Republican days. The Brotherhood's illiberal governing behaviour also becomes causal for explaining the military's forced reluctance to conduct a coup d'état" (Stacher 2020: 11).

[3] A Constitutional Declaration issued by Mursī earlier in August 2012 gave the president full legislative powers (Ketchley 2017).

[4] There is manipulation "of the revolution content in Egyptian schools' history textbooks and curricula by either distorting or entirely eliminating the role of the protesting masses and revolutionaries in generating political change" (Youssef 2021: 340).

was happening: literature became their tool to bear witness. As Felman, in her study on Camus's literature of testimony, explains:

> It is not an art of leisure but an art of urgency: it exists in time not just as a memorial but as an existential engagement, as an attempt to bring the backwardness of consciousness to the level of precipitant events (Felman1991:114).

Alison Gibbons (2019) has noted that during the uprisings in Egypt, novelists turned away from fiction toward nonfictional modes of writing: in the wake of the uprisings, it was as though fiction were no longer a sufficient means of representing and speaking out about and to the contemporary realities being experienced (2019: 318). Gibbons cites 'Ahdāf Suwayf's *al-Qāhirah: Madīnatī wa Ţawratinā* ("Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed, a Tahrir memoir;" 2012) as an example of a first-hand nonfictional account of the revolution.[5] Significantly, throughout the book Suwayf (b. 1950) uses the first person "I" and the collective "we," giving voice to the Egyptian collective. Likewise, El-Desouky (2013) explained that one of the obvious aesthetic achievements of the creative revolutionary energy consists of a wider narrative of the collective which revealed itself in a differing approach to narrative in the prose fiction, diaries and memoirs that appeared immediately after the events. Alongside the significant documentary trend, fiction continues to provide an essential tool to represent and discuss crucial political and social issues.

Moreover, departing from Andreas Pflitsch's thesis (2010) that there has never been a depoliticized period in modern Arabic literary history, Albers, Khalil, and Pannewick (2015) discuss the relationship between literature, society and politics in Arabic-speaking parts of the Middle East and North Africa and they argue the re-emergence of a new revolutionary iltizam[6] ("commitment") in the

[5] The book is loosely structured in five sections. The first, "Revolution I: Eighteen Days," is dated "25 January–11 February 2011" and documents the initial wave of protests in Tahrir Square. The second section is titled "An Interruption: Eight Months Later, October 2011." The third section, "The Eighteen Days Resumed: 1 February–12 February 2011," begins where the first section left off. These first three sections document "Revolution I," while sections four and five deal with "Revolution II" (with entries dating from October 2011 to October 2012, during the Presidential elections) and "Revolution III" (a postscript written in July 2013 and documenting Souief's concerned reflections on the deposal of Muhammed Morsi (Gibbons 2019: 318, 319).

[6] Term translated by Ṭaha Ḥusayn who spoke about *engagement* in the literary magazine *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* in three articles: *al-adab bayn al-itaṣāl wa al- infiṣāl* ("Literature between connection and separation;" no. 11 of August 1946), *Mulāḥẓāt* ("Remarks;" no. 21, August 1947), *Fi al-adab al-faransī* ("About French Literature;" no. 26, November 1947) the term gained immense prominence, and thus the idea of the politically and socially engaged author as a spokesperson of nations, political parties or ideologies became the all-embracing concept in the discourse of Arabic literary criticism in the mid-twentieth century and was expressed in the editorial note of the Lebanese periodical *al-adab* when it published its inaugural manifesto on literary commitment (*al-adab al- multazim*)Cf. https://al-adab.com/sites/default/files/aladab_1953_v01_01_0001_0002.

recent works of literature and art in the aftermath of 2011. One of the early novels that offers an illustrative example of how the political in literature was perceived and conceptualized in the 2011 aftermath is *Bāb al- Ḫurūǧ*, ("Exit door;" 2012) by ʻIzz al-Dīn Šukrī Fašīr (b. 1966),[7] who foretells the Islamic domination and the failure of the democratic project in Egypt. From a different perspective, Aḥmad ʻabd al-Laṭīf (b.1978) one year later, after the Brotherhood regime, published his third novel *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* ("The Sculptor's Book;" 2013) . This novel was written in the midst of the complex situation of post-revolutionary Egypt— from the Brotherhood regime, to the deposition of Mursī and the possible return of the military regime, a situation accompanied by violent turmoil and traumatic experiences.

This article focuses on *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* ("The Sculptor's Book") and argues that, though it reads and feels like a surreal or fantastic narrative, its events point allegorically at Egyptian political and social reality in a circuitous and urgent manner . Against this backdrop, this article looks at how allegory (Benjamin 1928, Jameson 1986) can help shed light on the literary treatment of political violence, historical collective trauma and argues that reading ʻAbd al-Laṭīf ʻs novel through the lens of trauma theory enables us to perceive the profound critique of the political Egyptian arena post 2011 as proposed by the writer.

I also argue that the novelist is preoccupied by preserving the revolutionary principles of freedom and a secular democratic state. The novel could be read not only as a representation of revolution and its failure, but also as a portal to the sufferings of the Egyptians in the crackdown regime, as the following pages will show.

This study draws on both the first wave of literary trauma theory (Caruth 1995, 1996; Hartman 1995) and the studies related to decolonized trauma theory by Rothberg 2009; Craps 2013; Buelens, Vanheule, Craps 2014. The literary analysis of the novel draws on trauma studies in literature (Vickroy 2002; Whitehead 2004; Luckhurst 2008; Baleav 2008)

Before starting the novel's analyses, I wish to illustrate some key points on Trauma theory, the state of the art and research on Arabic literature.

[7] The novel offers an imaginative account of the workings of power and the complex political forces that were unleashed by the revolution of 2011, scripting several possibilities that lead to two more revolutions up until 2020, through the memoirs of a translator who used to work in the President's office and who survived the subsequent regimes. The political imagination at work in the novelistic account is particularly illuminating in the way it seeks to script events out of political analysis of the different forces at play in a post-revolutionary Egypt. The analysis is sharp, historically informed and politically attuned, clearly drawing on Fichere's disciplinary expertise (El Desouqy 2013: 72).

2. Trauma theory and its state of art

Trauma theory is an area of cultural investigation that emerged in the early 1990s as a product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities. It promised to infuse the study of literary and cultural texts with new relevance. First developed by the scholarship of Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub (1991), Geoffrey Hartman (1995), and Cathy Caruth (1996), these studies relied on Freud's theories on traumatic experience and memory in order to investigate the concept of trauma and its role in literature, and whether the trauma that is an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether, can be perceived with the help of literature. In Hartman's words, "A theory emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma, and helping us to "read the wound" with the aid of literature. Therefore, its analytical framework relies on the nexus between the historical, the literary and the psychological. As Caruth (1996: 3) explains in her seminal scholarship:

> If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet.

The second wave of trauma scholarship (Cvetokovich 2003; Mandel 2006; Forter 2007) showed interest in the relationship between individual experience and collective violence by emphasising the cultural dimensions of trauma and paid more attention to representations of extreme experiences such as rape, war, the Holocaust, the Gulag, American slavery, colonial oppression and racism.

According to Visser (2018), since its debut in the 1990s, trauma theorization in literary studies has aroused not only widespread scholarly approbation and enthusiasm but also resistance and opposition, and much of the latter has come from the side of postcolonial and non-Western literary criticism. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out the limits of trauma theory for postcolonial studies, such as it remained trapped within Euro-American conceptual and historical frameworks[8] (Cf. Buelens, Craps 2008; Rothberg 2008) and its depoliticizing and de-historicizing tendencies (Luckhurst 2008). Their research focuses on the rapprochement between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies.[9]

[8] According to Stef Craps, "Most attention within trauma theory has been devoted to events that took place in Europe or the United States, most prominently the Holocaust, and more recently" (Craps 2014: 46).

[9] Those scholars question whether trauma theory as conceptualized by Caruth and the aforementioned scholars« provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world. For more on trauma research see: (Craps 2013; Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 2014; Baleav 2014; Kurtz 2018).

Although this response was slow to develop and has only become a strong factor in the debates on literary trauma theory in the past decade, its impact on the development of trauma theory has been significant, as noted by Visser (2018). Thus, the project of decolonizing trauma theory has involved a gradual process of moving away from the theory's Eurocentric tendencies towards an expansion of the theoretical field and towards a greater openness to culturally specific modes of addressing and negotiating trauma in global south.

Regarding the Middle East and Arabic region, it is something of a truism to observe that the violence and political crises in the present and in the past five decades have prompted several novelists to draw on traumatic events directly or indirectly for their books and to represent its impact. Notwithstanding, little scholarship has touched upon trauma theory (Moustafa 2009; Di Capua 2012; Gana 2014; Milich 2015; Lang 2015; Milich 2019; Greta 2021). All the above-mentioned scholars except for Di Capua 2012 and Milich 2019, discuss traumatic experiences and trauma in relation to traumas associated with the Lebanese civil war or the Syrian tragedy.

One of the seminal research on trauma in Egyptian novels has done by Di Capua 2012; based on Caruth and LaCapra, argues that in *Ḏāt* (1992) Ṣunʿ Allāh Ibrāhīm exposes an accumulative traumatic condition and he explains:

> This condition is not necessarily the outcome of a single historical event such as the 1967 war, but, rather, and more importantly, the ongoing trauma of the everyday: of struggling in poverty; of experiencing political coercion and state apathy; of living under a rigid patriarchal order; and of the daily effort to get by and survive (Di Capua 2012: 83).

Ibrāhīm wrote *Ḏāt* in 1992 and his surrounding reality[10] doesn't differ a greatly from ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 's one, despite the distance of twenty years there still the ongoing trauma of everyday in Egypt besides the political turmoil the country experienced during and aftermath 2011, specifically the escalating violence and instability in the streets.

3. *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt*

Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Laṭīf was born in 1978 and received his degree in Spanish literature from al-Azhar University. He is a writer, literary translator, journalist and deputy editor-in-chief of the famous

[10] For an overview of Ṣunʿ Allāh Ibrāhīm and his narrative world see Mehrez (1994) and Starkey (2016).

literary weekly *Aḫbār al-adab* ("The Literary News"), and was a disciple of the prominent writer Ǧamāl al- Ġīṭānī (1945-2015).[11]

He made his debut in 2010, with the novel *Ṣānaᶜ al-Mafātīḥ* ("The Keymaker"),[12] followed by six other novels[13] up to 2022. *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* ("The Sculptor's Book; 2013) is his third novel and it was awarded the Sawiris Literary Award in 2015.

Since his first novel, ʻAbd al-latīf has drawn on fantasy in his fictional works and shows a love for indirection and ambiguity. According to the Egyptian critic Fū'ād (2014), in ʻAbd al-latīf 's fictional work, realistic, social and historic threads merge in the structure of his imaginary world. Thus, the separation between the supernatural and the natural does not appear, but rather they interact with each other. One of the most obvious advantages of this kind of fantasy is that it allows readers to experience the world from various points of view.

In *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* I argue that he uses fantasy in the sense conceptualised by Rosemary Jackson, who proposes as explained by Atteberey (1992: 21): "first, fantasy is fundamentally a literature of desire and, second, that its ventures into the non-existent are really ways of challenging the existing political, social, and economic order." Atteberey points out that desire is not a simple psychological drive, but the tension produced by the social inhibition of such drives, "a lack resulting from cultural constraints." In a similar vein, scholars such as Kassem and Hashem 1985; Ḥalifī 1994; Avallone 2017, have shown the paramount importance of political crisis on the upsurge of the subgenre of the fantastic. The significance of reading the impact of political crises in these (un)realistic stories, is noted, for instance by Malak and Kassem in their edited collection *Flights of Fantasy: Arabic Short Stories* (1985: 10; Ghazoul 2004):

> The last few decades have been a period of unprecedented crisis for the Arab writer, particularly in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. They have left him traumatized forcing him to give vent to

[11] For an overview of Ǧamāl al- Ġīṭānī and *Ǧīl sittīnāt* see Kendall (2006).

[12] *Ṣānaᶜ al-Mafātīḥ* ("The key maker"), the main character in the novel, decides one day, tired of hearing the tales of the people of his village about corruption that struck his heart, to make a key for his ears, with this key he can open them whenever he wants and close them whenever he wants. This key to hearing becomes, in a few days, very much in demand, as everyone wants to stop having to listen to all the bad things and corruption that are happening. The people of the village go further in their wishes after they experienced the calmness of not listening to what is going on, so they ask for keys for their sight and speech as well! At a certain point, the key maker decides that people have to face reality and he refuses to continue making the keys for hearing, as well as for the other senses.

[13] *ᶜālam al-Mandal* ("The world of Tarot;" 2012), *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* ("The sculptor's book;" 2013), *Ilyās* (2014), *Ḥiṣn al-Turāb* ("Castle of dust;" 2017), *Sīqān taᶜraf waḥdāh ṭarīq al- ḫurūǧ* ("Legs that know alone their way out;" 2019), *ᶜAṣūr Dānyal fī madīnat al- ḫuyūṭ* ("Dānyal's epochs in the city of threads;" 2022).

> hitherto untold fears and repressed desires. He has been threatened on all fronts by aggressive forces.

The political crises have had a similar impact in the case of 'Abd al-Latīf, who took an active part in the 25 January Revolution, and he gives an account of the violence during the eighteen days of the revolution and its aftermath.[14] Thus, this atmosphere of disillusionment and trauma has shaped his narrative in *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt:*[15]

> The idea for 'The Sculptor's Book' arose from the questions raised by the Egyptian revolution, but it is not a novel about the revolution, but about its defeat, its dashed hopes and the pain it left behind. [...]The revolution born for a modern civil state returned with a bigger army and Islamist groups with more power. Here the idea revolved around the present, and the present was fear, and fear was accompanied by trauma.[16]

Moreover, his statements seem to align with the theses of (Matthies-Boon 2017, 2022),[17] which argue that Egyptian youth activists were profoundly traumatized during and after 2011.

3.1. Spatio-temporal settings and synopsis

The first thing we observe is that the novelistic space is not directly connected with a concrete geographically fixed place and there is a complete absence of temporal references.

The novel tells the story of a young man who leaves his world filled with blood, violence and ugliness for another fantastical and indefinite world. It is unclear whether it is on an island or on the bank of a river. He brought with him sculpture material, photos and pages with the life stories of his loved ones, mother, father, stepfather and other secondary characters from his former world. He modelled identical figures with clay collected from the riverbed, albeit smaller in size. After several unsuccessful attempts, he manages to improve the sculptures, then discovers that they have become real people, although they do not see him but only feel him. He finds himself alone and decides to create

[14] For more information on the violence related to the revolution, see Stacher (2020).

[15] In e-mail correspondence with 'Abd al-Latīf on 22 June 2022.

[16] All quotations are translated from the Arabic by the author of this article.

[17] Matthies-Boon (2017) in her seminal study that examines the emotional impact of Egypt's post-revolutionary political developments on 40 young activists, consisting of 25 males and 15 females between the age of 18 and 35 years from Cairo, highlights the impact of the revolution on youth activism "[...] in Egypt's hierarchically structured society the destruction of their hopes and aspirations has been marginalised from internal political debates" (Matthies-Boon 2017: 620).

a wife according to his aesthetic criteria. He models other members of his family, neighbours as well as animals and birds. As the story progresses, the community grows, becoming a real society. And one of his characters, brought from the previous world, becomes the leader of the new community. Then the conflicts of the former world are repeated, and his wife and child, born of their union, are killed. At this point he is disappointed and abandons the community and decides to do it all over again. He repeats the plot.

In her book Trauma Fiction, Whitehead (2004: 4) explains that:

> Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection.

Against this backdrop, the following analysis aims to demonstrate the narrative strategies employed by the novelist in order to reflect the impact of the Revolution's traumatic events and claim through allegory his individual and collective trauma.[18]

3.2. Narrative strategies and claiming trauma

The novel is written in the form of a diary with 24 entries, constructed in four chapters or *safr* (books). The narrative is interrupted three times: after the first chapter, with a section entitled *Ḥakāyāt Murāfaqah lil Tamāṭīl* ("Stories that accompanied the statues") and following the second and the third chapter where ʿAbd al-latīf breaks off from the main narrative by using a different typeface from that of the main text, with events recounted by a heterodiegetic narrator. Consequently, ʿAbd al-latīf employs a variety of differing narrative modes, using a deliberate pattern of alternation between, on the one hand first person narrative, on the other, a third-person, (omniscient narrator). Thus, the narrator relates the story in diary form in the first person, then four of his characters (mother, father, stepfather and the man in the barrel) relate fragments of their story in the first person.

He then switches to the omniscient narrator in a section entitled *Ḥāmiš* ("Margin") where he comments on the stories related by each character. The story of the last character, the man with the phallus, is related by the omniscient narrator. This strategy creates a fragmented and broken narrative

[18] Kai Erikson distinguishes between individual trauma and collective trauma: By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively. By collective trauma on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality (Erikson1995: 6).

that is a valid tool to depict the traumatized state of the protagonist and his characters, just as Whitehead (2004: 4), based on Caruth's thesis, explains that trauma for narrative fiction requires a literary form which departs from the conventional linear sequence. Lynee E. Angus and Leslie S. Greenberg (2011: 59) effectively characterize broken narratives as "states of narrative incoherence in which competing plotlines, and their accompanying emotions, block clients' efforts to achieve an integrated understanding of an emotionally unresolved or traumatic life-experience."

This fragmented writing is fostered by the letters that the author includes within the diary; one written by his stepfather and four passionate letters that the narrator exchanged with his bride. According to (Hamamsy 2010: 151–152):

> The epistolary writing affords the writer an opportunity to probe certain feelings and emotions that s/he would not be equally able to express in the case of first/third-person method of narration. The time one takes to write about her/his feelings allows the space needed to discover how one is really feeling at a given moment.

It is worth noting that inserting letters in a narrative is a distinctive feature of ʻAbd al-latīf ʻs novels. It is carried forward from his previous works and he continues to use it in his fiction. Those passionate letters full of strong emotions and love, in my opinion, form a clear juxtaposition with the detachment expressed later on by the narrator.

Another feature that reflects his state of anxiety is the beginning of the dairy in media res. In fact, the novel begins with *al-yawm al-ʻawāl baʻda al-sādas* ("the day one after six"); this in media res reflects a state of anxiety as pointed out by Martenas (1985: 3): '"[it] implies a state of turmoil or excitement, an inability to predict the future, an urge to master and purge overwhelming experiences or intense emotions."

Repetition is one of the key literary strategies in trauma narrative; Whitehead (2004: 86) explains that the device of repetition can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. The repetition emerges from the literary devices used by ʻAbd al-latīf; he repeats the same actions of the first chapter in the fourth chapter in a temporal loop as if he were stuck in eternal repetitive events, as a sort of myth of Sisyphus. For instance, the first day in the first and in the fourth chapter starts:

> وصلت إلى الجزيرة بواسطة قارب صغير بمجدافين، وضعت فيه ثيابا يليق بحياتي الجديدة التي ابحث عنها:برانس وجباب وعباءات، والبسة وسراويل، ونعالا مريحة.بعض الكتب والدفاتر والاوراق البيضاء، مع بعض الرسومات التي قد تصير في يوم ما منحوتات.

> I arrived on the island in a small boat, with two oars and put on the clothes of my new life, which I would like to live. I brought dressing gowns, tunics, coats, dresses, trousers and comfortable slippers. Some books, notebooks, blank sheets of paper, with some drawings that could someday become sculptures (‘Abd al-Laṭīf 2013: 19, 217).

This novel has also another particular feature: the novelist eschews conventional dialogue-paragraphs and blends dialogue, narrative and description, as in the following passage:

> أنا أعرف أشياء كثيرة لا تزالين تجهلينها ما هي؟ تسأل بشغف. سأحكيها لك. متى؟ لا تتعجلي، فأجمل ما في الحياة أن يأتي كل شيء في موعده. و الآن موعد ماذا؟ موعد أن أقول لك إنني انتظرتك كثيراً وما ظننت أبداً أنك ستخرجين على هذه الصورة، إنك أجمل مما توقعت وأكثر حياة مما كنت أتمنى [...] لا أفهم بعض ما تقوله، غير أنني أراك جميلاً جداً، تقول وتقترب، في نظرتك سحر، وفي كلماتك فتنة. نتعانق، تصل بالكاد حتى صدري، فتسمع نبضات قلبي المتخالجة، وأشعر بأن الكون بين راحتي.

> I know many things that you do not yet know, what are they? Ask eagerly. I will tell you. When? Don’t rush, because the best thing in life is that everything comes on time. Now the time for what? It is time to tell you that I have waited so long for you, and I never thought you would come out like this, that you are more beautiful than I expected, and more alive than I wanted [...] I don’t understand some of what you say, but I can see that you are very beautiful. She says and comes closer. In your magic gaze, and in your seductive words. We embrace and she barely reaches my chest, so she feels the beating of my heart and I feel that the universe is between my palms (‘Abd al-Laṭīf 2013: 113).

It worth noting that this is the first work in which ‘Abd al-Latīf experiments this technique that bears an echo of Saramago (Preto-Rodas 1999).

3.2.1 The narrator’s traumatic experiences

The events evolve on an island of fantasy. The writer, in sketching his characters, seems to draw on mythological Greek ones, however it is not hard to read the novel as an allegory of Egyptians’ trauma and disillusion in the aftermath of 2011 as I will illustrate later in this paper. Here allegory fulfils two functions: first, it creates a distance between the writer and the situation, second, it creates an indirect narrative mode to represent this trauma. Creating an indirect relationship between the text and the traumas they filter, for Hartman, is a sort of authorial “coldness” that must be assumed if one is to approach psychic anguish on the personal or collective level:

> I associated this coldness, leaning on the Greek myth, with Perseus’ shield, which guarded him from the petrifying glance of the Medusa, and speculated that tradition functioned as

> this shield"; with this protection absent, "the poet had to go against the real with the unshielded eye or the unshielded senses. This seemed to increase the risk and potential of trauma (Caruth and Hartman 1996: 632).

We can note this coldness in the emotional detachment of the protagonist; the narrator shows no emotions when his spouse and his son disappeared in the midst of the violence which broke out on the island, reflecting a perceived rootlessness and meaninglessness of life, which can indicate a sort of apathy associated with traumatic experience:

> أتوجه صوب مسكن عروس النهر، فلا أجد المسكن ولا أعثر عليها. أبحث عنها في كل مكان، حتى أصل لبيتي فوق التبة، غير انها لم تكن هناك [...] اهبط من التبة وانتبه لاول مرة وبشكل حقيقي، أن الجزيرة صارت غارقة في الدماء وأن المقاصل تملأ جميع جوانبها [...]، فأقرر جمع كل متعلقاتي في حقيبة والرحيل.

> I go towards the house of the river bride, but I can't find the house and I can't find her. I look for her everywhere until I reach my house on the hill, but she is not there [...]. I go down the hill and for the first time I realise that the island is flooded with blood, and that there are gallows everywhere[...]. So I decide to put everything in a suitcase and leave ('Abd al-Laṭīf 2013: 210).

The narrative contains almost a dozen nightmares. As per the narrator's description, those nightmares follow the same pattern of his walking through an empty large street, where he sees men hanging from gallows, deformed creatures, blood, men who are metamorphosed into animals, men with beards and huge bellies; in the description, the protagonist appears to be more emotionally engaged than in the passages relating to his present situation:

> أرى شوارع واسعة جداً وخالية إلا من مقاصل وسلالم وبالوعات ً وشرفات، وبينما أسير وحدي من شارع لاخر، مرعوبا من المشهد الضبابي، تنشق الارض فجأة ويخرج منها رجال بطونهم منتفخة ويسيرون على ظهورهم، رجال كثيرون حد أنهم يملؤون الشارع العريض الذي ّ أتوقف فيه [...] فيظهر في الشرفات رجال ضخام الجثة، ينزلون بأقدامهم على البطون المنتفخة ويسيرون فوقها بخطوات عسكرية. أتسلق الحائط لاصل إلى شرفة، ومن هناك أرى رقابا معلقة بالمقاصل و رقاب أخرى تطير بالسيوف، أقرر الهرب وعندما أصل لشارع اخر انتبه إلى ان قدمي مكتسيتان بالدم .

> I see empty, wide streets where there are gallows, ladders, manholes and balconies. While I wander alone from one street to the next, terrified by the foggy scene, the ground suddenly cracks and men with swollen stomachs emerge and walk on their backs. So many men fill the wide street where I stop [...] Men with big bodies appear on the balconies, putting their feet on their swollen bellies and stamping on them with military steps. I climb the wall to reach a balcony, and from there I see necks hanging from guillotines and

> other necks flying with swords, I decide to run away, and when I get to another street, I realise that my feet are covered in blood (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2013: 21).

Those nightmares could be seen as remnants of having witnessed the original events of the Revolution.[19] Dreaming of bloody streets is a clear allusion to the unprecedented massacres the country witnessed during and after the Revolution.[20] Moreover, the author seems to draw on psychological notions in his depiction of those recurring nightmares, Kolk and Hart (1995: 164) write: "traumatic memories of the arousing events may return as physical sensations, horrific images or nightmares, behavioural re-enactments, or a combination of these."

Throughout the novel, the narrator describes frequent nightmares which depict brutal scenes and the next morning, he finds signs of wounds on his body:

> أتذكر الاف المرات التي استيقظت فيها بعلامات على جسدي، ما بين قرصات وجروح، دون أن أفهم أبداً إن كانت آلام الروح تنعكس على الجسد.

> I remember thousands of times when I woke up with marks on my body, between needles and wounds. I never realised whether the pain of the soul is reflected on the body. (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2013: 140).

The depiction of recurrent brutal scenes with somatic reactions suggests that the narrator/writer is haunted by the violence witnessed during the revolution and its aftermath and reveals a traumatic disturbance. Relying on Rainey *et al.* (1987), Van Der Kolk and Saporta (1991: 207) pointed that:

> One of the hallmarks of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the intrusive reexperiencing of elements of the trauma in nightmares, flashbacks, or somatic reactions. These traumatic memories are triggered by autonomic arousal.

[19] According to Dori Laub's model of testimonial practices, the first level of witness is "that of being a witness to oneself" (1991:75).

[20] According to the Egyptian Health Ministry, 846 people were killed and 6,467 others were injured, though these figures are seen by civil society organizations to be extremely conservative and are highly debated. Some of those injured were deliberately shot in the eyes with rubber bullets, hospitals reported. Two of the bloodiest days were 28 January, when police attacked protesters assembled in central Cairo's iconic Tahrir Square after Friday prayers, and 2 February, during the so-called "battle of the camels" when hundreds of Mubarak sympathizers stormed into the square on camel- and horseback in a desperate bid to disperse the demonstrators. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2013/02/11/call-investigation-post-revolution-deaths-egypt. For more information, see Abaza (2016).

3.2.2 Characters' traumatic experiences

While the narrator does not recount the sufferings of his past life that led him to leave his former world, described as a cruel place, for another, he seems more concerned about his characters' traumatic experiences. In a section which follows the first chapter, the characters relate of their life stories. Their accounts depict lives full of sufferings, traumatic experiences, violence, failures and disappointments. The narrative commences with the mother's voice who describes her sad life with her husband, who had completely broken down and disappeared, trapped in some kind of prosopagnosia. At a certain point in his life, he starts to see all faces similar and in the end he disappears. Subsequently, the story related by the father appears to affirm to some extent his wife's story. He recounts in an inner monologue how he fell into a sewer, a passage that can be an allegory of the failure of the Revolution:

> المرة الوحيدة التي نظرت فيها إلى السماء، سقطت في البالوعة. كانت خطواتي بطيئة على عكس سقوطي الذي حدث في لمح البصر، وكانت رجفة الارض عند ارتطامي بها لايتناسب مع خفة وزني.

> The only time I raised my eyes to the sky, I fell through the sewer. My footsteps were slow in contradiction with my fall, happened in the blink of an eye and the quake of the earth when I struck was not proportionate to the lightness of my body ('Abd al-Laṭīf 2013: 47).

His father describes in a sort of dream/hallucination with surreal dystopian elements what he has seen inside. This passage can be read as an allusion to how the dream of a utopian society inspired by the revolution turned quickly into a horrific and nonsense nightmare "Dystopias follow utopias the way thunder follows lightning," writes Lepore (2017). Inside the sewer he found many people in the nude and he describes sexual intercourse with different women, blood covering everything as he was cutting up bodies and human organs and then he found his wife and two children and all the faces looked similar.

His stepfather, in the form of a letter, relates his emotions and memories with the narrator. From the narrator's comments, we are informed about his unfortunate life marked by failure in his work as a theatre director. The fourth voice is the *Rağul al -Barmīl* (He spent all his life in the barrel in the street) who relates people's different stories about him and his love with the mute woman who sells lottery tickets, then we are informed by the narrator that one day someone set fire to the *Rağul al -Barmīl* and his barrel.

The last character in this section is *Rağul al-qaḍīb al Muntaṣib dā'imān*. His story, on more pages than the other characters, is related in the third- person narrative and contains gothic elements. It begins by recounting a dream made by *Rağul al-qaḍīb;* he dreamt that a great number of ants are

attached to his phallus. The narrator describes the torment of the man because of his exaggerated volume of his phallus. *Rağul al-qaḍīb* seems withdrawn and alienated from the people around him. He lives alone as his wife and daughter have left him. Then, in a lively scene with the "camera's eye technique, the narrator portrays a physical relationship between *Rağul al-qaḍīb* and his neighbour, a woman, that we see dead, hanging from the gallows near his bed the following moment. Although ʿAbd al-latīf employs the method of multiple narration, we do not perceive a polyvocal perspective as their voices seem to highlight the main narrator's ideas, while *Rağul al-qaḍīb al Muntaṣib dā'imān*; his anti-hero par excellence, who should give a different point of view has been related in third person.[21]

Furthermore, all those stories are shaped by absence[22] and disquiet. In this section of the novel, ʿAbd al-Laṭīf draws a portrait of traumatised, disintegrated and alienated people. The narrator's family is broken apart under the strain of disappointment and hopelessness to manage their lives. Thus, all its members chose absence. The life of *Rağul al -Barmīl* was conditioned by prejudice, the injustice of society and by the atrocities of the people. *Rağul al-qaḍīb* has been alienated by his society. In this type of narrative, readers are engaged emotionally and cognitively as the author "signals for readers the effects of trauma on characters by engaging readers' cognitive and emotional responses in their depiction" (Vickroy 2014: 138).

While the events in the novel come to an end in the third chapter with the destruction of everything on the island, the author does not bring the novel to an end, but repeats the plot with the same actions. Thereby, the novel rhetorically resists any possibility of narrative closure through its textual form. By occluding narrative closure, the novel occludes at least by implication any corresponding emotional closure (Gana 2014: 79). The writer leaves us suspended, waiting for the resolution which suggests that this novel like the revolution, is still in progress (Hashamt 2015). As Samia Mehrez puts it, referencing Umberto Eco, "both the revolution and its translations remain 'open texts' at the literal and semiotic levels" (Mehrez 2012: 1).

To sum up, I argue that *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* as per narrative form, styles and plot, aptly conveys the traumatic impact of the Revolution 2011 by the intertwining of the three tropes of absence, indirection, and repetition (Pederson 2018: 100, 101).

Having addressed the main formal and stylistic features of the novel, I now aim to discuss the allegory deployed in the novel.

[21] For more on multiple narration in Arabic novels see Meyer (2001).

[22] For LaCapra, absence represents a transhistorical or foundational loss, a structural trauma that is not related to a particular event and to which we are all subject. Cf. LaCapra (1999).

4. *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* as an allegory of Egyptian political and social post-2011 reality

In modern Egyptian fiction, there are several examples of writers who express their political views through allegory in order to circumvent official censorship or social pressures. We can find the most illustrative example of the deployment of allegory in Nağīb Maḥfūẓ's fictional work, especially in *ʾAwlād Ḥāratinā* ("Children of Our Alley").[23] For al-Badawi, "it is the novel that introduces the allegory into modern Arabic fiction." (Badawi 1992: 254). Critics of Arabic literature (El-Gabalawy 1989; Badawi 1992; NAJJAR1998.) regard this novel as an early outcry of protest against oppression. as it was written in 1959, after parliamentary life had been brought to an end, the Constitution suspended, parties dissolved, and government censorship of the press imposed. According to (El-Desouky 2011; Greenberg 2013), *Children of Our Alley,* by offering an anatomy of the failures of the 1952 Revolution, and placing it in a particular conception of historical process, anticipates in many ways the recent momentous People's Revolution of 25 January 2011. With a similar slant, ʻAbd al-Latif published his novel in the aftermath of 2011.

In my analysis of this novel, I argue that ʿAbd al-Laṭīf employs the allegory in the sense proposed by Walter Benjamin in *The origin of German tragic Drama* (1928), where he stresses that allegory is a focal point from which to look at things, "the allegorical way of seeing" (*Betrachtung*) and he vigorously asserts that allegory is not mere "illustrative technique" but rather "a form of expression" (Benjamin 1928, quoted in Cowan 1981: 112).

As I mentioned earlier, the writer draws his narrative from religious narrative and Greek mythology. On the one hand, the steps in the construction of the statutes and the division of the diary into chapters lasting six days each recall the traditional Biblical parable of the creation in six days and his name *al-Naḥḥāt* could allude to *al-Muṣwar* ("the flawless shaper"), one of the ninety-nine names of God in Islam. On the other, two of his characters are overtly drawn from mythological figures as in the cases of *Rağul al-qaḍīb al Muntaṣib dā'imān* ("the man with the phallus that was always erect") that recalls Priapus and the other is *Rağul al Barmīl* ("the man of the Barrel") that recalls Diogenes.

[23] Using the narrative framework of a Cairo alley, the work outlines the spiritual and social history of man from Genesis to the present day. The main characters represent God and Satan, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Thinly disguised, the prophets are portrayed as social reformers striving to save their peoples from tyranny and oppression. Mahfouz then boldly allegorizes the "death of God" in the modern world at the hands of a new prophet, the magician who personifies science (El-Gabalawy 1989: 91).

Indeed, in a television interview, ʿAbd al-Laṭīf said that the Book of Genesis and *Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand* by Gioconda Belli were a source of great inspiration for him in this book.[24]

Thus, I think that *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* is an attempt to recreate a new world with words, "sculpture and writing are two sides of the same coin" (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2013: 16) and the theme of Genesis, gives the author the opportunity to realise a dream, a desire to create a better world, "the desire for redemption and totality or, in Sartre's words, the desire to be in-oneself-for-oneself or God" (LaCapra 1999: 700).

ʿAbd al-Laṭīf sets his novel in an imaginary place, none of his characters in their new life has a memory, in order to deal with such collective amnesia, the narrator has brought with him texts with their history. Here the novelist evokes the figure of the nationalist intellectual who alone understands the nation's heritage and can act as the "conscience of the nation" or, as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm puts it in his 1933 *ʿAwdat ar-Rūḥ* ("The Return of the spirit"): *Lisān al-Umma al nātiq* ("the nation's voice;" Jacquemond (2008).

A significant turning point in this plan occurred when *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* stole those texts and the narrator's garments. He rules the other characters by supplying them with food and clothes which represented their impelling needs and he convinced them that he has direct access to the truth via inspiration or revelation, in an explicit reference to the social work by the Muslim Brotherhood and religious fatwa:

> سألته فيه عن الاقدار والمصائر، عن الموت والحياة، عن الامس والغد، فأخبرني بحكمته أننا مجرد عرائس تحركها يد عظيمة، توجهنا إلى الخير حتى وإن بدا الخير شراً .

> I asked him about destinies and fates, about death and life, about yesterday and tomorrow, so he told me with his wisdom that we are merely puppets in the hands of fate, which directs us to the good even if the good seems to be evil (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2013: 127).

Here we find a significative example of how ʿAbd al-Laṭīf manages to intertwine his novel with elements taken from the present social reality of Egypt—what Wolfgang Iser called *Wirklichkeitssignale* (ISER 1991; quoted in Milich (2019: 150)—despite the novel fantastic setting. Furthermore, depicting *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* as a thief who has stolen the characters' written history alludes to the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood revealed themselves to be politically and religiously opportunistic and were therefore believed to have hijacked the identity of the people as a whole.

[24] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xG80UJp-2s

In the portrayal of the *Raǧul al-qaḍīb*, the author does not give a detailed description of his physical appearance. However, he does give him the features of a highly charismatic leader; He is represented with visible masculine power, *wasīm* (handsome), has good manners, a nice voice and he is the holder of occult knowledge as he can tell their past and their future. Thus, the people call him *al-ḫāriq* ("supernatural") (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2013: 105, 106). By depicting in details, the attitudes of *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* and his discourses addressed to the people, ʿAbd al-Laṭīf pens a vivid portrait of the ruler in an authoritative regime and his strategies that lead to deep veneration by the majority of the people, best summed up, perhaps, in the author's description of the statue made by some artist per immortalize the dictator:

> ألمح تمثال من بعيد، مقاما فوق قاعدة عالية. أقترب وأدقق النظر، يرتدي ثياب أهل الحكمة، بلحية طويلة وشعر مسترسل، وينظر إلى أعلى، نحو السماء، مبتهلا. أحدق. إنه رجل القضيب!
>
> A statue seen remotely, standing on a high pedestal. I approached and looked closely, clothed in the garments of the wise, with a long beard and flowing hair, and looked up at the sky. I stare at him. I found out that he is *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2023: 177).

It is worth noting how the author underlines the relationship between dictatorial power and super sexual power, echoing *the Feast of the Goat* by Vargas. This is a further reference to Latin American literature, which suggests that the author is greatly influenced by it.

On many pages, the writer addresses the theme of despotism, through the story of the *Raǧul al-qaḍīb*, which reflects his deep concern for political issues. A careful reading of the novel reveals that the characters in the novel represent the main groups of Egyptian society: ordinary people, the acculturated, marginalised people and politics.

Two other moments in the novel deserve our attention, reflecting the point of view of the author and allegorically representing political reality. The first one depicts the political system's strategy in dealing with dissenters: when *Raǧul al Barmīl* began to criticize *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* and cast mistrust on his supernatural power, *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* initially tried to corrupt him by promising him certain privileges. Albeit, when he insisted on his position, *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* ordered his fellows to beat *Raǧul al Barmīl* and left him paralysed. The second one is when *Raǧul al Barmīl* 's beloved accused *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* and spoke about what really happened, he cut off her tongue in an allegory of how a dictatorial regime suffocates the liberty of expression.

Interestingly, the subjective voice of the river- bride is the most foregrounded. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf depicts her as a purposeful and independent young woman. She is endowed with the agency of desire

vis-à-vis her Pygmalion. The sexual element is quite substantial, involving as it does passages and sentences relating their passionate physical relationship. She has many initiatives and her words are pregnant with hope for a prosperous future for the island:

> بعصا طويلة حددت عروسة النهر الارض التي ستزرعها،[...] حرثت الارض وحفرت قنوات بداخلها ورمت البذور التي ستصير يوما ثمرات طيبة. أنا سعيدة يا نحات لانني سأطعم نفسي بيدي وأطعم الجائعين.[...] أريد ان استخرج من هذه الثمار دواء وأضيف لمنح الحياة والحفاظ عليها.

> With a long stick, the bride identified the land she was planting [...] ploughed the ground, dug channels inside and threw seeds that would become good fruits. I'm happy, sculptor! because I will feed with my hands and feed the people who are hungry [...] I want to extract medicines out of these fruits and I add: give and preserve life (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf 2023: 131).

The competition between *al-Naḥḥāt* and *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* for her possession – the one legitimate, the other illegitimate – alludes to the struggle for political legitimacy within the real nationalistic context. It is not hard to understand that ʿAbd al-Laṭīf constructs the heroine of his novel as an allegory of the nation, William Granara (2014: 3) writes: "The female protagonist has often been constructed or manipulated as an allegory of the nation in modern Arabic literature." Her tragic death with her son, murdered by the followers of *Raǧul al-qaḍīb* accentuates the pain and trauma of the revolutionaries in seeing their dreams of a free and democratic country fade away.

5. Conclusion

Through an attentive reading of *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt*, I have illustrated how the textual strategies employed by Ahmad ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, on the one hand reflect the individual and collective trauma in the aftermath of 2011, on the other, convincingly convey the author's political criticism**.**

In this study, I argue that reading the *Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt* through the lens of trauma theory, gives a better tool to investigate national crises and their correlation with individual and collective trauma in Egypt post 2011. Stephan Milich (2015: 287) writes:

> By re-contextualizing the political causes and social consequences of traumatization and placing them in hitherto unconsidered or silenced politically explosive interrelationships, this literature is one of the most relevant forms of literary political writing today in Mashriq and Maghreb societies.

Given that Kitāb al-Naḥḥāt was published in 2013 (written on 28 October 2012, as ʿAbd al-Laṭīf specifies at the end of the book), the novel can be considered a belated response to the traumatic event of the

Revolution (Caruth 1996). Moreover, in the months that followed the Presidential election of 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood revealed their lack of willingness to collaborate with those with whom it marched during the uprising or to reform or restructure state institutions to become more transparent and accountable.[25]

The situation was worsened by the Constitutional Declaration in August 2012. It became clear that Egypt was transferred to another kind of dictatorship.[26] In this way and in such despotic contexts, fiction becomes the safest, perhaps the only possible, mode of life writing. Thus, I contend that ʿAbd al-Laṭīf"s work is an acknowledgment of his individual despair following 25th January a reflection of the stifling political atmosphere that had begun to envelop Egypt as the heady initial optimism of the 2011 Revolution wore thin, to be replaced by a mood of disillusion bordering on despair.

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[25] The Brotherhood also alienated those with whom it had marched during the uprising — liberals, leftists, and secularists — by allying with Salafis and former jihadis. Although Morsi made a bold decision to dismiss the Defence Minister, Field Marshal Muhammad Husayn Tantawi, and the Chief of Staff, Sami ʻAnan, in August 2012, this decision was linked mainly to internal arrangements and a "time-for-change" mentality within the military rather than serving as a sign of his "revolutionary" policy (Abaza 2013).

[26] In 2012, when the SCAF ruled after Mubarak was ousted, the artists painted a split portrait: one half depicted Mubarak, the other half portrayed the former military general Tantawi. While Mubarak's half-portrait remained, the half-portrait of Tantawi was repeatedly replaced over time by several presidential candidates. The first was Mohammed Shafiq, with a military background, who ran against former president Morsi. His half-portrait was followed by those of Ahmed Shafiq, Amr Moussa (a former Mubarak aide), and Tantawi. When the wall was painted over, the portrait reappeared in a smaller size, half Mubarak and half Muslim Brotherhood General Guide Mohamed Badie. These satirical portraits conveyed the message that nothing had changed and that the regime was only repeating the same gaffes (Abaza 2013).

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