Echoes from the Margins: Weaving Subaltern Agency through Narrative – A Study of Khairy Shalaby's *The Lodging House* and Hamdi Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement*

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> The underclass has become a mushrooming presence, in these years of liberal-conservative democracy, yet made difficult to recognize through versions of liberalized poststructuralism which have demonized reference to the structural workings of capitalism as essentialist and reductionist (Kane 2001, 320)

In a postmodern age in which the validity of class as an organizing principle is highly debated, classes vanish behind groups, class consciousness gives way to self-identification by race, ethnic group or religion, and class struggle shrinks behind hegemony, class analysis, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, still yields significant insights. This paper explores two postmodern Egyptian novels in translation, Khairy Shalaby's *The Lodging House* (1999) and Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement* (2002), as prototypes of an aesthetic of cognitive mapping. As two utterances in a subaltern discourse, both novels are examined as performative histories from below: as spaces from which their authors delineate a perspective and a political possibility.

Subaltern texts: creating agential identities

The founding editor of the 'Subaltern Studies' group, Ranajit Guha has identified a spotlighting of the "politics of the people" as its main purpose (Guha 1982, 4). Borrowing the term from Antonio Gramsci, Guha used the term subaltern broadly to denote 'groups who possess a subordinate social, political, and economic, or ideological status' (Guha 1982, 2). Subaltern classes, he argues, share a lack of access to means of articulation or a forced muting. Accordingly, his project was to recuperate a silenced discourse. He notes:

> It is up to us to make that extra effort, to develop the special skills and above all cultivate the disposition to hear these voices and interact with them. For they have many stories to tell— stories which for their complexity are unequalled by statist discourse and indeed opposed to its abstract and oversimplifying modes (Guha 1996, 3).

In a similar vein, Edward Said delineates the role of Subaltern Studies as means for bringing back "missing narratives" (Said 1988, vii). Accordingly, subalternist writings delineate a position from which multiple perspectives are voiced. A subaltern text is a space in which relations of dominance and subordination are negotiated.

The task of restoring the subaltern voice and writing them into history has, however, been marked as problematic. While Guha calls for recovering subaltern voices, Spivak complicates this project by arguing that the subaltern cannot speak in the absence of infrastructural conditions that allow for agency and recognition. In her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak critiques an unquestioned valorization of the underprivileged and the oppressed as subject. She also calls into question the Western critical discourse's representation (as *vertreten* or 'speaking for') of the 'undivided' subaltern subject that is not affected by notions of class or gender. Years later, she poses the same question: "Could the subaltern speak? Could it have its insurgency

recognized by official historians?" And the answer is ironically still in the negative (Spivak 2005, 476).

Tying it to a notion of class (as a "sense of economic collectivity, of social relations of formation as the basis of action", rather than a 'cultural origin'), Spivak defines subalternity as a "position without identity" (Spivak 2005, 476). Subalternity, she argues, is the space where "social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action" (Spivak 2005, 476). Building on Marx's notion of the two ways of being a class as 'constative' or 'performative', she delineates the difference between subalternity and agency. She argues that, for Marx, "a group of people are, and are not, a class depending upon whether they have consciousness of class" (Spivak 2005, 476). Moreover, she cites him in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*: "In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life…they form a class. In so far as …the identity of their interests fails to produce *a feeling of community*… they do not form a class" (Spivak 1999, 260). Whereas agency is the name Spivak gives for "an institutionally validated action, assuming collectivity, distinguished from the formation of the subject, which exceeds the outlines of the individual intention", subalternity is "imbricated with the idea of non-recognition of agency", she argues (Spivak 2005, 476-7). A group of people can be a class in the constative manner, but because of the "absence of the infrastructural institutions which are the condition and effect of class-consciousness, 'they could not make their class interest count', to have what they are saying and doing be recognized as such" (Spivak 2005, 477). Thus, they are not a class in a *performative* manner.

Because a 'nineteenth century historiography was constituted by such non-recognition, the role of the early subalternists, argues Spivak, was to challenge them by inserting a 'negative consciousness' in their 'new historiography'— recounting "the details of the practice of disenfranchised groups" (Spivak 2005, 477). As useful as these attempts have proven to be, Spivak marks them as 'constative'. In these recounts,

the subaltern as a presence are affirmed. Yet, neither are the subaltern really touched nor is the political strategy that appropriates them called into question. She reiterates, "Contemporary political conduct does not even rise to the status of the texts of the elite in earlier work. It is not decoded and contrasted to that which it subverts: the conformity of the subaltern to its own social norms" (Spivak 2005, 477).

To the problems of 'subject-ship' and agency, Spivak proposes the building of 'infrasctructures' so that agency would emerge. Infrastructures, argues Spivak, are "structures that allow *subaltern resistance* to be located and heard" (Spivak 2005, 483).What is required is a bringing of the subaltern from "the deduced subject of crisis to the logic of *agency*", she reiterates (Spivak 2005, 480). Yet, agency presumes collectivity, which is where a group acts by synecdoche: the part that seems to agree is taken to stand for the whole. I put aside the surplus of my subjectivity and metonymise myself, count myself as the part by which I am connected to the particular predicament, so that I can claim collectivity, and engage in action validated by the very collective. A performative contradiction connects the metonymy and the synecdoche into agential identity (Spivak 2005, 480).

Accordingly, the severance of the part from the whole is a kind of subalternity because "the power to self-synecdochise is taken away" (Spivak 2005, 482). What Spivak delineates is the need to learn from the subaltern— rather than study them. She adds: "to learn from these collectivities enough to suture rights thinking into the torn cultural fabric of responsibility…to activate a dormant ethical imperative"; a process she explains, saying: "A text is text-ile. To suture here is to weave, as in invisible mending" (Spivak 2005, 483).

Setting Spivak's metaphor to work, both Khairy Shalaby and Hamdi Abu Golayyel, in this reading, create allegorical spaces within their texts that not only foreground subaltern oppression and resistance, but also invite a reparative engagement with the contradictions embedded in the nation's fabric that fracture its imagined unity. In an attempt to develop

a feeling of the community that leads to a 'collective agency', both authors, as the analysis will attempt to prove, craft symbolic unifying terrains from which they elaborate "strategies of selfhood— singular [and] communal" (Bhabha 1994, 1). The narratives facilitate such a reparative engagement, I suggest, through what Fredric Jameson terms "ideologemes"—narrative units that mediate between lived experience and ideological structures—enabling the texts to register, negotiate, and symbolically resolve the contradictions at the heart of subaltern life.

Cognitive Mapping: a misfiguration

To define the smallest narrative units of class discourse, Fredric Jameson has used the term *ideologemes*. These ideologemes (that are of a social nature) inhabit cultures as much as inherited words and conceptions do. They are "the raw material, the inherited narrative paradigms", upon which works of art are processed. Yet, art works, simultaneously, transform these ideologemes into "texts of a different order" (Jameson 1981, 185). Ideologemes do not rise up to the level of complete ideas or finished narratives. As "amphibious" formations, they manifest themselves either as "pseudoidea[s]"; namely, "a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice", or as "protonarrative[s]"; that is, "a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes in opposition" (Jameson 1981, 87). Ideologemes play a mediatory role: they breach the gap between abstract concepts and cultural texts by acting as bases for both. Jameson delineates the dual function of ideologemes as: the wider space to which the text belongs, and simultaneously as elements comprised by the text, which reflect different and contradictory class interests. Accordingly, an identification of the ideologemes, that justify the ruling class domination and those which subvert them (in an attempt on the part of the ruled to undermine their power), would help unfold the contradictions and conflicts inherent within the nation itself. It is on this notion of art as a mode of knowledge— "a mode of knowledge of the [social] totality"— that Jameson's conception of 'cognitive mapping" is founded (Buchanan 2007, 157).

Synthesizing Althusser's[1] notion of ideology and Kevin Lynch's[2] "cognitive mapping", Jameson proposes "an extrapolation of Lynch's spatial analysis to the realm of social structure" (Jameson 2000, 283). He marks the need for a "mental map of the social and global totality we all carry in our heads in variously garbled forms" (Jameson 2000, 282). The merit of Althusser's notion of ideology, argues Jameson, is the way it stresses the "gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience" (Jameson 2000, 283). Yet, here comes the role of ideology that "attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations, such a reality" (Jameson 2000, 283).

Accordingly, Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping insists on art as a mode of knowledge—one that offers insight into the totality of human experience and the world .He defines the process of cognitive mapping as "the invention of ways of using one subject and one reality to get a mental grasp of something else which one cannot represent or imagine": namely, the totality or the whole (Buchanan 2007, 62). The part gives a 'mental grasp' of the whole. Yet, it does not stand for it as the whole itself is nonrepresentable. Besides, this map[3] that the work of art draws of the totality is not the "real". Collective words such as the people, the multitude, the masses or social class are, for Jameson, all maps, representations/misfigurations because they are articulations of a 'totality' greater than what one can practically confirm. They are "attempts to model something that's not representable"; and therefore, are not unalterable or unsubstitutable (Buchanan 2007, 230). In this manner, the distance between part and whole is retained. Part and whole are not one and the same.

Anchored in this framework of thought, the analysis will situate Shalaby's and Abu Golayyel's texts within a subaltern discourse. Identifying the ideologemes embedded in the contradictory class

discourses they portray, the analysis will disclose the texts' own attempts at cognitive mapping through narrative form and character positioning.

Conflicting ideologemes in *The Lodging House* **and** *Thieves in Retirement*

Written in 1999, Khairy Shalaby's *The Lodging House* is set in Damanhour, an Egyptian city, in the 1960s— leaving the reader with the impression that it is a reading of the sixties to the nineties. Set in Egypt in the sixties, the novel unfolds against a backdrop of Nasserism. Nasserism emphasized notions of socialism, equality, justice, national democracy, nationalization of industry, independent development, the significant role of Man and his free choice for the development of the nation and the need for a bridging of the gap between different social classes, drawing many Egyptians to it. However, it proved to be of little impact on the social and economic conditions of the people. It is this rift between ideals and promises of freedom, equality, opportunity, on the one hand, and a brutal reality of oppression and poverty, on the other, that the novel spotlights. Firmly grounded in terms of its place and time, the novel is narrated in the first person by an unnamed protagonist. Having assaulted Wael Effendi, one of his teachers, the narrator is expelled from the Public Teachers' Institute, shattering his peasant folks' and his dreams of mounting the ranks of the middle class. Moreover, failing to find a job, he starts his journey of degeneration by seeking refuge in "Wikalat Atiya", a place he marks out, from the very beginning, saying:

> I never thought I could be brought down so low that I would accept living in Wikalat Atiya. Nor did I imagine that I would become such a rotten bum that I would come to know a place in the city of Damanhour called Wikalat Atiya (Shalaby 2006, 1).

Highlighting the class structure in the urban society in Egypt in the years between 1952 and 1970, Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil marks four classes: a bourgeoisie, a petty bourgeoisie, wage laborers, and a sub-

proletariat as its main constituents (Abel-Fadil 1980, 92). While the novel expresses a subaltern point of view—presenting events through the eyes of a narrator and characters from a disprivileged sub-proletariat—it is not entirely devoid of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois perspectives. Through a series of character confrontations, the narrative reveals the ideological debate embedded in their contradictory class discourses. A key encounter between the narrator and Wael Effendi triggers off the narrative. This initial confrontation introduces the underlying conflict between 'essentialism' and 'ressentiment[4] ,' as two ideologemes underlying a bourgeoisie and a sub-proletariat class discourses respectively. Through an 'essentialism' that asserts fixed and immutable underlying essences uniting members of a class, the bourgeoisie seeks to fixate and dominate the peasantry, effectively denying them the right of social ascent. The narrator's story lays bare this dynamic as his social role is rigidly defined and his aspirations systematically denied. The narrator's peasant family, depriving themselves for his sake, manages to send him to school in the city. Yet, despite undertaking the necessary effort and revealing "talent […] in pedagogical studies and in lesson planning, including the modern methodologies", the narrator does not graduate from the Teachers' Institute (Shalaby 2006, 1). Rather, he is dispelled from the institute in retaliation for attacking his math teacher and causing him a permanent injury. The cause of the fight is the teacher's bias and prejudice against the narrator based on his detest of a despicable peasantry to which the narrator belongs. The narrator says:

> [Wael Effendi] was not happy that sons of detestable peasants from villages and hamlets, more like barefoot riffraff than anything else, could excel in education over the true sons of schools, originally from elite backgrounds and good, wealthy folks. (Shalaby 2006, 1).

Seeing the narrator as a social climber who usurps what, essentially, is not his right, Wael Effendi

> would screw with [the narrator] in every exam, provoking [him] with dirty looks, writing [him] up every time [he] sat up in [his] seat or coughed or turned around to ask one of [his] classmates for a ruler or compass or an eraser, things [he doesn't] think [he]ever bought once throughout all [his] schooldays. This pissed him off. So the son of a bitch saw fit to prevent anyone from helping [him] one bit; he even kicked out a classmate who snuck [him] a compass. (Shalaby 2006, 2)

No one paused to ask why the narrator had been treated so unjustly; not only this, the very notion that he had been 'wronged' had not occurred to anyone—except to the narrator himself. The dean of the institute's response to the altercation and to the narrator's conduct reveals the same disdain for the poor that Wael Effendi expresses. Thus, after the fight, the narrator was handed over to the city police "accompanied by the dean's curses and his description of [the narrator's] family and all [his] kind as despicable hooligans, and he cursed Taha Hussein as the one who *destroyed* education and polluted it with lowlifes like [the narrator]" (Shalaby 2006, 3). In a similar vein, Sayyed Elaishy, a student of law, of a rich family, and a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, ironically refuses to accept Abd al-Hamid Mehaina as a friend though he pays his tuition and expenses at al- Azhar and buys him and his family clothes. About Mehaina, he tells Al-Laqani and his other friends:

> I'm not willing to sit with him or give him a chance to be my friend and sit with me like an equal. He comes from a very low background and his father is from one of those nomadic gypsy tribes. Besides, he's envious and I hate envious people. If you get friendly with him, he will stop looking up to you and when that happens he will grow bolder and make fun of you and that which might have begun in charity will become almost an obligation on your part. I know this kind of person. My father's store is a huge place that gives me ample opportunity to watch them and observe their character traits (Shalaby 2006, 57).

Whereas the function of 'essentialism' as an ideologeme unfolds, within the text, as that of legitimation (acting as the means via which a bourgeoisie holds on to its power, position and privileges), *ressentiment* functions as a subversive tool— deployed by a subproletariat to undermine such a power by emphasizing the ethical inferiority and immorality of the members of a ruling bourgeoisie.

The narrator's consciousness of class inequities appears fairly at the beginning of the novel. His hopes and his family's of social ascent are tailed off soon after he arrives at the city to join the Teachers' Institute. It has not taken him long to discover that the promises of richness and happiness granted him by the Revolution's notions of social equality and justice seem far away.Dreaming of becoming like his rich and educated cousin's son and reaching what he has reached, the narrator realizes that "the distance between [them] was too far, and that [he] would not be like him, not ever, even if all the heavens themselves were on [his] side. The entire age to come would not be enough to catch up with his heels" (Shalaby 2006, 30). Bitterness and resentiment are the natural outcome. He reiterates: "Then I hated him" (Shalaby 2006, 30). Besides, describing his mother's condition after he has been dispelled from the institute, the narrator says: "I saw her placing her hand on her cheek like someone sentenced to life in misery…sighing bitterly whenever she saw an effendi passing by, be he a school teacher, or an employee of the health centre or the agriculture society" (Shalaby 2006, 330). Subsequently, revenge becomes the sole means of relief of the anger, bitterness and shame lodging in the psyche: "The imprisoned ah must break the bones of the chest and fly off to avenge itself" (Shalaby 2006, 295). Thus, the narrator is relieved only after he gouges his teacher's eye out in their fight. Moreover, his sexual experience with Badreya, his rich cousin's daughter, is itself an act of vengeance against her father, mother, and siblings who despised him for his poverty. Not only does the narrator's experience with Badreya unleash his internalized inferiority and his feelings of hatred, resentiment towards her arrogant family, it also functions as an act of revolt against a socially conditioned identity. He notes: "It was as if I were kneading them under my razor-

sharp sword, which doubled my pleasure and made it more profound as well as providing me with total relief and joy" (Shalaby 2006, 74).

Resentiment and anger instigate *ressentiment* .The narrator has to belittle what he does not (and could not) have to be able to survive. About his cousin's son, he says: "I said to myself that it does me no honor to be like him" (Shalaby 2006, 30). "Ressentiment" unfolds as a strategy the poor employ to undermine and challenge the rich. The rich, as brought to the light by the narrator, are immoral, hypocritical and have no compassion for the poor. More importantly is how their money is gotten in a questionable manner. For instance,the narrator's cousin's husband plots to steal the house they live in from its owner, who rapes his daughter, before poisoning him. Similarly, Sayyed Elaishy's fortune is all gotten off the back of the poor peasants. Rather than being ashamed of such a history, he is proud of it and laughs about it with his friends. In the same vein, Shawadfi tells the narrator: "Do you think prosperous people became that way by being honest? On the contrary[…] the more money in a person's hand, the stronger the proof that he's dishonest" (Shalaby 2006, 341).

In a similar vein, set against a backdrop of globalization, Hamdi Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement* (2002) discloses resonances of the same struggle with a legacy of Nasserism conveyed in Shalaby's narrative. Set in Egypt in the late nineties, the novel is narrated by an unnamed protagonist who leaves his Bedouin hamlet for Cairo, searching for better conditions of life. Settling in Manshiyat Nasser, in Helwan, a neighborhood on the fringes of Cairo, the narrator gets to know the stories and secrets of some of its residents who are members of a subproletariat (once belonging to a working class). Foregrounding a subaltern perspective— being narrated by a construction worker who relates the stories of subaltern characters— the narrative does not fall short of exposing an underlying class conflict between a bourgeoisie and a working class. On a critical inspection of the novel, "determinism", "fear" and "ressentiment" unfold as ideologemes underlying a class conflict that the text, in this reading, highlights.

Whereas *The Lodging House* describes a process of essentialism, in the making, *Thieves in Retirement* discloses 'determinism' and 'fear' as two ideologemes (deployed as a means of control) already assimilated and acted upon by a subaltern class. Abu Gamal, a retired worker, the owner of "Building 36", in Manshiyat Nasser, where the narrator rents an apartment, has been among the first to benefit from the nationalization of industry, and among the first workers to be laid off owing to the laws of privatization. Yet, he does not even "fritter away his time in contemplation of this irony"; let alone protest (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 5). Rather, he "adjust[s] quickly to this business of retirement. Indeed, and after some time had passed, naturally, he found it held some advantages over staying on the job" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 5). Since everything is determined, there is no room except for peaceful surrendering. No one is to blame, for 'who knows the unseen? Something grimmer might well have lay in store for him' (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 5). Abu Gamal is one of those who learn to be happy and grateful all through. Describing him the narrator says:

> a person whose talents distinguished him even among those select people who always find opportunity to praise God for everything. Hit by a bicycle, they praise God that it wasn't a car; and if it was a car, then— thank the Lord!— it wasn't a train If one of this select group were to break his arm, he would thank God that his neck was safe […] And so, if such a one is startled to find himself put on pension at an early age, he discovers that this fate came exactly at the right moment for the execution of more important projects (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 5).

Yet, Abu Gamal is not the only character whose life and actions are appropriated by 'Determinism' as an ideologeme. For others, 'Determinism' becomes a shield against ambiguity when human frailty proves a fact. Threatened by murky and ambiguous things, the Bedouins fortify themselves with "belief in other things, things that are no less

doubtful or obscured, which the Bedouin call qadar, fate, or namus", says the narrator (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 18).

In addition, fear in its different forms: fear of fate, fear of the unseen, fear of the powerful rulers, fear of the 'betrayals of the bosses at the factory' and fear of the other, unfolds in the narrative as another ideologeme that controls the lives of most of the characters (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 11). The narrator learns that 'fear' and maintaining a 'blameless life' are the 'sole guarantee of [his] safety' (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 15). Moreover, Adil's fear of his Muslim neighbors (being the only Christian in the building) forces him to "sacrifice his comfort for the sake of making his neighbors comfortable" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 95). Due to their fear, these people "cannot be free…they're never able to take firm decisions or act" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 95).Fear throws them into a silence that becomes a "goal all in itself" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 93). If fear and determinism are two ideologemes that control an exploited class, ressentiment, is still the subversive ideologeme that underlie the class discourse of the exploited. With the scarcity of alternatives, exercising imaginary vengeance by emphasizing the corruption and ethical immorality of the rich and powerful is still the only tactic the exploited deploy against the exploiter.

Pretty much like the members of the bourgeoisie in Wikalat Atiya, the new owners of the privatized factories (the business cronies: the outcome of the 'open-door' policy) show no mercy or compassion for the workers they lay off. Similarly, the Justice appears corrupt and ethically immoral. He shows no compassion for the weak and the poor, whom he exploits to grow richer and more powerful—discarding them once they are no longer of use to him. Gamal, Abu Gamal's eldest son, gets to know the Justice, who is a President of Court, "by chance at a hash soiree hosted by an officer in Maadi" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 80). Soon after, they have a business deal according to which Gamal is to act as a go-between the Justice and the family of the accused. The income is "divided by the judge, on principle of justice. One share to the dame

who presided over his apartment and another to cover the expenses of hosting the customers, while the rest went, untouched into the pocket of the Justice" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 82).In return, the Justice would stand by the family in time of trouble. However, when Abu Hanan, Gamal's uncle, puts his life's savings into a shipment of hashish, counting on the 'strength of his relationship with the Justice', and is caught red-handed, he is sentenced to life not having enough money to pay the quarter-million-pounds fine the Justice asks for. About the Justice, the narrator says: "The other one stood his ground. A fine was a fine. In court, ironically, he showed no hesitation. He sentenced Abu Hanan to life" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 84).These conflicting ideologemes not only expose the tensions within dominant ideological structures but also illuminate the texts' positioning as subaltern utterances, where marginalized voices contest, negotiate, and reconfigure hegemonic discourse

The Lodging House **and** *Thieves in Retirement***: two utterances in a subaltern discourse**

Narrated entirely from the point of view of subaltern characters — capturing the bleak conditions of severe poverty, and stifling oppression to which a subaltern class is subjected— *The Lodging House*, in this reading, attempts to recuperate a missing narrative. A reading through the novel unfolds Wikalat 'Atiya, which lends its name to the Arabic title, at the core of the narrative. A dilapidated caravanserai on the fringes of the city, Wikalat 'Atiya lodges a community of the city's vagrants, frauds, downtrodden, dispossessed and underprivileged. It is in Wikalat 'Atiya that the reader gets a glimpse of its inhabitants who are united by their oppression and displacement as they all leave their villages in search of a better life in the city. Located on the fringes of the city— "standing on its own"— the lodging house and its inhabitants "*demand attention*", the narrator tells us (Shalaby 2006, 9).

It does not take the reader long to first recognize the synecdochic relationship that ties Wikalat 'Atiya to the city of Damanhour; then, to recognize it as mimicry and subversion of Nasser's Egypt from a

subaltern perspective. It is "a state upon itself", the owner of the Joint tells the narrator (Shalaby 2006, 108). Moreover, describing it, the narrator says, "a refuge of the downtrodden and a place of ill repute", Wikalat 'Atiya, "for some, meant the city of Damanhour, even though Damanhour did not mean Wikalat 'Atiya" (Shalaby 2006, 8). It is run by Shawadfi who is

> [i]ts king and owner […].He is its *Gamal Abdel Nasser*. He *seized it* from its owner, Atiya and The Ministry of Awkaf just as Abdel Nasser seized the rule of the country from King Farouk. Except Shawadfi is smarter than Abdel Nasser because he got it without any army or a blessed revolution. To tell the truth, my dear sir, he is better than Abdel Nasser when it comes to ruling Wikalat Atiya (Shalaby 2006, 108).

In the novel, two opposing worlds are clearly demarcated: the world of Wikalat Atiya and another outside it. It is via a juxtaposition of these two worlds that the narrative makes its statement. At Wikalat 'Atiya, a different history is made— regardless of its conformity with the dominant. .In addition, the logic of the dominant law itself is questioned and contested by the laws and codes of the lodging house.

Whereas outside Wikalat Atiya the rule is for the rich and powerful and individual acts of resistance are doomed to failure, at Wikalat Atiya "common sense"[5] is radicalized. At Wikalat Atiya, individual aptitude and potential are valued within the collective. Not only is *history made from below,* problems and errors (of both ruler and ruled) are also exposed and subaltern solutions to the problems of the nation are provided. For instance, Shawadfi tells the narrator: "This country of ours, the truth be told, deserves burning. Yes, it deserves more than what it's getting, because it keeps flattering people— their heads get too big. That's the problem. That's become a deeply ingrained trait that we have from birth" (Shalaby 2006, 258) . The inhabitants of Wikalat Atiya may not be educated, but they are all very smart people whose "brains[are] jewels" (Shalaby 2006, 89) .Their voice may be low, but they

have a voice. They outsmart the rich, and the government— making the conditions of their successful survival. At Wikalat 'Atiya, the performance and achievements of the ruling class are evaluated. In rebuke, Shawadfi tells the narrator:

> The government has spoilt you all and filled you with false pride. They raise effendis for us with newspapers and cups of coffee who live off the backs of the poor. Here in this wikala I have young fellows who earn money out of thin air. They play with gold. No diploma and no nothing. Only a boy with his eyes wide open, a boy with real smarts, will come to any good in this world. Listen, my friend, now that you have left the school, forget about the schools and schooling and let's get to the point (Shalaby 2006, 19).

Besides, in an exchange between the narrator and the undertaker, the latter says:

> The revolution brought people prosperity but it brought me and those like me ruin. The bulldozer came one day and razed the neighborhood where the huts were, since that was government land. The government then subdivided it and offered it for sale to those who could afford to build a new neighborhood. There was nothing before us except Wikalat Atiya so we came here And it offered us shelter in peace (Shalaby 2006, 139).

In addition, the conflict between the Muslim Brothers and the ruling class unfolds as one of the major thematic concerns of the narrative. The text brings the Muslim Brothers to the fore through the eyes of ordinary people— raising the question of the relationship between religion and politics in modern Egypt.

Throwing the light on subaltern bleak conditions, de-silencing a subaltern voice, and unfolding a subaltern view are not the sole

concerns of the narrative, though. The symbolic significance of Wikalat Atiya as a space of *collective resistance* proves to be at the core of the narrative. Though the narrator reminds us that these are "a group of swindlers and con artists…lowlifes whom [he] was supposed to be against socially and morally," at Wikalat Atiya communal values are respected (Shalaby 2006, 352). Loyalty, neighborliness, long friendship, compassion and mutual affection are valued and cherished. The inhabitants of Wikalat Atiya "are all one family caring for each other and protecting each other" (Shalaby 2006, 345). Equality is the guiding principle of their community. People make their living 'with the sweat of their brow' (Shalaby 2006, 340). Everyone knows what she/he is worth and values the collective whom he/she *voluntarily* chooses to join. At Wikalat 'Atiya, religion is highly respected; yet its inhabitants are "from so many races and religions" (Shalaby 2006, 109). Not only does Wikalat Atiya provide shelter and protection to its inhabitants, it is a communal space of freedom. Their solidarity is the sole guarantor of their emancipation. Their acts of looting, fraud and smuggling are acts of defiance: their symbolic revolt against "a country that did not believe in honor, except by way of propaganda and false appearances" (Shalaby 2006, 354). It is only via a voluntary choice to be one of the members of Wikalat Atiya (namely, to join their collectivity) that the narrator becomes an agent of his own life. What the narrative seems to suggest is the power of the collective: calling people's attention to collective resistance as a possibility— a revolutionary alternative. At a time when the very rationale of thinking about alternatives is denied, Wikalat Atiya unfolds as a space of difference. It is a space where a different vision is proposed— where both 'agential' subjects and collectivity are affirmed against a "non-believing colonialism that tormented [them] and strengthened evil in [them] even after colonialism had left" (Shalaby 2006, 365).

Similar to Khairy Shalaby, Abu Golayyel constructs his narrative as a space where "small voices" are recovered and articulated (Guha 1996, 3).On close examination, 'Building No.36' in Manshiyat Nasser, unfolds at the core of the narrative. Describing it, the narrator says: "it was a

distinguished building, five stories high. The distinctive overhang of the balcony, jutting out further than any other edifice on the street, gave it a commanding presence that tipped you off to its inhabitants' uniquely striking characters" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 57). The building is located in Manshiyat Nasser— about which the narrator says: "The Newtown. It's a mongrel place, part village and part unplanned city fringe, destination of squatters and incomers, although thanks to the wave of Gamal Abd al-Nasir's hand, it has a *definite* class identity": that of a working class (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 78). Much like 'Wikalat 'Atiya', 'Building No. 36' lies 'at the very edge' of Cairo marking the externality of its inhabitants to the dominant system (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 40).The symbolic significance of Abu Gamal's dwelling lies in the way it provides another view: one of extreme poverty, unemployment, a lack of a clear sense of purpose, despair and frustration (in short: loss) — subverting, challenging and calling into question notions of liberalization and globalization. Describing the influence of a privatization policy on Egyptian industry and accordingly on its working class, Nazih Ayubi notes:

> After the country had initiated the "open door policy" (or what one may call glasnost), it took almost two full decades for the process of restructuring and privatization…to get under way…While this preference for glasnost weakened national industry by exposing it to sudden competition for which it was unprepared, it also distracted the available private funds, at their peak "oil boom" period, away from industry and towards consumerist or generally commercial activities (Ayubi, 1995, p. 339).

It is of this gradual degeneration of a working-class condition that Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement*, in this reading, yields a snapshot.

In the novel, Abu Gamal and his sons were once factory workers but end up as drug dealers, thieves and addicts. It was Nasser who, on

finding that the workers had no places to live, designated the area of Manshiyat Nasser to build houses for the workers, as the narrator says. Yet, it was not out of genuine care for the well-being of the workers or a well-planned strategy. The same lack of clear vision and guided long-term plan goes back to the era of Muhammad Ali Pasha who offered the Bedouins land to settle in without teaching them how to plant it which the narrator likens to "donating a slaughtered beast to a gaggle of hungry men in a desert without teaching them the skill of skinning it" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 54).

In the novel, "Building 36" emerges as a site of resistance, introduced early on as Abu Gamal's allegorical act of defiance against his forced early retirement. The importance of the building, for Abu Gamal, is the way it allows him to keep his four sons close. Despite the pervasive sense of failure and aimlessness that haunts the inhabitants of 'Building 36,' who come across as lost souls, they remain resilient. The narrator's only fear since he has rented the apartment has been that they will unite against him. Moreover, despite all their fights, Abu Gamal and Gamal realize that they 'only got each other, and nothing lasts for nobody' (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 10). Though the narrative keeps collective acts out of its ambit, the power of their unity, affiliation and solidarity lingers in the background.

Ultimately, both narratives can be seen as attempts to construct a periphery-sensitive discourse. Creating allegorical spaces within their texts, both authors, as the analysis has attempted to demonstrate, aim to challenge the ideologemes used to appropriate the subproletariat, and in doing so, to give voice to traces of a rebel consciousness. Though both texts seemingly end on an apocalyptic note (Shalaby's narrator put in jail, and Abu Golayyel's waiting for Abu Gamal's vengeance) both are not devoid of rays of hope. It is only due to their acts of rebellion that Shalaby's narrator sees Badreya— the emblem of success and achievement— "passing in front of [him]in a straight line, holding a bouquet of carnations" (Shalaby 2006, 426). And Abu Golayyel's narrator "put[s] limits on [his] fear" (Abu-Golayyel 2002, 124).

NOTES

1.Althusser redefines ideology as "the representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence" (Jameson, PCLLC 51).

2.The 'alienated city' for Kevin Lynch is "a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves[…] Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (Jameson, PCLLC 51).

3. Notably, Fredric Jameson conceives of 'mapping' as a form of inventing.

4. In his On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche uncovers how ressentiment develops in the weaker or oppressed groups of society. Since they cannot act against the powerful, they resort to internalizing their feelings of frustration, turning them into passive animosity or a moral condemnation of the powerful, frequently manifested in the form of cultural and ideological critique.He says: "ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the ressentiment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge." (Nietzsche 1989, 36)

5. Gramsci highlights the need for "radicalizing common sense and providing subaltern groups with the intellectual tools necessary to confront dominant hegemony, philosophy and power" (Ives 2009, 13)

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